

Sneak Peek #2: In Jack's Arms
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With a calm learned through many years in combat, Jack crept into the living room and killed the light by smacking the nearest switch. The room was plunged into darkness. Without the light silhouetting him, he was no longer an easy target. Though he had heard the squeal of tires following that explosion of glass, he didn't dare trust the miscreants who had attacked Abby's home to leave so easily.

Enough moonlight illuminated the space to let him see what had happened. Warm, muggy air drifted into the living room through a broken window. The slats of the wooden blinds were cracked and hanging awkwardly. As he hugged the wall and cautiously moved toward the front door, planting each footstep deliberately down on the hickory planks, Jack spotted the heavy brick sitting in the center of the room.

His gut lurched when he considered how badly that brick could have hurt Mattie or Abby if they had been sitting in the living room watching television as so many people did this time of night. He refused to even think about how lucky they were that it had only been a brick and not gunfire. He couldn't stomach the thought of either of them being seriously injured.

Listening intently and scoping out the quiet street, he confirmed it was safe to venture outside. The neighbors to the left were coming out of their front door, one of them on his cell phone and rattling off his address to the police. Sirens were already wailing in the distance and growing louder. He wasn't surprised by the quick response.

Though Abby and Mattie lived on one of the safer streets in this neighborhood, the area still had a bad reputation for violence and crime despite the efforts of the community to tamp it down. Judging by the speed of the response, a unit had been patrolling very near. Hopefully someone had seen the car that had brought the vandals to Abby's front door. Whether they would talk was another issue altogether.

Back in the house, he quickly returned to Abby and found her exactly where he had left her. She flung herself at him, wrapping her arms around his neck and letting him drag her into his embrace. He kissed the side of her neck and rubbed a reassuring hand down her back. "It's okay, sweetness. We're all right. It was only a brick."

"A brick? Why? Who would do something like that?"

Jack had a good idea and lowered her until her feet touched the floor. "Maybe that punk who tried to pull a knife on you in the store."

She continued to lean against him. "You really think he would take it that far?"

"I do." He heard a noise that sounded like Mattie's voice and grasped her hand. "Let's get Mattie. The police will be here any second, and he's going to be scared."

With their fingers interlaced, they made their way across the modestly-sized ranch-style house to Mattie's bedroom. The younger man sat wide-eyed on his bed and hugged his knees. Abby started to rush toward him, but Jack stopped her. He took the lead this time, certain Mattie didn't need or want to be coddled.

"Hey, bud, it's okay." He crouched down in front of the bed and tapped Mattie's knee. "Some bad guys tossed a brick through the window, but they're gone now. The cops are here, and we're all okay. Everyone is safe."

Mattie took it all in and finally nodded. "Okay, Jack—but it was *really* loud."

"I know it was." He motioned toward the television. "You want to keep watching your shows or do you want to come with us to talk to the police?"

Mattie shook his head. "I need to watch my shows. I've already seen the police before and they're not as cool as the firemen."

Jack smiled. "No, I guess not."

He stepped back to let Abby give her brother a hug and noticed the irritated expression on her face. The pinched set to her lips didn't bode well for him, and he accurately guessed he had overstepped the line by going to comfort Mattie first. Out in the hallway, she waited until the door was shut behind her to frown at him. "Why did you do that?"

"I knew what he needed. You're tense with fear and anxiety. I wanted him to see me and know that I have it under control."

"You're acting like I'm hysterical."

"Sugar, you're getting there," he said gently and reached for her trembling hand. A short while ago, she had been trembling for a totally different reason. Now she shook with terror and adrenaline.

Abby let him tug her close but she didn't allow him to pull her into his embrace. She tipped back her head and stared up at him with a bit of warning reflecting in those chocolate-brown eyes. "Jack, I'm his sister. *I* know what he needs."

Remembering what she had said earlier, he reminded her, "You told me that you appreciate the way I treat him like any other twenty-year-old man. That's what I was doing, Abby."

She considered his statement. Finally, she admitted, "It's hard for me to let someone else in, Jack. For years, I was all Mattie had. Until Granddad rescued us from that roach-infested hellhole where our mother kept us, it was just me and Mattie. That's it."

Jack wrapped his arms around Abby and hauled her in tight. His stomach pitched at the image of a tiny Abby shielding her baby brother in such an awful place. He had known that their mother had been a drug addict but he hadn't had any idea it was *that* bad. He pressed his lips to her temple and let them linger. "I'm used to being in charge, Abby. I've always been that way, even as a kid. I may have left my career as an officer in the Marine Corps behind but I'm still that same man."

"I like that man," she admitted quietly. "He makes me feel safe."

Eyes closing briefly, Jack relished her admission. "I won't let anyone hurt you or Mattie. I swear it, Abby."

She leaned back and smiled up at him. "I've never doubted that, Jack."

A knock at the door interrupted their tender moment. Taking her hand, Jack headed for the door and opened it to reveal a pair of police officers standing on the front porch. After giving his statement, Jack retrieved his phone from Abby's hand and called Finn while she talked to the police about the break-in at her shop, the run-in with the gang member and now this brick incident.

"Hey, bro," Finn greeted cheerfully. "Where are you? We're about to start a new round of Trivial Pursuit. Bee and Kelly are crushing Pop and me."

Considering Bee's brilliant mind that didn't surprise him in the least. "Finn, leave Pop with Bee. Get Kelly and meet me at Abby's place."

"What's wrong?" Finn's tone instantly changed. "Are you okay? Is Abby okay? What about Mattie?"

"We're okay, but we need some plywood or plastic sheeting. Some asshole threw a brick through a window."

"What's going on?" Kelly's deep voice rumbled in the background.

"Someone tried to hurt Abby and Mattie," Finn answered.

"Son of a bitch," Kelly grumbled. "Tell Jack we're on our way."

"I'm sure he heard you," Finn said. "Hell, I'm sure half of Houston heard you bellowing like that."

Shaking his head at his younger brothers, Jack interrupted their squabbling. "Finn, today would be nice."

"Yeah. We're coming. See you soon."

Glad to have his brothers on their way, Jack put away his phone and returned to Abby's side. By now, another familiar face had arrived on the scene. Looking tired as hell but fully focused on the crime, Detective Eric Santos listened intently to Abby's recollection of the events before conferring with the patrolmen who would be handling the case.

After making it clear he wanted to be kept in the loop, Eric caught Jack's eye and motioned with his fingers. Jack trailed the detective to a more private spot away from the officers and Abby. Eric ran his fingers through his midnight black hair and sighed. "I worried something like this would happen."

"I'm sure it was that asshole who tried to get nasty with Abby in her store. Only a coward throws a brick through a damned window."

"Agreed," Eric replied. Forehead creased with concern, the detective confessed, "When I heard the call go out for Abby's house, I thought for sure it was a drive-by. I couldn't get here fast enough."

Jack considered the detective's concern for Abby and Mattie a testament to the other man's character. "Mattie wanted to stay inside, but you might pop in to see him before you go. He was pretty rattled."

"And Abby?" Eric eyed her for a moment. "She might fool other people with that calm, cool exterior but not me. I've known her too long for that."

Not for the first time, Jack wondered if there wasn't something more to the friendship and history between the pair. Jealousy gripped him. "I've got it under control."

Eric's eyebrows arched at his possessive tone. "So you finally worked up the courage to stake your claim?"

Jack's eyes narrowed. "Was it that obvious?"

The detective snorted. "You went behind my back to bribe the summer league coordinator to put Mattie on your team. I wouldn't be much of a detective if I didn't put two-and-two together."

"It wasn't like that," Jack grumbled.

Eric snorted. "Yeah, man. Sure it wasn't." Growing serious, he said "Listen, this brick thing? It's probably a one-and-done deal. The 1-8-7 crew knows better than to push too hard with Abby."

"I hope that's true. I keep telling myself she's respected in the community, and her shop helps lots of people. They don't need that kind of backlash."

"True, but it's more than that." Eric hesitated. "You need to talk to Abby about her connection to Besian Beciraj."

Jack's jaw tightened when the name of the Albanian mob boss who had put his family through hell only a few short weeks ago registered. He glanced at Abby who was talking to her neighbors. He refused to believe that she could be involved in any dirty dealings. She wasn't that sort of woman.

Was she?

"I've got to run, Jack. Should I put a car on the house or—"

"I'm staying," he interjected. "I'm not leaving Abby alone at night until this mess is cleared up."

"I'm glad to hear that." Eric smacked his arm. "Don't hesitate to call me. I'm always available for my friends. Tell Mattie I'll touch base with him tomorrow and see if he'd like to go out for a bite later this week."

"Will do."

Jack returned to Abby's side and put a reassuring hand on her shoulder. She smiled up at him and continued on with her conversation. Once the neighbors and police were gone, Jack followed her back inside the house. While she checked in on Mattie, he grabbed a broom and dustpan and got to work. The brick had been taken away by the police as evidence but the mess remained.

He was scooping up glass shards when Kelly and Finn arrived. His youngest brother had a toolbox and slab of plywood from the scrap collection in the garage at the house they shared. Finn carried a small overnight bag and a tarp. Eyes narrowed and jaws clenched, they surveyed the damage.

Finally, Finn spoke. "Our fix won't be pretty but it will do until morning." He lifted the overnight bag. "I packed your things. I figured you'd be staying here tonight." Lowering his voice, he dropped the small piece of luggage on the nearest chair. "Make sure you keep that away from Mattie—if you know what I mean."

Jack got the message loud and clear. Mattie's curiosity could make for a dangerous situation if he started going through the bag and discovered a handgun and ammo. "Understood."

"Oh! Hey." Abby reacted with surprise upon finding his brothers in her living room. Her gaze flitted to the tools and supplies. "Wow. Thanks. That's really nice of you two to come over so late to help."

"We're happy to do it," Finn assured her.

"We'll be out of your hair in no time," Kelly promised and got to work.

Jack stepped closer to Abby and brushed his knuckles down her cheek. "Is Mattie all right?"

"He's already fast asleep." She leaned into his touch and smiled up at him. "I guess you were right about how to deal with him." Inhaling a long breath, she said, "If you don't need my help, I'll go finish up those dishes."

"We've got this covered."

She nodded and left his side, her slow movements showing her reluctance. He sensed she was beginning to feel the crash from the fight-or-flight response that had kicked in when the brick had come through the window. As soon as the repairs were complete, he would make sure she got the attention she needed.

"So whose ass are we kicking?" Kelly asked as he held up one side of the plywood while Finn hammered nails in place.

Jack readjusted his side of the plywood slab so it completely covered the shattered window. "We aren't kicking any asses just yet. This is a tangled mess, and I need to know all the angles before we act. We can't do anything that would put Abby or Mattie in more danger."

"You think this is tied in with the robbery at her store?" Finn asked as he gingerly stepped around the flowers planted in the bed beneath the window.

Jack shook his head. "This was personal. That robbery wasn't."

"What did they take?"

"Video cameras, cell phones and cameras," Jack said. "Abby told me that nothing else was touched, not the jewelry or guns or knives."

"That's weird."

Jack thought it was more than weird. "It feels calculated. Someone wanted those items for a very specific reason."

"Maybe it's a situation like the one with Bee," Kelly suggested. "Someone got a hold of those pictures of Jeb and used them to blackmail and extort her. Maybe someone pawned a device with sensitive photos on it. If you wanted it back, you would steal everything to provide some cover for your actions."

It was a possibility Jack hadn't considered. "If that's the case, I hope it was only someone trying to get back evidence of an affair or a sex tape and not an even worse crime."

"My advice?" Finn finished hammering the final nail. "Tell Abby to let it go. File her police report. File with the insurance. Leave it at that. If someone was willing to break into a business to get back a phone or a video camera, they're committed. She doesn't need that sort of trouble."

As usual, Finn offered sound advice. "I'll talk to her. You got a tape measure in that tool box?"

"Yep." Finn found the item in question, a notepad and pencil. They measured the window and Jack jotted down the numbers.

"Leave the tool box," he said as Kelly tidied up the area. "I need to take a look at the dishwasher."

"Figure out what you need and text me the info." Kelly stepped back to examine the plywood. "I'll head in to the hardware store first thing in the morning. Pop needs to get out and walk around some. I'll take him with me."

Jack considered his youngest brother for a moment. Since the fight and the shooting that had nearly killed their father, Kelly hadn't reported to work at the private security firm where he worked. "When are you going back to Lone Star?"

Kelly shrugged and tucked the hammer into the toolbox. "I'm not sure."

Jack's eyebrow raised and he shot a look at Finn. "You are planning to go back to work sometime?"

"Maybe," Kelly answered. "While I've been healing up from the tournament and taking care of Pop, I've been doing a lot of thinking."

"About?"

"About what I want out of life," he said matter-of-factly. "Since the day I graduated high school and shipped off to boot camp, I've been putting my life on the line for someone else. Maybe it's time I put me and the people who mean the most to me first."

"You mean Bee," Jack guessed.

"Yes. I nearly lost her. I realize how lucky I am that she gave me a second chance to fix things and make them right between us. She's it for me, Jack. She the one. She's the woman I'm going to marry someday. Right now? She needs me *here*. That's right where I plan to be."

Pride welled upside him. He reached out and tousled Kelly's short hair. "Listen to you! Talking like a big boy!"

Kelly smacked away his hand but couldn't stop the grin that tugged at his mouth. "Screw you."

Finn joined his laughter, but Jack could tell he was equally as proud of their younger brother for growing up and doing right by Bee. Her career was about to skyrocket, and she needed the full support of her man. It was good that Kelly was willing to take time off and commit totally to her.

When his brothers were gone and he was satisfied with the patch job they had done on the window, Jack locked the front door and grabbed his bag. He ducked into the kitchen, but Abby had already finished her chore. Heading down the hallway, he checked on Mattie who slept peacefully before continuing his search for Abby.

The room next to Mattie's had a locked door. He assumed it had belonged to their grandfather and left it alone. The door across the hall was slightly ajar. He heard the sound of rustling fabric and knocked softly. "Abby? May I come inside?"

"Yes."

He pushed open the door and stepped inside her bedroom. The serene space felt instantly relaxing with its soft gray walls and crisp white bedding. Dressed in tiny shorts and a tank top, she displayed inch after tantalizing inch of her trim legs. His tastes had always run to thicker, more voluptuous women, but there was just something about Abby and that perky dancer's frame that revved his engine.

The dimmed bedside lamps cast a warm glow to her rich, dark skin. His fingers just itched to get on her, to glide along her calves and up her thighs. He wanted to peel away those clothes and feel her naked beneath him while he worshipped her with his hands and mouth. He couldn't wait for his chance to pin her down and slide his tongue between the delicate petals of her pussy. He would have her screaming his name in no time.

Shaking himself from those tempting thoughts, he said, "We have the window boarded up for the night. Kelly offered to hit up the hardware store in the morning. If you don't mind, I'll keep Mattie with me so he can help us get the window replaced and fix the dishwasher."

"Are you sure? He can be difficult when it comes to tasks like that."

"I'm a patient man." He needed her to know that he was up for the challenge and in this for the long-haul. "Mattie likes hands-on work. I'm sure he'll love getting his hands dirty and learning some new skills."

"He will." She pinched the front of her shirt and rubbed the cotton between her fingers. The vulnerability reflected on her sweet face hit him right in the gut. "You're staying, right?"

"I'm staying." Dropping his bag, he crossed the space between them and dragged her into his arms. He sat down on the edge of her bed and tugged her between his legs. She perched on his thigh, and he wrapped his arms around her, cocooning her in place and sharing his heat with her. "I'll keep you safe, Abby."

She clutched at his shirt and nuzzled into him. "I keep thinking about what happened. I know they wouldn't have stopped with a brick if your truck hadn't been parked in the driveway."

He had been thinking the same thing but didn't want to frighten her by confirming it. Instead, he kissed her long and slow and deep. When he felt the tension leaving her body, he eased off and peered into her eyes. "I'm here now. I'm not going anywhere. No one will hurt you or Mattie."

She let loose a relaxed sigh and snuggled into him a little more. Detective Santos' instruction to ask Abby about her relationship with the Albanian mob boss ricocheted around his head, but he didn't think this was the right time. After such an incredibly long and stressful day, she needed to rest. Tomorrow he would get the truth out of her.

"If you'll let me borrow a pillow, I'll set up on the couch in the living room."

Her fingers tightened around the fistful of his shirt that she held. "No. I..." Her voice trailed off, but he didn't push her. She had to be the one to ask. Running her finger along the collar of his shirt, she eventually worked up the courage. "Will you stay with me tonight?"

He tipped her chin with his fingers and traced her full lower lip. Grinning, he said, "Try and get rid of me."

She issued a sarcastic snort. "Once you get a good look at the whole package that comes with Miss Abby Kirkwood, you'll probably go diving out that broken window."

She said it in a way that told him every other man she had dated had done the exact same thing. "Abby, I've been friends with you for quite a while now. I'm fully aware of the dynamics. I won't sit here and say that I understand what it's like to be a twenty-four-seven caregiver and guardian to a special needs adult, but I know what it's like to sacrifice for family. I understand that dating might be tricky."

"Tricky? Jack, it's a minefield."

The imagery that word evoked was too harsh and too violent for the lighthearted way she had used it. Memories of the IED that had claimed Finn's leg and the one that had nearly killed him a few months later blasted him. The chaos, the pain, the panic—it all came flooding back. He tried not to show how it affected him, but Abby caught the small flinch and wince.

"Oh God! Jack! I'm so sorry. I didn't mean—*ugh*. That was really stupid of me."

"Stop." He admonished her firmly but gently. "You don't have to walk around on eggshells around me." He cupped her face. "Baby, we've both got baggage. It's been four years since I left the Corps, and I still have nights where I can't sleep, where I just sit in front of the television and play an endless loop of my deployments in my head."

She pressed her lips to his cheek. "You're the strongest man I've ever known—and I don't mean physically. Everything you've been through and everything you've accomplished? It's amazing, Jack. When I see what you've done for your brothers and your dad, I'm just blown away by you."

He swallowed nervously. Receiving praise had always been an uncomfortable exercise for him. He deflected his discomfort by turning the praise around on her. "You're the amazing one. After everything your mother did, you're still filled with such kindness. The unconditional love you show Mattie and the way you defend and support him and fight for him to have every opportunity he deserves? That's what makes me lo—care for you so much."

At the very last possible instant, he caught himself before blundering into a full accounting of just how much she meant to him. The way Abby made him feel couldn't be denied. When she was near, his heart raced, his palms tingled and his body thrummed with such excitement. One smile from her, and he felt as if he could slay dragons.

But it was too soon and too new to tell her all that. He had only just worked up the courage to kiss her. She needed time to get used to their friendship changing from *just friends* to *us* before he confessed that he'd been pining over her for years. And that's where it was heading. Just as Kelly had started making plans for his future with Bee, Jack had hopes for a bright, happy future with Abby.

Come hell or high water, Jack intended to keep her right where she was—safe in his arms.