

ONE

Monday, June,

Memphis Jones passed through the doors of the women's restroom and combination shower that was this building, the one she'd entered less than ten minutes ago in search of a place to change. It was out of her work attire and into gear befitting the physicality associated with playing the game of football. It was her new goal and mission in life, or at least the reason she'd shown up here today, and out in the godforsaken boonies, too. She made a bet with her baby sister, Alex, and she'd lost.

A bet to not only try-out for the Austin Ballerz, the women's football team that made Austin, Texas its home, but to play for them next season, were she selected. The Ballerz were a young football team, the latest team to join the Women's Football Alliance, a league for women that loved to play tackle football. They were two years old, still considered infants in the football world, according to her sister, who was the team's current starting quarterback.

Her legs carried her down the hall to the glass door that was the building's entry and exit point. Today it was all about getting through this training Alex had signed her up for; training to help her improve, and was so not possible, but she was here anyway. 'Cause that was just how she rolled. She was a woman who kept her word. A quick in-and-out today, followed by a quick in-and-out at the tryouts and she was done. No more bet and no more of this football-playing nonsense.

She stopped short of the door, having caught sight of a man walking towards the building, and not just any man. He was *the man*, as her sister said often enough; the one in charge of tonight's training session. He was the current head coach for the Austin Ballerz and former NFL quarterback, Zachary Sloan. a.k.a. Coach Z.

"Look for the dude wearing reflective shades and a baseball cap with a badger on it," Alex had said by way of description. That was it, the only two features her sister thought important enough to share with her, which were woefully inadequate in Memphis's estimation, now that she'd laid eyes on him for the first time. Totally left off the part about him being handsome . . . he

was, or that he was built nicely, thick, not weight lifter thick, but with enough heft to make a woman feel safe. He was that too. Nope, none of that info had her sister thought to pass on.

It was him however, complete with his baseball cap, the brown badger affixed upon the crown and underneath it, dark curly hair, cut mid-length, peeked out. He was sans the shades, the second descriptor, the ones that rendered his thoughts indecipherable, according to her sister. They hung instead on the front collar of his shirt, leaving a pair of lovely greenish brown eyes for her and the world to admire. He was tall; the top of her head came to about his mouth, she estimated, the same place as it had with her father, who had stood six-two, and had been her personal height measuring stick. And really, her father was her anything-male measuring stick.

Wow and then wow again, Memphis thought admiringly, a nice hunk of man in loose fitting shorts and a snug fitting gold shirt. The words *Elite Football Camp* were scrawled in black cursive across the front of a chest chiseled in the image of Michelangelo's David, and dang he was fine.

He swung the door open wide and settled his right shoulder into it. He crossed his arms in front of his delicious chest and smiled, or maybe it wasn't quite a smile. She wasn't sure what he was doing with his lips. Too much attitude to be considered a smile; it was more a smirk. And what a waste of two supple and succulent lips, she thought.

"You're late, Jones," he said.

"Excuse me?" she said, surprised. And what a way to greet a person, she thought.

"I *said* you're late."

"Yes, I am. Sorry about that," she said, smiling back at him.

"Don't be sorry. Be on time," he said, with his pretty eyes staring straight into hers.

Okay, so he was going to be that dude, she thought, and loads and loads of insurance training for meeting and greeting people, some not so pleasant, kicked in and her smiled widened. "It's Memphis Jones. My friends call me Memphis," she said, extending her hand to him.

"Good to know, my-friends-call-me-Memphis. Your sister told me to expect you. She didn't tell me you'd be late," he said, taking her hand in his for a quick squeeze and release.

“You know, I heard you the first two times you said it. I’m late and I’m usually never late so again, you have my *apologies*. I had an appointment that ran over. Those things *do* happen you know, *plus* I had trouble finding you, which is crazy because I’m really familiar with Bastrop. I spent hours driving around here three years ago. Record heat in 2011, I don’t have to tell you, 100 degree days with no rain in sight will turn anything into a bonfire,” she said and smiled again.

“Wow, all that and without taking a breath, too. That’s pretty impressive Jones. Now if we could just get you to be on time . . .” he said.

Her smile widened again. Okay, she was not going there with him and he couldn’t make her. “I’m an insurance agent, in case my sister forgot to tell you. Sometimes my schedule is not my own.”

“Isn’t that another way to say ‘I’m late’,” he said. He’d tilted his head to the side as if he was studying her and was curious about her answer.

She smiled again, holding on tightly to it as it was past ready to flee. She took in a deep breath of fresh air instead and turned her gaze to the area surrounding them. “This is a really nice place you have here, not many people would think to put a football field in the middle of their property. But it works for you I guess, with the training that you do and all, and with you being the head coach of a football team, huh. You’re Z, right?” she asked, her eyes meeting up with his again.

“It’s Coach Z to you and I’m not the head coach, just one of the assistants. The one in charge of offense,” he said.

“There is a difference? Ha, who knew? Thanks for clearing that up for me, and thanks for agreeing to train me. Alex says you are one busy man,” she said, continuing with her smile, one that was growing harder and harder to hang on to.

“Your sister’s paying me to train you, but you’re welcome anyway.”

“Say what now?”

“I *said*, your sister is paying me to train you,” he said, slowly, enunciating every word this time.

“Oh,” she said.

“Yes, oh,” he said, smiling back at her, all full of cocky confidence. He’d re-crossed his arms in front of his chest.

“I’m not at all interested in playing football *or* making your team. That’s the first thing you should know then. I’m here *only* to fulfill a bet I made with my sister. Did she tell you about our bet?”

“Yes, she did.”

“I have to try out for the team, right, those were the terms, which I’m going to do. However, everything else, including this training, is a complete waste of time, yours and mine. I’m sorry to say. There’s no way I’m making anybody’s team. I suck too much for that.”

“I hope not. I don’t like having my time wasted, but as I understand it, the bet is for you to try out for the team *and* if you are selected, you actually *do* have to play. Isn’t that one of the terms of your bet too?” he asked.

“Ah . . . yes, it is,” she said, although she hadn’t expected him to know that. “But you did hear that part about me sucking?”

“Yes, I heard it. But fortunately for you, it doesn’t matter if you suck. We lost half of our players due to injuries last year. This is a rebuilding year for the Ballerz and we don’t have the luxury of being picky. We are in need of women. So, if you try out, you *will* make the team and you *will* be playing come fall,” he said.

“Oh, but you haven’t seen me play. Really, I’m that terrible,” she said.

“You can’t suck badly enough for me not to take you. Outside of your trouble with time, I’ve looked forward to your arrival,” he said, removing his shades from the front of his shirt. “Alex is one hell of an athlete and if you’re anything like her it will be worth it for the team. Hell, even if you’re only one fourth as good as she is, or one eighth as good, I’d be happy to have that.” He was holding his shades by their stems out in front of his face, staring into the lenses of them now, inspecting them, or so it looked like to her. “And since we’re short on time ‘cause you were, what is the word I’m looking for here?” he asked. He blew into the right lens at some speck of imaginary dust, before pulling them onto his eyes.

“Late.” She pushed the word through her teeth.

He smiled. It was a thing of beauty, and full-out cocky. “Exactly, so here’s the shortened version of my pre-camp spiel. You’ll have to ask one of the boys to fill in the rest of what you missed being . . .”

“Late,” she said again, her smile a thin line now.

“Right,” he said, chuckling. “Every day we start camp promptly at six o’clock, which means that you’ll need to arrive early if you have to change. We start with laps, two to be exact. The boys are taking the track now, so unless you don’t want to fall behind, you should probably head over,” he said, pointing to the area behind him.

“I’m sorry. What’s this about boys and camp?” she asked, shooting her gaze to his glasses before she leaned around him, as he was blocking her view. And yes, there were boys making their way over to the football field.

“You would know the answer to your questions had you not been . . .” he said.

“Late,” she said loudly, before she took a breath, a calming one, and said, more quietly, “I know. Late. You’ve said it enough. Believe me, I get it. I was late and you don’t like people who are late. The whole world knows it by now. Late. I was freaking late, and if you say it one more time, I swear I won’t be responsible for my actions,” straightening up, meeting his gaze again, her smile all but gone. “And Alex didn’t tell me anything about a camp. I thought it would be one on one, you and me, personal training?” she asked.

He laughed. “Nope, there’s no one on one, you and me personal training. I don’t have that kind of time. It’s you and them,” he said, pointing over his shoulder to the field behind him and smiling now, clearly enjoying her predicament.

“You expect me to train with them?”

“Yep,” he said, and it was the full-blown smile on display once again.

“Oh. That’s a lot of little boys,” she said.

“Fifty-five, if we are being exact,” he said, still smiling.

“Fifty-five!” she whispered. More to herself, he thought, watching her. Entertaining, she was. “And how old are they?” she asked.

“Not so little. Some are in high school, but mostly they are middle school age,” he said, still smiling fully, clearly enjoying himself.

“Oh,” she said, quiet for a second, her gaze still on him, and why did he have to be so pretty, she thought. She took in another breath of air. “You wouldn’t by chance have any other camps . . . say, like, for adults. A camp for only women would be perfect. I don’t have a problem driving to another location if I need to.”

“There’s no need, Jones. You have something against training with kids and or boys?” he asked.

“No it’s not that, it just that I think I would feel more comfortable training with people closer to my age. Are you sure you don’t have time for individual training? I’d be willing to pay you more if that helps.”

He was shaking his head from left to right, his answer “no” before she had finished her request. “Have you played football before?” he asked.

“No.”

“Then you are in the right place. This is what we do here every summer: introduce kids to the sport, assess their abilities while teaching them the fundamentals of the game. You’ll be fine, Jones. Those boys are students here, same as you. We have two weeks to give it our best shot. This is the only option I can offer you.”

“Two weeks?” Memphis squeaked out.

“Two weeks, and Alex didn’t tell you that either.”

“No. She did not.”

He smiled internally at the myriad expressions that flickered over her face. It a canvass for her emotions, he thought. She was funny to watch and easy to read. Whatever she felt seemed to show up on her face, no hiding anything: the shock, surprise, alarm, and was that fear there at the end? He wasn’t sure of the last bit, fleeting as it had been, but it was fun to watch nonetheless. Oh, and she was easier than easy to mess with and he looked forward to doing it often over the next two weeks. She should shoot her sister. It’s what he’d do if he were in her shoes, sending her out here so clearly uninformed.

“Three days, Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, from six to eight p.m. for the next two weeks, and I expect you to show up here, on time, ready to do your best. It’s what I expect from anybody that plays for me in season or out. Two weeks is easy, Jones,” he said, smiling internally again at the expression on her face now: a little bit of shellshock mixed with horror. “So are we done with the questions and our talk of fires and insurance?” he asked.

“Yes, I guess so.”

“Okay. So, if you don’t know it by now, timeliness is huge deal for me. One of the easiest ways to show respect of another person’s time is to show up when you’re supposed to. But in case that’s too much to ask of you, Jones, I have a three strike rule, as in baseball. Three strikes and don’t bother coming back, even if your sister is Alex. Got it?” he said, and he’d dropped his smile. All serious was the face staring back at her.

“Got it,” she squeezed passed her lips. She’d lost her smile too a while ago and couldn’t seem to resurrect it. It was quiet for a moment between them.

“Okay then, that will be three laps around the track,” he said.

“I thought you said two,” she said.

“I did, but that was before . . . and you need to learn how serious timeliness is to me,” he said, moving around her to stand in the doorway now, his back to the building, continuing to hold the door open. “You really should get started. I don’t know your fitness level, but based on what I’ve heard, I suspect you might be a while getting those laps done,” he said.

She smiled. Weak though it was, it was visible as she worked to hide her irritation. She turned on her heel and marched away. Forget the bit about being handsome. Irritating had smoothly taken its place. Three laps and crap, there was no way she could run three laps. Could she? She made her way to the track anyway.

This was such a bad idea, this playing football. She knew it when she agreed to the bet’s terms and nothing to be done about it now. She’d done it for Alex. It was anything for her sisters, and fortunately Alex had won . . . in so many ways she’d won. Getting her life together and meeting her fears head on. That’s what Alex had done and would continue to do. So here Memphis was, upholding her end of the bargain and, Oh God, playing football for real. Thirty

years old, and the thought of anything athletic could still reduce her to this quivering mass of nerves. “Breathe,” she said aloud to herself. “You can do this.”

She scanned the fields, where the boys were in the process of running their laps now, some moving faster than others. Crap, she thought at the change in her circumstances, just that quick. And crap, those laps weren’t going to run themselves, she thought, and the sooner she started the sooner she’d finish, an encouraging thought that had her placing her feet on the track, one in front of the other.

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I’m in trouble here, serious trouble, Memphis thought, struggling against passing out and not even ten minutes in. It was total depletion of the air in her lungs, now, plus she had a stitch in her side that had come from out of nowhere. She was rubbing it now, as it had grown more painful by the minute. What had she been thinking, taking off so fast? Trying to prove what to who. She knew who. Coach Z, as he’d instructed her to call him, and talk about taking yourself way too seriously. He was so that.

It was her irritation and wanting to make a good first impression that propelled her non-athletic self around the track at speeds impossible for her to maintain and now had her sputtering to a stop at the end of her first lap. As if making a good impression was possible. Okay, not so much a good impression, more a decent one had been her goal.

“I . . . don’t . . . know who you . . . were . . . trying to fool,” she said aloud around her panting, her new form of breathing. “You are . . . not a . . . runner,” she added to the admonishing-herself theme she was working. At best she walked, when and if she got around to exercising.

She was mostly careful with food, more so than anything when it came to her weight, and so far so good, she could still squeeze into a few high school things she’d kept to measure herself against. She walked and cut back when she felt she needed to, mostly after the holidays when she’d indulged in too many sweets.

Screw this, she thought, she would walk the rest of the way. What difference would it make anyway, she thought by way of rationalizing, still irritated that he'd added a third lap. All the boys were done. So there no point in rushing to finish, she might as well take her time and make this track-running thing last her through to the end of whatever came next. She was already late, which meant she would be late to the next thing, whatever it was. She was the only one making the run or walk now around the track anyway. Plus it didn't count, at least in her mind. Two laps was all that was required of the others, and it was all she would do.

Dang Memphis, you're so smart, she thought at her decision before turning her attention to the boys. They stood in a clump in the middle of the field now. Some coach was at the front blowing his whistle and passing out instructions.

"It's calisthenics and stretching time," Coach someone-other-than-Z shouted. It was the short and stout one that was shouting those instructions. Short, big shirt covering his bowling ball-sized belly; clearly *he* wasn't participating in the calisthenics and stretching time, she thought uncharitably.

"Jumping jacks. Give me twenty," the same coach added, and the boys were spreading out then, putting distance between themselves, arm's length, all participating, everyone but her. And yes, if she timed it right, she could totally see her way out of doing that activity.

Satisfied with her plan, she turned her attention to checking out Coach Z's property and its potential insurance needs. Interesting place he had here: a bunch of buildings off the main road, built in the same brick as his home. A compound of sorts that he'd built and with hopefully plenty of insurance needs. She lost herself in calculations and estimates for a while, surprised even to find herself rounding the last curve of her second lap what felt like minutes later.

She was feeling better, breathing easier now that she was back to walking. She heard a whistle and looked up to find him, Coach Z, standing in the middle of the field, hands on his hips, mouth clamped around a whistle, and staring at her. Surely he wasn't blowing that darn thing at her and if so, what did he expect her to do? Speed up or start running again? Neither of those were possibilities she wanted to entertain.

She looked around and behind her for someone other than her, in hopes that they might be the object of all his whistle blowing. Nope, there was no one behind her. She looked back at him, and he was pointing to her now, so yes, he meant her, and he had started to blow that thing again, short bursts of whistle blowing and he was moving his hand too, a kind of twirling of his fingers, which she guessed was a sign for her to get moving. She did, started jogging again, until he turned his back and then she stopped. She was another ten yards from being done with lap two.

She heard the whistle again halfway into the third and final lap, however this time she didn't look up. She was so going to ignore him. He must have gotten the message, 'cause the whistle blowing eventually stopped. She didn't take a chance and look his way again. Just going to write it down in her book as a victory, she thought. Yeah her!

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Memphis was finished with her final lap and heading over to the end of the fields where the boys stood. They were in the process of forming lines, three lines to be exact, which had been the instructions from some other coach. She'd actually gauged it perfectly and managed to miss that whole calisthenics thing. Ignoring him and walking slow had been just the ticket.

There were four other coaches assisting Coach Z with camp that she could see. She'd counted them while she finished that last lap, after she had grown tired of assessing his insurance needs and looking over his property. They, unlike, Z were all African American.

"Where do you think you're going?" Z asked. He was standing in the middle of the track, waiting for her it seemed. How had she missed him? Too consumed with praising herself, that's how. Too busy patting herself on the back, and she had dropped the-watching-out-for-him-ball.

"I thought Coach . . . something or other told us to . . ." she said, looking around for the coach that had belted out of the last set of instructions "He," she said, finding him and pointing to the round-shaped coach again, "told us to line up," she said, and smiled.

"Coach Beryl," he said, supplying the name for her.

“Yep . . . Coach Beryl told us to line up in the infield. That’s where I was headed,” she said, smiling again. She had gotten her irritation under control and it was back to her insurance agent’s finest.

“It’s called the end zone,” he said, correcting her.

“Right. The end zone,” she said.

“Not for you, Jones. Not yet anyway. I need twenty jumping jacks, ten lunges, and ten squats. That’s what you missed taking your sweet time walking your laps. I know you heard me,” he added, and smiled, kind of like an alligator, all teeth and taking a bite out of someone’s hide. He was still wearing those shades, so who knew what was going on behind them with his eyes.

“Oh, was that you? I’m so sorry,” she said, bringing her hand to her bosom in her best Scarlett O’Hara, *Gone With the Wind* impersonation. “I thought it was that the other coach . . .” she said, scanning the field for another coach. She found one and pointed to him. “I thought he was the one blowing it and not at me,” she said, smiling again.

“Right, Jones. It’s okay, you can do them now.”

“Do what now?”

“Jumping jacks, stretching, which consists of a few lunges, and squats.”

“Right now?” she asked, making a face.

“Is there another now that I should know about?” he asked, managing to keep his expression neutral ‘cause she was funny, as more of those facials expression from earlier shown on her face. Shock and surprise were there, joined by distaste and a whole lot of frustration there, at the end.

“But I’ll be late for that,” she said, pointing again to the boys standing in the end zone.

“It can keep. Plus it wouldn’t be fair to the boys, now, would it? They’ve done as we’ve asked and managed to complete all of their tasks. I’m sure I don’t need to point out to you, as an adult, the importance of setting a proper example. We shouldn’t weasel our way out of things. So I’ll take my jumping jacks, lunges, and squats now, Jones.”

“I am not a weasel,” she said.

“I hope not,” he said, and he blew that whistle again and she jumped at the unexpectedness of hearing it. He smiled around it, that same alligator smile he did so well.

“I don’t like to be whistled at,” she said, and smiled her version of an alligator smile too.

“Less talk, more action is the way to get me to stop blowing it. Now let’s go,” he said, clearing his throat. He had one hand holding his whistle near his mouth, the other at his waist.

She rolled her eyes, sighed her displeasure loudly, but moved to do his bidding. “You don’t have to watch me,” she said.

“It appears that I do. I’ll count them out for you. Jumping jacks first. Set, and go. One . . . two . . . three,” he said.

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“Four, five, six . . .” Z said, counting as Jones completed her jumping jacks. He’d seen her, thought she might be up to something, ignoring his whistle when he tried to get her to start jogging again earlier, taking her time finishing that last lap and taking her time getting over to the field, missing the next part of the workout intentionally. Next up was the forty-yard dash, but not for her, not until she made up what she’d purposefully missed.

She was out of shape, that much was clear, which could and would be fixed. Of course he was the man to do it, and if she meant to continue this stalling and game playing to avoid work, then he was the man to put an end to that too.

Alex had called him last week with the good news that her big sister would be trying out for the team and if she made it would play for them as well. He’d wanted to weep at the possibility of having another Jones woman playing for him, ‘cause if she was anything like Alex—athletic, smart, and fearless—the team would improve exponentially. Alex was one hell of a ball player, a quarterback that read defenses like you wouldn’t believe.

Unfortunately Alex had told him next to nothing about her sister. Meagerly, miserly and woefully inadequate had been the amount of words Alex had spared in describing Jones. “She drives a green Xterra and wears her hair naturally,” she said, and he had no clue what to do with that.

“Lunges, in a line. Give me ten up the field and ten back. Count them out as you go, and I need to hear you counting,” he said, shouting out his next set of instructions. He watched as she rolled her eyes again, but she started, moving away from him. “I can’t hear you Jones,” he said, looking over his shoulder at her, wobbling as she set her feet on the ground. He smiled internally ‘cause she was shouting them out now, the volume increasing as she counted until she was shouting out “Ten!” at the top of her lungs.

“And now ten more back to me,” he said.

She smirked, but returned, counting loudly again. And what was up with the wobbling and general unbalance that was this woman? He hoped it wasn’t intentional, or more shenanigans on her part. Really, he did not have time for that.

Most boys that came to his camps were here to learn, wanted to play football, and were eager to do what was asked. However, every so often he’d get one or two that were too sure of themselves, cocky, didn’t have to listen to a quarterback, NFL or not, who hadn’t made it to the level of, insert whatever famous quarterback they admired, and thought to give him cheek or, perhaps like Jones, less than their best. He wasn’t having it.

“Twenty squats,” he said, giving her the stone look he’d perfected long ago, perfect for times when intimidation was necessary.

“I thought you said ten. The boys only had to do ten.”

“Whining is not a good look for you and they weren’t late or goofing off. Twenty,” he said.

“I’m not whining, nor was I goofing off,” she said, meeting his eyes. He and his shady shades continued to stare at her. “Fine,” she said, squeezing the words out between her lips.

He could tell she was starting to flag at eleven. Her legs were wobbly, more so than earlier and that was saying something, shaking in that way they did when one was tired, so he walked over and stood beside her. “Eleven,” he said, and she jumped, surprised again, he guessed, but she perked up.

“Twelve,” they said together.

“Thirteen,” she said alone and went back to wobbling. He continued to stand beside her until she finished, and the word “twenty,” passed through her lips.

“So here is the deal Jones, for you to take or leave. If you don’t want to become my demonstration dummy—the person I call on to illustrate what ever drill I need illustrating—I suggest you do what we ask and stop dragging your feet.”

“I wasn’t . . . intentionally dragging . . . my feet . . . or any . . . other part . . . of my . . . body,” she said, sarcastic in tone when she could get a word in between breaths of air and trying to stand on legs reduced to jelly. “I’m . . . just . . . not . . . into sports,” she said.

“Yeah, well, that’s too bad. Your sister asked me to help you and I intend to. She thinks there is some talent within you,” he said, his hand pointing to her. “Now, I don’t have time to babysit you. So I’ll need you to try. Give me your word that you’ll try your best each and every time you step out on my field.”

“Just your field?” Memphis asked, pulling forth her most formidable snarky smile to go along with her question. She couldn’t resist it, watching as he smiled in response, if you could call it that. Only one side of his mouth had moved out of its straight line, so maybe it wasn’t a complete smile. “No one should be this serious about sports,” she added.

“Well, I am this serious about sports. So what are *you* going to do Jones?”

“I give you my word.”

“And what words would those be?”

“I’ll try,” she said, rolling her eyes.

“Good. We are running forties next,” he said, pointing toward the end zone again, where the boys were lined up in three rows. The three coaches were standing near the forty-yard line, with what must be stopwatches in their hand, waiting for them. Z waited until her eyes met his again.

She twisted her lips. Bit the bottom one, to hold in the smart remarks she wanted to make. He was not going to get the best of her.

“Cool,” she said and smiled, feeling anything but.

“Yep,” he said before he walked away and over to the front of the line, while she made her way to the end of one.