

OFF LIMITS

A Workplace Romance

[Author Name]

Chapter One Preview

CHAPTER ONE

KATE

The elevator climbs and my stomach drops.

I press my back against the cool metal wall, feel the subtle vibration of the cables pulling me higher, and watch the numbers tick upward on the digital display. 32. 33. 34. The air inside the elevator smells like money—expensive cologne from whoever rode up before me, leather from briefcases that cost more than my monthly rent, that particular scent of power and ambition that seems to permeate every inch of this building.

Each floor that passes feels like another step toward the edge of a cliff I'm either going to fly off or fall from. There's no in-between anymore. Not with Mom's hospital bills sitting in a stack on my kitchen counter, thick enough to prop open a door. Not with Sallie Mae sending emails that read more like threats than reminders. Not after last week's phone call from the hospital's billing department, the one where a woman with a voice like cold water explained that if we couldn't set up a payment plan by the end of the month, they'd be sending our account to collections.

Forty-seven floors. That's how high I have to go to either make my dreams come true or watch them crash and burn in spectacular fashion.

I catch my reflection in the polished brass doors and give myself the pep talk I've been rehearsing since 5 AM, when I woke up to my third alarm and nearly had a panic attack trying to decide between the navy blazer and the black one. I went with navy. It felt more... hopeful. Less like I was dressing for a funeral.

You belong here. You earned this. You are not going to throw up on your new boss.

Okay, maybe that last one is more of a prayer than a pep talk.

The numbers tick higher. 38. 39. 40.

My reflection stares back at me—dark curls tamed into what I hope is a professional bun, minimal makeup that took forty-five minutes to look natural, and a blazer I bought at Target with a coupon code and a prayer. The woman in the brass looks terrified. She looks like someone who's about to walk into the lion's den wearing a suit made of steak.

I straighten my spine. Square my shoulders. Channel every ounce of fake confidence I've ever summoned during job interviews and first dates and that one time I had to present my thesis to a panel of professors who looked like they'd rather be literally anywhere else.

Three assistants have quit this year. *Three*. The last one didn't even make it a month. The recruiter—a polished woman named Jennifer who wore Chanel like armor—called Dominic Ashford "demanding." HR called him "particular." The internet calls him a lot of things I can't repeat in polite company. A quick Google search last night revealed no fewer than seventeen articles about his "exacting standards" and three anonymous Glassdoor reviews that simply said: *Run*.

What the articles also revealed: Princeton economics, summa cum laude. Five years in the Navy after graduation—Naval Intelligence, whatever that means—before Wharton for his MBA and then building Ashford Enterprises into the forty-seven-billion-dollar empire it is today. The photos from his military years show a younger man, leaner, with a focused intensity that hasn't softened with age. If anything, it's sharpened. The kind of man who's seen things he doesn't talk about and doesn't need to.

I didn't run. I applied anyway.

Because none of that matters. Not when Mom's medical bills are piling up like autumn leaves and my student loans have student loans. Not when every other job offer I've gotten in the past six months has been entry-level positions with entry-level pay that wouldn't even cover my rent, let alone the \$2,847 I owe the hospital this month.

This job pays more than I've ever made in my life. Six figures. *Six figures*. I had to read the offer letter three times because I was convinced there was a typo. And it comes with health insurance that doesn't require a blood sacrifice to activate—the kind of coverage that might actually help Mom when she needs her next round

of treatments.

I can handle demanding. I can handle particular. I can handle whatever Dominic Ashford throws at me.
I have to.

The elevator dings. Floor 47.

Here we go.

The doors slide open and I step into a world of glass and chrome and money. So much money. The kind of money that whispers instead of shouts, that smells like fresh flowers and expensive leather and quiet power. The kind of money I've only ever seen in magazines and movies and the homes of the wealthy families I used to babysit for in high school.

The floor-to-ceiling windows offer a panoramic view of Manhattan that probably costs more per square foot than my entire apartment building. Morning light floods the space, catching on crystal vases filled with flowers so perfect they almost look fake. Everything is sleek lines and muted colors and the sort of aggressive minimalism that screams *we're too rich for clutter*.

The reception desk is a sleek curve of white marble that probably weighs more than my car. The woman behind it looks up from her computer, takes in my Target blazer and my careful smile and the knockoff designer bag I bought on Canal Street, and something flickers across her face.

Pity.

My stomach clenches, but I keep my smile firmly in place.

"Kate Cole?" she asks. "For Mr. Ashford?"

"That's me."

She stands, smoothing her designer dress—actual designer, probably costs more than my monthly rent—and her heels click against the marble floor as she rounds the desk. Everything about her screams old money trying to look casual. Pearls at her throat. A Cartier watch on her wrist. Hair that probably costs \$400 every six weeks to maintain.

"I'll show you to your desk. HR will be up shortly for orientation." She pauses at the glass doors that lead deeper into the floor, her hand hovering over the handle. Then she lowers her voice, like she's sharing a secret. Or a warning. "The last one only lasted three weeks."

"I appreciate the heads up," I say, keeping my voice light. "I'm hoping to beat that record."

She gives me a look that says *sure you are, honey* and pushes through the doors.

*

DOMINIC

I'm staring at her file when I should be reviewing the Hendricks acquisition.

The paperwork for the deal is spread across my desk in neat stacks—due diligence reports, financial projections, legal briefs that need signatures before noon. Twelve billion dollars hanging in the balance. The biggest acquisition in the company's history. The kind of deal that should have my complete attention.

Instead, I'm reading about Kate Cole for the third time this morning.

Twenty-six. MBA from a mid-tier program that I'd normally dismiss without a second glance, but her grades were flawless—4.0, summa cum laude, every academic award they could throw at her. Worked two jobs through undergrad while maintaining a full course load. Three through grad school. References that glow like she walks on water and shits sunshine.

One of them—a professor at Columbia—wrote: *In twenty years of teaching, I have never encountered a student with Kate's combination of brilliance and tenacity. She is, quite simply, exceptional.*

Exceptional people don't apply to be executive assistants.

That's the first red flag.

The second is that she actually applied to work for *me*.

I close the file and lean back in my chair, watching the city sprawl beneath my office windows. Forty-seven floors up, everyone looks like ants. Insignificant. Interchangeable. That's how I built this company—by remembering that business isn't personal. That sentiment is a liability. That the moment you start seeing people as anything more than variables in an equation, you've already lost.

That's how I need to see her. Just another assistant. Another name on a long list of people who couldn't handle the pressure, the hours, the exacting standards that built Ashford Enterprises from nothing but a business plan and a burning need to prove everyone wrong.

My father said I'd fail. He gave me six months before I came crawling back to the family business, begging for a position. That was twelve years ago. Last week, Forbes valued my company at forty-seven billion.

But I didn't come straight from Princeton to building empires. There were five years in between that my father still doesn't understand—five years in Naval Intelligence that taught me more about power and people than any Ivy League education ever could. Deployments to places I still can't name. Operations that don't exist in any official record. Learning to read a room, read a threat, read the lie behind someone's smile before they even finished telling it.

The Navy taught me control. Real control—the kind that comes from knowing exactly what you're capable of and choosing not to use it. The kind that lets you sit across from a hostile asset and smile while they sweat. The kind that built a forty-seven-billion-dollar company because I could see three moves ahead and wait for the right moment to strike.

I don't crawl. I don't beg. And I don't let anyone close enough to hurt me.

Not anymore.

My jaw tightens at the memory I've spent three years trying to bury. Miranda Whitfield. Two years of my life. Two years of sharing my bed, my secrets, my trust. She was my VP of Strategy, brilliant and ambitious and beautiful in a way that felt dangerous from the start. I should have known better. I *did* know better. But I let her in anyway, convinced myself that this time was different, that she saw me as more than just a shortcut to power.

I remember the night she told me she loved me. We were in my penthouse, the city glittering beneath us, and she'd looked at me like I was the only thing in the world that mattered. I believed her. God help me, I believed every word.

Three months later, she sold it all to Nexus Tech for a seven-figure payout and a corner office. Every strategic plan I'd shared with her over late-night dinners. Every vulnerability I'd shown her in the dark. Every piece of myself I'd been stupid enough to give. She walked into my office on a Tuesday morning, handed me her resignation, and smiled like we were strangers.

"It's not personal," she said. "It's just business."

The board wanted to sue her into oblivion. I wanted to watch the company she'd defected to burn. In the end, I settled for something quieter and more permanent: a rule.

No fraternizing.

It's not about control. It's about protection. Mine. The company's. Everyone's.

I turn back to my desk, to the pile of contracts and projections and problems that need solving. The new assistant will be here any minute. I'll give her the same impossible tasks I give all of them. She'll quit by Friday, just like the others.

That's the plan.

The one before lasted three weeks. The one before that, two. Rebecca, my first assistant of the year, made it six whole weeks before she left a tearful voicemail about "hostile work environments" and "unreasonable expectations." HR wasn't pleased. I didn't care.

Better they hate me and leave than stay and become another liability.

My office door opens without a knock.

I look up, ready to eviscerate whoever just made that mistake—

And freeze.

She's standing in my doorway. Not the receptionist, not Patricia Donnelly from HR, not anyone I was expecting. It's her. Kate Cole. The exceptional one who applied to be an assistant.

The file didn't prepare me for this. Didn't mention the way she fills the space, the quiet confidence that radiates from her like heat. Didn't warn me that she'd look at me with those eyes and make me feel—for one disconcerting moment—like I was the one being evaluated instead of the other way around.

Warm brown skin that seems to glow even in the harsh fluorescent light. Curls escaping from what was probably a neat bun this morning, little spirals framing her face that she keeps tucking behind her ear. And eyes—dark and bright and startlingly direct—that hold mine without flinching. Without looking away. Without any of the nervous deference I've come to expect from everyone who walks through that door.

She's wearing a blazer that doesn't quite fit right—probably off the rack, probably the nicest thing she owns—and her smile falters for just a second when she sees my expression. The cold assessment I know I'm projecting. The calculation.

Then she recovers. Straightens her spine. Lifts her chin.

And smiles.

Not a nervous smile. Not the simpering, please-don't-fire-me smile I usually get. A real one. Warm and unguarded and directed at me like I'm a person instead of a problem to be managed.

Something shifts in my chest. Something I haven't felt in years. Something that feels suspiciously like interest—real interest, not the calculated kind I've perfected for business negotiations and investor meetings. The kind that makes me want to know more. The kind that makes me want to ask questions that have nothing to do with quarterly reports or assistant qualifications.

I immediately crush it.

Just another assistant.

*

KATE

HR orientation is death by PowerPoint.

Patricia Donnelly, the HR director, is a woman in her late fifties with reading glasses on a chain and the exhausted patience of someone who's given this presentation approximately forty thousand times. She clicks through slide after slide of policies, procedures, and legal disclaimers while I try not to let my eyes glaze over.

Health insurance. The coverage is even better than I thought—Mom could see actual specialists instead of whoever happens to be in-network that day.

401k. With a company match that makes my eyes water.

Vacation accrual. Generous, though something tells me nobody around here actually takes time off.

Standard stuff. The kind of corporate bureaucracy I've sat through a dozen times at a dozen different jobs. I nod at the appropriate moments, ask the expected questions, and try not to think about the man sitting in the glass office at the end of the hall.

Those eyes. Gray like storm clouds, like steel, like something cold and sharp that could cut you if you got too close. He'd looked at me like he was already calculating how long I'd last.

The answer is: as long as it takes.

Then Patricia gets to page 47.

"The No Fraternizing Policy." Her voice sharpens, and she looks at me over her reading glasses with an intensity that feels personal. "This is important, Miss Cole. Mr. Ashford takes this *very* seriously."

I sit up straighter. "Of course."

"No romantic relationships between employees of different hierarchical levels. No dating. No..." she pauses, searching for the right word, her lips pressing thin, "...*entanglements* of any kind. Violation results in immediate termination."

"Understood."

"I mean it." She leans forward, and for the first time, she looks less like a tired HR drone and more like someone delivering a genuine warning. "Immediate. No warnings. No second chances. No appeals process. You're out the door before you can pack your desk."

I almost laugh. I'm here to work, not to date. The last thing I need is some office romance complicating my life. I've got enough complications—enough debt, enough stress, enough sleepless nights staring at the ceiling and wondering how I'm going to keep my head above water.

"You won't have any problems from me," I say. "I'm here to do a job."

Patricia studies me for a long moment, her eyes searching my face for something. A crack in my composure, maybe. A hint that I'm just another pretty young thing who thinks she can charm her way into the boss's good graces.

She won't find it. I've never been the charming type. I'm the type who works harder than everyone else because I know that's the only edge I've got.

Finally, she nods. "Good. Let me show you to your desk."

My desk is directly outside his office. Of course it is.

A glass wall separates us, floor-to-ceiling windows that offer no privacy whatsoever. Which means he can see everything I do. Every email I send, every phone call I take, every moment I spend staring blankly at my computer screen wondering what the hell I've gotten myself into. *Everything*.

I can see him right now through the glass—a dark silhouette against the Manhattan skyline, broad shoulders rigid with tension, phone pressed to his ear. He moves like someone who's never had to apologize for taking up space. Like the world rearranges itself around him instead of the other way around.

Focus, I tell myself. *He's just a man. An intimidating, unfairly attractive, probably-sociopathic man, but still just a man.*

The previous assistant's stuff is still there, scattered across the desk like the remnants of a hasty retreat. A wilting plant that's more brown than green, its soil cracked and dry—nobody's watered it in weeks. A half-empty water bottle with a ring of condensation dried beneath it. A coffee mug with a lipstick stain on the rim, some cheerful saying about Mondays printed on the side that feels almost mocking in this context. A scattered stack of sticky notes in various colors, most of them blank, a few with fragments of tasks that were never completed.

"She left in a hurry," Patricia says. Not quite a question.

"I gathered."

I start clearing it away, tossing the dead plant in the trash with a silent apology, stacking the abandoned office supplies in a pile to be thrown out. Patricia watches me for a moment, then seems to decide I don't require supervision.

"The phone system guide is in the top drawer. His schedule is in the shared calendar—never add anything without his explicit approval. He takes his coffee black, two sugars, exactly 180 degrees. Not 175, not 185. Exactly 180. The coffee maker on this floor is broken; there's one on forty-five that works. He doesn't eat lunch, but he expects you to. Something about productivity metrics." She rattles this off like a well-rehearsed script. "Any questions?"

A thousand. *How bad is he really? What made the last three assistants quit? Why does everyone look at me like I'm walking to my execution?*

I shake my head.

She leaves. The click of her heels on the marble fades into silence, and I'm alone with the ghost of whoever sat here before me. Alone with the glass wall and the view of his office and the faint scent of someone else's perfume still clinging to the chair.

I pick up a sticky note that was hidden under a stack of folders, half-observed by a binder clip. Four words in frantic handwriting, the letters getting more uneven toward the end like she was writing faster and faster, like she was running out of time:

RUN WHILE YOU CAN.

I stare at it for a long moment. Think about Mom in her hospital bed. Think about the stack of bills on my counter. Think about what it would mean to quit before I've even started.

Then I crumple it into a ball and toss it in the trash with everything else.
I'm not running anywhere.

* * *

Want to keep reading?

OFF LIMITS is available now on Amazon.

[Insert Amazon Link]