



Prologue

Sean must have rehearsed his apology twenty times. Forty, maybe. But he knew the second he laid eyes on Marissa his throat would seize up and he would forget why he came. More importantly he would regret the reason he left.

He heard the tick of the rental car blinker but it was nothing compared to the thundering in his chest. He stared at the plaque outside the school and pulled into the driveway leading into St. Margaret's School for girls. His car idled as the armed guard stepped out from the station and checked his I.D. Sean flashed his license and official Cubs jacket and the guard eagerly let him in.

His confidence shrank under the shade of the towering pines. The stone wall surrounding the school reminded him of his own coldness in how he abandoned Marissa. He wanted more than anything to make things right, but how?

Sean followed the road around the bend, past the open field and sprawling campus. The dorms dated back to the early 20's with solid

oak doors and wrought iron gates. He dated a girl from here before he set sights on Marissa. But even now, his memories failed him. All he could think of was seeing her.

Autumn came early. Chicago had not seen a drop in temperature but New Jersey was always early. Here it was just after Labor Day and he needed a coat. Sean pulled the car into the visitor parking lot and made sure Marissa could see him. He slid his arms into the Cubs jacket, turned down the radio and checked the rear view mirror. He wiped his teeth clean, careful not to look himself in the eye.

When the wind whipped over the car he dropped his gaze to a slender figure approaching the gate. His breathing stopped. His hands felt limp. He reached for the car door and his mouth went dry. Marissa stood there in her navy plaid skirt and tights. Her gray school sweater shirt matched her tired eyes and sunken grin.

One month away from her and the changes were obvious. She'd lost at least ten pounds; her stark complexion was no longer tan and bright. Sean emerged from the car with his hands folded in his pockets. His heart swelled as she wrapped her finger in the cuff of her sleeves and dropped eye contact.

The wave in her hair was blown out and her face seemed red from crying. He swallowed hard not knowing what he'd say. The wall he built between them was not about what happened to them but what he was hiding. He couldn't confess— it would destroy her forever.

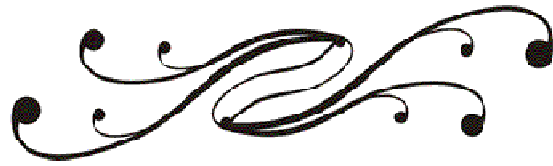
He stared up at the sky trying to regain his composure. This was not like the movies or some book that wrapped up all neatly in the end. They were broken over the miscarriage and things would never

be the same. He wanted to sweep her up in his arms and make her sorrow go away but guilt locked his arms to his sides.

One whiff of her favorite perfume and the tears welled up in his eyes. He felt his lower lip quiver as she steadily walked into his embrace. Marissa locked her arms around him as he placed his fatherly hand on her head. She gasped as her hair blew around his neck.

The pressure in his chest tightened. He pressed his cheek to the side of her head and closed his eyes. "I'm so sorry," he whispered. "It'll never happen again."

Jessica Adriel- Sample Read



One

Sean winced as the plane landed. The stewardess had been kind enough to slip him a few Jack Daniels and overlook his cat nap during the Chicago to Newark trip. He flew this airline frequently, just not to New Jersey, and never without his teammates.

When the seatbelt light turned off, Sean was ready to deplane. He eased his cast out of the row and hobbled up the aisle of the overbooked flight. Had he not scurried off now he'd have to wait—another thing he hated about Jersey. Everyone was in a hurry and here he was with a severed ankle tendon. He moved like molasses even on his crutches.

The stewardess slipped her number in Sean's pocket. Every bit the player, he smiled and winked. The incline up to the main terminal made for a rough arrival. His cast was getting heavier with each step. He could have had a wheelchair move him up the corridor, but Sean wanted to slow his arrival as much as possible.

Slipping his earpiece in, he shuffled through his iPod. Coming home was not a welcomed event—hence the Jack Daniels. He could handle the pain, it was the memories he tried to dull. Thankfully his family was Irish so there would be a keg at the graduation party. In fact, Sean's dad spent most of his after work in the recliner with NASCAR, rather than outside pitching to his son.

So here he was, Jack Daniels dampening his system, music blaring in his ears and a pair of crutches to remind him that while he may be alive—he was back in Jersey. For the next forty-eight hours he considered himself under the radar.

He followed the signs through the terminal as if he were another tourist on their way to Manhattan. Had he taken the assistance they offered him at the gate he could make it to curbside pick-up without breaking a sweat.

The carousel would no doubt be jammed with travelers awaiting their bags. He rounded the corner and swallowed hard. The Baggage Claim was walled in by New Yorkers with short tempers, foul language and insulting wit— each one jostling their bag off the carousel like a kid at a slot machine jerking the slots.

When a spot opened up he lunged for it and waited for his matching suitcase to cycle around. He yanked it from the steel turnabout with just enough ease to wobble back, putting pressure on his bad leg. After a stab of pain he convinced himself to drop two dollars into the caddy machine and retrieve a luggage cart. He tossed his crutches on top of his bags and hobbled outside.

The roar of traffic was deafening. He didn't need to remove his earpiece to remember that. He could see it. People zoomed in and out of lanes, honked their horns relentlessly and shouted out their windows. Everyone here told you what they thought when they thought it.

Sean was sure that routine would start the minute his parents picked him up. When was the last time he called? He emailed to confirm his itinerary. Phillip had a Facebook page, but other than that, maybe Christmas? He wasn't sure.

He had worried a little about the condition of his mother. Had she aged? Was she taking care of herself? Did Phillip do

anything around the house to help out? Was his dad still drinking?

He read Phillip's wall from time to time and heard all about his conversion to Jesus— whatever that meant. *What did he care?* He had a career to salvage. He was tired of checking his voicemail, holding his breath for the call that would eventually come. The worst thing that could happen would be a call from Hal Brazel. When he got that call, he knew Chicago was cutting him loose.

When a pearl Escalade swerved into the pick-up lane outside Newark Terminal Sean squinted into the empty passenger seat. Was that Phillip? Where were his parents?

Phillip jumped out with his arms opened wide. "Poppy."

Sean blanked. Was this his brother? Phillip looked more like east LA with his trimmed facial hair, new threads and a pinky ring. The music inside the car was blasting with some racial crap Sean once defended as Rap. Phillip was five years younger and had the pre- graduate smile to prove it. "Look at you boy!"

Phillip spun around in white Adidas and backed off the curb. "You like the new me?"

It didn't take long for Phillip to mention the crutches. "Pops, what'd you do?"

Sean got used to the nickname last year. It was his brother's way of rubbing in how 'uncool' it was to reach 21 and then slide down hill. He tossed his bag into Phillip's chest. "Take my bag you little punk."

Phillip grinned as he popped the door and put the bag inside. Sean walked casually to the passenger door. "You really are an old man, you know that?"

Sean tried not to smile but he missed the sarcasm of the East Coast. Before he knew it both bags were inside and they were off.

He buckled up after a friendly reminder and hung his arm out the window.

"I can't believe I have a real, live Chicago Cubs player in my car."

"Your car?" Sean rolled his eyes but reveled in the compliment.

Phillip laughed as he weaved to the right to exit the airport. "Basically. Mom doesn't drive much."

"What about work? Does she carpool?"

"Nope. Dad drives her."

Sean twisted in his seat. "Dad?"

"Honest to God. They're getting along a lot better now."

"You've got to be kidding."

"No sir." Phillip closed the windows as he pulled back onto I-95. "Things have changed while you were gone."

Sean distanced himself from the conversation. "So, you psyched for your big party?"

"Yes and no," he answered. "What about you? Are you glad to be back?"

Sean pulled on his chin, "Back in Jersey? No, not exactly." He stared at the smog and heavy traffic.

"Why not? It's been forever."

Sean rubbed his forehead. Here came the headache; the kind that only family can give you. "Not to me," he said studying the landscape. He knew what was waiting for him at home. And Phillip should mind his own business.

"You have any plans while you're here?"

Sean shook his head. "Just trying to lay low." His eyes dropped to his ankle. There was no way around it, his parents were probably home making a big deal that their son was returning to Chatham.

"So um, why didn't Mom and Dad come?"

Phillip shrugged. "No reason. Just busy, that's all."

Traffic came to a standstill. Phillip strummed on the steering wheel.

glad you're

Sean
Monday."



"Well I'm certainly
back."

smiled. "Yeah. Till

"Monday, got it."

Marissa raced out of the cab balancing her weekend laundry, bridal magazine and overstuffed bag with books for her final exam. Almost shutting the door on her cobalt skirt she skipped up the

curb and shoved her way into Penn Station to board the 5:10 train to Chatham.

Her heels clamored down the steps and around the lines of tourists as she gallivanted up the corridor and across the station toward track 48. She weaved around two Asian couples snapping photos and shimmied onto the train just as the doors were about to shut. Before she could take a deep breath, she bumped into the man standing behind her— another vague reminder that she was late.

She'd waited all month to see Hawke's final band performance, having missed the last three gigs due to Manhattan traffic. Even though she missed staring at him in a tight T-shirt and tattooed arms, holding him after the show was even better.

Marissa took a short breath and started to move through the train cabin. The compartment, of course, was full. She side stepped what she thought was a bum but NY didn't allow that. With rustling newspapers, ringing cell phones and Dean & DeLuca coffee cups Marissa surveyed the next car and kept walking.

She jostled her way into the second car as the train departed. The second she pulled open the air tight door, her phone buzzed. A gust of wind flapped a loose hair onto her lip as she dug through her bag. "Hold on," she yelled into her bag.

She didn't look like a fool. People in NY talked to themselves all the time, right?

She hoisted her bag up her arm and flipped open her phone. "Jocelyn, hey, can I call you right back?"

The voice on the other end was the never happy but always hilarious Jocelyn Adams. "Where are you?"

"I'm on the train."

"You couldn't stay in the city for our last weekend?"

She knew Joss was mad. But she never stayed in the city. She always went home on Friday and Hawke drove her back on Sunday night.

"You're ditching me for that hunk of yours?"

"Come on, don't be like that." Hoping she had her pass in her wallet, Marissa hustled through the next cabin and flopped into an open seat by a rambunctious family with twins. She shoved her laundry under the seat and addressed the loose hair stuck to her lip. "That's not the only reason. I see my sisters, too."

"Fine," she shouted, "I just called to tell you I got a date with Trent."

Marissa's sugary brown eyes widened. "The guy from our building?" Oh, this was not a good idea. Jocelyn was always chasing men and getting them, which only meant more chasing.

"Yes darling, that Trent. I was calling because I thought we could double. I really like this guy."

Marissa turned her back so the woman with small children couldn't hear her. "You like everybody until the next morning!"

Marissa covered her mouth as she spoke. "Listen I want you to try and behave. Guys like a girl who respects herself."

Jocelyn brushed the comment off as she always did. "Oh, I respect myself all right. I'll email you the video."

"You're not funny."

“Enjoy Hawke, and I’ll call you later.”

Marissa sat back and ended the call. A flare of anger pitted against her conscience. She made a mental note to tell Jocelyn what happened with Sean.

Slipping the phone in her bag she checked the time and patted her eyes. This wasn’t the time to cry over past loves or the pain they inflict. Sean left her after she miscarried. She’d never forgive him for that. She ran her hands through her hair as she leaned forward to take a deep breath.

Marissa noticed a pair of pearly sandals standing in front of her. She glanced up at the curious five-year old. She worried the train would shuffle the girl to the floor. “Here,” she patted the seat beside hers, “sit down before you fall.”

The child shook her head and kept staring. Her mother was too busy with the twins to notice the girl had gotten out of her seat. New York was a strange place. You didn’t care for strangers or apply any of the normal considerations. You just kept to yourself.

Retrieving a newly opened bottle of water, Marissa plopped the massive Bride issue in her lap and began studying the pages. The child sat down, her face beaming with pride. She pretended not to see the little girl standing in front of her. It wasn’t long before the child looked on and took a seat.

One by one she turned the pages, studying each gown and either redesigning it in her head or moving on to the next one. *Maybe if she found something she liked she could make it at school?* Hawke would love that. Of course, he’d have to propose again since

she panicked the first time. *Why did she do that?* True, he was dashing handsome and tall, built well and very charming. But he still scared her. Marissa paused on one of the pages. The thought of losing him is what really made her frantic. She'd been in love with Hawke since the day they met— even back when she was engaged to Sean.

But the mental gymnastics didn't stop there. She told herself she was too young to be tied down. It's not that she wanted other prospects but Sean took up most of her teenage years. He proposed when she was only seventeen. And look how that turned out! She reminded herself that she had bad luck when it came to love: First her father died, then Sean skipped town. She was definitely not going to ruin her chances with Hawke by pushing a marriage she wasn't ready for.

The twins across the way squirmed in their seat as Marissa glanced at their mother. She had three beautiful girls, just like her mother. Jocelyn hassled her for watching TV shows about families with multiple children, but the sound of pattering feet and loud voices made for nice background noise in the city. She hated being away from home. As much as she missed Hawke when he was working she could always entertain herself with the girls.

She smiled at the oldest daughter beside her. She began to kick her legs back and forth as the train moved along. The girl stared at Marissa and inched closer. No one had noticed the little girl had moved. Her mother had kids crawling over her lap and pulling on her shoulders while he just sat there staring out the window. It

unnerved her. She washed away the silt of anger that soured her tongue. "I'll never marry a man like that."

How could she? Her father was a wonderful man who was very involved in her life. After the twins were born he still managed to make time for her. He cut back his cross country travel and scheduled day trips up the eastern seaboard. He did whatever it took to provide for the girls and to also raise them. He'd never just sit there and vegetate on the train.

Marissa had fond memories of her dad. Sometimes they overtook her during the holidays and other times she recalled his voice to help her go to sleep. She thanked God for the memories and how much time they spent together right before his accident. When she turned fourteen he would coax her into the cab of his 18 wheeler and let her steer the rig. He'd chide her about driving his rig to school.

Two months later though— he was gone. Her heart sank for a great while. That's when everything changed. "For the better," she said pushing away the thoughts. But sometimes the heavy noise on the city streets made her think of the accident. Marissa could count on one hand the number of times she drove on I-95. She knew exactly where her dad had broken down and been hit. That's why she took the train.

She loved the way Hawke would rest against the platform railing waiting for her to arrive. She could usually spot him through the window and knew that cars four through nine had the best chance of docking near the station building. She would always

rush down the platform and into his arms. It had been an entire month since he last picked her up. He left work early every Friday to play the drums for a local band whose drummer was out on pregnancy leave.

She sighed, missing the riding home with him and using every moment to catch up on their week. She loved the way he would entwine their fingers and look over at her while they were driving back. Tonight was his last gig though and she vowed not to miss it. After this weekend they could spend the whole summer together on the back of his 02' Harley Sportster. Marissa loved riding around town on the sissy seat, clutching her arms around Hawke as if they were inseparable. But most of all she loved the way they could disappear by taking the bike into the woods and spending time alone.



T W O

The Moffit's Escalade bumped up the curb at the base of the freshly tarred driveway. The car pulled into the garage like a hockey puck sliding across the ice. The house and shrubs were still the same. Not much had changed since he left.

Sean waited till the car came to a halt before he looked across the street to the Gladstone's. He stared at the darkened house through the rear view mirror as he eased himself out of the SUV. Phillip retrieved his bags and slammed the door while Sean hopped along the garage wall trying to peek without Phillip seeing.

With the press of a button Phillip closed the garage door and headed inside. Sean made sure he kept his eyes off the Gladstone's while his brother held the door. He tottered around the car and into the house. But curiosity had already bitten him.

The Gladstone home was dark for a Friday night. Surely they hadn't moved. His mother would have said something.

Phillip cleared the landing of the raised ranch and waved Sean inside. "Ma, we're back."

His voice ricocheted off the walls as Sean winced from his headache.

"You need help Pops?"

He shook it off. "No, I got it."

Sean closed the door and wobbled inside. Jack, the family terrier, bounded down the steps and leapt for Sean. He caught the aging pup. "Good to see you Jack. How's my boy?"

Sean nuzzled the dog and looked him in the eye. Two years had aged the dog. Then again Jack was getting old when he first left. He never asked about the dog once he moved to Chicago, as news of a dying dog would never suit a boy. Not even now.

He placed the terrier on the ground and pulled himself along the stairway. It was good to be home.

Gladys was in the kitchen. The aroma of Irish cooking filled the house. True, Sean had been spoiled with upscale restaurants and fine wine, but there was nothing like home cooking to ease you into a long weekend. She appeared in the doorway to the kitchen with the telephone attached to her ear and the old phone cord tucked under her arm.

"Oh, he's here. I gotta go, I'll call you back." She hung up the phone and waited for her son to emerge.

She planted her fists on her hips as Sean rounded the landing. Like all mothers she spotted the cast and assumed the worst. "Oh my God, what happened?"

"Nothing Ma. I'm fine."

"Fine? You don't look fine." She fussed over him, squishing his face in her meat drenched hands.

"I'll be off for a couple weeks. No big deal."

She turned and hollered down the hall. "Mickey, get in here. Sean's in a cast."

Mr. Moffitt was no spring chicken. His wife was nine years younger. Sean removed his hat, unsure of where he stood with his father. The last time he was in this house he had been lectured and threatened for what happened with the Gladstone girl.

His father arrived from the hall just as Sean made it over the last step. Their eyes met. Sean was instantly softened by his father's hard stare. "Sean."

"Hey Pop." He could feel the disappointment in his wakeful glare. Sean took a deep breath as if waiting for approval.

The man gave his son a look over.

Gladys came to the rescue. "Are you hungry dear? I've been cooking all day." She intervened by taking his hand and led him into the kitchen.

Sean glanced around the outdated space. Apparently they weren't watching HGTV. The refrigerator was cleared off from the schedules, grades, papers and artwork that once adorned it. The door to the back patio was still beaten by Jack's tiny nail marks. The window was covered by the country apple pattern his mother had for decades. The same yellow cushions lined the booth style seating around the table. Even the garbage can was the same plastic kind with the flip top lid.

Disheartened, Sean took a seat waiting for his mother to array a home cooked meal before him.

Phillip took his bags down the hall as his father walked in behind him.

"It smells good Ma. Did you make cabbage?"

"I did. And some soup." Gladys busied herself as Mr. Moffit took a seat opposite his son.

He pretended not to notice the way his father was behaving. But the lack of excitement and welcome were apparent. There was no hiding what had been said here long ago. Sean had done his best to move on. He reminded himself of it every day— which is why he drank, something he was sure to hear about from his father once Phillip was in bed.

Waiting patiently for some food, Sean looked at the Tupperware salt and pepper shakers still on the table with the scratched up napkin holder beside it. The matching yellow dish towels were still hanging by the stove and the drying rack was set to the right of the sink.

His mother doused a pot with suds and started scrubbing as Sean looked up at his father. What was she waiting for? *Did they need to have a talk before he ate?*

Mr. Moffitt stared at his son as his wife filled the kitchen with chatter. Most of it was about family friends and people coming to the party on Sunday.

"So, how's the team? How's the season?"

Sean couldn't forget that his parents had cable TV and refused to add the sports package to their service so they could see his games. His dad would read the articles if Sean sent them via email but after a year of trying he gave up and resorted to phone calls when something changed.

"You see much of Christina?"

“Not since the fall Mom. I already told you at Christmas I’m with Clarice.”

“The married one?” His mother paused at the sink. “It may be your life but your father and I certainly don’t approve.”

His father crossed his arms. “That girl is no good, I told you that.”

Sean was not about to disagree. Clarice ditched him the second the news hit the papers. People had warned him that she was looking out for herself. But as egos go, Sean never considered her a gold digger, not with his charm and good looks. He’d admit she was high maintenance but he always left it at that.

His mother cut some fresh meat and piled it on two slices of thin rye and placed it on the table. Sean tried not to squirm but a hot meal was the least she could do. It had been quite a while since the family was all together.

His father studied him from across the table, more than likely sure that his son deserved even less than that cold sandwich. They gave him everything and then he up and left without making things right. A father couldn’t forgive his son for running out on his responsibilities and for not changing his ways.

Sean squeezed the empty bottle of mustard careful not to raise his eyes to his father. “They feed you out in Chicago?”

Sean wiped his mouth and sat back. He was devouring the food. Since the accident, everyone left him and it was take out at best. This meant he still had to get up and answer the door; and cash

was not his usual method of payment. "Of course. It's just that," He stopped short of mentioning his injury.

"Seems to me that with an injury you'd have time to think things through."

Sean tried not to rebut but it was obvious that things with the Gladstone's were still fresh on their mind. They wanted to talk about his last visit home and how that went. With any luck, his disappointment with this career wouldn't be as much of a blow as his news about Marissa.

Gladys cleaned up the kitchen and put away her pots and utensils. She maneuvered around the kitchen as if she too knew what was coming. "You won't recognize the twins Sean. They're entering Kindergarten in the fall."

There was no need to confirm. The only twins the family knew were the Gladstone girls.

"Maggie is such a handful. And Crystal is just as quiet as a mouse. They'll be around this weekend if you want to say hi. I'm sure they'll remember you."

Sean's cheeks perked up at the mention of their names. He missed them tremendously. He was part of their life for such a long time. He spent countless nights putting them to bed before he and Marissa headed down to the basement for a movie or out for a walk. Mrs. Gladstone was not on his favorite people list but he still loved the girls— All three of them.

Phillip tapped his hand on the doorframe and waved goodbye.

Sean leaned forward. "You're ditching me? I just got here."

"Sorry dude. Megan's waiting."

Sean wadded up a napkin and tossed it at his brother. "Who's Megan?"

"You'll meet her tomorrow Bro. See ya."

Something flashed in his brother's eyes. Sean sat back and let out a sigh. He remembered those days. But here he was— injured and trapped in his parent's house. And the subject of his conduct with Marissa Gladstone was about to be breeched.

Sean cleared his throat and sipped his water. "So, did you invite all the neighbors to this shindig tomorrow?"

Gladys paused at the cabinet. "No. It's not appropriate dear."

"Why not? They live here. They're a part of your lives aren't they?" He put the water glass down. "What's so inappropriate about that?"

Gladys was quiet. Sean's father drummed his fingers on the table. *See, that was the problem with the Moffit's and Sean knew it.* No one in his family ever talked through anything. They just guilted you into saying something so they can 'lord it' over you when you did.

The air grew heavy. His father's eyes burrowed into his.

"What neighbors are you asking about dear?"

"You know who I'm asking about mom. And I'm only asking if you warned them?"

She started wiping the counters. "Like I said dear, we don't see them much."

Sean cocked his head back. "You just raved about the girls. I think that's a bit of a misconception."

Sean knew that starting a conversation about the Gladstone's was just as troubling as chewing through the fresh pastrami on his plate. He suddenly lost his appetite. He was going to play their little game. But he certainly wasn't going to go down play or apologize for doing wrong to Marissa. Not when in his eyes, he did the right thing.

Sean cleared the table, something else he hadn't done since he left home. The conversation was over. He had 60 hours until his plane left for Chicago. When he returned to his room he spied through the blinds out at the Gladstone house.

How many nights had he done that before he asked Marissa out? He couldn't count. And how many times did he sit in his room and think of ways to make her happy? He sure was a long way away from those days. He looked again at the house as a wad of cotton dried out his throat. *Why did he walk away from her?* He padded his pocket for his pain pills, and soon remembered.

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