

5.55



Claerie Kavanaugh

5:55

by Claerie Kavanaugh

Cover from pexels.com and licensed under Creative Commons Zero; edited by Claerie Kavanaugh.

Text © 2016 Claerie Kavanaugh

This work is fiction. All names, characters, settings, and happenings are product of the author's imagination; any resemblance to actual events, locations, or persons is entirely coincidental.

All Rights Reserved

Cassie felt his eyes linger on her a little longer than they should have. She shivered. No matter what she did, Lydia's confession wouldn't leave her mind.

I should've helped her. I know what he's like. How could I have just left her there to fend for herself?

Even though the full-ride swimming scholarship was the best thing to happen to Cassie in the last five years, a sickening wave of guilt churned her stomach every time Lydia's name flashed on her caller I.D. Today especially, she wanted to be with her.

But she couldn't. Lydia was in Detroit and she was all the way in California. She sighed and fiddled with the cell tucked in her jacket pocket, willing it to ring again. She had never felt so helpless before in her life—besides, perhaps, when her mother died.

No. she scolded herself. Don't go there. Think about something else. Anything else. The cats, the project due in civics tomorrow, Jayce.

She stiffened as his leg brushed against hers. Scratch that. He was close enough already, sitting next to her like this; he didn't need to invade her mind too. Not again.

She took a deep breath and forced herself back to the present, waiting for the yelp of a kitten when the tip of its tail was taken off, or a head was crushed as Jayce dug, but it never came. They had been trying to rescue the young feline family for over an hour now. The space between the porch and where the cats were hidden was so narrow; it was hard to believe they'd been skinny enough to crawl down there in the first place.

"Careful!" she screeched, "You can't dig so roughly! What if one of them is in the way?"

Swallowing a laugh, he snatched the spade away. Cassie tumbled toward the mulch when she lunged for it.

She threw her hands down into the fresh soil, righting herself and glaring at him. His lips puckered as he tossed back his head to push the crop of jet-black hair from his face, though his gaze never left hers. "Oops. Sorry." He shrugged in that annoying, sly way of his.

Cassie scowled. "That wasn't funny, you ass. I could've split my face! Do you *not* see how old this place is?" She spread her arms.

Paint chipped off of the siding, stray pieces of wood dangled from a deck so rotted it could grow its own swamp, and grass lay dead and discolored under their feet.

“Why did you take this job anyway?”

Jayce offered her a soft smile, but the concern never left his eyes. “I told you, babe, it was this or the slammer.” He shrugged. “Besides, I like animals.” A smirk played on the edge of his lips as he scooted closer to her. When he caught her eyeing him, he plunged his hands into the ground and raked more soil away.

Cassie rolled her eyes. “Not the animal shelter, genius. I *mean*, why did you volunteer for *this* job? With *me*?” Then she paused as his pet name registered. “And *don’t* call me ‘babe.’” She jerked her knee away with a sharp breath.

“Oh, *come on*.” Jayce shoved her shoulder gently. “Don’t *be* like that, Cass.”

She only turned further away from him.

“What’s got you so uptight today, anyway?”

They reached for the unopened can of tuna they’d brought to entice the feline and her babies. Cassie yanked her arm back so their fingers had no chance to brush. Jayce’s hand closed around the container and he drew it into his lap. He popped the lid off and inched it into the hole. “Did... Did something happen with your dad?” The cats edged closer to the food and Cassie didn’t bother to look up.

Fuck!

Of *course* she wouldn’t be able to hide from him. They’d only known each other a few months before he started helping at the shelter, but sometimes it was creepy how he could sense her mood. The phone call this morning still burned at her subconscious, fighting to consume her thoughts.

Closing her eyes, Cassie took deep breaths and bit back the sting of tears. She didn’t want to remember the tremble in her stepmother’s voice, or the terror that had shot through her when she learned what her father had done.

Get it together, Cass! she chastised as a gulp of air caught in her throat. *It’s over. None of that matters now.*

She shook her head and let her chin rest atop her knees. Lydia was safe. Frank couldn’t hurt either of them anymore, and within the week, hopefully he wouldn’t be able to hurt anyone like that again for a long, long time.

“Cass? Are you okay?”

Cassie blinked. She stretched her legs out from where they'd fallen asleep curled against her chest. Her lips morphed into a thin smile when she realized that while she'd been lost in thought, Jayce had managed to coax the entire litter out of the hole beneath the old house.

Instead of answering, she focused on the little fur balls prowling around in front of her. She picked up the nearest one and placed it in her lap, stroking its back, which arched beneath her touch. The kitten purred and nestled itself on her thighs as its amber eyes drifted closed.

Cassie's grin widened. At least she could still help *someone* out here.

The absence of anyone to care for besides herself upon entering college had filled her with an odd sense of lonesomeness. She'd grown used to looking out for Lydia, and, when he let her, her bastard father, in the years since her mother's death. Maybe it was that maternal instinct that drew her to apply for a volunteer position at the shelter. Or, maybe it was just fate.

The kittens were all playful and healthy, if a bit skinny. Their mother however, was covered in scratches and the tip of her left ear was missing. Her eyes were still bright, though, as she rubbed against Jayce's leg, vying for attention.

"I think she likes you."

"What?" Jayce blinked before he noticed the animal caressing his pant leg. "Oh." He chuckled and reached down to pet her head. She nuzzled his hand. "Yeah, I guess she does."

Even so, Cassie could feel his eyes on her, and the pity in them made bile crawl up her throat. She didn't deserve his assurance. Not after what she let happen. *God, why didn't I just have the sense to call the damn police years ago?* "Just say it already!"

Jayce looked up, startled. "Say... what?"

"Whatever the hell you want to ask me."

"What makes you think I want to say anything?"

"*Jay.*" She raised a dubious eyebrow.

"I..." He trailed off and shuffled his beat up Converse back and forth. "I just wondered if you were okay. You never answered me when I asked if something happened with your dad."

Cassie winced. She'd known what was coming, but she'd still been holding on to some small shred of hope that he'd be smart enough to avoid the topic. Jayce was the only one who knew about her dad, but only because he'd poked and prodded until she couldn't take it anymore. Now, whenever she was having an off day, he automatically assumed it had something to do with her dick of a father. Most of the time, he was right. Not that she was about to admit it.

Still, even though they were fighting, he had been there for her through so much already, and it would be a relief to get the events of the previous night off her chest. Cassie stayed silent for another beat, her heart pounding against her ribs until she found the courage to meet his gaze.

"He... He tried to force himself on Lydia," she choked out, swallowing around the lump in her throat and cursing her blurry vision as tears clouded her eyes.

Jayce's face contorted. His nostrils flared and his eyes grew wide.

Cassie stumbled ahead before he could object. "She didn't let him though. She got to a phone and called her sister, who, thank God, was smart enough to contact the police. They... They took him into temporary custody until she's released from the hospital and decides if she wants to press charges. She's safe now, but..."

Jayce grimaced. "Oh, Cass... I'm sorry."

Cassie cringed at the pity etched in his features, but really, what had she expected? Potential rape wasn't exactly a lighthearted subject. "Yeah, well..." She cleared her throat and glanced at the overcast sky. "It looks like it's about to rain. We should... We should go."

Jayce watched her for a minute and opened his mouth to protest, but Cassie tossed him a pleading look.

Drop it, please.

He bit back his words and snapped his mouth shut.

Cassie relaxed, and he offered a small half-smile. "Yeah," he agreed. "Let's go."

"I just never believed he would actually... do it, you know? I mean, he's done some pretty fucked up stuff before, but... this?" She shook her head. "It just... It doesn't seem... real."

Jayce debated turning to face her, but the reflective note in her words made him think she was talking more to herself than him.

“My father is a lot of things, but...” She sighed and wiped away another tear. “I never imagined he would turn into... that guy. I mean; I know Lydia’s not my *real* mom, but she’s the only one I’ve had since I was just a kid... And after what happened to Steph... Mom...” She rubbed her index fingers over her temples. “I don’t know... I just wish there was something I could’ve done. I keep feeling like, if I’d been there, if I’d just listened to my instincts and called the police years ago, maybe... Maybe this wouldn’t have happened. Hell, there were a thousand opportunities to stop this; I was just too chicken to take them.” She dabbed her damp cheeks with a Kleenex from the console before turning back to face the window. “It’s... It’s my fault she got hurt.”

“She *almost* got hurt, Cass. She may have a few bad bruises, but she wasn’t *hurt*. At least, not in the way I know you’re thinking.”

“And that’s supposed to make it okay?” She whipped around to face him. “How is *any* of this okay, Jayce? My dad’s about to be put on trial for rape!”

“You’re right, it’s *not* okay. Not in any world is what happened okay.” He reached out to place a hand on her knee, relieved when she only raised her brow instead of pulling away. “But count your blessings. Things could’ve been so much worse.”

A small scoff sounded in the back of Cassie’s throat.

Jayce sighed. “Think about it. She *saved* herself. Hopefully, this time, it’s for good.”

Cassie’s hazel eyes met the carpet. “I know. Believe me; I’m beyond relieved that she’s safe. Truth be told, she should’ve been safe a long time ago. We both should have...”

“You are now. He’ll be put away for sure after this. He can’t hurt you anymore.”

Her gaze drifted back to the foggy afternoon. The clock on the dash read 5:25 p.m.

Thirty more minutes and it would be twelve hours since the rug had been swept out from under her. Again.

She sighed. Fives seemed to carry an increasingly unlucky history for Cassandra Danforth. Her mother had been thirty-five when cancer claimed her life. *She* had been

only fifteen when alcohol claimed her father's sanity. At 5:55 this morning, her father nearly claimed his wife without consent. Now at 5:25 p.m., Cassie was creeping closer to reliving her biggest leap of faith. Her biggest 'I wish.' Her biggest five. Her biggest mistake.

Glancing at Jayce again, with his adorable one dimpled half-smile as he tried to lift her spirits, her irises darkened to a forest green, and her hands curled into fists at her sides. The two of them had been together exactly five weeks to the day when she'd given herself to him. And her elation had lasted all of twenty-five glorious minutes before she came crashing back to Earth.

"Cassie?" His words were tentative, as if he somehow sensed her anger.

Thoughts cycled 'round in her mind; each of those thirty-seven days playing on loop like a terrifying slideshow. Their first meeting during her morning shift at the coffee shop, where she'd spilled his cappuccino all over his newly washed team jersey, but he'd insisted on paying anyway. The day he'd realized he was failing algebra, and then begged for her help so he wouldn't get kicked off the team. Their routine tutoring sessions that morphed into a date invitation within the span of two weeks. The morning she'd come into Hearts of Hope only to find *him* working behind the counter, thus discovering his brief brush with the law, and almost criminal record... So many little moments that finally culminated into one seemingly perfect night.

She couldn't get it out of her head. Brie's hard glare as she soaked in the scene before her. The clenched fists and narrowed eyes that didn't match Brie's gaping mouth as she followed Cassie's trembling frame when she dashed into the bathroom to don her clothes, Jayce's frantic utterances of Cassie's name as she sprinted out the door without waiting for further explanation.

She should hate Jayce for what he did to her; for using her as some sort of a distraction because he needed a break from his relationship with Brie. He broke her heart, and she should want nothing more to do with him. So... Why didn't she? Why did butterflies still flutter in her stomach every time he went to hold her hand, even as she snatched it away? Why couldn't she, after seeing his true nature with her own eyes, just be angry?

Because you trust him. And because you don't know what happened.

Cassie sighed. Maybe she did owe him a chance to explain himself. He wasn't like Frank, that much she knew for sure. Whether or not she believed his story though, that was another story.

"Cassie?" Jayce repeated, drawing her back from her evelries. "Are you alright?"

"Why did you do it?" Her words were hollow and cold.

Jayce's brow furrowed as he pulled into the animal shelter parking lot. "Do... what?"

"Lead me on like that," she spat. "Why did you have the *gall* to make me feel so special, make me believe I could *trust* you, make me—" Jayce winced as her voice hitched. "Make me *give myself to you*," she hissed, "if you already had a girlfriend?"

"Cass, I didn't, I mean, Brie's not... It wasn't like that!" He winced, knowing full well how lame that answer sounded.

Cassie's nostrils flared. "Yeah, sure. Of course it wasn't." She moved to grab for the door handle. "I should've known better than to expect a viable explanation from the likes of someone like *you*. You're nothing more than a delinquent."

"Cassie, wait!" He reached around to the passenger side of the door and hit the lock button.

She huffed, crossing her arms over her chest.

"Hear me out," he pleaded. "I never meant to hurt you that night. I never meant to hurt you, period."

Cassie roiled her eyes. "Then what *did* you mean to do? 'Cause it looked like you were trying to flaunt me in front of your girlfriend!"

"Brie is *not* my girlfriend," he snapped. "Don't you *ever* listen?"

Cassie's eyes widened, and she stared at him. "She's...not?"

"No! And she never was!"

"Then... Who is she?"

"Just this girl from my econ class. She's been trying to flirt with me ever since I transferred, but I have absolutely no interest in her *whatsoever*."

"Then, how did she get a key to your apartment? They don't just give those to anyone."

“Jack, the team captain, told her where I keep the spare under the welcome mat. He said she told him she left her jacket in my room, but since she’d never even *been* in my apartment before that night, God only knows what she really wanted.”

“So... You never really liked her?”

“Never. You’re the only one I’ve wanted to go out with since I met you.”

Cassie blushed in spite of herself. “Really?”

“Really. *Please* give me a second chance?”

Cassie bit her lip. His explanation seemed solid enough, but she wasn’t sure she could let down her walls again, especially in light of what happened to Lydia. On the other hand, Jayce understood the broken, hardened-by-the-world parts of her that no one else did. She’d really missed having him to lean on since she’d shut him out. “I’ll think about it,” she relented, “but I make no promises.”

“I understand.” He dropped her hand and unlocked the doors. “And whatever you decide, I’ll always be here if you need me.”

Cassie smiled and her shoulders drooped in relief. “Thanks.”

Glancing at her watch as she helped unload the back of the car and followed him into the shelter, Cassie couldn’t stop the small smirk that played on her face when she noticed the time: 5:55 p.m. Another five. Another choice. Another change.

She let Jayce walk a few paces ahead of her with the carrier, smiling at his silhouette in the late afternoon fog. It was true enough that fives harbored an interesting history for her, but as she watched him saunter into the old, beat up building with a grin on his face and the small rays of sun just barely peeking out from the clouds shining on his back, Cassie thought maybe, just maybe, not all fives had to end in disaster.