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It hadn't been the first time he'd hit her. She wanted it to be the last time.

"I need to report domestic battery," she'd said, heart in her mouth, to name-badged Sherri at the Forrest County Sheriff's Office.

The computer-entry of the details was perfunctory until Diana gave the name of the assailant. "My domestic partner, Officer Joseph Clay of the Denton Area Division of the State Highway Patrol."

Sherri paused. Only for a second. But Diana saw. Once the intake was done, she found herself sitting an incredibly long time in the waiting area, despite its being a slow Tuesday, with no one else in the room. Finally, the door was opened by a portly Deputy Tubbs. "Mrs. Clay?"

"It's Atestesso. Dr. Diana Atestesso."

He peered down at his clipboard. "Oh, yeah. My apologies, Professor. Would you mind if we talked in my office?"

Dee felt watched by the various Sheriff's personnel as she followed the Deputy through a small maze of cubicles towards an office. Tubbs looked over his shoulder. "Can I get you a coffee or a soda?"

"No, thank you."

"Alright. If you'd just take a seat here, I'll close the door for privacy."

She sat down on the other side of his desk while he wedged himself behind his computer and scanned the screen. "You're wishing to report domestic battery, is that correct, Ma'am?"

"That's sadly correct, Deputy Tubbs."

“I’m sorry to hear that, Ma’am.” He glanced at her for a passing second, then gazed at his clipboard again. Not looking up, he said, “Did Sherri tell ya about the Denton Area Abuse Resource Center, Ma’am?”

“Yes, she did, but I have resources of my own. I just want to report this and let the justice system do its job.”

“Well, Ma’am, that’s what’s tough in this situation—for domestic abuse cases, the wheels of justice grind awful slow. I just wanna make sure you have every help you need during this time.”

“Thanks for your concern, Deputy Tubbs. I’m not unaware of the exigencies of domestic battery. I want to see this through.”

He reclined in his chair, his badge glinting from the overhead fluorescents and paged through first the computer file, then the clipboard. “Says here that the purported incident occurred three nights ago, is that correct, Ma’am?”

“Friday night, to be exact.”

“Any reason why ya waited till now to report?”

“My partner hasn’t been home for nearly four days now. I have reason to believe he might be wary of my reporting this, so I had to pick the most opportune time to leave the house. I’ve called in sick to my job—it wouldn’t do to teach classes with a bruised cheek and a fat lip.”

His eyes lifted from the clipboard, paused over her for an uncomfortable time, then looked back to the clipboard. “Didja report to an emergency room for your injuries?”

“Deputy Tubbs, I’m a professor of nursing and an RN. That my injuries required no emergency treatment doesn’t make them any less injuries suffered at the hand of my partner.”

He shifted in his chair. “I was looking for some outside

confirmation of the time and degree of your injuries and to make sure ya received adequate care.”

“And, I’m sure,” said Diana, “Looking for some reason to believe that what I’m reporting is true.”

He put down the clipboard, lifted a pen off his desk, and started clicking it. “Ma’am, as an officer of the law, it’s my duty to not be biased, for or against anybody, but to enforce the law. What I believe ain’t the point. I’m just gathering info here.”

She felt a despondency and fatigue leaden her chest. “And of course,” she sighed, “There most definitely wouldn’t be any bias when a fellow law enforcement officer is involved.”

The clicking stopped. Tubbs lifted the clipboard again, ruffling through its pages till he perused one for so long she wondered if he even still acknowledged her presence in the room. Only when the silence and disengagement had become nearly unbearable did he put down the clipboard and press forward in the chair, resting his elbows on the desk and clasping his hands. “Mrs. Clay, can I be honest with you?”

He didn’t wait for her answer.

“Domestic fracas are hard to pin down, let alone prosecute, ’cuz they can be ‘he-said/she-said’ scenarios. I can see you’re injured, and I can’t know what you’re suffering inside, Ma’am. But Forrest County’s as rural as they come. We don’t have nearly the staff Denton does, and our DA don’t make headlines prosecuting domestic disputes but rather putting meth-producers behind bars. What you’re asking for is a long haul with a hard-to-figure outcome. You might wanna just go home, heal up, and see if you and Trooper Clay can come to some consensus on household peace. Otherwise, you’re in for a lot more pain and a whole lotta disappointment.”

“Mr. Tubbs, are you saying that you’re not going to pursue this and that I should just go home and shut up?”

“Mrs. Clay—”

“—Dr. Atestesso.”

“Ma’am, what I’m saying is that Trooper Clay is a fellow law enforcement officer, and that, when you’re counting on another gun having your back, it covers a multitude of sins.”

She stared at him. “How good-ol’-boy of you.”

“We have two female officers on staff here, Professor, and I guarantee they feel the same way. Like any of us, they wanna get home safe to their families.”

“Even if one of their family members batters them?”

He sighed. “Honestly, Ma’am, I’ve seen a hundred domestic disputes if I’ve seen one. They’re never clear-cut, never just one party to blame.”

She narrowed her eyes. “Which then exonerates any police officer involved in such a dispute?”

“Ma’am, your husband—”

“—My live-in partner?”

“—is a twice-decorated Highway Patrolman in just two years on-the-job. We look after each other because we have to. And the DA’ll look after him, too. It’s for the greater good.”

A tear pooled in the corner of her eye, but she refused to break down. “What about *my* good?”

“For that matter, Ma’am, Trooper Clay himself suffered injuries—” He paged through the clipboard. “Some blunt-force trauma to the cranium and lacerations to his wrist. Sounds like as as good was given to him, and then some.”

“He’d just belted me and maced my dog who was instinctively defending me! Plus, he was armed! How do you know anything about his injuries, as I reported nothing about them at intake because I had no idea what they might be, he fled

the home so quickly?”

Tubbs folded his hands together. “Like I said, Mrs. Clay, we look out for one another. Putting your life on the line every time you set foot out the door carries with it some privileges.”

“Like beating the shit out of loved ones?”

“Okay, okay. Look, you can pursue this, if you’re hell-bent on it, but it won’t go well, I promise you. That’s not a threat—just a reality. Believe it or not, I’m telling you more than I oughta because I feel for you. But I also gotta be able to go home to my own family after my shift is done, which isn’t always a given. So, you can fight this tooth and nail, to little or nil outcome, or you have an alternative.”

“Which is?”

“Like I said, we look after each other. This won’t go un-noted in the ranks and in the Highway Patrol superintendency, Mrs. Clay. There’ll be repercussions that oughta take care of this.”

“So that’s it? The blue brotherhood’ll ‘take care’ of it? How am I to know anything will truly be ‘noted with repercussions’? How am *I* able to go home without knowing whether it’ll cost me *my* life?”

He stared at her. “Ma’am, go home and make up with your husband. This thing’ll see itself through.”

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She went back to work on Wednesday. Holing up the rest of Tuesday at Barnes & Noble, she’d booked a pet-friendly AirBnB after alighting home to retrieve Golly. Her bruises had healed enough that foundation and lipstick covered them. After Clay had run, she’d flushed out Goliath’s eyes with contact saline solution and cradled him in her bed. He never whimpered, never covered. In fact, once she’d managed to

purge the mace and he got a night of sleep, Golly was up and ready the next morning to bag possums. If only she could be that unsinkable.

She'd taken Golly to work with her on Wednesday, and her students were thrilled to meet him. It brought her the only smile she could muster after days of uncontrollable anxiety. The question of returning home gnawed her. Revealing it to Selene in more detail than "Clay was wrestling with depression" was out of the question. Diana had tried telling someone about the abuse—the Sheriff's Department. What good had it done her? Aside from sharing her outrage and offering Diana a place to stay, what could Selene do? Dee would have to return to double-wide ranch at some point, even if only to pack her things for good. Wrestling with her fear of going home was a pining for Clay that humiliated her. How could she want to be with him after what he'd done? His temper was hair-trigger, and it hadn't been the only time she'd seen murder in his eyes. Her determination that this had to be the end of them was being eroded by the grief of losing what they had together. But what did they have if it could be shattered in a nanosecond by the Clay she didn't know inside the Clay she *thought* she knew? Dee could only imagine Selene's disdain if she'd confessed such conflicting thoughts, but another voice in her mind chastened her for thinking Selene could ever be so sanctimonious. Selene was her friend, her mentor, the one rock in her life besides Clay. The awareness that her relationship with Clay was so insular, that neither of them had many close outside friends, made her feel like she were standing atop the sand foundation that was Clay, as the tide rose.

Along with the anxiety and longing, was an obstinance that refused to cede ground to the bastard. It was her home, damn it! She felt stubborn, too, about their relationship. What was it if it couldn't weather crises? He needed her. She needed him. She couldn't shake the conviction that they were meant to be, no matter the challenges.

She stood outside herself, watching a hopelessly dramatic and lovelorn teen make a mountain out of a molehill. So he'd lost his temper—that didn't make him a domestic abuser. Besides, she already knew Clay barely tolerated Goliath, and she'd nonetheless kept pushing the envelope.

But, oh, for Christ's sake! It was her bed and her home, too! She could damn well let Goliath sleep wherever the fuck he wanted. Did any of that justify battery?

She was a tenure-track professor, after all—students looked to her for guidance, much like she looked to Selene. How could one incident so easily derail her? No, she had to reclaim her home. Anyway, for all she knew, Clay was gone for good.

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His patrol car was in their gravel driveway when she got home that night.