

## BRUISES

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CW: Violence, abuse, use of alcohol

I brought Kendall to my sister's wedding last weekend. She was so comfortable there, miles from her home, surrounded by strangers. She danced around the floor, befriendng my sister and the bridesmaids instantly. She wore a long, red dress that seemed resistant to gravity, so when she walked through the hall, it floated behind her. She was beautiful.

My mother had pulled me aside later to ask about the bruises on Kendall's arms. "She does karate," I told her. "It's nothing." She wasn't convinced.

"Bruises like that are rarely nothing," my mom said. "Keep an eye on her. You wouldn't want her to come home with something worse than a bruise."

My mother's nagging had a way of echoing in my mind. So, I stood in the lobby of the dojo, watching her and her classmates in the next room. They all wore the same black uniform: wide, stiff pants, a robe-like top covered in patches, and a belt tied neatly around their waists. Kendall was the only girl in the class, her small frame dwarfed by the guys around her.

She moved quickly and certain around the floor. She was working with one of the guys; their movements matched, the positioning of their arms and legs deliberate. It looked like a dance, and their precision made it clear they had done this a hundred times before. Kendall stepped in anticipation of a quick kick from the guy, her arm passing his leg to the side and causing him to spin before they both froze, facing each other with their arms bend in front of them, then stepped so they were standing side-by-side facing their instructor. I could hear the snap of their uniforms as their arms went to their sides.

I couldn't hear what Darren, their instructor, said to them, but the three of them laughed, rigid stances quickly abandoned. After another moment of discussion, Darren left to work with some of the other students.

Kendall hadn't noticed I was there until the class was over.

She exited the dojo a few minutes later with the guy she had been working with behind her. She smiled at me, a moment of surprise passing her face. She got to the lobby, and I tucked her beneath my arm, holding her close.

"You must be Andrew," Nick said in greeting. "I'm Nick. I've heard a lot about you!"

So, this was Nick. She'd talked about him before. She'd told me that she had been training with him since they were both really young. I'd never

considered the fact that he was a guy before. It was obvious, of course, but I'd never thought about it.

"It's nice to meet you," I said in response.

"How'd you like watching class?" Kendall said, slipping out of my arm to put her shoes on.

"It was pretty cool!" I said. "I couldn't hear much of what was being said, but you guys certainly laugh a lot."

As if I'd made a joke, they both laughed again, smiling organically at each other.

"Yeah," Nick said. "We definitely have fun."

My heart skipped a beat. "Well, we should get going." I grabbed Kendall's hand and started walking towards the door. "It was nice to meet you, Nick."

"Yeah, no worries, see you tomorrow Kendall!"

Kendall waved as we walked out the door. She practically skipped home, her energy still high after class. She stared at the window display of the bookstore until I dragged her away. She smiled at the Christmas decorations along the street. She pointed out knickknacks in the window of the antique store, giggling at a horrendous porcelain pig. She was infectious, and all my concern about Nick was gone as I followed her traipse down the street.

But then we got home, and she took off her jacket, revealing a new little bruise on her forearm.

I started spending more and more time standing in the lobby during her classes. Kendall and Nick danced together, two partners flowing together with punches and grabs and twists until the one playing assailant landed on the floor and the one playing victim stood a pace away. It was over, until the assailant stood up to swap roles. On and on this went, a quick burst of movement, and then nothing. Watching tiny Kendall throw Nick to the ground was mesmerizing. But then they'd switch.

I watched as she punched towards Nick, her feet spread apart, her left arm poised protectively in front of her body and her right arm extended. He moved quickly, one hand catching her arm while his other hand hit her stiffly in the ribcage. She bent over, and before I could even blink, he'd thrown her face-first to the ground, her wrist still in his grip. I went outside.

In our apartment later, I pinned her against the wall, her hands in my hair as I kissed her neck. She usually ran right to the shower when we got home, but I caught her before she could, so the sweet smell of her sweat drifted around us. I pushed her shirt up, feeling her soft skin, the tense muscles of her back and sides, the polyester of her sports bra. My hand brushed her right side, and she took a sharp breath, flinching to the side.

“Sorry,” she said, slightly out of breath. “It’s still a bit tender.”

She’d never flinched in class. She’d lean into each hit, and stand up straight to let it happen again. But now she flinched.

A small bruise was forming on her side, right where Nick’s fist had made impact. It was fresh, a bright reddish-purple colour. It looked angry. I was angry. “He hit you.”

“Well, yeah,” she shrugged, pulling her shirt over her head and throwing it on the floor. “That’s a bit of an occupational hazard.”

“But he hurt you.”

“Don’t worry about it, it happens.” She was laughing now. “I’ve been bruised a million times before.”

“This looks worse than the others.”

She shrugged again. “Accidents like this happen sometimes. I’ve done way worse to him. Did you know I broke his thumb once? This is nothing.”

She slid her cool hands up my shirt, pressing her lips against mine, and the thought was lost from my mind.

For the next two weeks, I watched that bruise grow and darken. For weeks, as it faded from purple to blue to green to yellow, I watched Nick hit her, and hit her, and hit her, little bruises marring her arms and legs. He was marking her, claiming her.

She never flinched.

“I don’t like how Nick looks at you,” I said to her over dinner.

She furrowed her brow at me. “How he looks at me? What do you mean?”

I regretted bringing it up right away. I’d somehow managed to avoid an argument about this in the months since I first met Nick, and I wanted to keep it that way.

“Forget it,” I said, looking back to my salmon. “I shouldn’t have said anything.”

The look on her face proved me right. “No,” she said, putting her fork down on the table. “You probably shouldn’t have. But you did. So, go on. What’s the issue?”

I sighed. “I just think he’s too comfortable, as if he expects something from you.”

“What does that even mean? We’re friends. We’ve been friends for years. I’d hope he’s comfortable with me by now.”

“Well, he’s comfortable enough to beat you black and blue every day.”

“Beat me? You do know we do karate together, right? It’s a contact sport. That’s part of it.”

“It shouldn’t be, though! He’s so much bigger than you.”

“So, if I was bigger, or a boy, you’d be okay with it?”

“That’s not what I’m saying. I’d just prefer it if you worked with someone more your size.”

“Listen. It took me years to gain enough respect from the people in that class for them to treat me like the others. They know I’m smaller than them. Nick especially knows that. He’s the only one who takes me seriously. Everyone else thinks they’re going to break me or something. But realistically, I need to work with someone bigger than me. He’s helping me. There’s nothing malicious about it.”

“I just don’t think you should have come home covered in bruises all the time.”

She shook her head, looking up at the ceiling for a moment. “You don’t get it,” her voice was so much quieter now, and I could hear my heart thrumming in my ears. She stood up, muttered something about a walk, and left, the door closing quietly behind her.

A few days of quiet tension later, my phone chimed with a text from her.

“I’m sorry to do this,” it said. “But I’ve gotta be with Sensei and Nick tonight after class. We’re going out for dinner. Something happened, I’ll explain more I promise. I’ll be home later and we can talk. I love you.”

All of the anger and jealousy that had been brewing inside of me erupted, and my phone flew across the room.

The past few years had been a lie. For our entire relationship, she had been with Nick. The millions of bruises that had covered her arms and legs for as long as I’d known her proved it. Each little bump and scrape on her body were evidence of a relationship that she deemed more important than me. She’d lied for years, and I believed her.

No. This was his fault. Kendall was with *me*; she always came back to me afterwards. Nick was hurting her, abusing her. She must feel so trapped, returning to those classes over and over again. And now he was taking her after class too. He was taking her, and she couldn’t do anything to stop it. She was trying. She had to be.

But why didn’t she just tell me what was happening? Why did she always just keep going back?

Hours passed in a blur of bad whiskey and flipped over furniture, and I started walking.

On the far side of the restaurant by the dojo, Kendall sat next to Nick at the bar. Their bodies were turned towards each other on the stools, knees almost touching. Darren was nowhere to be seen. Clearly, she’d thought that mentioning his presence would make me less suspicious. My chest and head felt like they

were on fire. Their conversation seemed serious, neither of them laughing like they usually did, and when Kendall shook her head and looked down, Nick reached out and touched her hand.

The world stopped. The pounding in my ears went silent. All I could see was that touch, their intimacy.

I rushed across the room and pulled Kendall off the stool. “Don’t touch her,” I said slowly, trying to stop my tongue from slurring the sounds together. “Don’t touch her.”

Nick was standing now, his hands up innocently. “Dude, you’re drunk. Calm down, we can talk.”

Kendall ripped her arm out of my grip; I hadn’t realized how tightly I was holding her. She planted herself in front of me, hands on my chest. “What is your problem?” she said firmly.

I hardly noticed her. Every nerve in my body was poised towards Nick, his eyebrows slightly furrowed, frowning, watching me. He had one hand raised towards me, his other reaching towards Kendall. He wasn’t touching her. It was so much worse.

I got Kendall out of the way, barely registering her slight shout and the clutter of wooden furniture. My arm swung towards Nick. The world tipped, my body lurching into the movement, a vice attached to my wrist. A sharp pain rushed through my torso. My shoulder pulled against the momentum of my fist. The floor flew towards me.

When I woke up, sprawled on the couch in the apartment, the room was still spinning, my vision blurry. Groaning, I slowly sat up, my right side catching painfully with each breath. Kendall was sitting on the chair across from me, the thick smell of the coffee she was drinking making me nauseous. She sat in silence, sipping her coffee, staring out the window, ignoring my labored movements.

My ribcage continued to throb, and I could picture the bruise forming, fresh, bright, angry. He’d stopped that useless punch so easily. I’d never even made contact. I curled in on myself, eyes squeezed shut to block out the spinning of the room. My side screamed with the movement. I sat there, head close to my knees, arms wrapped tight around myself, weight pressing on my shoulders, screaming silence in my head.

“There’s a lady in the beginner adult class,” Kendall said suddenly, jolting me into a sitting position, bile rising in my throat. “She joined a few months ago and has been training pretty regularly. Always super attentive, watched everything that we were doing really closely. And she picked stuff up pretty

quickly. We don't get many female students, let alone adult ones, so it was nice to see her get so... connected to it."

The weight was still pressing me. I wanted the silence back; I wanted her to stop. "Why are you telling me this?"

She put her hand up, silencing me. "Darren pulled Nick and I aside last night when she didn't show up to class. She was in the hospital. That's when I text you. After classes last night, the three of us went to visit her. She'd, uh, thought that the stuff she'd learned in the few months she'd been training was enough to stop her husband from beating her." She let out a quick huff of breath, almost a sad little laugh. "It wasn't."

*Stop.* "I don't understand..."

"After the hospital, we went to the bar to talk. Sensei wanted to make sure we were okay. He had to leave though, so Nick and I stayed there. I taught that student. I'd thought it was just a coincidence that I was always assigned to her, but apparently, she'd requested it. I'd spent all that time with her and never even knew what she was going through. I failed her. Nothing I showed her could help her. I just needed to talk to someone."

"Why did it have to be Nick?"

"He understands. He listens."

"You could talk to me."

"I clearly can't, though. You don't listen. I literally just brought it up with you, and all you cared about was that I was with Nick."

"I don't like him being alone with you. I don't trust him."

"You don't know him. You've never even tried to get to know him."

She wasn't speaking loudly, but the pounding in my head and my side raised with every word she said. "Kendall, please..."

"I thought that if you came to my classes and met my friends, we'd be closer. But you never cared."

"Kendall, stop, please, let me try again. We can talk about this."

She shook her head, holding my gaze for a moment, her eyes dry and clear. *Stop, please stop.*

"Please," I was begging, my hands shaking. "I want to try again."

She stood up and walked to the front door, picking up a full duffle bag from the entryway, and walked out.

The next day, I went to the dojo. She was there alone, her uniform abandoned in favour of some leggings and a sports bra, her hands wrapped. She moved gracefully around a heavy bag hanging from the ceiling, the chains holding it jingling with each contact. Every muscle in her body was tense, her bare arms and back firm. Her steps were subtle, her feet barely lifting from the

floor as she moved. Everything she did looked natural, like these movements were hers and hers alone. Her damp skin shone under the fluorescent lighting of the room, and there wasn't a bruise to be seen.

She never looked away from the bag. She never noticed me standing there, or if she did, she gave no indication. She didn't need to.

I turned around and left, the door closing quietly behind me.