

Chapter One

Sydney Bennett glanced at her watch then scanned the living room. Where was her purse? Just now, when she had about two minutes to spare, she couldn't find it. She let out a sigh of frustration and jogged to the bedroom of her ranch style home, averting her eyes from the unmade bed and stack of clothes on the floor. She snatched the purse from the desk chair and dashed up the hall. "Jessie, time to go."

When she entered the kitchen, her seventeen-year-old daughter still sat at the table scrolling through her phone. "Jessie."

Her blonde daughter looked up at her with a bland expression, then rolled her eyes. "I know, Mom. Calm down."

"Your ride'll be here any second and I don't see your bookbag or anything ready. Did you brush your teeth?"

"Oh, *Mom*. I'm not ten." Jessie slid out of her chair and, with a sigh, disappeared to the back of the house. She returned with her backpack and a baseball cap, still eyeing her phone.

Sydney hoisted her own tote over her shoulder, flipping her shoulder-length straight hair out of the way, and stood near the door. Her daily background hum of tension had kicked in about thirty minutes earlier. She took a breath. "It would be nice to be ready in advance, wouldn't it? I'd like us to leave at the same time, or else you first, so I can lock up." She cocked her head at her daughter. "Make sense?"

Frowning, Jessie nodded, not meeting her mother's eyes. "I'm tired of school. I can't wait till summer."

Something inside Sydney softened. She reached out to touch Jessie's free arm. "Me too. Won't be long, though. Another month and we'll have the whole summer. We can go visit Gram at the beach. Think about that. Summer'll be here soon." Jessie responded with a shrug as she shifted her backpack higher on one shoulder. Sydney kept the perky note in her voice. "And don't forget, today's Friday."

Sydney suspected more was going on in her daughter's teenage world, but there was no time to draw it gently out of her. And lately, drawing anything but a sullen pout from her only child was rare.

Just then, a car horn sounded in front of the house. "Bye, Mom." Jessie pushed the screen door.

"Bye, have a good—" but Jessie was gone. Sydney sighed but had no time to enjoy the silence. She grabbed her keys from a hook by the door and set the alarm. Maybe they could do something special together that weekend. A buffet breakfast or a pedicure. Once Friday was done, she'd make a few suggestions to perk Jessie up, and herself at the same time.

Immediately, Sydney joined the Charlotte, North Carolina morning traffic on the way to the high school where she'd been teaching math for the last twelve years. Why did it feel like twenty? How soon till she could retire?

Sydney shook her head and let out a staccato laugh, though sadness trickled down through her chest. She was only forty-nine, so it would be a while. The career she'd enjoyed for the first fifteen of her eighteen total years had become a daily sentence harder

each day to endure. Unlike some of her colleagues who planned to stay put in their jobs until age sixty-five, after which they'd receive the coveted teacher's pension for the rest of their days—she felt incapable of reaching that finish line. Could she even make it to this summer?

Sydney flipped on the radio and searched for something upbeat. Jazz or Christian rock.

One more month. She could do that, couldn't she? Never mind that the last week of that month would be an inhumane test of endurance, with conferences to prepare, a final exam to create and grade, semester grades to turn in . . . Just thinking about it made her want to turn at the next stoplight and plan a way to fake her own death.

Sure, there might be an easier way, but she'd have to find it later. She parked in the teacher's lot and sat still for a few minutes, watching her colleagues enter the building. Then she let out a sigh that was belly deep and opened the car door.



Later that day, Sydney lifted her gaze to the wall clock and stifled a sigh of relief. Five more minutes to go in her last period, statistics class. She'd just handed back an exam with disappointing average grades. Collective groans still echoed around the room.

"Okay, gang," she called over the grumbling. "I'm as disappointed as you all are with the grades. As you know, this was your last test before the final, so take this seriously. See what you did wrong and make sure you do *better* on the final. It's your opportunity to turn it around, get it?" She scanned the restless seniors for any sign of confirmation. Half of the students looked like their minds were elsewhere, packing up their books, looking at the clock, pulling out phones to check for text messages.

The bell rang, and within seconds, the room emptied. Sydney turned back to her desk but noticed Rod Matheson hovering near the back of the room. Rod stood at least six feet tall. His broad shoulders and muscular arms attested to hours on the football field and in the weight room. He would have been a nice-looking kid if not for the perpetually arrogant sneer he wore like a mask. Why was he hanging around?

As she arranged her papers and books on her desk, he approached. "Ms. Bennett?"

She looked up. Instead of a sardonic grin, it surprised her to see a humbler expression. She could almost picture how he had looked as an innocent nine-year-old, before football stardom and the adulation of his peers convinced him he was a super-celebrity who owed nothing to anyone but deserved everything.

"Hey, Rod. What's going on?" She kept her tone friendly, though his grades were among the worst. And she couldn't help her undying disdain for him.

"Um, well, I wanted to ask, well, here on my test you marked this one wrong . . ." He held out the document and pointed to one of his equations.

Sydney circled the desk and took it from him. "Yes, you got that one wrong. Do you remember, we went over this last week?" She looked up at his face, seeing the furrow between his brows deepen as he likely realized his humble act was about to backfire. She

returned her gaze to the paper. “This one, too. I know we went over it the day before the test. Remember?” Of course, he didn’t. Sydney knew the answer. Rod had been goofing off all semester.

Rod dropped his shoulders. “Do you think—I mean, could you give me partial credit for these four? They were partly right, weren’t they? That would bump my grade up a little bit.”

Sydney stared at him. “You’re kidding, right?” She shook her head and pointed to the equation. “I’m sorry, Rod. They *aren’t* right. I can’t mark them right. Even partially.” She wanted to shake her head at his audacity.

“It’s just that I’m still applying for colleges, and this’ll mess up my average.”

Anger frothed up in Sydney’s chest, but she held her voice to a monotone. “I agree that your grades haven’t been great this semester, Rod. I’m not sure if you didn’t understand the concepts or if maybe you didn’t work enough at home. I gave you a couple names of tutors, remember? I also offered to help you after class. Did you take any of those opportunities?”

He didn’t answer, but she saw his jaw tighten and his nostrils flare.

She backed up a step. “I know being on the football team takes a lot of time.” As do parties, doing shots and joints with friends, serial dating. “But your main job here is to study. Football is secondary.”

She definitely wouldn’t make headway with *that* argument, and she didn’t expect to. Rod’s jaw remained tight, and his eyes took on a murderous cast. Suddenly, Sydney became aware of his height over her and his muscular physique. And how close she stood to him. A slight wave of alarm grazed her mind, followed by a chill in her spine.

She kept her voice businesslike and moved another step back under the guise of reaching for something on her desk. “As I said at the end of class, you can make up points in the final. The final is worth more than this one. You have about three weeks before then. I’m sure you can bring your grade up.”

Instead of the conciliatory nod she’d hoped to see, he said, “Earlier in the term and again a couple weeks ago you said if we had good averages on the tests, we could skip the final. Remember?”

“Yes, I remember. But that isn’t your case, Rod.”

He shifted his weight, his agitation visibly growing. “I won’t be here for the final. I leave on a trip the day before. You said we could skip the final, so I made plans—”

“No, Rod. I said those who had a *good average* could skip the final. I even said the total average of all exams of the semester had to be at least ninety percent in order to skip the final. You weren’t aware that you were well below that?”

When he didn’t answer, Sydney threw up her hands. “I can’t help you with this, Rod. I’ve already given you many chances to do better, but it’s April. Oh, there *is* one more thing I can suggest.” She’d be amazed if he took her suggestion, but she’d offer it, anyway. “I have an extra-credit assignment you could do. And it’s a gift, believe me. I don’t have to give extra credit, but under the circumstances.” He didn’t respond. Sydney turned to the desk. “Where did I put that description? Here it is, statistics in the business world research project. You may be interested in that. Didn’t you tell me once you wanted to study business in college?”

He remained silent, but his expression had closed. She wished he'd just give up and leave her room. She desperately needed to begin her weekend. Maybe the local pool wouldn't be too crowded. A cool swim. That would be perfect.

She handed him the paper. "You can get a few extra points for this." He didn't take it, so she set it on the front edge of the desk. "Your best bet to raise your average is to change your trip dates and take the exam."

"I can't," he muttered so softly she almost didn't hear him. He said louder, "So, you can't change this grade? Just this once? How about I take the exam a week early?"

She stared at him. He avoided her gaze. "I've already done what I can to help you do better, but you know what? It's not my job to give you good grades so you can get into your chosen college. I do *my* job. It's *your* job to learn this stuff." She paused, knowing she was taking too much time with him. Wasting her breath. "You didn't put enough into it all semester, Rod, and now you're scrambling for favors because you realize the consequences. Face the weight of those consequences now and it'll improve the rest of your life, I promise."

A flash of what looked like utter confusion crossed his face. He grimaced. "Thanks for the lecture, Teach. You don't know anything about my life."

She crossed her arms and faced him. "No, I guess I don't. I don't know how you spend your time or how you're doing in your other classes. Maybe you think you can charm your way through high school because you're a big football star. It doesn't impress me. The numbers impress me because they prove you've made the effort to learn. Seeing if it even *matters* to you, that impresses me."

She should have said, "That'll be all, now go home." But something flickered inside, maybe a bit of sorrow over the kid's choices so far in his young life. "You have potential, Rod. Don't squander it. I mean, don't waste it."

"I know what squander means." He glowered and shot a glance toward the door.

"I assume so."

Her tone came out harder than she'd planned. As the words left her lips, Rod stepped toward her, appearing to grow larger as he did. With a guttural groan and a filthy expletive, he thrust her shoulders hard with both hands. She let out a cry and pushed back at him but hit air. She flailed her arms to catch herself. Sydney fell back against the whiteboard, bumping her head against it. She cried out when her lower back and waist hit the metal ridge which held dry erase pens. Rod stepped back, spun around, and left the room, still muttering obscenities.

Sydney dragged herself away from the whiteboard and stumbled into her chair, trembling all over. What had just happened? The lightning speed of her student's aggression was something she'd never seen in eighteen years of teaching. She'd never been afraid of any of her students, though many male seniors were much bigger than she was. She had to report it.

She winced with pain as she stood, locked up her room, and limped to the office of Wade Hannon, her principal. Pushing open the half-glass door, she saw only Pam, the secretary. The nearby offices were dark and empty. "Hey, Pam. Is Wade still here? I was just attacked by a student. I need to tell him."

Pam looked up abruptly, and her mouth dropped open. She stood and leaned forward over the counter. “Are you okay, Sydney? What happened?”

Sydney kept it brief but was glad to be able to tell someone else, even if it wasn't Wade. “I need to tell Wade. I guess he's gone until Monday. I'll have to call him at home.”

“Yes, that's the best thing to do. He'll definitely want to know about this.”

“I want that kid out of my class. There's just a month left, but I don't know what else he would do.” What would it be next time, a gun? A knife? Sydney shuddered.

“Wade had meetings off campus all afternoon, so he left the building a few hours ago. Give him a call, Sydney.”

“I will. Thanks anyway, Pam. I'm going home, but I told you about this first. The student is Rod Matheson.” She said his name slowly, clearly.

Pam's eyes widened. “The Mathesons won't want to hear this.”

That was for sure. Sydney had forgotten the kid's parents were on the school board and prominent in the banking world as well as the community. “I don't care who his parents are, Rod isn't above the law. I may press charges.”

Sydney fumed while she drove home. She touched the back of her head. A small knot had formed. Her lower back throbbed. No doubt she'd have a large bruise. She'd ask Jessie to take photos, proof of her claim. Knowing Rod's parents, they'd do everything in their power to get him off the hook, say he was worried and acted rashly, didn't mean it, or some other nonsense.

By dinnertime, Wade had not returned her phone calls. Three, to be exact, each one with mounting urgency in her tone. Where was he?

Finally, the phone rang. “Sydney, I'm sorry to be so late returning your call. I was in back-to-back meetings.”

“Until six-thirty? Really, Wade? I'm just glad Rod didn't have a gun.” Sydney couldn't keep frustration from coating her voice, along with the feeling that her boss didn't care about her welfare. She thought she heard social banter in the background, as if he were in a restaurant or bar.

“Now, Sydney, Rod isn't usually like that. I've known his family for years. He's a senior and they have a lot of pressure on them, especially now at the end of the year.” His voice came out silky, unruffled.

“Are you kidding me?” Her tone became shrill. “Every kid is pressured at the end of the year. That doesn't make them physically assault their teacher. You're minimizing this and I don't appreciate it. I was *attacked* in my *classroom* today. If you don't do something, I'm going to press charges.”

“No, Sydney, don't do that. I don't think that's the way to go. Besides, the Mathesons would be able to hire the best legal defense and you might go through all that for nothing.” Wade cleared his throat. “I'm not saying I won't handle it. Of course, I will. I'm on your side. What Rod did is not appropriate at all. I want to make sure my teachers are safe. But don't be impulsive. We have a protocol to follow. Let me ask you, are you injured?”

“Yes, but not badly. He pushed me, I fell against the whiteboard and hit my head. I also hit the metal railing on the bottom, so I have a bruise. But I do not want him in my class for the rest of the school year. I'm afraid of what he'll do next.”

“I can try to get him transferred to Cheryl’s class if you want. I’ll do that on Monday, but I’ll also have a conference with his parents. In the meantime, why don’t you rest over the weekend? I know it’s upsetting. It’ll do you good to rest and recover.”

After they hung up, Sydney had the lingering sense that her life was suddenly hanging in mid-air, and no one cared enough to catch her. A feeling not altogether unfamiliar. The school scene replayed in her mind several times. She flinched with the memory of the impact of the white board against her spine.

With a shiver, she crossed her arms and went to the kitchen window. And stared out at the back yard darkening under a setting sun.

