

interference

KAY HONEYMAN



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chapter one

I dropped three bottled waters and a bag of potato chips on the counter between the cashier and the girl who was yelling at him.

“Most boyfriends take their girlfriends out once in awhile.”

The cashier picked up his phone and checked the screen. “We go out.”

“I need to pay for these,” I said.

“We’ve been dating three months, and we’ve gone out twice,” the girl snapped.

“I don’t have money,” the cashier said.

“I have money. To pay for these.” I pushed the bottles closer.

“You had enough money to go to Lubbock with your cousin last weekend.”

I looked out the window. Mom was still in the passenger seat, digging through her purse. Dad was pumping gas. I didn’t have much time. “I’m kind of in a hurry.”

“It’s not like I don’t have options,” she continued. “Gabe called the whole time you were out of town.”

The cashier started scanning my items. “Next time, tell him I say hi.”

The girl balled her fists. Her purse smacked against the candy rack, sending packages flying as she spun and stormed out the door.

The guy didn't flinch. "Anything else?" he asked me, pulling a plastic bag from under the counter.

"I need to use your phone."

"Sorry. No pay phone. There's one at the gas station two exits east."

I smiled. "No. I need to use *your* phone."

The guy tipped his chin to the right, an early sign that he was going to say no.

"It's an emergency," I added.

"You're calm for someone who is in the middle of an emergency."

"I'm very good in a crisis."

He crossed his arms over his chest. "You're not using my phone."

Refusals were tricky to undo, but not impossible. "Fine, we'll go a different direction." I leaned over the counter and locked my eyes with his. "You're going to let me use your phone because someday your girlfriend will be stranded in some nowhere town and need to tell you something life-changing." His eyes remained empty. "The test results came in." Nothing. "She found your dog."

"Tucker?" the cashier said.

Bingo. "She needs to call you to tell you that Tucker is okay. She wants you to know where to pick him up. Wouldn't you want someone to loan her a phone?"

"Is *your* dog in trouble?" the cashier asked.

I looked over my shoulder. I needed to move this along before I got caught. "My cheating ex-boyfriend posted humiliating pictures of me online. My school hates me. My parents blame me for Dad's nosedive in the polls. And my college future is in the toilet."

“Man, what a week. And now your dog.” He slid his phone to me.

I skipped the gratitude and dialed Tasha’s number.

“Hello?”

“Hey, it’s Kate.” I moved toward the back of the store.

“I’ve been trying to call you. Is your phone dead?” It sounded like Tasha was at the coffee shop just across from the school. I could hear the clatter of plates and the hiss of the espresso machine.

“No, just held hostage.”

“So I guess you’re still in trouble?”

“I’m in Texas,” I said.

“Wow, when your parents punish you, they really go all out.”

“It’s not punishment. It’s protection, according to them. We’re lying low while the scandal blows over.”

“That may be sooner than you think. The board and the principal made a decision yesterday.”

“That was fast,” I said.

“They’re trying to get ahead of the bad press.”

The cashier eyed me suspiciously. I turned my back on him and slipped behind a display of chips. “So we won?”

Tasha hesitated. “Kind of.”

“What do you mean, kind of? Don’t tell me there are more pictures on the website. My dad is going to lose it.”

“No. Pictures are still down. The board decided that the principal will write three letters of recommendation. One for the most school service hours.”

“That has to be you.”

“Dances don’t plan themselves,” Tasha said. “The second letter goes to the student with the highest GPA.”

“Fair,” I said.

“And the third goes to the person with the most volunteer hours.”

“To help the school with the bad press. Smart. This all sounds like a win.”

“Well, you know that the student council secretary keeps up with everyone’s volunteer hours.”

“David Tressler, who has been in love with you since freshman year.”

“Right. So I asked myself, what would Kate do?”

“I would try to get a peek at the hours,” I said.

“Exactly. That’s the kind-of part.” I could hear the breath Tasha took before she broke the news. “Parker’s in the lead.”

My grip on the cashier’s phone tightened. “He’s never volunteered a day in his life! I should know. I dated him for a year. Well, almost a year. He was too busy to volunteer. You know, with all the lying and cheating.”

“Apparently, before Parker moved to DC, he spent the summer building houses in Juárez.”

“And they believe that?” My voice echoed through the store.

“You okay?” the clerk called.

I smiled and gave him a wave.

“It’s still a win,” Tasha said.

“It’s not a win until he pays for what he did,” I said.

“Remember why we did all this. The school news articles, the calls to the press, the research,” Tasha said. “It wasn’t for revenge. It was to make the system more fair.”

The bell above the door rang. “Sure, but Parker already hacked the new system,” I said.

“Kate,” Dad called from the door of the store.

“Got to go.” I hung up the phone and grabbed a giant bag of potato chips to hold in front of it. “Just getting a snack, Dad.”

I put the bag and the phone on the counter. The guy started to scan in silence. Dad strolled over. “This your phone?” he said to the cashier.

I gave the guy a look and shook my head. For a moment, one sliver of time, I thought I had gotten away with it.

The cashier nodded. “She needed to make a call to save her dog.”

“The empathy angle. Not bad.” Dad picked up the phone and tapped the screen until he found the call history. “A DC number? Kate?”

“Your dog got all the way to Washington, DC?” the cashier said. “That is some dog.”

“We don’t have a dog,” Dad said.

I bit my lip. “I was speaking metaphorically.”

“So the dog is okay?”

“The dog is fine,” Dad said. “Kate, you can go back to the car. I’ll pay this gentleman and we’ll be on our way.”

When I walked into the dry air that choked West Texas, I spotted the cashier’s girlfriend leaning against a stack of propane tanks. As I started past her, she wiped her hand across her eyes. I paused and walked over to her. “Look, it’s none of my business, but I don’t think he’s worth crying over,” I said.

The girl’s shoulders dropped. “You don’t know him.”

“He doesn’t take you on dates. He didn’t take you to Lubbock. He’s not worried you’ll get lost and need to call someone. He’ll probably just string you along until he cheats on you with some

snotty ambassador's daughter." I leaned against the wall next to the girl.

"I don't think Jesse knows any ambassadors—"

"He certainly doesn't deserve a year of your life. Almost a year. And you know what he really doesn't deserve? An amazing college recommendation."

"Are we still talking about my boyfriend?"

"No, I guess not." I took a deep breath. "Still, that guy doesn't deserve the two minutes you gave him in there."

She hiked up her purse. "You're right. So, what do I do?"

"You said it yourself. You've got other options."

"Yeah." Her back straightened. "There's Gabe."

"At the same time," I said, "the idea of a boyfriend is usually a lot less trouble than the actual boyfriend."

The girl nodded slowly. "You're right."

The bell on the door rang as Dad pushed it open. "And don't forget to vote next Tuesday," he said into the shop. "Got to love democracy." He let the glass door close behind him.

I followed Dad.

The girl called after me, "Hey, I hope that guy you dated gets what he deserves."

"He will," I said.

"What was that?" Dad asked as we walked to the car.

"I was trying to help."

"Last time you tried to help—"

"I know. I almost got kicked out of school, the donors dried up, and you dropped ten points in the polls." I snatched the bag of chips from Dad's bag. "I don't see why we had to leave DC. I didn't do anything wrong."

Dad opened the door for me, then slid into the front seat, handing Mom a water bottle. “Appearance is reality,” he said. “Besides, we’re not running away from anything. We’re running toward opportunity.”

“I thought you said appearance is reality,” I said.

“Very funny,” Dad replied.

As we drove, I raised my camera to my eye and framed a graveyard, then a series of collapsing houses landscaped with tires and metal buckets making a final stop on their journey to the dump. Those melted into another line of houses, these with peeling paint but trimmed hedges, followed by a series of small churches painted white, with bell towers squatting over the broad doorways. The scenes were charming enough, in a conventional small-town sort of way.

“Dad, can you slow down?” I said, looking through the lens of my camera again.

He glanced in the rearview mirror. “Are you still working on that photography project?”

Portfolio. It was a photography *portfolio*, the kind I needed to get into a decent fine arts school. Especially now that Parker had stolen my recommendation. That’s what I wanted to say. But I forced the corners of my mouth into a smile. “Yep.”

Mom patted at the faint shadows under her eyes, then closed the mirror on the car’s visor as Dad sped by a line of tumbleweeds pressed up against a fence. I had thought Texas would be prettier. In fact, I counted on it being prettier—large red barns, oversized flags whipping in the wind, fields of wildflowers, a few horses. I planned to spend the next two months diversifying a portfolio that “lacked soul,” according to my art teacher, Ms. Prescott.

When she said this, I told her that soul was overrated. She assured me that admissions committees felt differently. I said that “soul” was subjective, that some people might see soul in my photographs. She said that some people see Jesus in potato chips, but those people aren’t professors at top-tier art schools. I asked if she could be sure of that. Ms. Prescott said her office hours were over.

But if my pictures needed to sprout legs and dance when the admission committees opened my portfolio, I’d find a way to make it happen. That might be easier than uncovering some beauty in this landscape of spidery tree limbs and washed-out colors. An earthy smell gripped the air.

“Why does Texas stink?” I asked, leaning back against the seat.

Dad’s eyes met mine. “Shall we review the talking points again?”

I shook my head. “No, I wasn’t saying—”

His phone rang. Three pairs of eyes jerked to the cup holder where it rested. Dad’s hand moved automatically to answer it before gripping the steering wheel again, his knuckles white.

“I’ve been doing this since I was five,” I said. “I’m not actually going to tell people that Texas stinks.” I turned to Mom. “Tell Dad that I would never say that.”

“Your father is returning to his roots,” Mom said.

Dad nodded. “The family is slowing down the pace of life and focusing on what’s important.”

I watched a cloud of dust dance at the base of a telephone pole. “Who is going to ask these questions? Isn’t that the point of this extended vacation? To escape the questions?”

“Kate,” Dad prompted. “What are the Hamiltons doing in Texas?”

The phone stopped ringing. The silence grew heavier. I used to be able to parrot what my parents said, but lately the words stuck in my throat.

“Having a ready answer keeps you from saying something you’ll regret,” Dad said.

Like the truth.

When it came to college recommendations, Principal Strickland’s were legendary. One got Brian Lucas into Stanford despite that prank with the donkeys on his permanent record. Another got Amber McKinley into Columbia, even after an anxiety attack made her pass out during her interview.

But in a school full of the daughters of congressmen and sons of senators, people’s agendas could easily get tangled. The most valuable commodity in DC is power, and I quickly figured out that only the best-connected students got the principal’s recommendations. Tasha didn’t have power like that—her dad owned a car service company—but she deserved a recommendation.

It would have been a perfect plan without the backlash. I made a quick call to the *Washington Post*. The resulting cover story turned into a round of headlines and talk-show punch lines, then a flurry of meetings at school and rewritten policies to make things right. Tasha would get the recommendation she deserved. Win.

But Camille lost her letter of recommendation, and Camille had never lost anything that her father’s diplomatic immunity didn’t cover. She barely had to bat her dark brown eyes at Parker to get him on her side. But instead of just breaking up with me, he cheated on me for most of October. I’m usually better at reading people, but Parker was really committed to the role of loyal

boyfriend. I had pictures of him smiling behind the camera to prove it. I just didn't realize he was taking so many of *me*.

Then his photos started showing up on the school website. Most made me look drunk. Some made me look mean. But what pushed Mom and Dad into this three-day, five-state road trip was that the pictures made *them* look bad, like they were neglectful parents. Part of me wished that for once they'd spent some of their political capital to defend me. I imagined Dad storming into Principal Strickland's office to say that the system was wrong and the school was lucky to have someone like me who would fix it. I imagined Mom "accidentally" dumping tea on the woman in her book group who implied I was lucky to be with Parker. Instead, we packed up and drove to Texas.

There was another truth. Even before the pictures appeared, Dad was down fifteen points in his bid for reelection to North Carolina's Ninth Congressional District.

Dad always said that campaigns were like riding wild horses. You tried to control them but didn't expect to. A candidate's best bet was just to hold on for the ride. But in what should have been an easy trot back to the House seat he'd held for twelve years, Dad dropped the reins. He'd let quotes in the press go unanswered and missed opportunities to sling dirt on his opponent, a fresh-faced thirtysomething who had popped out of the political woodwork. He'd allowed emotions to leak onto his face and into his voice. One night in late October, just before the first pictures appeared on the website, I'd heard his campaign manager in our DC house, yelling words like "impossible" and "delusional." Dad had shouted his own two words back: "You're fired." Firing a

campaign manager three weeks before the November general election when you were double digits behind an opponent . . . Dad didn't just drop the reins; he set fire to the horses.

Now he was stepping down to save face. "Family business," the press release said. Politics *was* our family business, so the excuse was truer than usual. We'd had an unspoken agreement since we'd left DC: I wouldn't bring up his mess and he wouldn't bring up mine.

"Okay, but there really is a smell," I said. "Something . . ." *Disgusting? Putrid?* ". . . strange." Outside my car window, gas stations crept by on one side of the road while railroad tracks lined the other. These gave way to one-story storefronts, their windows painted with foot-high red letters that proclaimed RED DIRT #1.

Dad took a deep breath. "That's the smell of money. Oil money. Welcome to Red Dirt."

We passed a one-story building picketed with bright political signs. Then Dad's phone started to ring again. He set his jaw, glanced at the campaign signs, applied the brakes, and started to turn into the parking lot.

"Why are we stopping?" I asked. "Aren't we almost to Aunt Celia's house?"

"I'm dropping off some paperwork." Dad shook his head. "And start referring to it as *our* house," he said. "We need to establish ourselves here."

"Why? We're only staying two months."

He pulled into a space. "And that two months can get us back on track or further off, depending on how we use it. We better get our feet on the ground."

I leaned forward between the seats. “This sounds like a campaign. I don’t mean to bring up bad news, but we’re not campaigning, remember? You’re lying low for now.”

“I’m lying low in North Carolina,” Dad said. “This isn’t North Carolina. I want to get a feel for the political waters.” He stared at the brown building with a hungry look.

“Why would you care about the political waters?” I asked.

“I *always* care about the political waters. Especially in my hometown.”

I reached for the door. Politics was probably like any other addiction—there would be relapses. It seemed harmless to let Dad get one last fix. The next round of congressional elections wouldn’t be for two years, so unless he planned to run in a local election in Charlotte after the bad press died down, I was free from campaigning for the first time I could remember.

I stepped out of the car and stretched, giving Mom the opportunity to do a full scan of my outfit—a sweatshirt, sweatpants, and flip-flops. Her eyes lingered on the chipped polish somewhat covering my toenails. She looked at my father, and a whole conversation passed in their glance. “Why don’t you just stay in the car, Kate?” Her voice dripped with her usual sweetness, which was a half pitch too high to be real.

“It’s not like Dad is running for anything,” I said.

“I don’t think this is what you want people’s first impressions of you to be.”

“You people really have no idea how to take a break,” I said.

“You heard your father. He’s not taking a break. He’s getting back on track. You could do with some of that yourself,” Mom said.

Back on track? How was I supposed to get back on track when I was out in Texas while Parker pretended to be some do-gooder?

Wait. That was it. If I couldn't get good pictures in Texas, I could use the two months to volunteer. I spotted the red light blinking on my phone. If they left me in the car, I could call Tasha. "Okay, I'll stay in the car."

Dad raised an eyebrow. I'd made the shift too quickly. My mind searched for the right words. "You wanted me to be more cooperative," I said.

He nodded, pulled his jacket from the backseat, and closed the door. He fell for a classic Hamilton maneuver—people usually believe you when you're saying exactly what they want to hear.

I watched Mom and Dad disappear into the building before scrambling for my phone.

I called Tasha. "How many hours ahead of me is Parker?"

"About a hundred and twenty. Do you have a plan?"

"If Parker's hours transferred from Juárez, mine will transfer from Red Dirt. I'm going to rack up as many volunteer hours as I can over the next few months."

"How long are you in Texas?"

"Until Dad can show his face in DC again. Maybe two months."

"You're leaving me alone without a best friend for two months. What am I supposed to do?"

"Try to keep Parker away from children's hospitals and food banks."

The front door of the building opened, and I slumped down in my seat, letting the car door hide my phone. But instead of Mom and Dad, two people my age came out. The guy said something,

and the girl smiled and gently punched his arm. They looked like a good match. “You could go after that secret crush you won’t tell me about,” I said.

“I don’t have a secret crush.”

“You’ve been leaving lunch early for the past two weeks, which means you’re trying to get to English class early. You’re never early. Who is it? Derek Whittler?”

“No, I got over him months ago.”

“Hudson Mann?”

“You know I’m not telling you.”

“Adam Benson?”

“If I tell you—”

“It will never happen. I know. Your ridiculous superstition.”

“It’s not ridiculous. It’s a fact. If I tell anyone who my crush is, it never works out.”

“Fine. I’m just saying my absence will give you more time for Mystery Man.”

“I do need someone to take me to the movies while you’re out of town,” Tasha said.

The girl’s blonde ponytail swung behind her as she handed the guy a stack of books. *Books*. I sat up straighter and scanned the building for a sign.

RED DIRT LIBRARY. Just what I needed—an underfunded mecca of volunteer opportunities.

“I’m taking Mom’s advice and getting back on track. I’ll call you later.” I jammed the phone into the front pocket of my sweat-shirt and stepped out of the car.