

# Before I Fall

JESSICA SCOTT

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## DEDICATION

To my real life stats savior  
You know who you are



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Before I Fall

## Chapter One

### Beth

My dad has good days and bad. The good days are awesome. When he's awake and he's pretending to cook breakfast and I'm pretending to eat it. It's a joke between us that he burns water. But that's okay.

On the good days, I humor him. Because for those brief interludes, I have my dad back.

The not so good days, like today, are more common. Days when he can't get out of bed without my help.

I bring him his medication. I know exactly how much he takes and how often.

And I know exactly when he runs out.

I've gotten better about keeping up with his appointments so he doesn't, but the faceless bastards at the VA cancel more than they keep. But what can we do? He can't get private insurance with his health and because someone decided that his back wasn't entirely service related, he doesn't have a high enough disability rating to qualify for automatic care. So we wait for them to fit him in and when we can't, we go to the emergency room and the bills pile up. Because despite him not being able to move on the bad days, his back pain treatments are elective.

Bastards.

So I juggle phone calls to the docs and try to keep us above water.

I leave his phone by his bed and make sure it's plugged in to charge before I head to school. He's got water and the pills he'll need when he finally comes out of the fog. Our tiny house is only a mile from campus. Not in the best part of town but not the worst either. I've got an hour before class, which means I need to hustle. Thankfully, it's not terribly hot today so I won't arrive on campus a sweating, soggy mess. That always makes a good impression especially at a wealthy southern school like this one.

I make it to campus with twenty minutes to spare and check my email on the campus Wi-Fi. I can't check it at the house - internet is a luxury we can't afford. If I'm lucky, my neighbor's signal sometimes bleeds over into our house. Most of the time, though, I'm not that lucky. Which is fine. Except for days like this where there's a note from my professor asking me to come by her office before class.

Professor Blake is terrifying to those who don't know her. She's so damn smart it's scary, and she doesn't let any of us get away with not speaking up in class. Sit up straight. Speak loudly. She's harder on the girls, too. Some of the underclassmen complain that she's being unfair. I don't complain though. I know she's doing it for a reason.

"You got my note just in time," she says. Her tortoise shell glasses reflect the florescent light, and I can't see her eyes.

"Yes, ma'am." She's told me not to call her ma'am but it slips out anyway. I can't help it.

Thankfully, she doesn't push the issue.

"I have a job for you."

"Sure." A job meant extra money on the side. Money that I could use to get my dad his medications. Or you know, buy food. Little things, you know? It's hard as hell to do stats when your stomach is rumbling. "What does it entail?"

"Tutoring. Business statistics."

"I hear a but in there."

"He's a former soldier."

Once, when my mom first left us, I couldn't wake my dad up. My blood pounded so loud in my ears that I could hardly hear. That's how I feel now. Professor Blake knows how I feel about the war, about soldiers. I can't deal with all the hoah chest beating bullshit. Not with my dad and everything the war has done to him.

"Before you say no, hear me out. Noah has some very well placed friends that want him very much to succeed here. He's got a ticket into the business school graduate program, but only if he gets through stats."

I'm having a hard time breathing. I can't do this. But the idea of extra money, just a little. It's a strong motivator when you don't have it. Principles are for people who can afford them. "So why me?"

"Because you've got the best head for stats I've seen in a long time, and I've seen you explain things to the underclassmen in ways that make sense to them. You can translate."

"There's no one else?" I hate that I need this job.

Professor Blake removes her glasses with a quiet sigh. "Our school is very pro-military, Beth."

She's right. That's the only reason I was able to get in. This is one of the Southern Ivies. A top school in the southeast that I have no business being at except for my dad who knew the dean of the law school from his time in the army. I hate the war and everything it's done to my family. But I wouldn't be where I am today if my dad hadn't gone to war and sacrificed everything to make sure I had a future outside of our crappy little place outside of Fort Benning. There are things worse than death and my dad lives with them every day.

I will not let him down.

"Okay. When do I start?"

She hands me a slip of paper. It's yellow and has her letterhead at the top in neat, formal block letters. "Here's his information. Make contact and see what his schedule is." She places her glasses back on and just like that I'm dismissed.

Blake is not a warm woman, but I wouldn't have made it through my first semester at this school. If not for her and my friend Abby, I would have left from the sheer overwhelming force of being surrounded by money and wealth and all the intangibles that came along with it. I did not belong here but because of Professor Blake, I hadn't quit.

So if I need to tutor some blockhead soldier to make the powers that be happy then so be it. Graduating from this program is my one chance to take care of my dad and I will not fail.

## Noah

I hate being on campus. I feel old. Which isn't entirely logical because I'm only a few years older than the kids plugged in and tuned out around me. Part of me envies them. The



casual nonchalance as they stroll from class to class, listening to music without a care in the world.

It feels surreal. Like a dream that I'm going to wake up from any minute now and find that I'm still in Iraq with LT and the guys. A few months ago, I was patrolling a shithole town in the middle of Iraq where we had no official boots on the ground and now I'm here. I feel like I've been ripped out of my normal.

Hell, I don't even know what to wear to class. This is not a problem I've had for the last four years.

I erred on the side of caution - khakis and a button down polo. I hope I don't look like a fucking douchebag. LT would be proud of me. I think. But he's not here to tell me what to do, and I'm so far out of my fucking league it's not even funny.

I almost grin at the note. LT is still looking after me. His parents are both academics, and it is because of him that I am even here. I told him there was no fucking way I was going to make it into the business school because math was basically a foreign language to me.

My phone vibrates in my pocket, distracting me from the fact that my happy ass is lost on campus. Kind of hard to navigate when the terrain is buildings and mopeds as opposed to burned out city streets and destroyed mosques.

Stats tutor contact info: Beth Lamont. Email her, don't text.

Apparently, LT was serious about making sure I didn't fail. Class hadn't even started yet, and there I was with my very own tutor. I was paying for it out of pocket. There were limits to how much pride I could swallow. It was bad enough that I wanted to put on my ruck and get the hell out of this place.

Half the students looked like they'd turn sixteen shades of purple if I said the wrong thing. Like look out, here's the crazy ass veteran, one bad day away from shooting the place up. The other half probably expected the former soldier to speak in broken English and be barely literate. Douchebags. Need to get working on that whole cussing thing, too. Couldn't be swearing like I was back with the guys or calling my classmates names. Not if I wanted to fit in.

I'm not sure about this. Not any of it. I never figured I was the college type - at least not this kind of college.

I tap out an email to the tutor and ask when she's available to meet. The response comes back quickly. A surprise, really. I can't tell you how many emails I sent trying to get my schedule fixed and nothing. Silence. Hell, the idea of actually responding to someone seems foreign. I had to physically go to the registrar's office to get a simple question answered about a form. No one would answer a damn email. Sometimes, I think they'd be more comfortable with carrier pigeons. Or not having to interact at all. I can't imagine what my old platoon would do to this place.

Noon at The Grind.

Which is about as useful information as giving me directions in Arabic because I have no idea a) what The Grind is or b) where it might be.

I respond to her email and tell her that.

Library coffee shop. Central campus.

Okay then. This ought to be interesting.

I head to my first class. Business stats. Great. Guess I'll get my head wrapped around it before I meet the tutor. That should be fun.

I didn't think that fun and statistics going in the same sentence but whatever. It was a required course, so I guess that's where I was going to be.

My hands start sweating the minute I step into the classroom. Hello school anxiety. Fuck, I forgot how much I hate school. I'm at the back of the room, the wall behind me where I can see the doors and windows. I hate the idea of someone coming in behind me. Call it PTSD or whatever, but I hate not being able to see who's coming or going.

I reach into my backpack and pull out a small pill bottle. My anxiety is tripping at a double time, and I'm going to have a goddamned heart attack at this point.

I hate the pills more than I hate being in the classroom again, but there's not much I can do about it. Not if I want to do this right.

And LT would pretty much haunt me if I fuck this up.

I choke down the bitter pill and pull out my notebook as the rest of the class filters in.

I flip to the back of the notebook and start taking notes. Observations. Old habit from Iraq. Keeps me sane, I guess.

The females have some kind of religious objection to pants. Yoga pants might as well be full on burkhas. I've seen actual tights being worn as outer garments and no one bats an eye. It feels strange seeing so much flesh after being in Iraq where the only flesh you saw was...

Well, wasn't that a happy fucking thought.

Jesus. I scrub my hands over my face. Need to put that shit aside, a.s.a.p.

The professor comes in, and I immediately turn my attention to the front of the classroom. She looks stern today, but I'm pretty sure that's a front. She's got to look mean in front of these young kids. She's nothing like she was when we talked about enrollment before I started. She was one of the few people who did respond to emails at this place.

"Good morning. I'm Professor Blake, and this is my TA Beth Lamont. If you have problems or issues, go through her. She speaks for me and has my full faith and confidence. If you want to pass this class, pay attention because she knows this information inside and out."

Beth Lamont. Hello, tutor.

I lose the rest of whatever Professor Blake has to say. Because Beth Lamont is like some kind of stats goddess. Add in that she's drop dead smoking hot, but it's her eyes that grab hold of me. Piercing green and intense. She looks at me, and I can feel my entire body standing at the position of attention. It's been a long time since a woman made me stand up and take notice. And I'm supposed to focus on stats around her? I'd be lucky to remember how to write my name in crayons around her.

I am completely fucked.

## Chapter Two

### Beth

It doesn't take me long to figure out who Noah Warren is. He's a little bit older than the rest of the fresh faced underclassmen I've gotten used to. I'm not even twenty-one but I feel ancient these days. I was up late last night, worrying about my dad.

I can feel him watching me as I hand out the syllabus and the first class notes. My hackles are up - he's staring and being rude. I don't tolerate this from the jocks but right then, I'm stuck. The rest of the class is focused on Professor Blake, but not our soldier. Oh no, he's being such a stereotype it's not even funny. Staring. Not even trying to be slick about it like the football player in the front of the class room who's trying to catch a glimpse at my tits when I lean down to pass the papers out.

Instead, our soldier just leans back, nonchalant like he owns the place. Like the whole world should bend over and kiss his ass because he's defending our freedom. Well, I know all about that, and the price is too goddamned high.

And wow, how is that for bitterness and angst on a Monday morning. I need to get my shit together. I haven't even spoken to him and I'm already tarring and feathering him. Not going to be very productive for our tutoring relationship if I hate him before we even get started.

I take a deep breath and hand him the syllabus and first lecture worksheet.

I imagine he's figured out that I'm his tutor.

I turn back and head down the stairs to my desk in the front as Professor Blake drops her bombshell on the class.

"There will be no computer use in this class. You may use laptops during lab when Beth is instructing because there will be practical applications. But during lecture, you will not use computers. If your phones go off, you can expect to be docked participation points, and those are a significant portion of your grade."

There was the requisite crying and wailing and gnashing of the teeth. I remember my first time I heard of Professor Blake's no computer rule. I thought it was draconian and complete bullshit. And then I realized she was right - I learned better by writing things down. Especially the stats stuff.

I look up at Noah. He's watching the class now. He's scowling. He looks like he might frown a lot. He looks...harder than the rest of the class. There are angles to his cheeks and shadows beneath his eyes. His dark hair is shorter than most and he damn sure doesn't have that crazy ass swoop thing that so many of the guys are doing these days.

Everything about him radiates soldier. I wonder if he knows how intimidating he looks. And then I immediately wonder why the hell I care what he thinks.

I'm going to be his tutor not his shrink.

He shifts and his eyes collide with mine. Something tightens in the vicinity of my belly. It's not fear. Soldiers don't scare me, not even ones who look like they were forged in fire like Noah.

No, it's something else. Something tight and tense and distinctly distracting. I'm not in the mood for my hormones to overwhelm my common sense.

I stomp on the feeling viciously.

I'm staring at him, now. I'm deliberately trying to look confident and confrontational. Men like Noah don't respect weakness. Show a moment's hesitation and the next thing you know they've got your ass pinned in a corner trying to grab your tits.

He lifts one brow in response. I have no idea how to read that reaction.

## Noah

I had to swallow my pride and ask some perky blond directions to the joint. I hadn't expected Valley Girl air headedness but then again, I didn't really know what I expected. I managed to interpret the directions between a few giggles and several likes and ahs and ums. I imagined her briefing my CO and almost smiled at the train wreck it would be. We had a lieutenant like her once. She was in the intelligence shop and she might have been the smartest lieutenant in the brigade, but the way she talked made everyone think she was a complete space cadet.

She'd said like one too many times during a briefing to the division commander and yeah, well, last I heard, she'd been in charge of keeping the latrines cleaned down in Kuwait. Which wasn't fair but then again, what in life was? Guess the meat eaters in the brigade hadn't wanted listen to the Valley Girl give them intelligence reports on what the Kurdish Pesh and ISIS were up to at any given point in time. My cup of coffee from The Grind isn't terrible. It certainly isn't Green Bean coffee but it's a passable second place. Green Bean had enough caffeine in it to keep you up for two days straight. This stuff...it's softer, I guess. Smoother? I'm not really sure. It isn't bad. Just not what I am used to. Nothing here is.

I wonder if there is any way to run down to Bragg and get some of the hard stuff. Hell, I am considering chewing on coffee beans at this point. Anything to clear the fog in my brain. But I need the fog to keep the anxiety at bay, so I guess I am fucked there, too. Guess I could start getting used to the place. No better place to start with the coffee, I guess.

The Grind is busy. Small, low tables are crowded with laptops and books and students all looking intently at their work. It's like a morgue in here. Everyone is hyper focused. Don't these people know how to have a good time? Relax a little bit? Hell, there were no seats anywhere. The Grind was apparently a popular, if silent, place.

The tutor walks in at exactly twelve fifty eight. Two minutes to spare.

"You're not late." I'm mildly shocked.

She did that eyebrow thing again, and I have to admit, on her it is pretty fucking sexy. "I tend to be punctual. It's a life skill."

"Kitty has claws," I say.

She stiffens. Apparently, the joke fell flat. Guess I was going to work on that.

"Let's get something straight, shall we? My name is Beth, and I'm going to tutor you in business stats. We are not going to be friends or fuck buddies or anything else you might think of. I'm not kitty or any other pet name. I'm here to get a degree not a husband."

My not strong enough coffee burns my tongue as her words sink in. She's damn sure

prickly all right. I can't decide if I admire her spine or if it's unnecessary. Hell, it isn't like I tried to grab her ass or asked her to suck my dick.

The coffee slides down my throat. "Glad we cleared that up," I say instead. "I wasn't sure if blow jobs came with the tutoring."

She grinds her teeth. There isn't much by way of sense of humor in the tutor. She has a no nonsense look about her. Her dark blond hair is drawn tight to her neck, and I can't figure out if she is naturally flawless or if she is just damn good with makeup.

There is a freshness to her though that isn't something I am used to either. Enlisted women, the few I'd been around, either try way too hard with too much black eyeliner downrange or aren't interested in men beyond the buddy level.

But this academic woman is a new species entirely for me, and as our standoff continues, I realize I have no idea what the rules of engagement are with someone like her. At least not beyond her name is not Kitty and she's not here for a husband. Those she made pretty clear.

She is fucking stunning and I suddenly can't talk.

She clears her throat. "So are we going to stand here and continue to stare at each other, or are we going to get to work? I have somewhere to be in two hours."

I motion toward the library. "Lead the way."

## Beth

He's watching my ass as I walk in front of him. He's just the type who would do something like that. The blow job comment had caught me completely off guard. I hate that. I always think of smart ass comebacks fifteen minutes too late.

So now I am even more irritated than I had been when he'd been staring in class. What the hell had Professor Blake been thinking?

I lead us to a small table out of the way where there wouldn't be a lot of disruption. Stats is one of those things that takes a lot of concentration. At least it had for me until I learned the language.

I pull out the worksheet from class. Homework and lessons. "So let's get the business stuff out of the way," I say. I hate the tone in my voice. I'm not normally a ball busting bitch, but he's set me off and if being cold and curt is the only way to keep him in line then so be it. "I'd like to be paid each meeting. Cash."

"What's your rate?"

I sit back. How the hell did that question catch me off guard? I don't know. I work part-time at the country club next to campus, but the tips are hit or miss. The thing about the other half? Some of them are stingier than others. Most of the time, I make okay tips. It's enough to keep the lights on most of the time. When it wasn't, I tried not to be bitter about how they didn't need the money like I did.

But I just smiled and took their orders.

I'm stuck. Noah is not my first tutoring job but my other jobs were paid by the university. I have no idea how much to charge for freelance work.

"Fifty dollars an hour, three times a week," he offers abruptly.

I cover my shock with my hand. "Huh?"

"Fifty dollars an hour. I saw a sign in the common area charging that much for Spanish. Figure stats should be at least that much, right?"

My voice is stuck somewhere in the bottom of my chest. Fifty bucks an hour is a lot of groceries and medication. It feels wrong taking that kind of money, even from Mr. Does the Tutoring Come with Blowjob.

"Will that be a problem?"

I shake my head. "No. That's fine." There's a stack of bills that need to be paid. The electricity is a week overdue. Like I said, the country club wasn't the most reliable income. I'm counting on tips tonight to make a payment tomorrow to keep them from shutting it off. Again. Between that and the money from tutoring - I could keep the lights on. I can feel my face burning hot. I turn away, digging into my backpack to keep him from seeing my humiliation, not wanting him to see my relief.

"Same time, same place? Monday, Wednesday and Friday?" My computer flickers to life.

"Works for me. How much pain should I be prepared for?" He sounds worried. He should. Professor Blake is one of the top in her field, and that's no small feat considering she came up at a time when women were still blazing trails in the business world.

"Depends on if you do the work or not," I say. I can't quite bring myself to offer him comfort. I'm still irritated by the blowjob comment. "So let's get started." I lean over the worksheet. "What questions do you have from class today?"

I look up to find him watching me. There's something in his eyes that tugs at me. I don't want to be tugged at.

He looks away. He's strangling that poor pen in his hands. Clearly, I've struck a nerve with my question.

I wish I didn't remember how that felt. The lost sensation of not having a clue what I was doing. I didn't even know what questions to ask.

I don't want to feel anything charitable toward him, but there's something about the way he shifts. Something that makes him vulnerable.

I run my tongue over my teeth. This isn't going well. "Okay look. We'll start with the basics, okay?"

I open my laptop to the lecture notes.

He finally notices my computer. "I haven't seen one of the black MacBooks in years," he says.

He's not being a prick, but I bristle anyway. "It might be old but she's never failed me."

"It can run stats software? Isn't that pretty intense processor wise?"

I don't feel like telling him that to run said stats program, I have to shut down every other program and clear the cache. I don't want to admit that there's just no money to buy a new computer. I can't even finance one because I don't have the credit for it.

Business school is about looking the part as much as it is knowing the game so none of those words are going to leave my lips.

"It gets the job done," I say. "Now, the first lecture."

"I get everything about what stats is supposed to do. I got lost somewhere around regression."

"Don't worry about regression right now. We're going to focus on understanding what we're looking at first up. Basic concepts."

I look over at him. He's scowling at the paper. I can see tiny flecks of blue and gold in his green eyes. He drags one hand through his short dark hair and leans his forward. He's practically radiating tension, and I can feel it infecting me.

Damn it, I don't give a shit about his anxiety. I don't care.

"So the normal distribution is?"

I take a deep breath. This stuff I know. I draw the standard bell shaped curve on his

paper. "The normal distribution says that any results are normally..."

## Noah

She knows her stuff. She relaxes when she starts talking about confidence intervals and normal distributions. Hell, I can't even spell normal distribution.

But she has a way of making things make sense.

And her confidence isn't scary so much as it is really fucking attractive.

I'm watching her lips move and I swear to God I'm trying to pay attention, but my brain decides to take a detour into not stats-ville. She's got a great mouth. It's a little too wide, and she has a tendency to chew on the inside of her lip when she's focusing.

I look down because I don't want her to catch me not paying attention. I need to understand this stuff, not stare at her like a lovesick private.

I'm focusing on confidence intervals when something dings on her computer. She frowns and opens her email. It's angled away so I can't look over her shoulder, but something is clearly wrong. A flush creeps up her neck. She grinds her teeth when she's irritated. I tend to notice that in other people. I do the same thing when the anxiety starts taking hold. At least when it starts. It graduates quickly beyond teeth grinding into paralyzing.

I glance at my watch. It's almost time for her to go. I have no idea how I'm going to get my homework done, but I'll figure it out later. I'm meeting some of the guys from the veterans group on campus at some place called Baywater Inn. Because of course LT put me in touch with these guys, too.

But watching her, something is clearly wrong. I want to ask, but given how our history isn't exactly on the confide-your-darkest-secrets level, I don't.

She snaps her laptop closed and sighs. "I've got to run and make a phone call. Are you set for your assignment for lab?"

"I'll figure it out."

Her lips press into a flat line. "You can always look it up online."

"Sure thing."

She's distracted now. Not paying attention. I watch her move. There's an edge to her seriousness now. A tension in the long lines of her neck. A strand of hair fell free from the knot and brushes her temple. I want to tuck it back into place but I'm pretty sure if I tried it, I'd be rewarded with a knee in the balls. And I like them where they are, thanks. I'd come too close to losing them to risk them now.

I pull out my wallet and hand her two twenties and a ten. She hesitates then offers the ten back. "We didn't do the full hour." I refuse the money. "Keep it. Obviously you've got something to take care of. Don't worry about it."

She sucks in a deep breath like she's going to argue but then clamps her mouth shut. "Thank you."

She didn't choke on it, but it's a close thing. I am suddenly deeply curious about what has gotten her all wound up in such a short amount of time.

Maybe I'll get a chance to ask her some day.

But I definitely have the impression that Beth Lamont isn't into warm cuddles and hugs. She strikes me as independent and tough.

And I admire the hell out of that attitude, even as she scares the shit out of me with

how smart she is.