

CLEAN

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Cate released the breath that'd been trapped in her chest since early morning as she pulled into her apartment's lot. It was barely eleven, but exhaustion consumed her. She wanted to curl up on her couch, watch sad movies, and sob her eyes out, but she couldn't to give into her grief anymore. *What's done is done*. From now on, she'd focus on the present, instead of dwelling on the past and what should've—could've—been.

Cate's attention caught on a beat-up white SUV as she drove past. *That looks like...* She shook her head. *Don't be ridiculous*. She pulled into her spot and headed in, listing the things to do to make her living space *hers* again.

"Catie?"

Cate's focus snapped back to the present. "Kristin? What are you doing here?"

Kristin grinned, holding up a bottle of wine and tinfoil-wrapped plate. "Mom told me about your divorce. I'm here with the cure for a broken heart: wine and chocolate."

Cate shook her head and unlocked her door. "I don't know what Mom told you, but I'm fine." She dropped her purse on the entryway bench and threw her keys onto the counter, then faced her sister, who'd moved into the doorway without crossing the threshold.

Kristin rolled her eyes. "I know you like to tough things out, show how strong and independent you are, but there's no way you're fine. Your marriage ended. The person you pictured spending the rest of your life with is gone. You're not fine."

Cate glared at her. "How could you possibly know how I'm feeling? You've never been divorced. Hell, you've never even broken up with anyone. You've been in the world's most perfect relationship since you were twenty. You have no idea how I'm feeling."

Something flickered behind Kristin's eyes.

Probably pity.

"You're right, I don't know how you're feeling."

"Glad we agree," Cate said. She started to close the door. "I'll—"

Kristin stepped in. "Why don't I come in so we can talk about it. I did come all this way."

Cate wanted to shove her sister out and slam the deadbolt behind her, but... *Damnit.* "I guess it's a haul to get here from Philly. You can stay for bit."

Kristin beamed. "Awesome! I'll just put this down over here, 'kay?" She put down her things and walked in further. "What do you want to do first? Talk? Shop? Cry?"

She kept chatting, but Cate ignored her. She dug underneath the sink, grabbing paper towels, wipes, all-purpose cleaner, everything that she'd use. She carried them to the table and headed to the linen closet for the vacuum and duster.

"Um, Cate? What're you doing?"

"What does it look like I'm doing? I'm cleaning." Cate cocked her head, considering the pile. *What am I forgetting?*

"Actually, it seems less like cleaning, and more like avoiding me and my questions."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Cate said. *Trash bags.* She went back and grabbed the box from beneath the sink. "I said you could stay, didn't I?"

"Yes, but then you started ignoring me."

Cate nodded, surveying her trove. *Now, where do I start?* She turned to face her sister.

"What do you want from me?"

"I want to talk."

"Look, Kristin, I said you could stay, and I meant it. But I have things to do that I won't put off just because you showed up. If you wanna stay, stay. If you don't, don't."

Kristin's jaw tightened. "Okay."

"So... you're leaving?" Cate tried to keep hope from her voice.

"No, I'll help."

"What?"

"I said," Kristin glared at Cate, "I'll help. You're cleaning your apartment. I'll help you."

"You hate cleaning."

They'd shared a room when they were kids. At one point, Cate put down a line of tape, dividing the room into the messy side—Kristin's—and the clean side—Cate's. Cate wasn't allowed on Kristin's side, meaning she couldn't organize Kristin's mess of toys and clothes, and Kristin wasn't allowed on Cate's side, meaning she couldn't make a mess and force Cate to live in it. Of course, Cate's side happened to include their bedroom door, which also meant Kristin couldn't leave when their parents called them for dinner.

"Yeah," Kristin said, shrugging, "but I love you. I'm willing to do what I hate if it means spending time together."

Shame pierced Cate's chest. Her sister was here because she loved Cate, and what was Cate's response? Cate's eyes stung with guilt, and she turned away to avoid Kristin's gaze.

"Thank you," she said, swallowing the lump in her throat. "I'll start with the bathroom. Could you vacuum, please?" Cate armed herself with the bleach and a roll of paper towels and marched into the bathroom.

The white noise of the vacuum lulled Cate into a meditative state. Her mind drifted as she scrubbed the memories of her failed marriage. She washed away the one time they'd tried shower sex, refusing to remember the way they'd fallen, their limbs tangled together, to the shower floor. They'd laughed despite the bruises that'd form, slipping and sliding on the soap-slicked tile as they endeavored to stand. After they'd finished, they agreed to never again attempt something a magazine mentioned.

She turned to the sink, avoiding the toothbrush caddy from their wedding registry, and scrubbed the sink basin. Distantly, she recognized when the vacuum stopped but still jumped when Kristin's voice chirped behind her.

"Done with the vacuuming. At least," Kristin said, glancing at the tiled floor, "I finished the main areas. I didn't go into the study. I assume it's already been cleaned?"

Cate scrubbed harder the water stain on the countertop and ignored the pointed question.

"Great. Could you do the dishes?"

"Actually, I thought I'd help in here." Kristin knelt beside toilet and swallowed a gag.

"You haven't done this yet, right?"

"Uh, no, I haven't. But you don't have to—"

"It's okay." Kristen smiled. "I don't mind. This way we can chat as we clean." After a few minutes of silent spraying and fierce scrubbing, Kristin spoke. "Where were you this morning? I showed up at nine, but you were gone."

"You waited that long for me to get back? Why?" Cate glanced at her.

Kristin was wielding a toilet brush with a scrunched nose. "I told you, I wanted to make sure you were okay. But you didn't answer my question—why were you gone?"

Cate focused on rinsing and wiping away the disinfectant, pondering a way to escape. "I had things to do."

"Like what?"

"Just *things*, Kristin. I don't owe you a play-by-play. Leave it alone." Cate's defensive tone made her flinch. *With a voice like that, no wonder he left.* Cate shoved away the ugly thought. Kristin was blinking furiously, holding back tears. Cate pressed her eyelids together. "Hungry!" She yelped. Hopefully, this would solve both Cate's asshole-ness and Kristin's determined probing.

Kristin looked at her sister like she'd gone insane, and Cate realized she hadn't finished the thought.

"I'm hungry. Maybe we could do lunch? You could go out and pick something up for us. Your choice, my treat."

"Fine."

Cate finished in the restroom and moved onto the living room. She wiped the windows as Kristen walked in, holding brown paper bags.

"I went to the deli and got sandwiches," Kristen said. "Since it's on your dime and not mine, I also threw in some sodas and chips."

Cate huffed. "Oh, right. My teacher's salary can really afford all those extras."

"Better your teacher's salary than my part-time, student budget."

Cate laughed and grabbed plates and napkins, while Kristen unloaded the food and pushed aside the cleaning supplies.

"So—"

"I haven't heard any news on the wedding front lately." Cate cut her off. "What's up with that?"

Kristen choked. "We don't have to talk about that. I'm sure you don't wanna hear about wedding stuff right now, with..."

"The devastating collapse of my marriage?" Cate shrugged through the grief souring her stomach. "No divorce is going to keep me from wedding details, especially yours."

Kristen frowned. "I don't know..."

"C'mon, I'm dying to hear all about the dress, the venue, and... everything." *Keep smiling, Cate. Keep smiling and don't think about the album glaring at you from the coffee table.* Her smile felt more like a primal baring of teeth, some animalistic effort to exert the force of her will, but she held it nonetheless.

Kristin sighed. "Like you know, we haven't chosen a date yet, and we..." Kristin's voice caught, and she cleared her throat. "We can't seem to agree on those other things, either."

"Well, you know what they say. Planning a wedding is one of the most stressful things a person can do in life. Don't worry. Once you pick a date, it'll all come together."

Kristin pursed her lips. "Right. Maybe we can—"

"How's school?" Cate interrupted, her heart aching from thoughts of her own wedding. If Kristin asked how she felt, she'd burst into tears.

"Oh, it's... fine." Kristin swigged her soda. "How's—"

"Do you like your classes? You're in the vet tech program, right?"

Cate proceeded to ask Kristin every possible question about her life, avoiding her sister's threatening interrogation using every evasive strategy she knew. All the phone calls with their mother had trained her for this.

Everything was going perfectly until her gaze wandered from Kristin to the hallway, and Cate caught a glimpse of the closed door. She didn't see a wooden panel. She saw the scratch across the bottom, where he'd damaged it moving furniture. She recalled her panic upon first seeing it and her then-husband's soothing words. He'd insisted it was just a little scratch and they'd paint over it before moving out. Except they'd never gotten around to it and now he was gone, leaving her to patch up the damage he'd left behind.

"Enough about me and my boring life. How're you doing? I know," Kristin held her hands up, "you don't want to talk about it, but humor me. I'm your sister, and I've answered every question you've thrown at me for the past half-hour. Surely you can spare a reply for just one of mine."

Cate blinked, as emotions fought for release. Her head throbbed. "It's only been twenty minutes." She grabbed their empty plates and headed to the kitchen. "We should get back to work. There's still a lot to do." She looked at Kristin. "Unless you're ready to go?"

Kristin shook her head. "Nope. I have all the time in the world. What now, Catie?"

"You do the dishes. I'm gonna work on my closet." Cate bolted to the safety of her closet.

She closed the door and inhaled, comforted by the warm lights and pleasant perfume. *She's only going to be here for a few more hours. You can do this.* After composing herself, Cate sorted through her clothes, discarding the items drenched with memories and folding them into a large storage bin to donate.

After a good half-hour, she'd removed half of her wardrobe. *At least this gives me an excuse to buy new clothes.* As though she'd have the money available for such an expense. She needed to remember that she was on a single income now—a middle school teacher's salary. She'd be lucky to keep living in her apartment without a roommate.

Kristin came in, holding a book. "Hey, Catie? Where were these photos taken?"

Icy shock shot through Cate.

"I can see they were taken in Europe, so I guess the better question is *when?* We used to talk about going there, remember? We said we'd backpack all over when you graduated college, and I graduated high school. But we never did." Kristin looked at Cate, still frozen. "Why didn't we, Catie?"

Cate thawed in a blaze of fury. "Why do you have that?"

"I found it in Ha- in *his* office. I thought I'd help clean it out so you wouldn't have to." Kristin smiled, obviously pleased with her own genius.

"I didn't ask you to do that," Cate said, clenching her fists. "In fact, I didn't ask you to do anything anywhere near that room. Why did you think it okay to go in there?"

Kristin blinked, stepping back from her sister's fury. "I just thought—"

"No, you didn't think at all. Otherwise, you wouldn't have done something as monumentally *stupid* as bringing me the photo album from my honeymoon on the day I sign divorce papers. I mean, are you fucking kidding me, Kristin? I've been trying all day, but you

just don't get it. I don't want to talk about my divorce. I don't want to talk about my feelings. And I certainly don't want to talk about my honeymoon!" Cate grabbed the album from Kristin and slammed the cover shut. "You never know when to quit, and on most days, that's fine. I deal with it because we're family and I don't have a choice. But today? Today's been the most exhausting day I've ever had, and I don't have the energy to deal with you and your questions."

Cate stormed out, pausing in front of the now-ajar door to the spare-bedroom-turned-study. The room was a mess—thanks to her ex, who'd never been organized. The shelves were bare, save for a few books Cate had given to him, some knick-knacks from trips they'd taken, and a framed wedding photo. She wore a white, poofy ballgown and he a black suit at the front of a church. They were in the middle of their vows, and he was sliding the ring onto her finger while she held back tears.

"Catie, please." Kristin dragged Cate back to reality with a force that gave her whiplash.

Cate spun around, dropped the album onto the nearest surface, and glared at her sister.

"No. I want—I *need* you out."

Kristin was choking back tears.

But Cate didn't care. Too many of her own emotions bubbled and brewed beneath the surface, and Kristin couldn't be close by when they inevitably overflowed. "Please."

Kristin fled, grabbing her things, and rushing out. Cate waited until she was sure Kristin had left, then finally—*finally*—sank to the floor and sobbed.

After she'd excreted all the moisture from her body, Cate left the spare room, shutting the door behind her. *No more crying today.* She trudged to her bedroom, eyeing the bin of clothes piled high. She grabbed the lid and clicked it on, locking it. She was dragging it out to her car when her phone rang.

She answered without thought. "Kristin, I'm—"

"Kristin?" squawked the voice. "Why'd you think that I was Kristin? Did you even check who was calling before picking up? That's dangerous, Catherine. You need to be careful, now that you're on your own."

Oh, no. "Hi, Mom."

"Hello, darling. How *are* you doing? I heard from Evelyn the divorce was finalized today, you poor dear."

"Mom, why are you still talking to her? I just divorced her son."

"Nonsense, I *love* Evelyn."

Cate massaged her temples. "Mom, was there a reason you called, because—"

"Oh! Yes, I was calling to see if you knew Kristin's whereabouts. She left the house early this morning but failed to leave a note letting your father and I know where she went and when she'd be back. I tried calling her, but her phone's off. Have you seen her?"

"Why would she leave a note? Are you staying with her in Philly?"

"Philly? She left there weeks ago after she and James broke up."

Cate's head spun. "They broke up? Why?"

"Apparently, he cheated on her, the bastard, so she moved in with us. Don't the two of you talk anymore? You'd think she'd have told you."

"I... had no idea." Guilt crept in as she thought back to everything she'd said.

Cate's mother tutted. "Well, it's hardly your fault. She can be so secretive about her life. It's hard to get *anything* out of her."

"Right," Cate said, wincing at the words.

"Anyway, have you seen her?" She answered her own question. "No, of course you haven't, otherwise you'd know all this. Please, tell her to call me if you hear from her."

"Sure, Mom."

They exchanged farewells, and then Cate headed out. *I need to find my sister.*

Cate drove around for thirty minutes, searching several parking lots before spying her sister's junker. The beat-up SUV was alone in Pleasant Valley Park's lot when Cate pulled in. She rushed to the bench where her sister sat, looking out at the lake. "Kristin, I've been looking everywhere for you."

"You found me."

Cate sat down. "Mom's panicking. Something about not leaving a note?"

"Now you know." Kristin nodded. "That's why I was so willing to stay and help. My life's a mess."

"It could be worse."

Kristin lifted an eyebrow. "My fiancé cheated, so I left. I had nowhere else to live and no sustainable income since I'm in school, so I moved back into my parents' place. I'm failing my classes because I haven't thought about math and physics since high school. How much worse could it be?"

"You could have a shitty sister who screams at you for caring and throws you out."

Kristin smiled through puffy eyes. "Yeah, that'd suck."

Cate grabbed her hand. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said all those things."

"It's fine."

"No, it's not."

"I kept asking questions you clearly didn't want to answer, and then I asked about your honeymoon. It's enough to set any new divorcée off."

Cate laughed. "Maybe so, but I still shouldn't have yelled. " Cate squeezed Kristin's hand. "You *can* talk to me, you know."

"I'm just so sor—"

"Why don't we both say we screwed up and forgive one another, okay? We could do this all day."

"Okay."

They sat quietly for a moment, staring at the lake. "Hey, Kristin? Do you want to move in with me?"

"Really?"

"I mean, I have a spare room. And you might not have much, but anything helps. A teacher's salary only goes so far."

"Oh, Catie, I'd love that. I'll be neat, I swear."

"No, you won't, but it'll be fine. We'll work it out."

"And we can yell at each other and run away every time we fight." Kristin grinned.

"That, too."

The End.