

DARE YOU TO LIE

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A TOM DOHERTY ASSOCIATES BOOK
NEW YORK

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ONE

Guilty . . .

That single word unraveled my entire life.

From the time of my father's arrest until his verdict was delivered, nothing else mattered to me. Not school. Not my friends. Nothing. I was consumed by the trial—the lies and scandal surrounding it. There was no doubt in my mind that he was innocent, but the evidence said otherwise.

And there was plenty of that.

The prosecution had paraded witness after witness up to take the stand and testify against my father. Colleagues. Friends. No one was off-limits.

Even me.

I'd cried that morning, knowing that I had no choice but to stand before the court and swear on a Bible that I had seen my father, FBI detective Bruce Danners, on the night in question. The night when his alleged criminal activities came to a head. I was the one who placed him with the victim.

I was the nail in his judicial coffin.

I knew I'd never forget the look on his face as he stared at me while I sat on the witness stand. There was pride in his eyes when I told the truth. There was also relief. I'd said I'd lie under oath if it meant keeping him out of prison. I mean, what juror wouldn't believe a sob story from a poor seventeen-year-old girl

who had been coerced and leveraged into testifying against her own father? If I'd poured on the tears and played my cards right, surely at least one of them would have found my story plausible. And if they did, the jury would have been split and unable to convict him. That whole "beyond a shadow of a doubt" thing would have gotten in the way.

My father would have been home free.

But I couldn't do it. The integrity that I'd inherited from my father was the reason why. And that integrity was also the reason I knew my father couldn't possibly have done what he was accused of.

The sound of a gavel echoed through the room, branding my father a cop killer. That slap of reality yanked me from my mind's downward spiral. I looked up through bleary eyes to see my father being led away by the bailiff. My heart pounded wildly in my chest. "Daddy!" I screamed before realizing the word had left my mouth. He looked back over his shoulder to me and forced a sad smile.

"It'll be okay, Kylene. The truth can't stay buried forever."

Tears fell freely down my cheeks.

The commotion surrounding me died off not long after my father disappeared. The reporters scattered to interview the winning team. The witnesses dispersed to go on with their daily lives. The jury was taken back to their private area to undoubtedly be thanked for fulfilling their civic duty. I, however, sat and pondered my father's final words as they ran over and over again through my mind. By the time the courtroom was empty, two things were abundantly clear: my father would never stop proclaiming his innocence.

And I would never stop trying to prove it.

TWO

FOUR WEEKS LATER . . .

I stood outside the massive red brick building, eyeing it as if it were an enemy. As far as I was concerned, it was. Almost two and a half years ago, the end of my freshman year at Jasperville High, had been torture. I didn't think I'd survive the next. So, the day my father came home and told me he'd been promoted and we'd be moving to Columbus, I was elated. I squealed so loudly he actually had to cover his ears. But that elation was short-lived.

Fast-forward to my senior year, and I once again found myself standing just outside the gates of hell, knowing exactly what that spiteful place had in store for me. This time, however, I was ready for it. Nobody within those walls could make my life any worse than it already was.

My father's conviction had made certain of that.

With that unwelcome thought in mind, I took a deep breath and climbed the wide concrete steps that led to the main doors. On the pole to my right, the American flag flew high and proud above me—our country's symbol of freedom.

"'Liberty and justice for all,' my ass."

A group of younger girls—probably freshmen—overheard me talking to myself and giggled, whispering conspiratorially to one another as I passed. I sighed heavily. It was going to be a long day.

I hadn't wanted to move back to Jasperville. In fact, I might have died a little inside the day my mother announced that she was getting a divorce and moving out west to live with her new boyfriend. I could either go with her or move into her childhood home with her father. Though I loved Gramps with a passion, I loathed where he lived—or at least which school district his home fell within. The only positive I could see at the time was that Logan Hill Prison was only thirty minutes from his house.

And that was my father's new home for the next twenty-five to life.

Through the entire move, I did my best not to let Gramps see just how dismayed I was by my homecoming. With no other outlet for my anxiety—no one to turn to—in the quiet of the night, I'd lie on the cot Gramps had set up in his tiny den, and let the pent-up tears roll down my cheeks. Tears full of hurt and betrayal. Tears fueled not only by my father's incarceration and my mother's all but abandoning him and me both, but also by the wrong I had escaped when we moved to Columbus.

A wrong I had wanted to keep in my past.

One I would now be constantly reminded of.

I stopped at the top of the school stairs to stare down the cluster of would-be mean girls, to let them know I didn't care about what they thought. That their ridicule didn't bother me. It was amazing how well a glare could silence others, especially when paired with a raging case of resting bitch face. It took only seven seconds to do just that—a personal record. That particular group of wannabes was going to have to find some other poor kid to gang up on.

My skin was far too thick for their low level of skill.

Once inside the building, I made my way up the half flight of stairs to the front office to pick up my class schedule.

Mrs. Baber sat behind her wall of aged dark wood, as always, assuming her post as the gatekeeper to the principal and all other high-level administrative staff. With her glasses perched near the end of her nose, she looked up at me and exhaled heavily.

"Ms. Danners."

"Mrs. Baber. You look lovely this morning. Did you get a new hairdo?" I asked, knowing full well that her helmet of silver curls hadn't seen a new style in at least a decade. Maybe two. Ignoring my obvious attempt at sucking up, she slapped a piece of paper down on the counter between us and slid it toward me.

"You're late for first period. Not the best way to make a good impression. You have physics with Mr. Callahan. I suggest you get up there as fast as those skinny legs will carry you. He's not known for being gracious about tardiness."

"An excellent and helpful observation, Mrs. Baber. Consider it duly noted." I threw her an exaggerated wink before snatching the class schedule off the counter and turning to leave. In my hurry to escape, I slammed into someone entering Mrs. Baber's chamber of doom.

"I'm so sorry!" I exclaimed, staggering back from the wall of distressed black clothing I'd just collided with. As my eyes scanned up toward his face, Mrs. Baber started in.

"Mr. Higgins. Don't you have somewhere to be right now?"

It was then that my gaze reached his face. It was a welcome sight indeed.

"Garrett?"

"Well, I'll be damned," he said, the distinct curl at the corner of his mouth upturning.

"Language, young man!" Mrs. Baber shouted.

"Sorry, ma'am. I just thought I saw a ghost."

"Shut up," I said with a smile.

"Kylene Danners, what in the hell are you doing here?"

"Long story, and since I'm late for physics, not one I can share at the moment."

"Callahan?"

"Yep."

His smile spread wider.

"Then allow me to show you the way. We can be delinquent together."

"Some things never change," Mrs. Baber mumbled to herself.

Garrett made a sweeping gesture with his arm, complete with a bow, and I curtsied in return before heading out of the office. He followed right behind me. Whatever he'd come down to the office for was no longer a priority.

I seemed to have taken its place.

"You sure are all grown up now, Ky. They put something in the water up there in the big city? Because, damn, girl . . ."

I shook my head. Garrett had always been incorrigible. Even after my absence, it appeared that hadn't changed.

"Hey, eyes up here, big guy." I pointed to my face, which earned me a hardy laugh from the boy I'd grown up with. The best friend I'd left behind. "And since you feel it necessary to comment on my appearance, I think it's only fair for me to inquire about this rather interesting new look you have going. Burglar chic or daddy-never-loved-me bad boy? I can't decide."

He frowned at me, his big brown eyes covered by a mess of black hair that slipped out from behind his ear.

"You don't like it? It doesn't scream, 'Bring me home to meet your parents?'"

I laughed.

"It screams something, all right." My sarcastic tone was hardly lost on him. Garrett and I had known each other since

we were four. There was little to nothing he didn't know about me. At least until my family left. I hadn't really spoken to him since then, but he knew why. By the look of things, he didn't hold that against me. Maybe he was just being nice. Maybe he knew that coming back to Jasperville High couldn't be easy for me. Or maybe there were some people in your life that you would always just be friends with regardless of what happened between you.

I hoped that was true.

I really needed an ally.

We crested the final stairs to the third floor and made our way to room 333. The hallway was empty, affording the two of us as much privacy as we were likely to get in that building. Garrett stopped me right before I could reach the doorknob to the physics room.

"Ky," he started, giving me his super-serious Garrett stare. The one that reminded me of his father, the sheriff. "About your dad . . . I just wanted to tell you—"

"Please," I interrupted him, putting my palm up to deflect his pity. "The entire state of Ohio and the better part of the country know all about what my father was convicted of. I can't rehash this right now. It's all I can do not to run from here screaming. I wanted to homeschool myself instead of come back here, but Mom—before she bailed on me—wouldn't sign off on it. She said it was unhealthy for me to hole up in the house all day—and she'd know a thing or two about that."

"Listen, I wasn't trying to pry, I was just—"

The door to room 333 swung open, revealing a rather perturbed-looking Mr. Callahan in all his middle-aged glory, complete with pleated khaki pants and coffee-stained oxford shirt.

"Mr. Higgins, I thought I—" He stopped short and his eyes fell on me. It seemed to take a second for him to realize who

I was, but once he did, that realization was written all over his face. "Ms. Danners. How nice of you to join us this morning."

"It's nice to be here, sir," I replied with a hundred-watt smile plastered on my face.

"Perhaps you two will find it easier to learn about Newton if you actually enter the classroom."

"I was just telling Garrett that, Mr. Callahan, but you know how those cops' kids are. They think the rules don't apply to them."

"Says the daughter of an imprisoned ex-FBI detective," Mr. Callahan muttered under his breath, though he did little to hide the contempt for my father's crime from his expression. A jolt of hurt and surprise shot through me. I'd mentally prepared for snide remarks from the student body at JHS, but not from the staff. I felt my expression fall for a second, before a spark ignited within me. I narrowed my eyes at him and did my best to rein in the anger that raged inside.

"Detectives' kids are an entirely different breed."

"I'm sure they are, Ms. Danners."

He stepped back from the doorway to allow us to enter. Garrett went first, casting a sympathetic glance back at me. He knew that Callahan's remark was only the first of many that would be thrown my way that day. He also knew that I wouldn't take any of them lightly. I was a pit bull when people came after someone I loved. If they crossed me, they didn't just burn a bridge—they doused that thing in gasoline, laced it with TNT, lit a match, and blew that bitch sky-high.

Garrett knew that Mr. Callahan had just made himself an enemy.

I wondered how many more Jasperville Fighting Badgers would find themselves on my shit list by the end of the week.