

Always



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VISITOR

J. SYMONE

He had promised he would come home. How could he betray her like this?

The first thing she saw were her brothers sitting and talking with Max and Cecily. All her uneasiness melted away as she ran to hug them. “You’re back!” she shouted to Jamie and Jason. “I thought you both still had another couple of weeks?” She turned and acknowledged Jacob. Her smile was big. “I wasn’t expecting you home at all.”

“We, um, received a joint assignment,” Jason told her.

“Really? What?”

As soon as she asked, she noticed her brothers weren’t smiling. She noted Max and Cecily who were strangely silent, and realized Jax wasn’t with them. Looking back at Jason, she realized her brothers were wearing their dress uniforms. A familiar sick feeling overtook her all at once because she knew exactly what was happening. It had hardly been a year, but the details of that moment rushed to the forefront of her mind. She wasn’t ready to hear the words.

“No.” She rejected what was coming. Backing away, she bumped into Desmond. She grabbed his arm, desperate for an anchor in her suddenly careening world.

“JJ, you know it’s better that we’re the ones telling you,” Jason said carefully.

“No!” she yelled again.

When fitness trainer JJ Marceaux catches the eye of pro rugby star Desmond Cade, she quickly finds out how hard it is to get off his radar. As fate keeps pulling them together, her heart and her mind go to war over whether or not to let down the protective wall that surrounds her. But can Desmond convince her to trust enough to let him in, or will the heartache from her past rob her of the joy in her future?

KUDOS for *Always*

In *Always* by J. Symone, JJ Marceaux is an aerobics instructor whose five brothers are in the military. One brother was killed in the Middle East, which combined with a broken engagement, has caused JJ to build walls around her heart to protect herself from letting anyone get close enough to hurt her again. Then she meets Desmond Cade, who won't take no for an answer. A rugby star, he's famous, wealthy, and gorgeous. Irresistible. Just what she says she doesn't need, even though he's just what she wants. Plus, he has a teenage daughter who JJ is totally in love with. When her four remaining brothers conspire with Desmond, JJ is hard put to resist, until disaster strikes. A charming love story with enchanting characters and a well thought out plot, the book is a heart-warming and touching read. ~ *Taylor Jones, Reviewer*

Always by J. Symone is the story of a young woman who has suffered too much loss in her life. Our heroine, JJ Marceaux, lost her parents when she was just a child. Raised by her five brothers, all of whom join the military, she is further devastated when one of her brothers is killed in action in the war in the Middle East. A failed engagement is the final straw and JJ builds formidable walls to protect her heart. But then she meets rugby star, Desmond Cade, who is determined to break through her defenses. Using every weapon at his disposal, from her brothers, to his daughter, and even his membership at the gym where JJ works, he hacks away at her walls until she gives him a chance. But their relationship is short-lived as disaster sends her reeling and she pushes him away. Now he has to prove he will be there for her, no matter what. *Always* is a charming, well-written tale of two people with too much baggage to overcome and a love that could see them through—if they let it. Heartwarming as well as heartbreaking, it's a poignant and entertaining read. ~ *Regan Murphy, Reviewer*

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To my family—I know I stress y’all out but thank you for affording me every opportunity to chase all of my dreams and be successful in doing so.

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Maddy Kay, our friendship has stood the test of distance and even grown stronger because of it. Thank you for being by my side for all my highs and lows over the years and telling me to do it whenever I tell you a new life plan.

Lauren—all I can say is thank you for putting up with me. Hailee and Meagan, thank you for the greatness that is our group text. Cecily (my real one), Yesac, Ashleigh, Kayla, Krissy, Christopher (my real life Jaxon), and Kennedy—I live to see you happy and enjoying life.

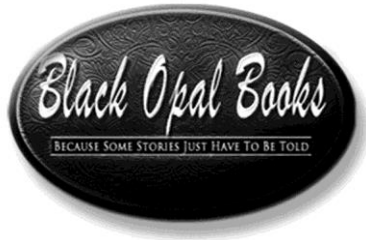
To all my KVA girls, especially the class of 2016—you ladies are solid and I can’t imagine coaching a more fun group.

I love you all dearly,
J.S.

Always

J. SYMONE

A Black Opal Books Publication



GENRE: INTERRACIAL ROMANCE/CONTEMPORARY ROMANCE

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DEDICATION

*To the love of my life—
wherever you are, whoever you are.*

Chapter 1

JJ bent over, gasping for air. By no means was she out of shape, but this Houston winter brought a bitter cold she wasn't used to. It was freezing outside and only the truly committed were out for their morning runs. As she rested against a tree in Hermann Park, she checked out a guy sitting on one of the swings in the nearby playground.

There was no missing him as he watched her run, but now his head was down. She couldn't see his face, but based on how his muscles bulged underneath his fitted hoodie as he sat in the swing, he was well built and tall. His hands were clasped together, as if he was praying. Something about him sitting there, seemingly so at peace with the world despite the thirty-five degree weather, intrigued her. The picture he made stirred an unidentifiable feeling deep inside her. Exhausted from last night's bar outing and her looming workday, she shoved her unexpected introspection aside and completed one last lap around the park. As she passed the stranger, she thought he gave a tiny smile, but he didn't wave or call out in greeting. He simply stood and walked away in the opposite direction.

As a fitness trainer, her job was always more exhausting at the beginning of the year. Between existing clients and new comers sticking to their New Year's resolutions, there was hardly a chance to take a breath between sessions. From the time she clocked in every morning, every minute was

either spent with clients or in meetings. As the day went on, the crowd at the gym was dying down, and she finished with her last client. Her thoughts centered on getting home to her loft, pouring a glass of wine, and slipping in to a bubble bath. As soon as she clocked out, she all but ran out the door. In her hasty exit, she bumped in to one of the late night gym goers. Although he seemed familiar, he didn't seem to notice the bump, with his hood up and his headphones over his ears, so she muttered a quick apology and kept moving.

Once home she poured a glass of riesling, lit a few of her favorite scented candles, and ran hot water in her tub. She put her phone on silent, turned on her music, stripped down, and slipped in to her bath. Closing her eyes, she entered a near blissful state.



By all accounts, Desmond Cade was an open book, living a life that made most men jealous. With an Ivy League education, the star professional rugby player made it a point to flash his charming smile at the cameras constantly following him and the women who threw themselves at his feet. The media portrayed him as a god among men. With his money, fame, and hanger-ons, the image was hard to dispute. Yet, with the exception of time spent with his daughter, Lively, more often than not, he felt alone. So, to recapture his sense of being grounded, every now and then, he'd go back to where he grew up and sit in the swings of his favorite place, Hermann Park. There, he found a unique peace in a spot where he didn't have to be "the guy."

He was coming off a stellar season, but even the heavy dose of attention from his fans and team couldn't drag out him out of his current preoccupation. As a veteran in the rugby world, he would play until he couldn't. When he wasn't working, he spent time with Lively, making sure she knew her dad would always be there. Yet, after another failed relationship, this time with a Victoria's Secret model,

he wondered what else life had in store for him. Maybe, despite the fame and fortune, he'd never find what he was looking for.

For now, he'd focus on the highlight of his off-season, his workouts. He preferred hitting the gym before sunrise and late at night to avoid distractions. Even star athletes had quirks, and since Wednesday was leg day, he was in his favorite pair of basketball shorts and his hoodie was held up with his headphones. Playing his music before walking in helped him get in the zone. Sometimes he got a little too zoned in, and accidentally walked into people.



“Heads up JJ, Terence is in the building.”

“Oh, please no, I'm in no mood for him today.” JJ loved everything about her job, from the opportunity to help people, to having fun in a great environment. There was one fly in her ointment, Terence Stewart. Over the last six months, the gym regular had become persistent in his pursuit of her. An army-veteran-turned-professional-body-builder, his confidence was bullet proof. He used any time she was at her desk alone as an opportunity to hit on her. When she worked out, he came over to offer tips or be her spotter. The more she rejected him, the more determined he became.

Like right now, for instance. He was locked on target and heading her way, even though she did everything she could to stay busy and keep moving. Her patience was at an end, so it was a good thing her best friend and coworker, Cecily Taylor, saw what was happening, and quickly made her way over to JJ, cutting Terence off. “Hey, girl, I brought Jax to the gym today. He's in the kids' zone, dying to see you.”

“You're timing is quality.” JJ's enthusiasm was obvious. “I'm gonna go see him right now.” She beat feet to the kids' zone. Spending time with her cousin and godson, Jaxon always made her smile.

“Auntie JJ!”

“Hey, big guy! How’s my main man?”

“Good. Look at my trains.”

He held up his toys and his joy made her smile.

“You know who loves trains don’t you? The tickle monster!”

Warned by her tone, Jax giggled and tried to run, but JJ already had him in her hands.

They played together for almost a half hour until Cecily finally came to pick him up. “Hey guys, time to go.”

“Hi, Mommy.”

“Ready to go home, my love?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Go grab your jacket and your shoes.” Cecily turned to JJ. “We still good for tonight?”

“Yeah.” JJ got to her feet and stretched. “I have a client intake to finish and then I’m headed home.” She watched as Cecily helped her struggling son put on his thick winter coat.

“Perfect.”

Jax waved his fingers. “Bye, JJ, I love you.”

“I love you too, big man.”



JJ was ready to spend some quality time with Cecily. They were best friends, who were more like sisters, because Cecily was the only person JJ really trusted with the details of her private life. Mainly because, as outspoken as Cecily could get, she was the one who’d been there for JJ through thick and thin.

“Knock, knock. Hey, girl.”

“Hey, grab your glass.” On the couch, JJ took a sip of wine, while Cecily settled across from her. “Is it me or did the boy grow again?”

“Nope, not you. He is definitely bigger. My poor guy needed a new winter wardrobe because his clothes didn’t fit. Oh, and since we’re on the subject, I noticed more of a

glimmer in your eye than normal when you were with him today.”

JJ’s glass halted halfway to her lips. “What?”

“It’s the same look I had when I walked by the gym daycare after I found out I was pregnant.”

“Ceci, I am not pregnant.”

Her best friend grinned. “I know that, but those hormones of yours are going off. Don’t deny it.” She waggled a finger. “I know you far too well. So what’s the problem?”

That was the million-dollar question. JJ couldn’t pinpoint why her emotions were all over the place lately. “I don’t know. Half the time, I think I don’t even want to get married and have kids. Other times, I feel I’d love that life, but there’s no one out there for me to share it with.” Exasperated with herself, she gave an exaggerated shudder. “Ugh, there are some days I even think about just getting with T—”

“If you say Terence Stewart, our friendship is done, and you will never be allowed to see Jax again.”

“Over dramatic much?”

“When you say things like that, it makes me think you are mentally unstable. Terence is arrogant, conceited, and incapable of loving anyone but himself. Do me a favor, please don’t settle again. You’ll meet your man one day, and I promise you, it’s not Terence Stewart.”

“Fine, but what do I do until that day?”

Cecily tipped her glass against JJ’s. “You enjoy yourself. I love my husband and son with everything in me, but once you have a those things, the freedom to do what you want goes out the window.”

“True.”

They each took a long sip of wine, and JJ enjoyed the peace that came with it.

“Ooh, and you know what?” Cecily said excitedly. “We can go out next weekend. Max has tickets to the rugby scrimmage.”

“Men in spandex. I’m in.”



The city was alive with the arrival of spring and the start of rugby season. With the rest of his team, Desmond sat at the press table fielding questions. “Des, how you feeling about this season man?”

“Ah, I’m ready to get to work.”

With spring training underway, everyone, from fans on the street to reporters at press conferences, was asking Desmond the same question. Was he was ready to help the team bring a championship trophy back to Houston? He was. Winter was spent in the gym getting his body ready. Each day he watched films from the last season, noting mistakes and making corrections. He wasn’t going to be beat again.



The first practices leading to the intra-squad scrimmage were open to the public. It was a chance for the fans to meet their favorite players, take pictures, and get autographs. The younger kids loved seeing how big the players were up close.

Max’s company always provided VIP passes, and he brought everyone to all the exclusive events. Next to JJ an excited Jax could barely sit still in the car. He wore his favorite number-nine, Desmond Cade jersey and a big smile.

As soon as they stepped in to the stadium, Jax sprinted to the players. JJ ran after up with him, while Cecily and Max went to find one of Max’s old college friends, who was also member of the team. By the time she caught up to Jax, he was talking to the famous Desmond Cade. Cade was kneeling next to Jax. “What’s your name, young one?”

“Jaxon Dillon Taylor, but everyone calls me Jax.”

“Right on, Jax. My name is Desmond Quincy Cade, but everyone calls me Des. How old are you?”

“I’m five.” Not missing a beat, her godson added, “This is JJ, she’s twenty-five.”

Heat rose under her cheeks. “Wow, thanks for tossing that out there, buddy.” She tried to play it cool with a soft grin, even though she was a bigger fan of the superstar than her pint-sized companion.

Desmond looked up at her with a smile and a laugh. She stood behind Jax while Desmond stared at her.

The moment threatened to become awkward before he finally spoke, “Cade. Um, my name, it’s Desmond Cade.”

She tried not to laugh at his boyish inelegance. “Yeah, I know who you are. It’s nice to meet you Desmond Cade. I’m JJ. Jax, here, is a huge fan of yours.”

“I see.” He rose to his feet, still staring at her. “What about you? Are you a fan?”

“I love a good rugby match.”

His smile widened and the spark of interest in his gaze deepened.

The encounter was cut short when Max called to them, “Jax, JJ, come on.”

JJ peeked over her shoulder to find him and Cecily waiting. “All right, coming.” Turning back, she said. “Jax, say ‘bye.’”

“Bye, Des.”

“Bye, Jax.”

As she walked away, she could feel Des watching until someone called his name. Since the match was only a scrimmage, their tickets got them access to the field area, which meant they could see all the action up close.

During the match it seemed like the announcer was saying the same thing over and over: “DESMOND CADE WITH THE TRY!” After his third score, he came off the field for a break.

“Desmond! Hi, Des!” Now on a first name basis with his favorite player, Jax couldn’t contain his excitement.

“Jax-on! What up, rude dude! How do you like the match so far?”

Obviously unprepared for such an exuberant interaction, Jax ducked behind Cecily.

Desmond stepped away briefly and then came back with one hand behind his back. “Hey, Jax, I got something for ya.”

Jax stepped from behind his mom with curiosity written all over his face.

Desmond’s arm came from behind his back to reveal one of the game’s scoring balls. “It’s yours. After the game, I’ll help you get all the guys to sign it.”

“Awesome! Thank you!” Jax nabbed his new gift and shared it with his parents.

“You are quite welcome, friend.”

Desmond’s eyes drifted to JJ. Their gazes collided and locked for a breathless moment. A shout from the field broke the moment, and Desmond turned back to the match. JJ continued to stare, this time at his ass.



“Hey, Mike, let me get a towel.” Desmond ran past his best friend and fellow rugby player, Mike Canton. They’d grown up together, attending the same schools and playing on the same teams. Eventually, they both ended up at Yale, and after graduation had been drafted to the same professional team. Mike was the brother Desmond never had.

“Hey, man, you see that girl over there?” Des tilted his head toward the sideline. “The one next to the hyped-up little dude?”

Mike followed his direction and let out a low whistle. “Yeah, she’s hot.”

“Tell me about it. That’s the girl I saw at the park and at the gym.”

“Nice. You get her name?”

“Yeah, it’s JJ.”

“Those are initials,” Mike grinned. “Did you get her number?”

“It’s not exactly the time to do that, you know?”

“Keep waiting.” Mike bent over to stretch his hamstrings. “You’re gonna mess around and she’s gonna be wifed up before you even make a move.”



On the drive home, Jax talked about his new ball like it was an Olympic medal. Silence only occurred in the car during his brief nap. As soon as they pulled in the driveway, he was back at it.

“Hey, Daddy, can we go out and play with my ball?”

Max put the car in park. “Sure, bud, let’s go.”

JJ and Cecily watched them head to the backyard. Even before Cecily spoke, JJ could feel her stare. “All right girl, give me the details.”

JJ knew what her friend wanted, but pretended ignorance. “What on earth are you talking about?”

“I’m talking about Desmond Cade.” Cecily wiggled her eyebrows. “I saw how he was checking you out.”

“He wasn’t checking me out.”

Cecily pushed open the door and stepped inside the house. “The fact that you don’t know when you’re getting ‘the look’ is sad. He was definitely into you.”

JJ followed her to the kitchen and took a beer from the refrigerator. “That’s laughable. He was just being nice. Besides, he changes girlfriends like I change shoes. No, thank you.”

“Whatever.” Cecily tossed her keys on the counter. “If I didn’t have Max, I’d definitely ride that ride.”

Giving an exaggerated shudder, JJ grimaced. “Thank you for that visual.”

Cecily leaned back against the counter and folded her arms. “I’m just saying, you could do a lot worse.”

Granted Desmond Cade was a walking wet dream, but who needed that kind of headache? “Yeah, too bad it doesn’t really matter. It’s not like I’m gonna run in to him again. We roll in two, very different worlds.”

Cecily wagged a finger. “Never say never. Fate has a funny way of intervening.”

“Right.” JJ glanced down at her watch. “All right, I gotta bounce. Five in the morning comes early.”

Blowing out a breath, Cecily straightened and gave JJ a hug. “Fine. But it’s supposed to pour down tomorrow, so can you please run at the gym? I don’t want you sick in my guest room again.”

“Yes, Mom. I’ll see you at work tomorrow.”

Five o’clock arrived while rain pounded against JJ’s windows. It was still dark outside as she grabbed her gym bag, hopped in her custom outfitted Chevy Tahoe, and left for the gym. Once there, she found the pre-sunrise crowd already well at work. Jumping on the treadmill, she started her two-mile warm up.



Desmond finished on the bench press and made his way to the dumbbell racks to work on his biceps. It was his last step in wrapping up his morning workout before doing satellite interviews and a team press conference later in the day. Before he could start his first set of curls, he looked in the mirror and caught sight of JJ on a treadmill across the gym. Determined to talk to her, he started toward her, but someone called his name.

“Hey, Des!” A guy sporting muscles made by machine instead of exercise was headed his way. His beefy hand was out. “Terence.”

Des dipped his head in acknowledgement but didn’t encourage conversation.

Not that it made a difference, since Terence kept on going. “Great playing yesterday, man. Looks like good things are in store for the team this season.”

“Yeah. Hey, can you excuse me for a minute? I wanted to say ‘hi’ to a friend of mine.” It wasn’t intentional, but his attention drifted back to JJ.

Terence followed his look and gave a slow nod. “Yeah, I see my girlfriend over there, so I’m gonna go check in.”

Shock coursed through Desmond, but he tried not to let it show. “That’s your girl? You’re a lucky man.”

“Yes, sir,” Terence agreed with smug satisfaction.

As if she heard their conversation, JJ stepped off the treadmill and looked up. She flashed a quick, empty smile and kept walking.

Desmond left Terence and headed to the locker room to clean up and get ready for his day of interviews, his mind whirling. What the hell just happened? Terence’s claim was hard to believe.

JJ didn’t strike him as the type of woman to fall for a meathead. Were they really together? Was Mike right, had he missed his chance? Desmond wasn’t the type to try and steal someone’s girlfriend, but he’d never come across anyone like JJ. There was something different about her, something that kept him hooked, despite knowing better.

Unfortunately, he had to set the matter aside as he got mentally ready for work. Fielding texts and emails from his assistant and agent, he walked out of the locker room, and straight into the object of his speculation.

He and JJ ran full force in to each other. The impact knocked JJ to the ground. “Ow! Bro, you need to put the phone down and pay attention.”

Flustered, he offered his hand. “I’m so sorry, miss. I—JJ?”

“Desmond, I’m starting to think you’re following me,” she said sharply.

“I—well—no. Uh—you work here?”

“Nothing gets by you, Ivy League.” Annoyance was clear in her voice. “Did the shiny nametag with the gym logo give it away?” She didn’t wait for his answer. “Yes, I work

here and I'm about to be late for a training session, so if you could help me up that'd be solid."

"Right, sorry." He grabbed her outstretched hand and lifted her from the floor. The moment they touched, his pulse quickened.

"Any chance I can get my hand back sometime soon?"

"Huh?" Blinking back to reality, he let go. "Wow, I must seem like such an idiot."

"A little bit." Her rebuke was softened by the teasing glint in her eyes. "Bye now." She took off, leaving him speechless once again.



JJ waited until she rounded the corner before leaning against the wall and taking a deep breath. *Shake it off, girl.*

Later in the day she found Cecily sitting on JJ's desk, waiting. "Hello, boss."

"Don't 'hello boss' me. Why didn't you tell me you saw Desmond this morning?"

"It was a footnote in my day. I saw him upstairs, and then he all but tackled me on the main floor." JJ paused, remembering that she hadn't told her friend about the encounter. "How did you even know we saw each other?" Cecily slowly motioned to an envelope on the desk. "Hmmm, wonder why it's already open?"

Guilt colored her friend's face red. "Shut up and read the damn note."

JJ rolled her eyes and started reading.

JJ, I'm so sorry about almost taking you out. I'll admit, it was nice to see you again, though. Please accept these front row season tickets and field passes for you and a guest. See you soon, Des Cade.

Feeling her heart beat a little faster, she took a deep breath. "Ah, that's nice of him."

Ceci buried her face in her hands. "Girl, wake up before I hurt you! He is in to you. How are you not seeing it?"

JJ threw her hands up. “I don’t want to be his girl for two weeks and then tossed aside.”

“I’m not saying throw your panties at him. But maybe talk to him, get to know him, and *then* throw your panties at him.”

JJ hung her head at the ridiculous notion. “Classy. These tickets are pretty solid, and Jax would love it.”

“Exactly. First match is Saturday night. We’ll need to talk about what to wear.”

“It’s amazing how you have time to work. You’re always trying to figure out my life for me.”

“Someone has to, if you won’t.”



Opening day arrived, and the city buzzed with anticipation.

Outside the locker room, Desmond was getting his pre-game pep talk from Lively.

“You can do it, Dad. Don’t give up. Don’t surrender. Play like my life depends on it.”

“Lively Cade, you are one of a kind. I love you.”

“I love you too, Dad.”

He rested a hand on her shoulder. “All right, you and Ashley take Big Don to your seats. I don’t want you wandering the stadium by yourselves.”

“Yes, Daddy.”

The BBVA Stadium was packed and the crowd was amped. When the visiting team hit the field, the entire stadium erupted in boos.

Desmond led his hyped-up team to the edge of the tunnel. “Lock and load, boys. It’s show time.”

They stormed the field.



As the players took the field, Jax jumped to his feet. “JJ, look! There’s Des!”

He leaned so far forward that she grabbed a handful of his shirt so he wouldn't topple over the retaining wall in his excitement. "Yep, I see him, big man."

He cupped his hands around his mouth to try and make his voice heard. "Des!"

"It's loud, Jax, I don't think he'll be able to hear you."

On the field she could see Desmond and Mike stretching and getting loose. Desmond glanced up, obviously searching for someone. When he saw them, he got up and jogged over. "Party people! What's up, Jax? Do you like the seats?"

He jumped up and down and pumped his fist in the air. "Yeah! This is awesome!"

"Cool, cool." Desmond leaned in closer and whispered to Jax, loud enough for JJ to hear, "How does JJ like them?" He slid a hopeful glance her way.

"She likes them a lot! On the way over, she kept saying how cool it was to get the tickets."

"Oh, really? Nice to know. You enjoy the match. I'll try to make it exciting for you." Desmond kept his eyes on JJ and flashed his million-dollar smile.

"Hey, Daddio."

The young voice caught JJ's attention and she turned to watch two teenage girls head her way.

As they settled in, Desmond's smile changed into something more real. "What took you so long?"

"Snacks."

He tapped the foil wrapped hotdog in the spirited girl's hand. "You know I hate when you eat this junk."

"I know you hate when I eat it without you," she teased.

"Shhh, don't tell the world. Let's do this." The girl and Desmond did a complicated exchange of finger wiggles and hand slaps. When they were done, he headed back out to the field.

Next to her, Jax who watched the entire exchange with an open mouth, squeaked, "How'd you do that?"

“We’ve been practicing for about nine years now,” the girl said with a grin. “He’s my dad. I’m Lively.” She held out her hand for Jax to shake, then turned to JJ. “Hi!”

“Hi.” It was all JJ could get out of her mouth as she took in the teenager who was Desmond’s daughter. Jax spent most of the match asking Lively questions. She answered each one without any signs of impatience, seemingly happy to chatter along.

“So, Jax, is this your mom?” Lively asked, recapturing JJ’s attention.

“No, this is my JJ,” he said proudly.

“I’m his cousin,” JJ clarified. “It’s nice to meet you.”

“Nice to meet you, too.”

When the game ended, JJ turned to her godson. “Time to roll out, big man.”

“Aw, man. Can we say bye to Des?” For good measure, Jax added in a whine, “Please?”

“Maybe next time.”

“Don’t worry, Jax,” Lively said. “I’ll tell him you said bye.”

He pouted but agreed. “Okay. Bye, Lively.”

“Bye, Jax. It was nice to meet you.”

Chapter 2

Monday morning rolled around and JJ was off to an early start at work. With a six a.m. client, her usual morning run had to wait until later in the day. After wrapping up with her first client, she was visited by a happy Cecily. Sitting back in her chair, JJ said, “It’s seven in the morning, you can’t be here for work.”

“Talk,” Cecily demanded.

Dramatically, JJ put her hands behind her head and leaned back farther. “Okay, what are we doing for lunch today? I’m in the mood for Panera.”

Cecily sucked her teeth. “I hate you. Tell me how it went with Desmond.”

“I’m assuming Jax told you our seats were right next to his daughter’s? And how he talked to her the whole game?”

“Yeah. What was she like?”

JJ sat up again, getting a bit more genuine with the conversation. “She was sweet. Super nice to Jax. She seems to really adore her dad.”

“How did the two of you interact?”

“We didn’t. We made eye contact and spoke once, but I didn’t want to seem like another groupie chasing after her dad.”

“If you won’t, I will.”

JJ rolled her eyes in amusement. “Max is so lucky to have you.”

Cecily held up her hands in surrender. “Hey, I got married, I didn’t go blind.”

“Noted. I’d like to get back to work now if that’s all right?”

“Yeah, yeah.” Cecily waved her hand and wiggled her eyebrows. “I’ll go get to work on my employee evaluations. You know, because I’m the boss.”

“I live in a cruel and unfair world,” JJ joked as Cecily walked away.

JJ’s day continued on without any blips. She worked with three of her more enjoyable clients and, before her last group of came in, had plenty of time to get food and a good workout in. After forty-five minutes of bike sprints and an ab workout that made most grown men cry, she geared up to do pull ups.

On her second set, a booming voice with a distinct New Orleans drawl erupted from behind her. “That is some form. Who taught you how to do those?”

Joy burst through her as recognition hit. She dropped from the bar, spun around, and there he was, standing in front of her. Her older brother, Jonathan. At six-foot-five, the man wearing his green beret dress uniform was part of a Special Forces unit. She never knew when he was coming or going but she was always happy to see his face. Stunned by his unexpected appearance, she could only stand, taking him in.

“Are you gonna stand there, or can your big brother get a hug?”

Taking off like Lolo Jones, she leapt into her brother’s open arms. Jonathan held her tight, but her grip was tighter. As much as she hated crying, she couldn’t stop the tears from rolling down her face. Three long years had passed since she saw him last, and she wanted to make sure this was real.

“I’m tapping out, number six,” he rumbled.

She took a deep breath and when she let it out it emerged as a choked laugh. “My bad, number three.”

As two of six siblings, they were eight years apart, but tight as could be. With tears still flowing and an ear-to-ear grin, she ignored the stares of the gym patrons and led him by his larger-than-average arm to her desk.

“What...” she started but paused to formulate her thoughts “What are you doing home?”

He smiled that big smile all her brothers were well known for. “I can’t stop by and visit my baby sister?”

She took a breath, attempting to wrangle both the excitement and the worry she felt. “You know what I mean. It’s not like I talk to you on the phone all the time. You’re certainly not one to just drop by and say hello.” There was a meekness in her voice, brought on by the rush of happiness and relief at seeing her brother.

He planted his hands on the chair’s arms and began to get up. “Fair enough. I’ll leave.”

“You move, and I’ll drop you right here.”

He surveyed her expression. “What? Have you lost touch with reality?” he questioned.

She did something she rarely did, she giggled. Partly because she knew she couldn’t take her big brother down, and partly because she wanted to try anyway.

“Okay,” she said, “let me ask you this. How long will you be home?” She hated to even ask the question because her stomach instantly knotted.

His answer was quick. “Couple weeks.”

Cecily crossed the second floor and caught sight of them. She changed direction and stopped. “Well, hello military man,” she said with a playful note of seduction.

“Hi, Ceci.” Jonathan and Ceci shared a long stare.

When it went on a bit too long, JJ cleared her throat. “Ahem, don’t forget she’s married and has a son, Jon.” She turned to her friend. “Don’t forget you’re married and have a son.”

“Already told you, it doesn’t make me blind,” Cecily insisted.

“Also, I’m not in to crazy chicks,” Jonathan added.

“Just because you couldn’t handle me in bed does not make me crazy.”

“No, you being crazy, makes you crazy,” he shot back. Then he added under his breath, “PS, I can definitely handle you in bed.” He leaned back in his chair and held Cecily’s gaze in silent challenge. Cecily stared right back and arched her eyebrow.

“Okay,” JJ interrupted, drawing out the word. “Before you two strip and have sex on my desk, I’d like to remind you that we are in public.”

“Never stopped her before,” Jonathan said jokingly.

“No, it hasn’t,” Cecily boasted proudly. “That’s how I made Jax.”

“Thanks for that image.” JJ grimaced. “I’m sure if Jax hears the story of his conception, he’ll be needing quite a bit of therapy.”

Cecily turned to her. “It was forever ago. How can it still be awkward? So I slept with your brother, so what?”

Jonathan shook his head and snorted.

“As horrifying as it was, that’s not what makes it awkward,” JJ insisted.

“Was it because that was the first night we met?” Cecily persisted.

“No, whole other story, but you’re getting warmer.”

Cecily’s eyes started to wander out of boredom.

JJ took pity on her. “Stuck? Let me help refresh your memory of that night. Not only did you hook up with Jon, in my bedroom—” She shot a sharp look at her brother. “—but then, you were so drunk, that when you went to find him for round two—”

“Three,” Jon interrupted.

“Shut up,” JJ snapped then turned back to her friend. “Instead of finding Jon, you found Jamie and had sex with him, also in my room.”

“It’s not my fault they’re identical, and I still don’t see the problem,” Cecily declared.

JJ and Jonathan couldn't hold back their own amusement anymore. They had been trying not to laugh but, in their efforts, resorted to tears instead.

When JJ could finally speak, she finished with, "The problem is I had to get a new bed and sanitize my entire room."

"Could've been worse," Cecily teased, a wicked glint in her eye.

"I see no way that's at all possible."

Cecily and Jonathan looked at one another, then answered in unison, "Could've slept with Jerett too."

Laughter broke through the room and then, like a storm blowing through, a somber feeling erupted. Jamie, Jonathan, and Jerett were identical triplets and, like Jonathan and all the boys, Jerett was military. Deployed by the Army to Iraq for his third tour, he didn't make it back. It was almost a year to the day since JJ received the news, not from official channels, but from Jason and Jamie. She hadn't forgotten the pain of that day, but she sure as hell did what she could to suppress it. Like now.

She breathed through the heartache and met Jonathan's eyes. "Is that why you came home?" He didn't say anything, but when she looked in his eyes she got her answer. She glanced down at her watch and took a deep breath. "Look," she said in an aggravated tone. "I'm fine and I have work to do. I have more clients left, but you're welcome to stay and work out, or you can get my key and go crash in the loft." She didn't wait for his response before getting up from her chair and walking away.



Jonathan watched his baby sister walk away, his heart aching. "Has she talked about it at all, Ceci?"

Cecily's voice was soft, but there was anger in it. "JJ, show emotion? You know your sister better than that, of

course not. The last time I brought it up, she tried to fight me.”

He covered his face with his hand and blew out a hard sigh. “Awesome.”

A hand hit his shoulder, and then Cecily’s voice came from above him. “What are you going to do?”

“The only thing I can do, be a brother.”

He knew to give JJ her space when she was trying to deal with things, especially since she wasn’t exactly an open book when it came to emotions. He swiped her keys, stepped out to the gym floor, and watched her as she tried to look busy. After a minute, he left.

On the way to JJ’s loft, he stopped by their favorite pizza place to grab a large pie and then went next door for a case of Shiner Bock. Time to get his baby sister to open up. He scanned the loft and saw a few pictures here and there, but knew this wasn’t home for her. He set the pizza and beer on the counter, and then tossed his bag by the front door. He kicked off his boots, grabbed a beer, and collapsed on the couch. *Home is where the heart is, and JJ’s heart isn’t here.*



An hour later, JJ walked in and tossed her bag on the floor next to her brother’s. She saw the pizza and beer and was more than happy to indulge. “Thanks,” she said.

“Welcome.”

“What’s on?”

“Baseball.”

“I hate baseball.”

“I know.”

At that, she rolled her eyes and took a seat on the other end of the couch. About thirty minutes of not talking later, she came out with, “I got tickets to the Star’s match on Saturday. You in?”

“Cool. Another beer?”

“Sure.” She kept her seat, knowing what was coming next.

“Go get it.”

She thought about it for a brief second. Jonathan gave her a look. She quickly considered her options. Either she got up and got him the beer, or she could be subjected to a series of head locks, noogies, and wet willies, then get the beer. She chose option A, which earned her a quick, knowing smile from her brother. She was no one’s servant, but when it came to her brothers, she was low man on the totem pole. Not that she minded. Having her brother home was a good thing.

When she brought back the beers, she retook her place on the couch, but this time she sat right next to Jonathan. He put his arm around her, bringing her close, and she laid her head on his chest, exactly like when she was little girl. Her tears dampened his shirt but she tried to keep her sniffles quiet. He kissed the top of her head and hugged her tight.

Unable to bear it, she whispered, “I miss him so much.”

“I know, kid. I miss him, too.”

The two of them sat there, staring blankly at the television until they both fell asleep.



“Game day baby, let’s go! Let’s do it!”

The team was in the tunnel about to take the field before the match. Their shouts echoed out on to the field as Desmond led them out. JJ couldn’t help but lean forward, anxious to watch. She managed to convince herself that she was only excited about the game and not her new on-field acquaintance. Once again, she was sitting next to Desmond’s daughter.

Her brother scanned their surroundings. “Sis, these seats are sick! How’d you get these?”

“A friend of mine couldn’t use them, so he gave them to me.” She figured that would satisfy her brother’s curiosity without her having to bring Desmond in to the conversation. Unfortunately, as the team poured on to the field, Desmond jogged over to Lively, and they did their handshake.

He panned over to JJ. “JJ, glad to see you again. No Jax today?”

“No, he’s in the box seats with his mom and dad this time. I thought my brother would enjoy the view today.” She hoped that would be the end of the conversation, but Desmond acted like he had all the time in the world to talk.

“This is your brother?” Was that relief in his voice? He stuck out his hand to shake Jonathan’s. “Nice to meet you. I’m Desmond Cade.”

Her brother didn’t hesitate to clasp it. “Jonathan Marceaux.”

JJ stood expressionless as Jonathan and Desmond held eye contact.

Desmond’s attention returned to JJ. “You have a lovely sister.”

Jonathan threw an arm around the back of her chair. “Yeah, she’s something.”

“Again, nice meeting you, Jonathan. Enjoy the match.” Desmond put his focus back on sidelines.

As he ran to join up with his team, JJ couldn’t force herself to look away, partly because she was staring at his butt, and partly because she knew Jonathan was staring a hole in her face.

“So a friend gave you these tickets?”

She could hear the tone in her brother’s voice and wanted nothing to do with it. Still not looking at him, she came out with a quick, “Yep.” She shot a sidelong glance at her brother and then quickly turned back to the field. “Match is starting,” she said, hoping to get his attention off her. She could feel Jonathan staring a little longer before he finally turned to the field.

The crowd was a sea of cheers and chants during the entire match. The play-by-play announcer was earning his check for the day: “Mike Canton to Des Cade and DES CADE WITH THE TRY!”

The crowd chanted, “DC! DC! DC!”

After his fourth scoring run, Desmond came off the field for a break. He looked straight at JJ, who pretended not to notice him. Still, she couldn’t help but watch as he turned to Jonathan. The two men made eye contact and it was almost like they had a full conversation, each one attempting to read the other. JJ almost shook her head. Poor Desmond. He was clueless that Jonathan read people daily, a necessary survival skill, which made him far better and faster at it than Desmond.

Desmond finished the match with six tries and another nine assists. After it ended, she headed for the stairs.

Behind her, Jonathan called, “We aren’t going to wait for your friend?”

She shot him a familiar disgruntled look. “I’m leaving. If you’re not in the car when the engine starts, I won’t hesitate to leave you here.”

He laughed and ran to catch up with her. “Mr. Desmond Cade,” he started, as they idled in the crowded parking lot.

“Colin Kaepernick,” she retorted.

“What?”

She feigned surprise. “Oh, we aren’t naming random athletes?” she teased.

“How long have you been dating?”

“We are not dating!” she denied a bit too passionately.

Her brother knew when to press and when to back off. She’d taught her brothers early on that getting involved in her love life was hazardous to their health. They might tease her during the early stages, but she was aware that before getting serious with anyone, her prospective beau would have to pass the brother test. Jason, Jamie, Jonathan, Jerett, and Jacob Marceaux were big guys, but they were some of the nicest boys you’d ever meet. Unless you were a boy try-

ing to spend alone time with their baby sister, then they became less loveable. When potential love interests started buzzing around her at a young age, her brothers made a point of making their presence known. It was their job to protect her, and they were very good at it.

He narrowed his eyes. “What’s the story with you two then?”

She tightened her lips. “There is no story, and there is no ‘you two.’ He knocked me down at the gym, felt bad about it, and left the tickets for me.”

“You know that’s actually a story, right?”

“Shut up.”

He made a show of tapping his finger to his chin while he thought. “How does he know about Jax?”

“What?” She’d forgotten Desmond had mentioned her godson, which meant Jonathan’s questions were going to keep coming. Unless she did something quick. “Max took us to the scrimmage and Jax met him at the autograph signing.” Hopefully her answer would sate his curiosity. She sent a prayer up that Jonathan was done.

Her prayer went unanswered, as he kept on. “It’s funny, the guy meets hundreds of people at those things, yet he manages to remember Jaxon, by name, no less.”

“Who doesn’t remember Jax?”

“True. Guess I’m over thinking.”

“You always do.” Feeling confident she’d won this round, she raised an eyebrow and smirked before changing the subject. “What do you want to do tonight?”

“Actually, some of the guys are taking me out. That’s cool, right?”

No, absolutely not. Instead of voicing her objection, she managed to say, “Yeah. I mean, you don’t actually need my permission. We aren’t attached at the hip or whatever. I got stuff to do at my place anyway.”

They got back to her loft, and Jonathan left shortly thereafter. Deciding to take this time while he was out to do both mounds of their laundry, she gathered up the dirty

clothes. While the clothes washed, she grabbed a beer from the fridge and sat on the couch. Taking a deep breath, she lifted the beer to her lips and it was bottoms up. Hopefully, she managed to stifle Jonathan's insinuation about her and Desmond.

It wasn't as if anything was going on between the two of them. Not that the idea didn't have merit. It was just that she wasn't the type to fall for a sports star. She had never dated a professional athlete before, not that she'd never been offered. She knew the type—arrogant, self-centered.

She was a fairly private person, and the idea of being with someone whose life was lived in the spotlight wasn't something she wanted. Though, admittedly, she didn't hate how his ass looked in his shorts, or how his jersey was tight, showing off his chest and arms. And his smile—it made her heart beat a little faster. Wait—what? Crap. No way was she falling for Desmond Cade. That life wasn't for her.

Her adrenaline spiked as her brain began rattling off options and, in an effort to counter her reaction, she stood, went in to her bedroom to change clothes, and then ran out the door heading for the gym.

She arrived breathing heavy, but still feeling the nerves. At the front desk, she frantically patted herself down. "Forgot my card, Aaron."

"You haven't used your card in four months," the front desk clerk joked. "Go ahead."

She gave him a smile and a wave, then headed upstairs to hit the weights. She bolted for the bench press and loaded on two, twenty-five pound plates. Placing her hands on the bar, she closed her eyes and took a deep breath.

"Need a spot?"

She opened her eyes, only to take another deep breath and sit up from the bench. "Ivy League, you're making a strong case as a stalker. You seem to be following me everywhere."

He flashed the smile that sent her heart racing. "Following you? Never. I will say, it's a very pleasant coincidence."

Their gazes locked, but she quickly turned away because she didn't want him to read anything in to it. "Why are you even here? You had a game a few hours ago, shouldn't you be celebrating with your posse or whatever?"

Desmond snorted. "Not tonight. Maybe when we win the championship."

"Fair enough. Why are you here?"

He gave her sad eyes. "If you must know, my date bailed on me tonight."

"Sorry to hear that." She feigned disinterest, even though a spurt of jealousy erupted.

"It's hard to compete with a bunch of fifteen year olds and the mall."

"Yeah...huh?"

He placed his hand on the bar to brace himself. "My date for tonight was my daughter. I think you met her."

She set her eyes on the bench, avoiding eye contact. "Yes, Lively. Sweet kid."

"I'm lucky. But she ditched me tonight, and I came here to clear my head."

JJ nodded and assumed the interaction was over.

"How about that spot?" he asked again.

"Um...sure, why not." She didn't actually need a spotter, but didn't want to be rude. She made it through her first set and was breathing heavy.

"Geez. Strong much?"

She tried to hide her grin. "It's sort of in my job description."

"Guess a bodybuilder for a boyfriend doesn't hurt either," he jeered.

The urge to grin died and she stared at him blankly. "What boyfriend?"

Desmond folded his arms. "You know, that big dude who gives himself the finger guns in the mirror every time he sees himself. What's his name? Trey? Tyler? Oh, Terence!"

Shock rocketed through her. “Who—” She tried to be calm and quiet, but it was hard. “Who in the hell told you Terence and I were together?”

“Uh—he did. That day I knocked you down,” Desmond explained. He nervously scratched his head and waited.

“No, absolutely not.” She shook her head violently. “Last time I checked, hell hadn’t frozen over yet.”

He accepted her comical response. “All right. Point made.”

“Sure?” She narrowed her gaze on him. “Because I want to make that abundantly clear.”

“Yeah, I got it.”

She went on to her next set, all the while shaking off the idea of Terence as a boyfriend.

“So are you?” Desmond asked.

“Am I what?”

“With someone?”

“I am not,” she said, slowly and deliberately.

Desmond looked as if he was storing the information in a file in his brain. “Okay.”

“Okay.” She finished out her last set and went to the next part of her workout. Desmond followed right along until she stopped him. “Was there something else?”

“I was thinking maybe we could work out together.”

“Really? I thought you came here to clear your head.”

“I did, but partner workouts can help with that.”

She studied him and nodded. “That’s fine. I’m doing a workout I use to do with my brothers, so don’t feel bad if you can’t keep up.”

He gave her a confident shrug. “I’m a professional athlete. I think I’ll be all right.”

She scoffed and turned back to the machine.

“Then proceed we shall.” She went from exercise to exercise, silently challenging him to keep up. “Listen, I know you played today, so if your body can’t take it, tell me. Your team doesn’t need you hurt, and I don’t need to get blamed for it.”

Desmond was bent at the waist, breathing heavily, but still managed a cocky smile. "I'm good."

"All right then. To the squat racks."

They loaded on two forty-five-pound plates and another twenty-five-pound plate on each side of the bar. Before she could step to it, Desmond got ready to lift.

"What are you doing, Ivy League?"

He looked like a lost puppy. "We didn't rack this for me?"

"How presumptuous. No. You can adjust it how you want, but this is my set." She all but pushed him aside and started lifting. When she was done, she racked the bar and caught Desmond intently focused on her legs through the mirror. "Problem?"

He tried to hide his guilt-ridden expression. "No, no. Most of the girls I've been around, don't know their way around a weight room."

She couldn't tell if it was a pick up line, or if he was being sincere. She shrugged. Why the hell did it matter? "Again, that's what they pay me for."

"Also, your legs are solid."

Definitely a pickup line. She raised an eyebrow and smirked. "Thanks, I guess. By the way, I'm not most girls."

He stood up and added more weight to the bar before starting his own set. "I am slowly learning that about you."

"You're studying me?"

He did four repetitions and paused before the fifth. "I suppose you could say that. When something interests me, I love to learn everything about it."

Feeling more joy than she cared to show, she stared down at the floor. "Abs."

He racked the bar. "What?"

"Abs workout. Then you and I are done."

"After you."

Thirty minutes later, they were completely drenched in sweat. JJ, who wasn't shy about her body, took off her wet shirt and grabbed a towel to dry off. She stood in her sports

bra and shorts, her few tattoos on display, including the one on her right rib cage. She caught Desmond's transfixed stare in the mirror. Her voice took on a mocking tone, "Still studying?"

He briskly shook his head to get out of his trance. "Huh? Sorry."

"You aren't exactly slick about it."

"I am so sorry. I didn't mean to—"

"It's fine. People stare."

"I believe that." He went back to studying her tattoos. "That's a lemniscate."

"Come again?"

"Your tattoo. It's an infinity symbol."

"It is. Made up of the names of all the important men in my life."

They exchanged glances as he tried to recover from the brutal workout she put him through. "Can I walk you out?"

"Sure."

They made their way down the stairs and didn't say anything until they hit the exit. When they got outside, he scanned the parking lot. "Where's your car?"

"Um..." Suddenly she remembered why she came to the gym and how she arrived. "I actually didn't drive here. I ran."

"Wonder Woman, it's pitch black. I can't let you walk alone in the dark. May I give you a ride?"

She didn't exactly want to be alone with him, but she had no desire to walk home either. "Sure."

They walked to his truck, a black Ford Expedition with darkly tinted windows.

"Nice wheels."

"It does the job. Doors are unlocked, you can get in."

"Thanks."

He opened the back door and set his bag on the seat. "Let me toss on a fresh shirt real quick."

She missed part of what he said and turned to ask him to repeat it, but the words froze in her throat as she caught him

in the middle of taking off his shirt. Damn, his body was bruised, tattooed, and perfectly chiseled. She caught herself staring and turned around before he noticed.

“All right.” He got into the driver’s seat. “Where am I going?” She gave him her address and they drove off. “What the hell kind of workout did you just put me through?” he demanded.

Satisfied with her ability to wear him down, she explained, “I told you, it’s a workout I did with my brothers when we were younger. Are you feeling it already?”

“I can’t lie. My body hates me right now.”

“I see an ice bath in your future.”

“Yeah, no kidding. That was more like a military grade workout.”

She didn’t turn to face him but she restrained herself from laughing “Did I not tell you my family has a history in the military?”

Desmond didn’t seem at all bothered by her attempt to hustle him. “You said brothers, with an ‘s.’ More than the one I met today?”

“Yes.”

“How many?”

“Five.” There was a minute’s pause, then she corrected herself. “Four.”

“Mind if I ask?”

She avoided his gaze and stared out the window. “As a matter of fact, I do.”

He stopped asking questions. Except for the GPS giving directions, no one else spoke. He made a right turn and stopped in front of a tall glass building.

“Here,” she said, interrupting the quiet.

“May I walk you in?”

Her immediate thought was nope, but what came out was, “Sure.” *What are you doing?*

“Is that your favorite word?” he teased.

Catching the joke, she repeated, “Sure.”

The elevator ride to her sixth floor loft was slow going. Both stayed quiet, JJ trying to dodge anymore personal inquiries. “All right, this is me. Thank you for the ride and for walking me up.”

“You’re welcome. Thank you for letting me work out with you.” They exchanged smiles and this time, when they made eye contact, she was sure her heart would beat its way out of her chest. They moved closer and he gripped her waist. Standing pressed against him, she couldn’t believe how right this situation felt. In some weird way this is exactly what she wanted, what she needed. It left her vibrating, craving more. Only a few inches separated their lips.

Desmond dipped to close that distance in an obvious attempt to kiss her, but as his lips brushed hers with a whisper-light touch, she pulled back and softly placed her hands on his chest, stopping herself more than him. “Goodnight, Desmond.”

He looked perplexed. “Um, goodnight.” She opened her door to go inside and he called after her, “See you soon?”

She didn’t turn, but answered, “Sure.”

As soon as her door was closed, she leaned against it and closed her eyes. What the hell just happened? Had he actually tried to kiss her? Why did she stop him? No, it was the right thing to do. Letting him kiss her would’ve opened the door to something she didn’t want. Or did she? A little voice reminded her how good it felt to be wrapped in his arms. She drifted to the kitchen, in search of something stronger than beer to finish out her night. Searching through her cabinets, she let out a sigh of relief when she came across a bottle of tequila in the back. She grabbed it and her favorite shot glass. She poured her first shot, took a moment to reflect on what happened, and then downed it. Four shots later, she was satisfied with the idea of going to bed. And that’s exactly what she did.



“What?” Cecily’s voice blared across the room.

“Keep your voice down,” JJ hissed. The whole restaurant was looking at them.

Cecily slapped her hand on the table. “Girl, I’m sorry, but you can’t spring something like that on me and not expect me to get loud. Why didn’t you call me?”

“Because my first thought was to drink. If I didn’t know what to make of the situation, why would I want you yelling at me about it?”

Visibly frustrated, Cecily clenched her fists. “You’re damn right I would’ve yelled. He wants you. Something he made perfectly clear. I don’t understand the problem.”

JJ took a long sip of wine, thinking about Cecily’s words. “To be honest, I don’t understand the problem either. I’ve never hesitated with someone I feel such a passion for.”

“What was it like?”

“What?”

Cecily pointed at her. “JJ, I hate when you do that.”

JJ shrugged. “Do what?”

“Act like you have no idea what I’m talking about.”

“I don’t.”

“You spent one-on-one quality time with the very delicious Desmond Cade. What was it like?”

JJ took another long drink and studied her friend. Remembering last night’s practice session made her lips curve.

Cecily caught the expression and leaned forward. “I see that smile. Spill it.”

“I’ll admit, I had a good time with him. He makes a good workout partner.”

“I bet.”

“Gym partner, Ceci.” JJ shrugged, trying to put her thoughts into words. “It was different seeing him away from all the cameras. He’s...”

“Human?”

“Yes. When he put his hands around me, my body went insane.”

“You want him.”

JJ bit her bottom lip. "Sort of."

"You're an idiot."

"I know."

"It's so hard to be you, Miss Marceaux," Cecily teased.

"Ah, that's why I have you."

"Cheers to that." The waiter came by with another bottle of wine, but JJ stopped him before he could refill her glass. "No more for me. I'm driving."

Cecily fixed her eyes on the clock behind JJ. "Yeah, we should call it a night. Max and I are going with Jax's class to the zoo tomorrow."

"That's laughable. You're not what people would call 'outdoorsy.'"

Cecily grinned. "Tell me about it. When that boy begs for something, it's hard to say no."

"It's the eyes."

"No shit. You would know."

They stood and gathered their purses.

JJ clapped her friend on the back. "Now, let's see what the boys are up to."

"Your brother is spending time with his favorite cousin and my son, which means, if the house is still standing, I'll be amazed."

When they arrived at the house, they walked through the front door and into what sounded like a tactical police raid.

"Nerf guns," Cecily and JJ said simultaneously. Jax was crouched down in the hallway, Jonathan was in place between the bar and the island, while Max peeked over the couch.

Surveying the situation, JJ burst into laughter. "Dude, your house is trashed."

Cecily immediately began directing traffic. "Game over, boys. Max, clean up my house. Jon, get my son bathed and ready for bed."

"Aw, man," the boys, young and old, said.

Chapter 3

Jonathan woke at two a.m. to hear JJ throwing up in the bathroom. “Hey sis, you okay?” A muffled groan echoed, then, “Yeah, just wanted to get a closer view of the toilet.”

“Okay, smart ass. I’m coming in.” He found her curled up on the floor. “How long have you been in here?”

“I don’t know, but every time I think I’m done—” Gagging interrupted her. When she finally finished, she gasped, “Ugh, kill me, please.”

“Not unless you’re turning into a zombie.” Jonathan put his hand on her forehead, “You are burning up, sis.”

She was draped in a towel, her face covered in sweat. “Really? Because I’m freezing.” Her usual snark lost some bite as she latched onto the toilet.

“Oh, yeah, you are definitely sick. Thanks for saving it until I got home. Think we can get you back to your bed?”

“Yes.”

He helped her off the floor and they started for her bed before JJ doubled back to the toilet. Crouched next to her, he drew comforting circles on her back. Helping her to her feet again when she was finished, he got her back to bed and pulled her blanket over her. “I haven’t seen you this sick since you had food poisoning at camp when you were fifteen.”

“I remember that. Lots of girls got sick.”

He went to get a towel from the bathroom and returned to sit next to her on the edge of the bed. Gently he wiped her forehead.

“Yeah, and I had to go to all the way to Austin to get you. You aren’t going to work today. I’ll call the doctor as soon as they open.”

It had been a long time since he had taken care of his sister while she was sick. Making a mental checklist of what he needed to accomplish. He brought her Tylenol, praying it would kick in fast and let her sleep.

Minutes later, her eyes fluttered closed. “I love you, number three.”

“I love you too, number six.”

Convinced she would be asleep for a while, he grabbed his phone and headphones, and quietly slipped out of the loft for a run. He ran to Hermann Park, stopping to take it in when he got to the entrance. He wasn’t as open to spending time there as his sister and, before the past could take him over, he was off in a sprint.

Cranking up his music, he completed twelve miles by the time he made it back to JJ’s apartment. Coming in, he was relieved to find her still asleep. After showering in the guest bathroom, he sprawled on the couch, staring at the ceiling in deep thought. Eventually his eyelids grew heavy and he drifted off. He awoke again at seven forty-five a.m. Shriill screams jerked him upright and he was running down the hall.

“Stop! Mom, come back! Where are you going? Daddy!”

Jonathan rushed in to JJ’s room. “JJ? JJ, wake up!” He sat next to her, rubbing her arm and holding her hand while she came out of her dream. “What the hell was that?”

She took a few shallow breaths and cradled her cheek in her hand. “Nothing. Fever induced hallucinations.”

“Really? Because it sounded like you were having nightmares again.”

“I wasn’t.”

He folded his arms locked eyes with his sister. “How long this time?”

“I don’t want to do this with you. Drop it.”

Jonathan didn’t want to drop it, but he saw that it was almost eight. Stepping out of the room to call the doctor, he came back soon after and told her to get dressed. “Your appointment is in thirty minutes.”

They rode the whole way without talking to each other. After giving her a thorough exam, the doctor confirmed she had the flu, advising her not to go back to work for a week.

“I’m not missing work for a week,” she grumbled as they got into the truck.

“Calm down.” Jonathan carefully backed up. “I called Cecily already and told her you’d be out this week.”

She sighed and laid her head on the seat back. “Of course you did. This blows.”

“I’m not hearing a ‘thank you’ in there anywhere.” He caught her sarcastic smile. “Eh. Good enough. Let’s go get your medicine, some food for me, and get your mean ass back home.”

They sat in the Chick-fil-A drive thru and he decided to keep pushing. “Look, while you take a week off, I’m gonna get some work in. I have a few recruiting jobs, but I’ll make sure you have what you need before I leave.”

“I do know how to take care of myself.”

“You don’t have to be Miss Independent *all* the time you know. It’s okay to let people take care of you.”



As they got Jonathan’s food, JJ thought about what her brother said, but refused to dwell on it for too long. “Wrong way,” she told him as he pulled into the street. “Home is the other direction.”

He tapped the steering wheel as if in anticipation. “Is it? How soon you forget, baby sister.”

Taking in the familiar surroundings, she hung her head. Irritation spiked, but instead of unloading, she took a deep breath and gathered her thoughts, refusing to look at him. “Could you please take me back to my place?”

“Come on, I need to get something,” he cajoled. “We’ll be in and out.” There was a gentle note to his voice, as if he was worried she’d break.

She sank down in her seat. “I’m not going in.”

“Just for a minute.”

She kept silent as they rolled in to the long driveway of a huge two-story, stone-front house situated on the opposite side of the park where she ran.

“JJ, come with me, please.” He took her by the hand, walked to the back door, and then pulled a key from under one of the groupings of rocks. He turned the key in the lock and opened the door. “When’s the last time you were here?”

She didn’t answer, choosing to convey her displeasure with an eye roll and shrug. Still, she followed him in.

“I’ll be back.” Jonathan disappeared around the corner, then he was stomping up the stairs.

Feeling the dizzying effects of her fever spiking, she took a few steps to the kitchen and braced against the island. On the refrigerator were family pictures, dating back at least twenty years. Unable to help herself, she studied them. The group of kids on the beach running from the tide, a little girl, no older than five, smiling a toothless grin with ice cream all over her face, and a group of boys, all proudly holding their rifles, on the deck of a cabin.

When she came across that same little girl a few years older and, twenty feet in the air while her dad waited with open arms to catch her, she reached out to grab the picture. She stopped before her fingers could brush the faded photo. Backing away from the fridge, she had every intention of going out the door when something in the living room caught her attention.

A large silver frame held a predominant position on the media stand. Unable to stop, she picked it up, cradling it

carefully. The same little girl from the other pictures was back, probably around eight in this one. She wore a dance costume and held a bouquet of roses. Her dad held her in his arms and her mom was in the midst of giving her a kiss.

Two of the boys stood next to them, and the others were all on one knee, sporting proud smiles. The glow on the little girl's face was proof she was in an enchanted state of mind.

"I remember that night," Jonathan said from behind her.

Startled by his sudden emergence, she almost dropped the picture. "Geez, Jon! Do you have to sneak up on me like that?"

"It's in my training."

"I'm not one of your targets."

"You sure?"

She punched him and held up the picture. "You said you remember this one?"

"Yep, you were seven and so excited about your dance recital." He stopped, as if recalling the day. "You did a great job, by the way."

Hearing his praise, even all these years later, drew her gaze from the picture and she smiled back at him. She felt a wave of anguish as her tone softened. "We look so happy."

"We were. Especially Mom and Dad because it was one of the last times we were together as a family, before Jason left for basic training."

"I don't remember this one."

"If you came home more, maybe you would."

Flustered by the statement, she bit the inside of her cheek. "You, Jason, Jamie, and Jacob, you guys get to remember everything. I'm the only one that didn't get to grow up with them."

"I understand."

Another bout of heartache was coming on and she fought to keep it at bay. "No, you don't. You can't possibly understand what it's like to grow up without your parents." Feeling frustrated at his lack of understanding, she examined

the picture again and was filled with a mixture of sadness and fatigue. She set it back and walked out of the door.

When they got back to her loft, she spent most of the afternoon in bed, trying to rest. A few hours later she found Jonathan on the couch going over his recruiting schedule.

She stood in the doorway watching him. Finally, she prompted, “So?”

“What?”

“You drag me all the way to the house while I’m sick, and you don’t even tell me why?”

“You didn’t ask.”

“I’m asking now.”

He directed her over to the counter where a stuffed elephant that seemed like it had seen far better days sat.

“I can’t believe you went back for that.”

“But it’s—”

“I know what it is.” Confusion was plain on his face, but she was too upset to explain. “I’m feeling tired again. I’m gonna go back to bed.”

She went to her room and closed the door. Instead of sleeping right away she focused her eyes on her window and became consumed with her thoughts before finally falling asleep for a few hours.

Off her normal schedule and finally feeling hungry, she came out of her room and microwaved a bowl of soup. She barely acknowledged Jonathan. “I do have a guest bedroom with an actual bed and everything.”

All he did was grunt. She sat down and stared for a minute before reaching out and grabbing the elephant from his hands.

“Tunks,” she said quietly as memories of her favorite stuffed animal began cascading through her mind. She let out a quiet laugh when she remembered how Jerett hid her elephant from her as a joke and, when the joke was over, he forgot where he put it. She was so upset that she didn’t speak to him for the entire week it took him to find it. What neither of them knew was that when Jamie found it on a shelf in his

closet, he thought it would be funny to hide it in Jason's room—where none of them were allowed to go unless invited in. After JJ stooped to spiking Jarett's juice with hot sauce, the elephant mysteriously appeared on the kitchen counter.

She blew out a long sigh before sharing her thoughts. "Four months," she whispered, knowing her brother was pretending to be asleep. "I started having nightmares again four months ago. Sometimes I wake up in the middle of the night and sit there. It hurts all the time. I have no parents, one brother is gone, and I don't see the rest of them enough. I love Max, Ceci, and Jaxon and my time with them, but at the end of the day, I'm here, alone. I know you brought Tunks because he always helped me sleep at night, but I can't sleep with a stuffed elephant for the rest of my life."

With his eyes still closed, Jonathan reached out and grabbed his sister's hand, giving her a gentle squeeze. For the first time, in a long time, she was voicing her feelings. It wasn't easy, and she appreciated his silence. "I want to be able to have someone that can be there for me, even on my absolute worst days. I want to trust my heart with that person and have them trust their heart to me. I want to be with someone that, we can be serious and sincere, and be completely passionate even at the most random times."

Silence settled around them, and she felt curiously lighter after putting all that out there. Rarely did she talk much about herself, even to Cecily. JJ had spent so much of her life building a wall around her past and trying to move as far away from it as possible. The irony, she thought, was that she knew without a doubt she wanted to have that one person to connect and be completely open with. Without realizing it, her mind drifted to her and Desmond standing in the hallway. It wasn't the worst position she'd ever been in. She let out a big yawn.

"Bed time."

The rumble of Jonathan's voice spooked her and left her blinking. His hand was out and she put her free one in it.

With a tug he pulled her to her feet. Elephant in hand, she followed him to her bedroom. She crawled in and went to sleep, Tunks cradled in her arms.



At noon the next day, JJ woke up to the sun in her face and an empty apartment. She never slept past seven in the morning, but the combination of being sick and exhausted kept her down. She walked into the kitchen and found a note from Jonathan. The sight of his familiar handwriting on the little piece of paper made her heart sink. The last time he left a note she didn't see him again for three years. Warily, she read it *Number six. Had to do some recruiting and get a workout in. Call me if you need me. Love you.*

Relief hit. She went back to her room, grabbed her blanket and Tunks, and then stretched out on the couch to watch television. Since she was rarely home during the day, she was delighted to find a *CASTLE* marathon. "Tunks, you are about to witness some cool crime drama my friend." She explained the entire show to her elephant as if she was talking to her best friend.



Jonathan walked into the gym, and Cecily immediately pegged him. She called him in to her office. "Hey, Jon. What you been up to?"

He put his finger on his chest and tapped his name patch. "Ceci. You know when I'm in uniform you have to call me Commander Marceaux."

"Ha! Sweetie, when it's only you and me, I'll call you whatever I want."

He took the seat across from her. "I was out doing some recruiting at an event in Richmond. You know, get some work in while I'm home."

Cecily's playful demeanor faded and her gaze dimmed with worry. "Why are you home? Not that I don't love having you here, but from the moment you showed up, it seems like something's been bothering you."

He hesitated, but she insisted, "Jonathan Elliot Marceaux, I'm your friend, just as much as I'm JJ's. Talk to me."

He leaned forward in his chair while he gathered his thoughts. "I was unofficially ordered to come home and 'be with my family.'"

"Okay, that's not such a big deal. When do the rest of the boys come back?"

"They don't. Just me. Jason is retiring in two months. Jamie is coming back right before his baby is due. Jacob is leading a relief mission in South America."

"That sucks, but they actually came home for Jerett's funeral, you didn't."

"That's a cheap shot."

"I'm just speaking the truth. How come the stars aligned for you this year?"

"It's complicated."

"Wrong answer. Try again."

It wasn't in Cecily's nature to leave something alone, so he continued. "I didn't get to take my bereavement leave so that's what I'm calling it. In reality, my bosses ordered me home before my next assignment, but I have to go back."

"When?"

"Sometime next week."

"Where?"

"I can't tell you that."

"How long?"

"I don't know. But even if I did—" he said, cutting himself off.

"You can't tell me that either."

"Right."

She folded her arms. "I take it JJ doesn't know?"

"I haven't found the right time to tell her." In retrospect, he figured her should have told her as soon as he came home.

“I wanted to see how she was doing, and I didn’t want to piss her off before we even had a chance to hang out.”

“You can’t pull that note crap like you did last time. She didn’t take that lightly.”

He hung his head in shame. “I thought it’d be easier for her.”

She arched an eyebrow and glared at him, trying to understand his reasoning. “You mean easier for you. She was ready to hunt you down and shoot you.”

“That’s my baby sister.”

“Yeah, right.”

“Listen, you have an extremely big mouth. Please, do *not* tell JJ anything before I have a chance to.”

“You know you just insulted me, right?”

“Ceci—”

“Shut up. I heard you.”

He pointed to her. “She’s going to need her best friend so she doesn’t go off on the world.”

She mockingly clapped at his statement. “You’re her best friend, but I’ll settle for second best.”

“You always do.”

“Watch yourself, Commander,” Cecily warned with a finger wag.

Jonathan chuckled all the way to the locker room. For all his discipline, he was a man of rituals. Every time he visited the gym, he went for locker number twenty-five.

The only thing that bothered him was the locker’s placement. It was in the front of the aisle, which meant he would have to talk to someone.

“Whoa, military man?”

He turned around to see a thick-necked iron jockey eyeing his uniform. Not in a talking mood, Jonathan kept his response short and dry. “Yes, sir.”

“Yeah, I did my time in the army and got out,” the man responded arrogantly.

That statement got Jonathan's attention. "I suppose it's a lifestyle for some and a job for others now, isn't it?" His smile was all teeth. "If you weren't in to it, why join?"

The guy stared at him with a dumbfounded look then puffed out his chest and hit it with his fist a couple of times. "Girls love the uniform."

Deciding the conversation was over, Jonathan turned back to his locker and began changing. Unfortunately, meat head didn't get the hint.

"Matter of fact, I got a girl I've been dating who works here."

Poor woman. "Congratulations."

"Yep. Dynamite body. Loves seeing me in my uniform and loves it even more when I take it off."

Jonathan barely refrained from choking. "Okay then."

"Her name is JJ."

That unexpected comment had Jonathan's head whipping around the locker door.

Happy to have Jonathan's attention, the meathead practically leered. "Ah, you know which one I'm talking about."

What an idiot. It took every bit of his control not to punch the ass in the face. Meathead had to be the only person in the gym unaware of who Jonathan was, or his obvious resemblance to JJ. "Yeah, I've seen her around. Nice girl."

"She's a freak. The nice ones always are, though."

Anger burned bright and hot, but Jonathan began a slow mental countdown to avoid leaving the idiot in a pool of his own blood. "Interesting."

The idiot poked Jonathan in the shoulder with two fingers. "Hey, hands off, bro."

Jonathan glanced at his shoulder then to at meathead in disbelief of his actions. He did another slow count to five and with feigned sincerity told him, "I wouldn't do that to ya, big fella."

The asshole flipped two finger guns and walked out, leaving Jonathan wondering how the hell that idiot got past the psych evaluation.

Back upstairs in the gym, Jonathan was amused at how Cecily deliberately ignored him as she dealt with a client. He ran five miles on the treadmill, and, while lifting weights, purposely chose the machine next to her just to annoy.

Judging by the visual scan he got, her client didn't seem to mind him imposing on her workout.

When her client went to get water, Cecily leaned over and whispered to him, "Last boyfriend filed a restraining order."

Forewarned, Jonathan took the hint and put in another ten miles before calling it quits for the night. Even though it was late, he decided to shower at the gym instead of going home and possibly waking JJ. Since he didn't have another set of clothes, after he showered he put his uniform back on. In the quiet of the deserted locker room, he pondered his earlier conversation with Cecily. In the mirror, the commendation medals spanning his chest winked under the fluorescent lighting. For a moment, he wondered if the medals and everything he had gone through to get them were worth not seeing his family or even settling down himself. He had toyed with the idea of retirement before, but now it was weighing heavily on his mind.

"Thank you for your service, sir."

He spun around at the unfamiliar voice behind him. When he realized it was Desmond, he held out his hand. "Mr. Cade, just upholding a family tradition."

Desmond shook his hand. "No surprise at all, you're in the military. Everything about you screams 'man of honor.'"

Even though Jonathan heard similar sentiments many times before, it always caused a stir of pride. "Actually, it's Commander Jonathan Marceaux, Army Special Forces."

Respect shone in Desmond's gaze and he nodded to acknowledge Jonathan's title. "Will I see you and JJ at the match this weekend?" There was no way Jonathan could miss the hope written over Desmond's face.

"Sorry, but no." Desmond's expression darkened with disappointment, leaving Jonathan to explain. "She is at home

with the flu. In the event she feels better, we're going to visit one of our brothers."

"She mentioned she had four brothers. Though I think she was trying to avoid telling me about one."

Surprised JJ would share even that much with Desmond, Jonathan's gaze dropped away and came back. "Yeah, there are five brothers, but if she didn't tell you what happened, she has her reasons." Not giving Desmond time to respond, Jonathan walked out of locker room, not wanting to get into the why behind his statement. He was tired and ready to get some sleep.



The next morning, JJ came out of her room and was greeted with a familiar aroma. "I smell coffee. Did you make me some?"

"I didn't, but good to see you're feeling better. Even better news for you."

"What's that?"

"It's Thursday which means you can go back to work soon."

"That is great news," JJ said enthusiastically. "I missed you yesterday. You were gone when I woke up and hadn't returned when I fell asleep."

"You got plenty of rest, didn't you? You needed quiet and I needed to work."

She couldn't fail to miss he was in work mode, something she absolutely hated. Still, she loved messing with him. "Hug me."

"No."

She pouted. "Why not?"

"You're sick, and you smell bad. When's the last time you showered?" She glared at him until they both cracked up.

"Can I at least get a kiss?"

“I guess.” He brought her in close and dropped a kiss on her forehead.

When he didn’t let go, she said, “Okay, you can let go of my head now.”

“I could, but I’d rather put you in a head lock.”

Maybe she shouldn’t have gotten so close to him. “Can we not? I’m sick.”

“You’re fine. I put you in a headlock. Show me how you get out.”

She struggled, but her brother’s grip was just tight enough she had no room to slip free.

“Come on, number six, I know you can get out of this,” he cajoled.

Pulling her scattered thoughts together, she realized there was some room for a head-butt. Wasting no time, she whipped her head backward, gently enough she wouldn’t bloody or break his nose. When he recoiled, she elbowed him, hard, forcing him to release her.

He recovered quickly, which made her think he was going in for another move. Instead, he opened his arms and gave her a big hug. “I love you, Jess. I need you not to forget that.” His arms tightened around her.

She gave him a pat on the back. “I love you too, Jonny.”

“Don’t call me Jonny.”

“You know the rules, call me Jess, I call you Jonny.”

He pushed her away. “Moment over.”

“Oh, whatever.” She took a seat across from him at the kitchen island. “Are you recruiting again today?”

“Yep, Bellaire High School. First, I’m going to Jax’s school for show and tell. I actually need to get dressed and head over there.”

“Bummer for me, but Jax will be thrilled. Guess I’ll call Ceci to come over and hang.” She sent her friend a quick text.

He stood and gave her an open-handed tap to the back of the head. “Do me a favor. Bust some suds and take a shower. I wasn’t kidding when I said you smell bad.”

She gave him her best annoyed stare. “Is this you loving me?”

As soon as he left, she took his advice and showered, hoping it would make her feel better. When she got out, she stared at the ruffled mess of her bed. No way did she want to crawl back in where she’d tossed and turned, sweating out her fever. She tossed all her bedding in the washer and sat on the couch to watch TV until Cecily arrived. Thirty minutes later a knock sounded at her door.

“Finally! You were supposed to be here fifteen minutes—” She swung open the door, but instead of Cecily, Desmond stood on the other side. Her mouth dropped open in shock.

“Is this a bad time?”

“No, sorry. I was expecting someone else. Please, come in.” She stepped to the side and let him in the front door.

“Sorry to come by unannounced, but I ran in to your brother at the gym last night. He mentioned you were sick, and I know when Lively’s sick, she can be very particular, so I brought a few things for you.”

Desmond’s unusual chatter made her believe the sports star might be nervous. She led him to the kitchen. He set everything out on her island while she leaned on the opposite wall with her arms crossed.

“I brought some magazines. I don’t know what you’re in to, so I bought one of every kind. Here’s some vitamin C drops. I got basically the whole menu from Panera Bread and Chick-fil-A.” He finally stopped talking and looked up. He bit the inside of his cheek, but his eyes sparkled with humor. “Too much? It’s too much. I should’ve have called.”

“Quit talking,” she said, fighting the urge to tease him. “Since I never gave you my number, I’d be a little concerned if you called. This is sweet, and thoughtful. No one, besides my brothers goes to these lengths for me. Thank you.”

His face lit up. “I know it won’t magically make you better but, hopefully, it makes being at home more bearable.”

She picked up one of the cookies from Panera and held it up like a trophy. “This definitely makes it better.” She took a bite and delighted in the sugary sweetness. “I was watching a little TV. You’re welcome to stay and hang out.”

The words spilled without permission, but she wanted to express her appreciation of his generosity. Besides, part of her wanted to spend time with him.

He put his hands in his pockets. “I do. I mean I really want to...”

She listened to him trail off and tried to guide him to his response. “But?”

“But I have practice soon.”

Disappointed with his answer, she refused to show it. “Maybe next time, Ivy League.”

“Rain check?”

She couldn’t miss the hopeful note in his voice. “Sure.” She walked him to the door. “I’d give you a hug, but I’d rather not have the entire city try to kill me if you got sick.”

They stood in the doorway and he turned to her. “I wouldn’t mind getting quarantined with you.”

Ignoring the underlying implication in his comment, she gently pushed the door closed. Right before it closed, she yelled out, “Have a good practice Mr. Cade.”

She leaned against her door, disappointed that he couldn’t stay, but happy to see him at all. Feeling chipper after his visit and with her cookie still in hand, she walked to her living room, jumped over the back of her couch, and landed comfortably on the cushions.

Another thirty minutes went by, and Cecily came through the door. JJ let her head fall against the couch’s back. “Look who decided to show up. I’ve only been waiting on you for an hour.”

“Sorry, sorry. I stopped at Max’s office and it took a little longer than I expected.”

“You could’ve called.”

“My hands were occupied.”

“With what?” JJ eyed Cecily, saw the pleased look on her face, and buried her head in her couch. “Jesus, Ceci. Go wash your hands before you touch anything in my house.”

“Whatever.” Cecily walked to the kitchen where Desmond left all the food. “What’s all this?” she yelled out over running water.

JJ got up and stood in the entryway. “Desmond brought all of it over about an hour ago. Apparently, Jonny-boy told him I was sick and this was his way of wishing me well.”

“Why’d you let him leave?”

“Was I supposed to tie him to the bed? He had practice.”

“Is he coming back after?”

“Um, doubtful. I’m sick after all.”

“So? Y’all can play doctor.”

“There’s always next time,” JJ said quietly. The idea of him showing up at her place again made more than just her heart flutter.

“Mmmhmm. Sounds like you’re feeling better.”

“Yeah, thanks to Jon. He’s been taking good care of me. Kind of sucks to be sick while he’s here, though. We haven’t had a lot of quality time together.”

“Since you’re feeling better, make sure you two make the most of the time you do have.”

Shocked by her friend’s oddly timed sincerity, JJ couldn’t ignore it. “Cecily Taylor, I had no idea you could be all sensitive.”

“Meh, it must be hormones. Listen, I got news for you.”

“Shoot.”

“Max and I are expecting baby number two.”

JJ’s eyes grew wide. “Shut up! I didn’t even know you guys were trying.”

“Eh, we weren’t, but after we found out, we were elated.”

“That is awesome. How far along?”

“Eight weeks.”

“I’m not sure what surprises me more—that you’re pregnant, or that you actually kept a secret for eight weeks.”

Cecily laughed and picked up one of the magazines off the counter. “Cosmo, eh? Quizzes?”

“Of course.” They each grabbed food and headed over to the couch.



Thursday night, JJ cornered Jonathan after he got home. “Big brother, can we do some sparring tomorrow morning? I need to get my endurance up.”

“Sure thing. What time?”

“Six. To let my body can get back in rhythm.”

“Cool. See you in the morning.”

Friday came and she was excited to hit the mat with her brother. She grew up fighting with her brothers. There was a sense of accomplishment when she managed to get one over on them. Even better, thanks to her consistent sparring with them, she was never afraid to take anyone on.

Standing at the edge of a mat, she finished tightening her glove. “Can you not go all out on me? I want to be able to walk out of here.”

Jonathan nodded. “I’ll go as hard as I think you can handle, like always. Gloves on.”

They began sparring and Jonathan dropped her three times in as many minutes. She tried to mount an offensive strike, but with every defensive move it was like Jonathan saw it coming and blocked her. After taking a hit that knocked the wind out of her, she saw an aggression in Jonathan’s eyes that told her his mind wasn’t totally zoned in on their session.

She stepped off the mat, taking a moment to recover. “Hold on, I need a break,” she said as she tried to suck down air.

“Can’t ask for breaks in a fight.”

“Good thing we’re in a gym, sparring.”

“Quit being a wuss. Suck it up and let’s go.”

Hearing that pissed her off to no end and, against her better judgment, she stepped back to the mat. Jonathan threw a punch but she blocked it. When she threw a punch, he grabbed her arm and pulled her in close, driving his knee into her gut. While she tried to remember how to breathe, he sidestepped and delivered another shot, this time landing a hit to her kidney. She dropped to the mat and, even though she was fuming at her brother, the pain of his hits reduced her to tears.

“What the hell is your problem?” she demanded, trying to breathe through the pain.

“Don’t blame me because you can’t hold your own,” he growled, circling her.

“Bullshit! Your head is off in some war zone right now.”

“I’m just trying to make sure you’re ready.”

“For what? I’m not gonna go pick a fight with a damn CIA agent.” She managed to push aside her anger and frustration to see her brother’s demeanor wasn’t anything she recognized. He almost appeared scared. “Jon, look at me. What is going on?”

“I want to make sure that you will be okay no matter what.”

“You think the way to do that is to crack my ribs and bruise my kidney? Is this your advanced course of tough love? Because I want no part of it.” JJ saw a faint curl of his lips as he mustered some type of smile.

“Come on,” he said. “One more round.”

“Yeah, all right. Why not shoot for a collapsed lung? Another punch on my frequent visitor card at the hospital.”

“Dramatic.”

“Warranted.”

They touched gloves and started back in. More focused than before, she landed significant strikes. She whipped out a roundhouse kick, but Jonathan used her momentum to spin her in to a rear chokehold.

“Get out of it,” he grunted.

As before, she centered herself and began to drop to a squat. At the last minute, she laced her fingers behind his neck and propelled herself into the air. As she came down, her hands' downward momentum brought his head forward, sending him airborne. He landed hard on his back. When he rolled to make a move, she locked him in a guillotine. Her brother might be stronger than her, but if she tightened her grip a bit more, she could make him pass out. She flexed her muscles to lock her grip, and he tapped out.

They laid side by side on the mat, catching their breath and evaluating bruises and aches. "You didn't let me have that did you?" She knew the answer, but wanted confirmation.

"When have I ever tapped out to spare your feelings? I started seeing stars. Submission earned."

"Sweet."

They left the mat arm in arm, and she enjoyed the shared moment.

"Hey, let's go to a nice breakfast," she suggested. "A mimosa sounds good."

"Or four. Shower and meet in twenty?"

She gave him a frown "Try forty-five, number three."



"Hey, Lively, what time do you guys play?" Desmond took out a pen and paper and started writing. "Okay, nine, eleven, twelve. What about a cross match? Sounds good. You ready? All right then, line 'em up and take 'em down." Suddenly, remembering he was in a public locker room, he dropped his voice. "I love you too, sweetheart."

Hanging up, he found Jonathan nearby at a locker. They exchanged handshakes.

Desmond held up his phone. "My daughter."

"Sounds like you have a volleyball player," Jonathan returned.

“Yeah, she’s at a tournament in Baltimore this weekend. How’d you know it was volleyball?”

“JJ played. It was her main sport and she excelled. The times sounded like pool times for a morning wave. Nine, eleven, and twelve? Her team must be second in their pool. Your question about a cross match, tells me they’re a strong team for advancement. Baltimore means they’re in the Northeast Qualifier.”

Amazed, Desmond stared at Jonathan. “That’s impressive.”

“It’s my job to remember details.”

“You sound like your sister,” Desmond joked. “Lively told me she wants to be the Keri Walsh of her generation.”

“Lofty. Hey, thank you for bringing all the food over for my sister. I appreciate you looking out for her.”

“Oh, yeah. Just wanted to help out.”

They kept talking until Jonathan’s phone vibrated with an incoming text message.

“Somewhere to be?”

“My baby sister telling a grown man what to do and when to do it. Join us for breakfast?”

Desmond held up his phone again. “I would, if I didn’t have a small army telling this grown man what to do.” They joked around as they continued talking and walking to the front of the gym. Spotting Terence coming in from the parking lot, Desmond tapped Jonathan on his chest. “Wanna meet you sister’s boyfriend?”

Jonathan followed Desmond’s stare and shook his head, his jaw clenched. “We’ve met. I gave him my word I wouldn’t try to steal her from him, after he called her freaky.”

Desmond tried his best to not laugh and bring Jonathan’s wrath on him. “That’s quality.”

“That’s me avoiding a murder charge.”

“He doesn’t know who you are?”

“He’s stupid, so hard to tell.”

Desmond bounced up and down. “Let’s have some fun with this.”

Terence walked in and immediately saw the guys smiling at him. “D. Cade! What’s up, man?”

Desmond didn’t say anything for fear of cackling in his face.

“And the military man,” Terence said, acknowledging Jonathan. “I didn’t know you guys knew each other.”

“We didn’t,” Jonathan said. “He’s a friend of my sister’s. She works here. You might know her—Jess?”

“Can’t say that I do.”

Jonathan frowned. “Big place, I suppose.”

“Boys. Good morning, Desmond, Terence.”

JJ’s greeting came from behind them. When they turned, they were met with a big smile.

“What are you, a ninja?” Desmond joked.

She hugged Jonathan. “Sorry. My brothers taught me how to walk really, really quiet.”

He put his arm around her shoulders and kissed the top of her head. “Sure did.”

Terence’s expression was priceless, a combination of surprise and confusion.

JJ, who had no idea what was going on, misread it. “Oh, gosh, I’m sorry. Terence, this is one of my older brothers, Commander Jonathan Marceaux.”

“Commander?” Terence muttered.

“Yeah. I major in ‘special missions.’”

“Doesn’t that basically mean you can sneak up on people and kill them before they even know you’re coming?” Desmond added.

“Essentially, yes.”

Terence visibly swallowed.

Jonathan sported a huge grin with an edge of mean. He stuck out his hand to Terence. “Nice to meet you.”

Terence’s eyes were big and worried, his mouth hanging open. Desmond was enjoying every minute of making him uncomfortable.

JJ leaned around her brother. "Terence, are you okay? You look like you just saw a ghost."

"Yeah, I didn't know you had a brother."

"Yep. Five."

"*Five?*" Terence repeated with a squeak.

Jonathan locked gazes with the smaller man. "Five."

Desmond's laughter cut through the rising tension.

JJ turned around. "What is so damn funny?"

Jonathan and Desmond exchanged looks and, before either could answer, Terence interrupted. "Um, I need to get to my workout."

Once he was far enough away, the two men laughed heartily.

"You two look like ten year olds," JJ said. "Are you ready to go?"

"Yes. Don't you think it's rude not to invite your boyfriend to breakfast?"

"What?" For a moment she was stunned, then she began to put the obvious pieces together. "Again? Are you kidding me? He told you we were dating, didn't he?"

"Yep."

"He had no clue you were my brother?"

"Nope."

She turned to Desmond. "This was your idea, wasn't it?"

Desmond held his hand up in surrender. "Um..."

Jonathan grinned. "Right again."

JJ shook her head at both of them and chuckled. "Let's go. I'm hungry. Ivy League, are you joining us?"

"I would, but—"

"Let me guess, duty calls?"

"Sorry. Another rain check?"

"That's two."

Jonathan shook his head at Desmond. "Bro, being in debt to her isn't a good look. She doesn't forget."

“That’s what I’m counting on. See y’all later.” Desmond started walking out but turned around when he heard JJ call out.

“Hey, wait.” She ran to catch up to him. “I won’t be there this weekend.”

“I know.”

“I wanted to just...um...” She leaned in and kissed him on the cheek. “Good luck, Ivy League.”



“Another glass?”

“Yes, please.” As the waitress walked away, Jonathan went back to the conversation. “You ready to be an aunt again?”

She thought about Jamie’s new baby arriving to join her five nephews. “I have plenty of practice with diaper changes and bottle feedings. At least it’s a girl this time. I was starting to think our family could only produce boys.”

“You’re here.”

“Anomaly. I didn’t exactly have a normal upbringing, did I?”

“Was it that bad?”

She gently kicked his leg underneath the table. “Of course not. I love you guys, but I could’ve certainly used a big sister to help me with the five of you.” She tilted her head as a new thought popped in her mind. “Are you ever planning on getting married and having kids?”

“Who says I don’t have kids?” he joked.

“That’s not funny.”

“I raised you, you’re my kid. I’m married to the job. Need I say more?”

“Seriously?” She leered at him. In her mind, the response was absurd.

“People get married to be happy. For me, being happy is knowing what I do around the globe protects people at home. I’m all about protecting Max and his family, my nieces and

nephews, present and future, and you. It's always been my job to protect you."

She studied her brother the way he'd taught her to study others. He stared out the window avoiding eye contact, but there were tears in his eyes. Something bad was coming and she was afraid she knew exactly what it was. "You're going back, sooner rather than later, aren't you?"

He locked in on the condensation on his glass. "I have to."

"You don't."

"Jess—"

She put a hand up to stop him. It was something she was well accustomed to, but her brothers being away on duty always made her feel sick to her stomach. "Don't. You don't get to justify leaving me again. In my selfishness, I'll admit I want you to stay here with me. I want to know every morning you'll be here. God help me, should I ever get married, I want you to give your blessing and be the one to walk me down the aisle." She paused to brace for what she was about to say. "I want to be selfish, but I can't stop you from doing something you were born to do. I hate that this is what you do, and who you are. At the same time, I understand why you do it. It's in your DNA. Hell, it's in all six of us, but somewhere along the way, you turned in to Captain damn America when I wasn't looking."

His smile was gentle, even though it still carried a trace of sadness. "So, you're all right with me going back?"

She closed her eyes. "No, I'm not all right with it. It annoys the hell out of me, but I don't have a choice. The thing that keeps me going, is you always come home. It's how I manage not to cry myself to sleep every night."

He frowned. "You hold a lot more inside than you should."

She made a show of finding a positive in the situation. "At least you warned me this time, instead of leaving a damn sticky note." She sneered at her brother's embarrassment.

"Geez, y'all are not gonna let that go, are you?"

“It was like being ditched after a one night stand.”

“I promise I will do my best to come back.”

“No, promise me that after you leave, I will see you again. Mom and dad are gone. Jerett is gone.” Nervously, she began picking her fingernails. “You can’t leave me too, Jonathan.”

He grabbed her hands and held them tight. “Jessica, I promise you, no matter what, I will never let you be alone.”

She nodded along, knowing he always kept his word.

They continued with their meal, talking and laughing like always, when he brought up another subject.

“So, uh, I have a question for you sis.”

“Go.”

“How long are you gonna let Desmond Cade hang around before you allow him past that wall of yours?”

She raised an eyebrow. “Excuse me?”

“Quit it. You think I don’t see how you look at him? You didn’t even look at your ex that way, and you almost married him.”

“Key word there is almost.” She shook her fork at him. “It didn’t happen remember?”

“How long are you going to hang on to that hurt? This guy cares about you. He brought you the care package of all care packages. I’m sure if he wasn’t in season, he’d be at the gym all day just to be around you.”

“What are you saying? I refuse to throw myself at him. You’ve seen the girls he’s dated, I don’t fit that image.” She spoke passionately, trying to make her point clear to Jonathan and to herself.

“I’m not saying go and throw yourself at his feet. I’m saying, give the guy a chance. You deserve to be happy, and, who knows? He might surprise you.”

She tapped her fingers on the table. “If he turns out to be like all the others?”

“Then at least you know and can move on.”

Chapter 4

The rain pounded hard against the car windows as JJ stared at the gray clouds searching for a glimpse of sunlight. There was none to be found.

“You ready?” Jonathan asked.

She took a minute and then answered, “Yes.” Meeting him at the front of the truck, they made their way across the cemetery. “There he is.” She pointed out their brother’s headstone. “Right next to mom and dad.”

She stayed back giving Jonathan his one-on-one time with their brother. She couldn’t imagine what it was like to lose a triplet. The three boys shared a deep bond. Her brothers were her solid ground. She idolized them. When she lost Jerett, she felt like a piece of that ground disappeared. She had come to terms with the fact that it was always a possibility, losing a brother, but that didn’t make it easier when it actually happened. Knowing Jon would talk a while, she made her way to where Max and Cecily stood with Jax.

She had her arms draped over Jax’s shoulders as they swayed back and forth slowly. In an unexpected turn, she saw Jonathan look to her with tears in his eyes.

She ran up behind him and touched his shoulder. “Jon?”

“I’m good. Give me another minute?”

“Sure.” She couldn’t remember a time when her brothers really cried, especially Jonathan. She didn’t know what to do, except give him the space he asked for.

After another few minutes, he stood and gathered himself. His soft, "See you soon," drifted to her.

They switched places and it was her turn to talk to her parents and brother. "Hi, Jerett. You know that day is still burned in my head?" Before she could express her next thought, she had to breathe deeply and collect herself before she went down the rabbit hole of emotions. "I can't do it again with Jonathan. Protect him, please. I want to wake up and see him again. I know you're giving me that dumb look, like you have no idea what you're supposed to do. Don't be stupid, watch out for your damn brother." She turned to leave and then peered back at Jarett's headstone. "I love you, number four." She looked to the sky again and walked away.

All five of them walked back and got into their respective cars. As JJ settled in the passenger seat to wait for Jonathan, she noticed he pulled out his phone. His fingers flew quickly, then he pocketed the phone and got behind the wheel.

Neither of them said more than a few words on the way home. JJ assumed the same position as before, staring out of the passenger window at the rain. "I want to go home," she said, breaking the silence.

"Good, since that's where we're going," Jonathan replied.

Still looking out the window, she gave him a familiar line. "How soon you forget." She let a few more seconds tick by. "I want us to stay at the house until you have to leave."

Jonathan's agreement came immediately, "Sure," he said. "Anything for my baby sister."

"Can it be like when I was little? Where we watch all the classic Batman movies?"

"Absolutely."

They went to her loft to pick up their stuff. "Unlock the door please, I gotta get my mail. I haven't checked it in like six days." When they were both inside, they grabbed a beer.

"Hold." She took both bottles and set them aside. Opening the cabinet, she pulled out a bottle of bourbon and two

glasses. "Our brother deserves a proper salute." She poured two drinks.

"That he does."

"Here's to Jerett Gabriel Marceaux, an American hero and a good friend."

"More importantly," Jonathan added. "One hell of a big brother."

"Cheers." They clinked glasses and threw back their drinks.

"I'll tell you one thing," Jonathan said as JJ handed him his beer.

"What's that?"

"No one can ever question you're a Marceaux."

Intrigued, she urged him to continue. "Really? Why? My looks? My smile?"

"Nah, none of that. Your alcohol preferences. Bet if I check in that cabinet I'd find scotch, bourbon, and vodka, along with that terrible excuse for rum you like to drink. Though that last one is probably from mom's side of the family."

"You'd be right." They hooked arms and walked to the couch to sit.

He shifted to look at her. "You've been keeping yourself under control? I know how you like to drown your feelings from time to time."

She stayed looking straight ahead and didn't answer. She knew he had a right to be concerned. Alcohol was her go-to in times of acute stress. "I'm fine, Jonathan. No need to worry."

"Little sister, I'll always worry about you. It's what keeps me from constantly thinking about getting shot. Time to change the subject. We have to go to dinner at Max and Ceci's tonight. Did you know she's pregnant?"

She looked over at Jonathan with surprise since she assumed she was the only one Ceci had told. "Yeah, she told me. How did you find out?" He didn't say anything, just

gave his sister a look and she understood his confident grin. “Right, right. It’s your job to notice things.”

He nodded in agreement.

She slid down on the couch until her head rested on the back and put her feet up on the coffee table. “I just want to sit and not have to talk for a while before we leave, if that’s okay.”



Jonathan and JJ walked in their cousins’ house, ready to enjoy family time. Jax dropped the foam sword he was playing with and ran to them. “Uncle Jon!”

“Small soldier!” Jonathan and Jax hugged each other tight. “Let’s go to your room and hang out. I gotta talk to you about something important.”

JJ watched them disappear down the hall before she met Cecily in the kitchen and poured herself a glass of wine.

“You could help me finish dinner so we can all eat.”

“Meh, I’m good with my glass.”

Cecily waved her off and pulled the food from the oven. “So, Jon is back there talking to Jax. I wonder what about,” she said.

“He’s telling him that he’s going back on duty.”

Cecily flicked an eyebrow at her. “You know?”

“Yes, I know. How do you know?”

“Jon told me a few days ago, so I could be ready for when he told you.”

“Figures. I’m getting sick of people hiding things from me.” Her mood shifted to mildly annoyed.

“Are you okay?”

“Yes.” JJ wasn’t technically lying since she wasn’t sure how she felt.

Max set the table and the girls brought the food over. When they heard footsteps, all three turned to see Jax and Jonathan, hand in hand, coming down the hallway. Jax sniffled and tried to stifle tears, but it was painfully obvious how

hard he took the news. They sat down to dinner and it was quiet, but not for long.

“Can I hold your gun before you leave?”

Jonathan eyed his pseudo-nephew and couldn't resist. “I can't think of a single reason why not, trooper.”

“Really?” Cecily blurted out. “You can't think of a single reason why a small child shouldn't hold a sniper rifle?”

“Oh, come on, Ceci. Dad let me hold a gun when I was four.”

“He let me hold one when I was six,” Max chimed in.

At that, Cecily shut her eyes. “Babe, you're supposed to be on my side.

Max shrugged his shoulders nonchalantly.

“By the way,” Jonathan started. “Your girl here picked up a gun and pulled the trigger at the ripe age of three. She always was the favorite child.”

Cecily turned her attention to JJ, who didn't add anything but a head nod. “Let me get this right, your father, and uncle, let all of you use a loaded gun before you were in kindergarten?”

The three of them exchanged glances and snickered.

“Absolutely not,” Jonathan explained. “We were allowed to touch his service weapons, not fire them. Practice with airsoft and paintball guns was required before we were ever allowed to fire the real deal. I'm not gonna let him take the thing to the park and unload a clip. He just wants to touch it.”

Jax looked at Cecily with his big green eyes. “Please, Mommy?”

“Come on, Ceci. I'm a weapons expert and an expert marksman. Who better to show him?”

“Ugh, fine!”

“Yay!” Jax hurried to finish his dinner and get to the guns.

Finally breaking her silence, JJ said, “See now, was that hard? Personally, I prefer knives to guns, but Jax has to start somewhere.”

Cecily frowned in JJ's direction. "Now you want to add to the conversation? I hate when y'all gang up on me. This is why I drink." She gestured to Max. "Your family is ridiculous."

"Guess it's too bad you're on hiatus, then, uh? How is the little one, anyway?"

She rubbed her stomach. "Super. I'm real excited for the future when it bears down on my bladder and I have to pee every five minutes."

Jonathan snapped his fingers at his cousin. "Max, tell your wife that isn't appropriate dinner table language."

The rest of dinner consisted of Jonathan telling the few war stories he could share, to the Jax's enjoyment. When dinner was finished, the boys cleared the table and then disappeared to Jonathan's truck to check out his service weapons.

Cecily and JJ went to the living room to hang out. "You really shot a gun when you were three?"

"Nope."

"Jon's making stuff up?"

"No, I hadn't had my birthday yet. I was a few weeks short of three when I shot it. Daddy felt bad because all the boys got to shoot out in the country. They were getting ready to go and I stood at the door crying."

Cecily stared at JJ who was dead serious. "Can I ask you something?"

"Shoot."

"Funny. How much do you actually remember from before that night?"

"I recall decent sequences, and some of what people tell me. Max and the boys share stories with vivid details which helps a lot."

"I know we touched on it back in college, but you never went in to detail about you losing chunks of your memory."

"I wouldn't want you to know what it's like. The memories are there, they just hide from me sometimes. At this point, it's more about making new ones."

“Fair enough. New topic?”

“Please.”

“You and Desmond—”

“Bye.” JJ got up and went to the kitchen. “If we are gonna do this, I need wine.” She grabbed a bottle, filled her glass to the top, and took a hefty sip.

Cecily waited until she put the glass down to keep pushing. “What do you want to happen between the two of you?”

“No clue. Next question.”

“You’re so difficult. I’ve never seen you run from a guy as much as you run from him.”

“I’m not running.” JJ had repeated the statement so many times that she started to find it humorous.

“You are. If this was a race, you’d be Lolo Jones.”

“I’m not running. I’m not hiding. There’s nothing there.”

Visibly annoyed with that answer, Cecily checked the clock. “They’ve been outside for a while.” JJ looked at Cecily, dumbfounded. Cecily blinked. “What’s the problem?”

“The fact you didn’t hear them drive off.”

Alarmed, she sat up. “What? Where’d they go?”

“If I had to guess? They went to upgrade Jax from Nerf to airsoft guns.”

Twenty minutes later, the guys returned, new guns in hand. Jax entered the house with tactical precision. “Mommy, look what uncle Jon got me!”

Jonathan took the gun from his hand and hit the safety lock. “Remember the rules, troop, when you’re in the house, safety stays on.”

“Yes, sir.”

Cecily went in to mother mode, as if she was about to rip in to Jonathan.

“Don’t look at me like that,” he said. “This is the least I can do for him. Boy’s gotta learn to shoot.”

“That he does,” JJ agreed.

“I hate y’all.”

Jonathan gave Cecily a big hug. “You love us. That’s why you married in to our family.”

“JJ, look! Isn’t it cool!” Jax yelled.

“Yeah, big man, it sure is. Let’s go put all this cool stuff in your room and get you ready for bed.” She went with him to his room.

Jax emerged from his room in his camouflage pajamas, JJ right behind him. “Uncle Jon, can we go to the park tomorrow?”

She had a staring contest with her brother and knew how much he had disliked the park since he was eighteen. She cut in and answered for him. “Jax that sounds wonderful. In fact, why don’t we all go and make an afternoon of it?”

“Great,” Jonathan said reluctantly.

“Awesome!”

“Wonderful. Time for bed, mister,” Cecily said.

The long day finally began to wear on JJ, who let out a sigh. “We need to get going too.”

Jonathan agreed. “Yes, there’s a long run on the agenda tomorrow.”

Cecily badgered both of them. “Y’all are such over achievers.”



Jonathan slammed the front door to their childhood home. “You know I hate that park.”

“Yes, but you’ll go because Jax loves it and wants to spend time with you before you leave.” She stood inches from him and puffed her chest. “Maybe don’t break the door.”

“Whatever. Are you profiling me?”

“I am. You should be proud—”

His phone interrupted her. It was a text from Cecily. *Your sister’s an idiot. Here’s Desmond’s number. Glad*

someone else sees how good he is for her. He tried to play the text off, but didn't quite succeed.

"What's that about?" She reached for his phone but he saw her move for it and held it over his head.

"Nothing, just a buddy of mine. Hey, I need to step outside to make a call. Be back in a minute."

She sat on the floor untying her shoes. "Fine But don't take forever."

He waited until the door closed behind her before dialing Desmond's number. When it went to voicemail, he left a message to meet first thing Monday morning. "Do not tell JJ if you see her before then." He hung up and walked in to the house.



JJ was staring at the pictures again.

"You know, I think we can do something better than Batman tonight," he said proudly.

"Something better than Batman? I'm intrigued."

"Hold on." He ducked out of the living room and came back with three photo albums in hand. "Bet you haven't seen these in a while," he teased.

She picked up the first book and opened it. She recognized her brothers and her parents. Jonathan pointed out certain pictures to jog her memory. There were the triplets celebrating their first birthday in high chairs, with cake all over their faces. In the same picture, a three-year old Jason sat off to the side, face deep in a bowl of ice cream.

She scanned through more pages and spotted a glorious sight. "Oh my goodness. You're *all* in matching sweater vests and bow ties!"

He pursed his lips and nodded. "Yeah, mom thought it'd be cute for the yearly family pictures."

They flipped through the first two albums, sharing laughs at the memories their mom and dad captured.

She picked up the last scrapbook and noticed it was in much better condition than the other two. "What's the deal with this one? It's barely been touched." She opened the cover and saw her baby picture.

"This one is all you," Jonathan's voice was gruff.

She turned the page and smiled when she saw her birth certificate and hospital bracelet. "Jessica Jaxon Marceaux," she proudly read out loud.

"Proof that you were dad's favorite from the start."

There were pictures of birthday parties, recitals, and other candid moments. Many of the pictures were of her with the cheerleaders on the sidelines of her brothers' football games.

Jonathan pointed to the picture. "Those girls loved you. More than they loved us!"

"I don't think they loved me *that* much."

She found one picture where she was on top of a pyramid, arms triumphantly in the air. Another showed her kissing the school mascot.

"Look at us!" She pointed out a picture of Jerett, Jonathan, and Jamie, all in their football uniforms right before their senior appreciation game. JJ and Jacob were on the field as well.

"This was a good night." There was excitement in Jonathan's voice. "The announcer called out our names and talked about how we were military kids. For some reason, they started talking about dad, which was weird, because dad was out on duty for months. Then, dad walks out from behind our coaching staff and the crowd goes crazy! We ran to him, all of us were hugging him, and we look back to see you still standing in the middle of the field."

She ran her fingers across the picture. "I didn't think it was him."

"You figured it out real fast." Putting his feet up, he kept on with the story. "Dad took two steps to you, and you turned in to a running back trying to get to him."

The pages that followed were mostly of JJ in different dance costumes. Some captured her on stage, and others showed her smiling with the girls in her dance company. There were countless medals, trophies, and certificates. “The competitive dance lifestyle was hardcore,” she said out loud.

The last preserved page showed a nine-year old JJ with medals around her neck and a trophy in her hands. Noting the date in the bottom corner on one of the pictures, she said, “Right before the accident.”

“Yes.”

She looked at Jonathan, then back down at the pictures.

“JJ, it won’t kill you to look at this stuff and be in this house, as long as you don’t let it consume you. Don’t hide from your past.”

“Who said I was hiding?”

“Fair enough.” He chose his words carefully, “You’ve closed this part of you away.”

She laid her head on his shoulder. “Why are you being emotional?”

He gave her a slap on the thigh. “Because someone has to push your buttons from time to time.”

“Who better than you?” She scanned the pictures in the rest of the book. Over time her brothers added to the collection with shots of significant moments and achievements, ending with her college graduation from the University of Texas. She spent the rest of the night listening to Jonathan share countless stories from their childhood.



Hanging out at the edge of the park where Cecily, Max, and Jax waited, JJ took a step forward but noticed Jonathan wasn’t moving. “Less than twenty-four hours ago you told me not to let my past rob me of my future. Take your own advice.”

She grabbed his hand and pulled him to where Jax was waiting. She sat on her favorite swing and watched Jax and Jonathan run circles around each other.

They climbed the jungle gym, hung upside down from the monkey bars, and slid down the slides.

A phone rang, and JJ watched Jonathan reached into his pocket. "Hey, buddy, I have to take this call. How about you go grab a snack." When Jax was on his way, Jonathan answered, his voice drifting to her. With each word, her tension mounted.

"Commander Marceaux. Yes, sir. Really, that soon? No, sir, it's no problem. Yes, sir, I understand. I'll be there. Thank you, sir." He hung up and walked over to her, sitting on the swing next to her.

She didn't have to look at him to know what was coming. "When?" She stared in to the space before her.

"Forty-eight hours."

She nodded but didn't give any other reaction. "Okay."

"Okay?"

"Not like I can change anything. Can you please push me now?"

"Of course."

She let him push her until she couldn't hold herself together anymore. Her feet dragged on the ground stopping her momentum. Jumping up from the swing, her tears flowed as she buried her face in his chest. He wrapped his arms around her.

"I want to be selfish. I want you to stay here. I need you here with me!"

He gave no response, letting her cry, holding her as long as she needed.

"Auntie JJ? Why are you crying?" Jax's small voice cut in.

JJ made sure to dry her tears and force a smile before she turned around. "Buddy, I got overwhelmed with how much I love you and your uncle. Why don't we play a little while longer?"

Jax ran to the jungle gym, leaving JJ and Jonathan to chase after him.

When Max and Cecily gathered Jax to head home, the siblings chose to stay a while longer. They sat side by side on the swings not speaking. Minutes passed before she turned to her brother, the adoration she felt seeping from her.

He set his hand on hers. "What's up?"

She combed her wind-blown hair behind her ear with her fingers. "Nothing, big brother. Let's go home."



At five the next morning, the brother and sister duo woke up and went for an extended run. Music pulsed in their headphones as they worked to keep pace with each other. When they made it back home, JJ showered and left for the gym. After she left, Jonathan showered, got dressed, and went to meet up with Desmond.

He stood to greet Jonathan when he walked in. "Jon, good to see you."

"You too, man. How was the match?"

"Team made some critical errors, but we pulled it out."

"Glad to hear it."

Desmond changed the topic. "You wanted to talk. What about?"

Jonathan took a moment to study the other man. "You and JJ...she's my sister and..." He knew what Desmond was thinking but wasn't sure how to start the conversation. "You like my sister."

Desmond opened his mouth, but nothing came out.

"It's not actually a question. I've seen how you look at her, and normally, I would've put you in check as soon as I met you. Luckily for you, I've seen how she looks at you, how she changes the topic any time your name is brought up."

Desmond furrowed his brow. "I guess I'm a little transparent. Where is this going?"

"In a little more than thirty-six hours, I have to report back to active duty. Odds are I won't return for quite some time, if at all." Jonathan didn't waste time, keeping his voice serious and his expression grim. Based on how Desmond shifted on his feet, he was picking up Jon's vibe. "I'm telling you this because I need to ask you for a favor. If you're not up to it, you need to tell me."

"Anything. What is it?"

Jonathan wondered if he was making the right decision, but it wasn't as if he had the luxury of time. Desmond seemed like a straight shooter, and JJ was falling fast, whether she wanted to admit it or not. "I need you to take care of JJ."

Desmond wasn't as adept at hiding his facial expressions so it was easy to read his shock. "Are you serious?"

"You went to Yale, meaning I have to assume you aren't an idiot. You seem to have shown an interest of some kind in my sister." Jonathan waited, giving Desmond a chance to dispute it. Instead, all he got was dodged eye contact. "That's what I thought. Listen, I'm not saying stick to her side twenty-four seven. But she's gonna need someone to be there for her, and I'd much rather have you in her corner than that juiced-up douchebag from the gym."

Desmond clenched his fist against his thighs. "I can do that."

"Are you sure? Because this is my baby sister, my only sister. If you mess up I *will* kill you."

Desmond grinned. "Understandable. I won't let you down."

"Good to hear. One more thing, JJ never finds out about this conversation."

Desmond nodded in agreement.

As Jonathan got up to leave, Desmond put his hand up to stop him. "Hold up, man."

"Yes?"

Desmond stuck out his hand to shake. "I do hope to see you back here again."

Jonathan took a deep breath and the offering. "You and me both."



Jonathan and JJ spent their remaining hours together watching classic Batman movies and debating who portrayed the Dark Knight best.

"Keaton, Kilmer, Clooney. How are we even having this conversation?" Jonathan shook his head.

"Seriously?" She counted off on her fingers. "No. Val Kilmer definitely tops the list. Then George Clooney, *then* Michael Keaton. Case closed."

Jonathan jutted his chin in mock disappointment. "How is it that we're related?"

"How is it, that you are blind to the truth?" JJ shot back.

Hours went by and the conversations changed, but the one thing that stayed the same was their sincere enjoyment of each other.



Jonathan's departure was inevitable, but it didn't make it any easier for JJ to stomach when the day came. She was quiet, watching him go back and forth, putting on his uniform and packing his bag.

When it was time, they made two stops. The first was to Max and Cecily's house to say goodbye. Jonathan embraced Max, who was more of a brother than a cousin.

Max's voice was rough. "Stay safe, brother. You gotta come back and help me with this boy."

"Don't be a hero," Cecily whispered, hugging him before pressing a kiss on his cheek.

"Uncle Jon?"

Jonathan knelt down on one knee so he and Jax could see eye to eye. "Small soldier."

Jax crossed his arms. "Do you really have to leave?"

"Yeah, troop, I really do."

"Are you gonna shoot bad guys?"

"I am."

"Cool! I'm gonna tell all my friends!" Jax and Jonathan hugged for a long time before saying goodbye.

"I love you, Jax. You make sure you watch out for your little brother or sister, okay?"

"Yes, sir." They gave each other a salute and JJ and Jonathan left.

Their second stop was to the park. They each took a seat on the swings and didn't say anything. JJ took a deep breath, knowing this could be her last chance to share with her brother. "You know, I don't have all the pieces from my childhood, but when I come here, I feel a few of them. Like when Mom and Dad would bring us here, and y'all would play football and I would cheer. Remember that one time, when I took the ball and you chased me? Then y'all caught me, dog piled on me, and took turns tickling me until I peed? And this is the swing Daddy used to push me on. I always begged him to make me go higher."

"JJ—"

She took a breath but didn't exhale until right away. "You think I'm shying from my past. I'm not. I feel it every time I'm here. I run this park every day. Yes, there are times I think I have the strength to cross the street and go to our old house, just to get a sense of Mom and Dad. Then I end up not doing it. This place keeps me feeling close to them, close to Jerett. I find peace in knowing I have this. That's why I don't ever go to the house."

Jonathan's only response was the trademark Marceaux smile.

"Can you push me one more time, number three?"

"Always, number six." He pushed his sister and she pumped her legs to go higher. A few minutes in, he eased up

to slowly stop the swing. He twisted her until they were face to face and sank into the seat next to her. As she stared into his beloved face, her smile faded.

“It’s time,” he said quietly.

Tears welled, but she refused to let herself cry. He grabbed her hands and held them tight in his. “I am so very proud of you, JJ. I couldn’t ask for a better sister, a better friend. I love you to the moon and back.”

They hugged each other tight and, though it was muffled, he heard his baby sister say, “I love you, Jonathan.”

With that, he kissed her on the forehead, walked to his truck, and drove off.

Chapter 5

First thing the next morning, JJ was back to her routine. She forced herself to compartmentalize her emotions, otherwise she'd break down in the middle of the gym. Even though her coworkers knew the situation, they were kind enough not to mention it.

Cecily made a point to give JJ space, but it didn't stop her from checking in. "Hey, sis, wanna go out for lunch?"

"Uh, no, thank you. I have a long break and I'm not hungry. I'm just going to work out."

"Find me, if you need me."

"I'm fine, Ceci."

"Didn't say you weren't."

After Cecily walked away, tears formed. JJ closed her eyes and took a deep breath. She appreciated Ceci for being a good friend but all she wanted was to keep her mind on work.

The rest of the week, JJ didn't sleep much at night and settled for going through the motions during the day. She didn't talk to anyone except her clients, and her time off was spent on long runs or alone at home searching for an elusive sense of peace. Even the park couldn't provide her its usual solace.

Saturday came, and she skipped the rugby game. Instead, she gave her tickets to a friend. She spent the day walking around the city, wandering the streets with her

headphones in, her emotions on lockdown. The music occupied her brain until she couldn't think about anything else. When *365 Days* by ZZ Ward came on, she sang at the top of her lungs, uncaring of how she appeared to those passing by. For the first time that week, she was content to exist in the moment.

As the sun began to set, she considered cabbing back to her apartment, but decided to make it back on her own without wasting time hailing a taxi. When she made it back to her place, she found a note on her door. Plucking it off the door, she read, *Missed you today. Hoping to cash in one of those rain checks this week. Look forward to hearing from you. Ivy League.* Simple and to the point, Desmond's note managed to worm its way into her frozen heart.

Maybe Jonathan was right. She needed someone to hang out with, and Desmond might make trying worthwhile. Of course, she didn't have to do it tonight. There was time enough later. She set the note on the counter.



JJ worked through the rest of the weekend. Several of her regular clients were due for workout updates and she had a new client coming aboard. Fine-tuning each plan took hours, stretched by her meticulously checking and double-checking against client information.

Finally, her new client, a fifteen year old, volleyball player, was ready to go for a six a.m. workout on Monday. Working with students early before school started, or later in the afternoon after school got out, wasn't an unusual occurrence. One of JJ's specialties was sport enhancement training, and she worked with all ages. It required groups of pre and post season athletes coming in for training during the summer.

A few stayed through the entire season in hopes of maintaining their edge.

While she waited for the student to show, she reviewed the new client file one more time. “LC,” she murmured out loud.

“That’s me,” said an eager voice from behind the screen of the file folder.

JJ set the file down to see Lively Cade standing on the other side of the desk. Stunned, she reached for a greeting. “Uh, Lively? Hi. You’re my new client?”

“I am,” Lively answered perkily. “Word on the street says you do wonders for volleyball players.”

JJ stared blankly. “The street?”

“The volleyball community. My coach said I should come see you.”

JJ’s network of former teammates and coaches sent players her way because they knew she would get kids where they needed to be. “Who’s your coach?”

“This year it’s Kaitlyn Belle.”

“Kait the Great,” JJ proclaimed excitedly. “She collects national championships like it’s going out of style. You must be some kind of all-star to be playing for her.”

Lively shrugged off the comment. “The problem is, I’m the youngest one on the team. I don’t want to let everyone down.”

“Well then, let’s get to work.”

JJ worked Lively hard, paying special attention to her core and legs. At the end of the workout, she was put off to see a smile still on Lively’s face. “How are you feeling?”

“Like crap.” Lively bent over to catch her breath. “School is going to be an experience today.”

“Then why are you smiling?”

“Because at least I can feel it. I get to be here and get better. A lot of people don’t get this kind of opportunity.”

JJ saw her as a professional player in the making, not just a high school freshman. “That is quite the perspective.”

“My dad made a life by working hard and capitalizing on opportunities. He taught me to be the same way.”

“In that case, I look forward to helping you reach your mountain top. See you Thursday?”

“Yes ma’am.” Lively let JJ get a few steps away before stopping her. “Would it be weird if I asked you not to tell my dad you’re my trainer? He tends to put in his two cents about everything.”

“Not an issue. I don’t discuss my clients with anyone,” JJ assured her.

“Thank you.” Lively disappeared down the stairs, leaving JJ to prep for her next client.

A few hours later, Cecily strolled in. JJ greeted her with a big hug and a smile. “Good morning, sweet friend.”

“What the hell? What’d you do?” Cecily had known her to be overly nice in the wake of messing something up.

“Nothing. I love you is all. I wanted to make sure you knew that.”

“Right, right. So, you’re okay? No trash can full of empty liquor bottles?”

JJ turned her nose up. “Why do you ask?”

“Because I called and left five voicemails and twenty texts this weekend. None of which you responded to.”

“Oh, sorry. I needed time alone. But, I’m alive, and I’m me again,” JJ said, beaming.

Cecily welcomed that answer with a sisterly understanding. “Funny thing, I think that actually reassures me.” She hugged her again. “Glad to have you back.”

Lively’s simple acceptance of Desmond’s approach to life was one JJ wanted to emulate. Hearing that piece of life wisdom from a teenager reminded JJ of why she loved her job. Buoyed by renewed optimism, she soared through the rest of the week.

When her last afternoon client for Thursday canceled, she opted to save her write ups for the next day and skipped out of the gym early. She longed for a relaxing evening hanging at her apartment. After her shower, she got comfortable, her mood still riding high. Inspired, she picked up her guitar and started strumming different notes. Her latest at-

tempt to learn a song by NEEDTOBREATHE was hampered by the fact she hadn't practiced in a few weeks. Singing the lyrics, she strummed the chords. Finally ready, she belted the chorus.

She ran through the entire song once and was halfway through a second time when a knock sounded at the door. Not expecting anyone, she cautiously walked to the door.

When she opened it, her face brightened. "I was wondering how long it would take you. Week's almost over, you know."

"You knew I was coming?"

She slid across the wood floor in her socks like she was acting out *Risky Business*, leaving Desmond shaking his head and laughing in the doorway. "Not today specifically, but it's not like you to leave me alone for longer than twenty-four hours, let alone two whole weeks. I got a little worried." She didn't bother to hide her hint of playful sarcasm.

He followed her inside. "You never called me."

"Yet here you are."

"Touché. I've missed our awkward gym encounters though," he admitted. "Was that you singing?"

"Hmmm? That depends. How long were you standing outside my door before you knocked?"

He kicked at the floor but didn't answer.

"That long, huh?" She took a bow. "Yes, it was me. As if the missed notes and weird pauses didn't give it away."

"I don't know, I thought it was pretty good."

She rolled her eyes and offered him a seat on the couch.

"Can I hear it again?"

"Fat chance."

He sat down and egged her on. "Come on. You aren't shy, are you?"

"Not at all, but I'm still learning that particular song." She walked over to put her guitar back in its stand but he stopped her with a hand on her wrist.

"A different one then?"

"Will you stop asking if I do it?"

He thought about it for a moment. “Yes.”

She set her guitar in its stand and took one step away from it, which caused him to plead with her, “Please? One time?”

Ignoring him, she pulled the cover off of her cello and took a seat behind it. She shot him a look that told him to shut up immediately. She had her head down the whole time but when she finished and looked up, she saw him leaned forward with his elbows on his knees.

“Satisfied now?” she asked when she was done.

“I am.”

Playing hostess, she got up and went to the kitchen. “Drink?”

“Water.”

“So, tell me,” she started as she made her way back to the couch. “How did you know Jonathan left?” His back shot straight up at her question. She shook her head at how alert he became. “Wow, you should never ever play poker.”

He opened his mouth but no sentences came out. “I’m—uh—not sure what you’re talking about.”

“Forgive me if I—uh—don’t believe you,” she mocked.

“You’re making fun of me?”

“You’re lying to me. It’s good to know you’re absolutely terrible at lying.” The playfulness disappeared from her voice. “I’ll ask again. How did you know?”

“What makes you think I knew anything prior to you telling me just now?”

“Good night, you graduated from Yale? Let’s see—you’ve been here for fifteen minutes and you didn’t ask where he was. Hell, you haven’t even mentioned his name.”

He stared straight ahead before finally looking at her. Guilt was etched all over his face, which made it easy to guess.

“Jon told you he was leaving, didn’t he?”

Desmond nodded.

“That wasn’t so hard, was it? I’m not an idiot. I went to college too. They gave me a real degree when I graduated and everything”

“You’re funny. He told me not—”

“Not to tell me. I know. He’s been my brother a lot longer than he’s been your friend. I’ll do you a favor and not ask what you boys talked about. Now, tell me about your match this weekend.”

She chuckled at his cheerful reaction for such an easy out. They spent the next few hours talking and sharing sports stories.

“Okay.” He switched topics. “I have a question.”

“I know what you’re gonna ask, and the answer is, yes, I am awesome, all the time, at everything.”

His lips curled slightly. “That’s good to know, but that wasn’t my question.”

She regained a measure of slight seriousness. “Ask away.”

“Everyone calls me Des, everyone except you. You insist on calling me Ivy League. Why is that?”

She took a minute before answering. “I call you Ivy League because I’m a huge believer in recognizing irony.”

Reading the implication behind her thinly veiled insult, he winced. “Thanks for calling me stupid.”

“Hold on,” she continued, “I think that your education is an accomplishment that should be recognized. Not everyone can make it to Yale. I don’t know why the world calls you Des, but your name is Desmond.”

“You call Jonathan, Jon. What’s the difference?”

“About twenty-five years. First, he’s family. Second, there were six of us, so we shortened names growing up. We actually decided to call each other by birth order number.” She readjusted her position on the couch to face him. “Third, I think Desmond sounds a hell of a lot sexier than Des.”

She could tell he gave some thought to her last point. “Is that why they call you JJ? Because there were six of you?”

“Nope.”

“Are you going to tell me why they call you JJ?”

She thought about leaving him hanging. “People call me JJ because that’s my name.”

“I call bull. You’re the youngest *and* the only girl? I have to believe your parents put thought into your name. Besides, I heard Jon call you Jess at one point.”

Surprised, she nodded “Ooh, your Ivy League is showing” she said admiringly. “You’re right, they did. For that wonderful answer, I’ll let you in on the big secret.”

He sat up and made sure to pay attention.

“The plan was to name me after my dad, Jaxon, but when they found out I was a girl, my mom wanted me to have a girl’s name, go figure. In keeping with the Js, they went with Jessica. Dad still wanted me to have his name, to make sure I was a daddy’s girl,” she said with satisfaction. “So, my full name is Jessica Jaxon Marceaux. My brother’s insisted on calling me Jaxon, which stuck until it got confusing. I refused to be called Jessica, or any variation. I was about four when everyone started calling me JJ. Been that way ever since.”

“That is more complex than I anticipated.” He bobbed his head like a doll as he thought about it. “Then again, so are you.”

“Thank you?”

“It’s a compliment. Wait, Jaxon? Is that where—”

“Yes. Little man Jax is my godson—and my cousin—but he’s more like a nephew.”

“You know, when we first met, I thought he was your son.”

She pointed to herself. “It’s the eyes.”

“No kidding. Emerald green, with no mix of blues or browns, isn’t exactly a common color. Only two percent of people in the world have green eyes like yours.”

“You’re really smart. The eyes are a family trait, but it’s not predictable.”

“Well, damn. I feel like I completed JJ 101.”

“Nah, that was more like Intro to JJ.” She slid in closer to him and made sure to rest her hand on his thigh. She leaned in and whispered in his ear, “JJ 101 is a bit more hands on.”

His earlier hesitation disappeared and the look in his eyes told her that they were on the same page. He leaned in to kiss her, but just before their lips met his phone vibrated on the coffee table, startling them both. She wanted to ignore it but, glancing at the caller ID, she saw the picture of Desmond’s underwear model ex-girlfriend.

He muted his phone and set his eyes back on her. “Moment passed?”

She arched an eyebrow, trying not to call him an idiot outright. “You guessed right, Des. I’d say it’s time to call it a night anyway.”

“Right.” He picked up on her blatant use of the nickname she professed to hate and rubbed the back of his neck. “Can we hang out again soon?”

“That’s up to you. You’re the one with the rain check. Maybe next time you’ll leave your phone on silent.” She wasn’t thrilled and wanted him to know.

“I play in Vegas and will be gone until Sunday.”

“I think I’ll be able to survive,” she said more annoyed than before.

“See you soon, JJ.”

He smirked and, even though she tried to resist, she faintly gave one right back.

“Goodnight, Desmond. Good luck in Vegas with your match.”



With the Vegas game done, Desmond returned with a bottle of Ciroc, and eventually worked his way back in JJ’s good graces. Gradually, the two of them began spending more and more time together, meeting at the gym early in the

morning or late at night for workouts. After Desmond's home games, they would sit on the sideline making small talk about his match while Jax played on the field, sometimes with Lively or other players and their kids. Occasionally JJ allowed the conversations to turn personal, and slowly their friendship grew.

Both were video game enthusiasts. JJ considered her setup solid until she went to his house for the first time. His home sat on three acres in the historic River Oaks neighborhood in Houston. The drive from the street to the front door should've warned her, but she didn't grasp how big his house was until she stepped out of her truck.

"Wow. You must be important or something to have a place like this," she said as he gave her the grand tour.

"I do pretty well." He pushed open a set of French doors on the second floor. "Ah, here we go, this is my media room."

"Are you serious?" Scanning the room, she was absolutely floored. He had every game console, every game, and every possible controller. "You're just showing off. There's no way you play all these." She picked up one of the cases and her jaw dropped. "This one isn't even out yet!"

"If you don't want to play—"

"I didn't say that. Buckle up, Ivy League, I'll show you how it's done."

They each picked up a wireless controller and sat side by side on the sofa.

She was falling hard for Desmond, but she tried to keep their relationship from going further. Needing someone to talk to, she took advantage of a rare girl's night with Cecily.

"Ceci, I'm not sure what's worse—the fact I'm fighting myself, or the fact you won't let me drink right now."

With Cecily pregnant, JJ was no longer allowed to drink in her company.

"It wouldn't be fair to me and the baby if we had to watch you drink and we can't."

"Do you and Max know what you're having yet?"

“We decided to be surprised.”

JJ narrowed her eyes at her friend. “So, naturally, you know and haven’t told Max.”

“No, not this time. I really do want to be surprised.”

“That’s nice. My mom did that once, then she had triplets.” Catching the absolute shock washing over her best friend’s face sent JJ into peals of laughter.

Ceci threw a decorative pillow at JJ. “That’s not even funny. Weren’t we talking about you and Desmond? How you’re scared to let yourself be in a real relationship with him?”

“Ouch.” JJ tilted her head back on the couch. “That is so...not...completely wrong, I guess. I don’t know what it is. I like being with him, we have a great time together.”

“But?”

“But I’ve been single for a long time and I don’t even know how to be in a healthy relationship. Especially with one of the most popular athletes in the country.”

“That’s a fair point. I think you’re scared.”

JJ’s throat felt tight as she tried to swallow. “I’m not scared.”

“The last relationship you were in ended badly, which is putting it nicely. You and Alex were together for years, and he turned out to be nothing short of a jackass.”

Cecily hit a nerve and JJ felt a rush of old anger. “Careful, Ceci.”

It was more of a warning for her, than Cecily.

“You can’t tell me that what happened with you and Alex isn’t affecting how you’re treating your relationship with Desmond. You thought Alex was ‘the one.’ He wasn’t. To avoid making that mistake again, you’re keeping Desmond standing at the edge of the doorway.”

JJ gave away every bit of anger that she was feeling about being brought back to that point in her life. It was something she rarely thought on, but when she did, her default emotion was fury. “I give you a lot of liberties when it

comes to talking about my life, but you're dancing on a very fine line. That's the one thing I asked you to never bring up."

"JJ—"

"I need to go before I say something I don't mean."



The next morning when JJ met up with Desmond at the gym, she was in a fighting mood. After they finished lifting weights, she went to her gym bag and grabbed her hand wraps.

He watched as she skillfully wrapped her hands. "We added fight training?"

She glared at him "For your sake, you and I will never spar each other. Could you steady the bag for me please?"

"Sure thing."

She unloaded on the heavy bag, at first striking with punches. Upset with her conversation with Cecily, she began to work out her frustration, throwing a few kicks that landed a little too close to Desmond.

He jerked his head back to avoid being hit. "Whoa, whoa, hold on. Are you mad at me?"

"Why would you ask that?"

"I couldn't help but notice a few of your kicks seemed fairly close to my head."

She slowed her breathing and let her adrenaline settle before answering. "I was just focused." She undid her wraps and threw them in her bag.

He stepped in front of her to keep her from walking any farther. "What's wrong? Tell me if I did something to upset you."

She thought for a moment, chewing on her cheek as she did. "I'm fine, really."

"Really?"

"Yes."

"You're not mad at me?"

“Not currently. Besides, you’d know if I was mad at you.”

“How?”

“I wouldn’t have missed your head.”

He jumped on the opportunity. “In that case—dinner at my place tonight? You and me.”

She paused at the idea and felt a slight panic. “Like a date?”

“We don’t have to call it that. It can be two friends hanging out like always. We’ll just be doing it in the evening, alone.”

There was more charming allure in his voice than usual and she heard it immediately. The anger from the night before melted away as she studied his face. “I’d like that very much.”



JJ sat back from Desmond’s table. “Ah, that food was amazing.”

Desmond made a show of patting himself on the back. “I can’t cook, but I can work my way around a takeout menu. Glad you liked it.”

“Noted. Where’s Lively tonight?”

“At a friend’s house, studying for an exam.”

“She’s a special kid.”

“Like her big papa.” Desmond wasted no time laughing at his own joke as he led her out to the back patio. The night was unusually cool for May, and his fire pit was going. She sat on the couch staring up at the stars as he poured her a glass of wine. “Here you go.”

“What? Oh, thank you.”

“You left me again. Second time today.”

“My apologies. I’m here, promise.” She took a sip of wine and turned to him. “Can I ask you a question, a serious one?”

“Go for it.”

“What happened between you and Lively’s mom? She doesn’t seem to be in the picture and neither you nor Lively talk about her.”

He stared into the fire.

“You don’t have to—”

He cut her off. “It’s no issue. It’s just been a good minute since someone asked about her. She and I hooked up a few times in high school, and I stupidly didn’t use protection. I was a freshman on my varsity wrestling team and thought I had to prove how much of a man I was to the other guys. We were never in in love or anything, but when she came and told me she was pregnant, I was terrified. We talked about it and agreed to keep the baby.

“My parents were pissed. They told me they’d let me stay in the house, but I would have to work and take care of my responsibilities. About a month or so after Lively was born, her mom decided she didn’t want a baby slowing her down. She gave up her parental rights, her parents moved her across the country, and she got a fresh start. Last I heard, she was traveling the world ‘becoming one with the earth’ or some shit like that.”

For the first time she heard a hint of sincere condescension in Desmond’s voice. “Does Lively ever ask about her?”

“She used to. I wanted to tell her some romanticized story about her mom, but I told her the same thing I told you. That’s more than one question. My turn.”

Playing the question game could lead into dangerous territory, but she went along anyway. “Go for it, Ivy League.”

“I know your brother—”

“Not a great start,” she interrupted.

“Hold on. I was saying I know you lost one brother, and I put two and two together on how that happened after seeing Jonathan in his uniform. I want to know about your parents. You adore your brothers, but I don’t think I’ve heard you mention your mom and dad outside of your childhood.” He paused, but she waited for him to ask the question. “Did you guys have a falling out?”

She bit the inside of her cheek as she weighed the cost of opening up that part of her life. Given how open he was with her, she decided to share. “Ah, that is—I can answer this. Just maybe not in a way that you want.”

He took her hand and held on to it. “Try me.”

She took another second to think. “First off, there was no falling out. I loved my parents dearly and they loved me.”

“Loved? Past tense.”

“When I was ten, I was in a car accident with my parents. The only thing I know about the accident itself, is what my brothers and the doctors told me. It was night and we were on our way back from Jacob’s football game. We were supposed to meet him at the field house, but we never showed. The cops said the truck driver that hit us was drunk. My mom died on impact.”

There was a giant knot in her stomach as memories rushed back. The gentle squeeze of Desmond’s hand helped to remind her he was there with her. “Dad must have wanted to be with her, because he bled out in the ambulance. I didn’t wake up for a few days and had a couple of serious injuries. I was the only one who survived.” Done with sharing, she stopped talking and took a long sip of wine, trying to recover.

He stared off toward the reflective waters of the pool. “That is some heavy stuff. After something that traumatic, some people would’ve spiraled out of control.”

“Some people aren’t me. My parents made sure if anything ever happened to them, their kids would be more than taken care of. I had five brothers who made it their sole purpose to make sure I wasn’t robbed of the rest of my childhood. They taught me what I needed to know to get through life.”

He put his arm around her, hugging her. Instinctively, she slid in tight, taking comfort in his hold. They sat there, silent, listening to the crackling of the fire and watching the flames dance.



JJ finally broke the silence of the night. “Did you have one more?”

Unsure what she was asking, he rubbed his chin over her hair. “What’s that?”

“You have one more question left to ask.”

“We don’t have to do this.”

“I don’t like being in debt to people. Ask away.”

He wasn’t one hundred percent sure she wouldn’t kick him in the head, but he asked anyway. “Have you ever been in love?”

She scoffed and went back to her wine. “You’re asking all the big questions tonight. I’ll answer that, but fair warning, the last time someone brought it up, you got all touchy because my foot got too close to your head. Still want to know?”

He didn’t think twice. “Yes. And that’s another question.”

“Okay, yes. I was in love—or what I mistook as love.”

“Sounds like a tragedy.”

“It’s the same old love story. I dated a guy in college and fell head over heels. He proposed junior year and I said yes. Later, I found out he was banging a cheerleader for two months. I broke it off right away, but the shock lasted a while.”

When she stopped talking, he didn’t say anything. Instead, he got up and stood against the brick pillar at the edge of the patio, gazing up at the stars. He took a long time to sort out his words before finally giving voice to how he felt. “His loss. I knew there was something about you that was different, something that made you stand out. You’re beautiful, like, gorgeous on an unworldly level. You’re funny and fun to be with, and intelligent.” He turned around to face her. “But the one thing I find truly remarkable is how you can be

this beautiful, fun, and intelligent, even after everything life has thrown at you.”

She set her glass down and slowly walked over to him, their gazes locked. She studied his face, staying quiet. She placed her hands on his chest as if to push him away, but drew closer instead. “You have one more question, Ivy League.”

He wrapped one hand around her waist. He softly brushed her hair back from her face letting his palm caress her cheek. The stars were bright and the fire made her face glow. “Miss Marceaux, may I please kiss you?”

“Absolutely.”

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About the Author



J. Symone grew up in Katy, Texas, a city just on the outskirts of Houston. A natural athlete, the goal was always to make it to the professional level. Writing wasn't on her radar as more than anything but a class assignment or something to kill time. It wasn't until a poetry project given her junior year of high school that she began to put real thought in to her writing. By her senior year, she had written upwards of twenty poems and short stories. Over the years she has written on a lot of topics, but romance was never one of them. It's a subject she finds challenge with and one with which she enjoys developing characters for. With every new story she begins, she takes a deep breath, a leap of faith, and lets the world around her spark her imagination. Personal trainer by day and writer at night, she finds that one is always a suitable mental break from the other.

“In the human heart, there is always a perpetual generation of passions, such that the ruin of one is almost always the foundation of another.” ~ François de La Rochefoucauld