

CHAPTER 1

Candy and a small bouquet of yellow tulips in hand, I check the time. I have about forty minutes to wrap up a polite hospital visit and catch my train back to the city.

The elevator is empty. No one to witness my shallow, raspy breathing. It delivers me to the floor, but when the car door opens, I pause, punched by a sudden sense of trepidation. When the elevator chimes its intention to move on, I make myself step out.

I pass the nurse's station and follow the numbered placards next to each doorway until I locate Coach's room. The door is open, but I hesitate, wondering if I'll be welcome. I haven't spoken to anyone in the McCaffrey family. No one knows I'm coming. The door is open, and murmurs of a one-sided conversation float out as I rest against the cool hallway wall.

I haven't looked at myself since I got off the train. Mid-May's summer-like weather makes my hair frizz. I run a smoothing hand over my ponytail, hoping I don't look half as disheveled as I feel. This visit wouldn't be so awkward if I'd kept in touch. Worse, I've no good excuse. At least not one I can tell Coach.

Because part of my excuse involves his son.

Knowing I need to do this, I draw in a steady breath to steel myself and push away from the wall. Inside, the only light in the room is from a doublewide window; its ledge jam-packed with flowers. There's an assortment of greeting cards tucked in among them. A white partition curtain obscures the bed from the doorway.

I rap my knuckles on the open door, twice, and call out, "Hello."

"Jayden?"

I stop. That's Cooper's voice. And there he is, rising from a chair near the window, pocketing his cell phone. He comes toward me.

My stomach drops and my breath catches.

"You're here," I blurt out, and then shake my head at my stupidity. "Of course, you're here."

"Wouldn't be anywhere else right now." He hugs me. "It's good to see you."

The warm greeting throws me off, and I'm stiff in his embrace.

We step apart, and I give him a quick once over. He's still stupid handsome. His broadened shoulders and thickened build make him appear older, more mature, and somehow even better looking.

I never liked pretty boys. They attract too much undeserved adulation. But Cooper, even as a teen, had a rare kindness about him. For this reason, I'd never held his beauty against him.

"How have you been since the car accident?" Last spring, some drunk asshole T-boned Cooper's car. I was away at college, but my sister had told me it'd been serious enough that he'd been hospitalized. I study his face, looking for evidence: scars or blemishes. But Cooper looks completely intact. "You okay?"

"My car was totaled, but thankfully, my injuries have healed." He gives me a careless shrug. It's a casual indifference unnatural to the Cooper I once knew so well. "But, yeah, I'm okay."

Green eyes fringed with incredibly long, thick eyelashes sweep lazily over the whole of me. "But you, you look great."

I glance away. I'd forgotten how disarming those peepers of his can be. Under the intensity of his gaze, I feel like I'm standing in Times Square with a guitar, in nothing but tight-whities.

"Oh, no. I'm a mess." I wave off his compliment, pushing a lock of my dark hair behind an ear, and offer him the flowers and candy I brought. "These are for your dad. Is he up for a quick visit?"

"He sleeps on and off, but we'll wake him up. He'll be excited to see you." Cooper's easygoing smile slips into place as he accepts the gifts. "Caramels are his favorite."

"I remember," I say and follow him as he strides to the window and wedges the tulips onto the sill. Several larger bouquets dwarf my small offering.

"How did you know to come?"

"Your sister messaged Kara."

A few feet further into the room, past the curtain, a hospital bed dominates the space. Under a white hospital blanket, Kellan McCaffrey sleeps. I haven't seen him in a couple of years. My stout and hearty mentor has never been a giant in the physical sense. Like his son, he stands less than six feet tall, but striding the length of a classroom chalkboard, energetically retelling a period in history, or shouting encouragement from the sidelines at sports competitions, he never had a problem commanding attention.

But here, in front of me, he appears to have shrunk, and his usually ruddy complexion is grayish. He looks sickly. Old. Anguish wiggles in the back of my throat.

Cooper crosses to the side of the hospital bed and gives his father's arm a gentle nudge. "Pop, you have a visitor."

Coach's eyes slowly open, his tired blue gaze fixed on his son. Their physical resemblance is undeniable. The same defined chin, straight nose, and shock of thick, wavy hair. Cooper's hair, though, mostly grown out of his regular crew cut style, is chestnut, burnished with natural golden highlights, and his face is clean-shaven while his father has a salt and pepper mop that matches the woolly mustache that engulfs his upper lip.

"You must be special. Look who came to see you," Cooper says, motioning to me.

Coach's eyes swing slowly left until he finds me. Even as tears threaten my eyes, I step forward and smile, like I've been called onto the stage.

"Hey, Coach." I take his warm, thick hand in mine.

"Jayden 'Courageous Cat' Jones as I live and breathe. How about that? This *is* a good day." Coach's voice is wispy and gruff, but he smiles affectionately. "Is Troy with you?"

Cooper tips his head, giving my answer his full attention.

"No, he's in Nevada, but he wishes he could be here," I say.

"Right, right. The old noodle is soggy. Loses track of things." He taps the side of his head, making fun of the memory failure. "He's out in Las Vegas filming the television show. All that attention going to his head?"

I laugh. "You think that enormous ego has room to grow?"

"I'm just teasing. You know Troy is one of three of my all-time favorite student-athletes. You can guess the other two." Coach looks from Cooper to me, a smile deep in his eyes. "Those were good years. You, Troy, and Coop were like the Three Musketeers. Always together."

Across the bed, Cooper and I look at each other. There's a sadness in his expression. I feel it too. We were close. The best of friends—him, me, and Troy—but that's over. Guilt claws my throat, and I'm the first to break eye contact.

“I followed your collegiate wrestling stats. You finished with an impressive record and graduated top of your class at North Central.” Unaware of the angst between Cooper and me, Coach rambles on. “Onto law school next, right?”

A surge of heat collars my neck.

“I finished my first year at Brooklyn Law, but I decided not to go back.”

“Law school was your dream, Courageous Cat.” Coach blinks at me. “All you ever talked about is wanting to be the next Notorious RBG.”

I smile. This man forgets nothing.

“That plan is on hold is all. I want to consider other options first.”

“I believe in you.” Coach pats my hand. “You will achieve whatever you set your mind to, Cat.”

Warmth zips from my chest through my limbs. I didn’t realize how much I needed to hear those words, and more so, from him, someone I’ve always respected.

With labored breath, Coach squeezes my hand; his tired grin stirs my deep affection.

“Winners don’t sit back on their heels. You have to lean into the fight.”

His words prompt a memory of myself in a blue wrestling singlet, the only girl on the high school wrestling team, facing off with my male opponent, Coach relentlessly urging me to make a move. Tears prick the back of my eyes as I’m slammed with the reminder of why this man held an important place in my life. He knew exactly what to say to motivate me to do better, to be my best.

I sandwich his thick hands with mine and recite from memory. “*You already have all you need to succeed.*”

“I say that?”

“You sure did.” I nod, another smile touching my lips. “I remember everything you taught me.”

He returns the smile. “You were teachable. Your eagerness to learn made my job easy. I’d have taken a hundred students like you.”

“And I’d have taken a hundred teachers like you,” I say.

“Courageous Cat, you’ve made my day. Thank you for coming to visit.” His fingers curl tightly around my hand, then go slack. “I wish I were better company, but this old man can’t keep his eyes open.”

“Don’t worry about it, Pop. I’m sure Jayden understands.” Cooper brushes a hand through his father’s hair. The simple, loving gesture chokes me up. “You want anything?”

“No, I’m good, son,” he says.

“You rest and get better,” I whisper, and press a kiss to the side of Coach’s stubbled face. Heavy eyelids flutter over those earnest sky-blue eyes.

I catch Cooper’s attention and motion to the door. The two of us quietly move into the hallway, where I check the time. I’ll have to leave soon if I want to catch my train.

“What’s happening with his health?” I ask.

“He started having heart trouble again, about eight months ago. I don’t suppose you knew that.”

I wince. “No, I hadn’t heard.”

“His cardiologist recommended retirement. He resisted, but finally, after graduation last June, he did. It’s been really, really tough for him, but continuing to work wasn’t an option.”

I cross my arms over my chest, hugging myself. “Where does that leave him now?”

“It’s a wait-and-see and pray-for-the-best kind of situation,” he says. “Top order of business, though, is to keep him comfortable.”

The note of acceptance in his tone makes my heart heavy.

“If there’s anything I can do for him, or your family, please let me know.”

“Thanks,” he says with a smile that doesn’t reach his eyes.

I’m saying the same words to him that other people had said to me when my father was dying. A sour recollection stuffed away in the recesses of my memory creeps back in. Color floods my face as I remember how I sought comfort from him the night we buried my father.

We’d taken a ride to the beach in his Chevy to get away from my mother and the guests who’d remained at my house after the funeral services.

I’d confessed to the idea of giving up my scholarship and leaving North Central, to come home and be accessible for my younger sister. In his calming, reassuring voice, he’d said I should trust my mother, that Kara would be fine.

I’d cried because I felt useless, and he’d pulled me into his arms. All I wanted was to put a bullet in that day, in the horrible, heavy feelings. Cooper was warm, solid. Safe.

And I kissed him.

Something I’d wanted to do since the first time I met him. He met my intensity and kissed me back with strong lips and a seeking tongue.

Impatient to get to the next step, I tugged the straps of my dress and my bra off my shoulders and put his hands on me. But he did something unexpected.

He stopped.

The heat in his eyes went cool and his hands dropped away. Humiliated, I'd twisted around to cover myself and insisted he take me home. He tried to make me feel better during the drive, apologizing, but I'd rebuffed his apologies.

I'd thrown myself at him. Crossed a line he hadn't wanted to cross—a genie you can't put back in the bottle.

My face burns afresh with the memory. Here we stand today, basically strangers, because my stupid, reckless action closed the door on our friendship.

I'd sealed that door closed when I'd slept with Troy.

With a sigh, Cooper leans against the doorjamb and looks down the hall. I sense he's remembering these things, too.

He watches the nurse walk by before he looks at me again. "Sounds like you bailed on law school."

"I didn't bail on it. It's just on hold." I shift my weight, glancing toward the exit sign.

"On hold for what? What are you planning to do?"

I raise my chin. "I'm going to Vegas."

His eyebrows arch with surprise.

"To join Troy Murphy's entourage?" he asks with a little snarl in his voice.

"Hardly." A rise of defiance rattles me.

He studies me. "You and Troy, in the same city, finally, huh?"

I brace myself for a lecture, remembering the heated argument that ensued after he found me in Troy's bed the day after the car incident, when I'd ruined things with him.

We have spoken little since.

“Good for you. That’ll be nice for you guys.” He looks around before his attention returns to me. “I never thought you’d guys stay together this long. Guess I was mistaken.”

I bristle at the comment, but to be fair, I don’t think any of us could have foreseen that after our thoughtless night together, Troy and I, hampered by the distance between our colleges, would continue the relationship. Every summer, along with marking my father’s death anniversary, marked another year for us. This summer, we’d mark three.

I count to ten before I respond. “I’m going to audition for Sin City Fight Club and try my hand at semi-professional fighting. Figure best to do it while I’m still in shape from wrestling and young enough to make a go of it. The opportunity might not come again. If I get cast, it could lead to serious opportunities.”

“It sure could.” He heels the floor and nods. He wants to say something, but he isn’t. “Good luck with the audition, though I don’t think you’ll need it.”

“Thanks,” I say, realizing that though we aren’t close anymore, his opinion still holds weight with me. “So, how about you? You start grad school?”

“Not yet. I took some time off after the accident and to be home with Dad, so I have some schooling to catch up on. Just finished my undergrad a few weeks ago at Stony Brook.”

“Stony Brook? But they don’t have a wrestling program.” I’m flabbergasted, and I can’t hide it.

“No, they don’t. I let that go, switched things up.” He holds my gaze. “That we know so little about each other’s lives shows how cut off we’ve been from each other, doesn’t it?”

The undercurrent of defiance in the question floods my face with heat. I don’t know how to respond. The awkward silence between us unnerves me.

“Well then, it looks like goodbye.” His shoulders square as he draws in a breath. “I’m sorry you didn’t get to see Jess and my mom. I made them take a break and go home for a few hours. They’ll be upset that they missed you.”

I want to leave, but I’m anchored in place by the brave face he puts on. I remember how the exhaustion and worry wore me down when my father was in the hospital.

“Please let them know I’m thinking of them, and that I’ll try to come back before I leave,” I say.

“I hope you will,” he says.

I graze his forearm with my fingertips, surprised when the touch sends tingles up the length of my arm, shocked that he still affects me like this.

“It’s going to be okay.” We both know I’m lying. It’s what people say in this situation, to be kind. A false brief whisper of hope.

It’s what they said to me before Dad died. Of course, nothing was okay.

And it still isn’t.

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As I’m waiting on the train platform, my cell vibrates.

Cooper: *Thanks for coming.*

Me: *Of course. I love your dad.* I pause and add: *Please keep me updated on his condition.*

Cooper: *I will. It was really good to see you.*

I smile and type back: *You, too.*

Cooper: *We should get together before you leave for Vegas. Dinner or something?*

Me: *Let me check my calendar.*

It's pure lip service. Even if I have time, we both know I won't meet up with him. The hospital visit is enough to know the unease between us continues.

Cooper: *Sounds like an it's-not-gonna-happen if ever I heard one.*

Busted.

Me: *Troy and I will be home over the summer. All three of us can go out together then.*

A lengthy pause follows before he replies.

Cooper: *You'll only agree if we include Troy?*

Me: *Of course not. My train just pulled up. Talk soon.*

I drop into a row of empty train seats and stare out the window. Cooper is extending an olive branch to *me*, not Troy. After all this time, and all the water under our collective bridges, to agree to meet for a social outing without Troy would be disloyal.

When Troy and I became a couple, Cooper made it clear he didn't agree with our choice. I'd never seen Cooper lose his cool like the day he'd barged into Troy's room unannounced and found us in bed together.

Cooper had dragged Troy bare-assed into the hallway to chew him out. The guys had argued bitterly, and things got heated.

The memory of Cooper's expression that morning still makes the hair on the back of my neck stand up. I think we both understood that if things had gone differently between us, I wouldn't have slept with Troy.

But I was protective of Troy and our relationship. Troy had saved me—saved me from a freefall into sadness after my father died.

The train vibrates as it rolls along the tracks. I sit and scroll through my cell phone images, to one of Troy and I mugging for a selfie. Though the times we see each other are infrequent, we talk often. Troy makes me happy.

Being the ones who changed the dynamics of the friendship, it became difficult for Troy and me hang out with Cooper without an ever-present elephant in the room. Every month that ticked by expanded the divide. I missed Cooper. Missed his steady presence in my life, but there didn't seem to be a way back to the camaraderie of our high school days.

Our connection dwindled away. None of us knew how to save it.