

From *To Save Him* by Jade C. Jamison

Chapter One

AFTER MY DIVORCE, I floundered. You don't need the ugly, sordid details any more than I wish to share them, but let's just suffice it to say I was pathetic—and a shitty mother during that brief dark period in my life. I found that establishing (and maintaining) a routine was key to my sanity, and my schedule became my lifeline.

My life became boring, to be sure, but sane:

- Up at five AM (except weekends).
- Start coffee.
- Morning walk (if it's snowing, use treadmill instead).
- Get kids up.
- Shower.
- Coffee and newspaper or journaling.
- See kids off to school (used to be driving them to school when they were younger).
- Yoga.
- AM writing.
- Lunch.
- PM writing.
- Time with kids/ homework.
- Dinner.
- Free time.
- Bed time.

I was fortunate enough to already be an established independent author when Mel left with his shiny new girlfriend. I had to step up my game, though: seven or more hours writing per day, writing one book a month (or more) under various pen names. Since Mel devolved into irresponsibility after he left and seemed to have forgotten he had kids, I had to become the sole breadwinner for my family. It involved a lot of hard work and strategy as well as discipline (also helped by my anal schedule)...but I'd done it. Screw Mel.

No. *Fuck* Mel.

One afternoon a few years after the sleazeball had left, I was writing, going at quite a pace. My goal was typically one thousand words an hour with a five minute break at the top of each hour, and so, at the end of my writing day, I usually had between seven and ten thousand words (unless, of course, I was in revision mode, and then all bets were off). On this particular day, I had about forty-five minutes left before the kids got home and I'd skipped my last break, because I needed to get the words down on paper.

The blasted doorbell wasn't helping me out.

I typed a couple of notes so I could pick up where I left off after I got rid of whoever was at the front door and clicked the save icon before rolling my chair back from the desk. I gritted my teeth before taking a deep breath. So big deal. My routine had been interrupted. I could handle this.

This was, after all, what grown people had to deal with.

It was probably the postal carrier with a package or something. That guy was usually the only person who stopped by for me anymore. Most times, if the doorbell rang, it was one of the kids' friends and it was later in the day

But I answered the door to a striking young man, one I'd never met before. I was certain of that, because he had the kind of face I'd never forget. Dark brown hair, shoulder length, with deep brown eyes, the color of rich coffee, cheekbones a model would kill for, and a smile in those eyes that his lips didn't show. There was also a deep sadness in them, beckoning me to ask why. But that probably wasn't for me to know.

"Mrs. Morton?"

Oh. Should I know him? Or was this maybe a ruse—another bullshit move by my ex? Was this young man getting ready to serve me with paperwork? I steeled myself for the inevitable.

"Yes—er, *no*."

"Oh." He started to turn away.

"It hasn't been *Mrs. Morton* for a very long time." Something I'd seen in his eyes told me I could trust him. "I *used* to be Mrs. Morton, though."

He turned to face me again, nodding as a look of relief softened his features. "My name is Brandon Abbott...and I served in the Marines with your son Gabe."

Those words alone pushed what little oxygen I had in my lungs out of them where it evaporated and mingled with the air of the planet. I tried to take in a deep breath but it caught in my throat. Seconds later, I felt dizzy. Worse, my heart felt a familiar ache, one that had dulled as time had passed and I'd accepted that I'd never see my son again.

This young man, though—he might have been one of the last people on this earth to see my beloved firstborn alive...and I had to know more. "Please come in."

I stepped aside and young man named Brandon said, "Thank you, ma'am."

"Please—no *ma'am*." It made me feel old to be called *ma'am*, but I didn't want to voice my reasons. And, before he then took to calling me *Mrs. Morton* again, I told him what I wanted in an effort to bypass the awkwardness that could have ensued. "Call me Kimberly." He seemed a tad uncomfortable with my directive, but he nodded just the same and walked through the doorway.

I noticed his clothing as he passed by me. He wore faded blue jeans with black boots and a red flannel shirt over a black t-shirt. He also wore a chain around his neck that disappeared under the shirt, but that was the only jewelry he wore. Once I closed the door, I led him into the house proper. "Please have a seat," I said, waving my hand toward the living room furniture. It didn't matter to me where he sat, but I wanted him to be comfortable.

He chose the stuffed gray chair next to the window, and I examined his face once more. I tried to picture him and Gabriel hanging around together. My sweet, steadfast son Gabe—I tried to see in my mind what he would have looked like today. My eldest son had had his father's dark brown hair paired with blue eyes, but he'd inherited his heart-shaped lips and apple cheeks from me. I felt another pang of melancholy as I looked at this young man named Brandon, and envy tugged at my heart. Gabriel had been my rock—solid, steady, and empathetic—when his dad had left. Gabe had just been starting his freshman year in high school and could have used his dad's support as well, but he instead became *my* pillar, and he likely had only felt capable and strong because of his basketball coach, a man who had become my son's mentor and continued to be throughout the remainder of his days in school.

So I drank in the vision of this young man, this Brandon, one of the last people on earth to ever have the opportunity to enjoy my son's company, and I swallowed hard, willing the tears back. "I'm sorry," he said. "Maybe this was a bad idea."

I lied. "No, not at all." It might not have been a bad idea (and, thus, I wasn't telling a complete lie, but the truth was I was having a hellish time handling all the emotions bubbling to the surface).

And he knew it. "It seems like my presence is upsetting you."

"No. It's not you. It's just—still hard to accept that he's gone. He was...my *baby*." Brandon nodded but said nothing else. "Please..." I said, my voice trailing off. I wanted him to speak, but I couldn't find any more words with which to encourage him.

But he didn't need that. He sucked down a deep breath before he spoke again. "Your son and I were in the same platoon, and some things happened to us that have forever bonded us as brothers." He paused and I could practically tell by the way his eyes lost focus that he was experiencing the moment as if it was happening in front of me. "The day before he passed, Mrs.—*Kimberly*, we were talking about our families and how badly we needed to go home, be with the ones we love, and it was clear to me the bond between you and Gabe. He said you had the most beautiful soul he'd ever known. He said you were his 'recharge.' He talked about you so much that night that I felt like I already knew you. And then...when Gabe died, I knew I had to meet the woman who'd given birth to such an amazing human being...and I had to let you know how very much your son loved you."

Oh, God. His words were like a knife plunged straight into my heart. I could feel the water welling up in my eyes, see them blurring my vision. The tears were dangerously close to dropping, and I didn't want to cry in front of this stranger, so I clenched my hands together, digging my nails into my palms, and drew in a deep breath before asking, "Can I get you something to drink?"

He was a sweet young man, understanding that I needed a few moments alone. "Sure."

"Iced tea?"

"That would be nice. Thanks."

I nodded and stood, smoothing my hands on my jeans, and then turned around to walk toward the kitchen. I managed to not sob out loud, but the tears started pouring as soon as I started walking out of the room. By the time I was in the kitchen, the tears were out of control. There would be no iced tea until I could let go of the overpowering emotions that had taken over my heart. I snatched a napkin off the table and held it up to my eyes, my chest heaving as I let the tears flow.

Several minutes passed before I could get any kind of control over myself, and I knew it was because I was holding back from a full-on emotional onslaught. I didn't want to sob loudly, but the potential to do so lay dormant inside my chest. I sighed, letting it go for the moment, and then I blew my nose into the napkin playing makeshift tissue. After tossing it in the trash, I ran cool water in the sink, splashing it on my cheeks and under my eyes, hoping to alleviate the certain redness and puffiness my crying jag likely caused. Then I quickly threw a kettle on the stove, hoping the fire would bring the water to boiling in a hurry, and, while it heated, I gathered everything else I needed—glasses, sugar, spoons, a tray—and debated if I wanted to pair a snack with it. I decided against food and, after another few minutes, I was finally heading back to the living room.

Oh, God, please don't let the evidence be on my face. Actually, though, I knew it had to be. Instead, *please don't comment. Please let me grieve in private. I can't share it anymore and I'm not ready to.*

Brandon stood in front of the couch, his back to me. He was looking at the pictures of my family on the wall. He heard me set the tray on the coffee table and he pivoted. "Are these all your kids?"

He was looking at the last formal photo my kids had taken together. Before then, we'd had pictures of all five of us together—me, Mel, and the kids—but since the divorce, I only had the kids in pictures together until I'd simply stopped thinking about it.

The particular picture Brandon was looking at showed Gabe as a freshman in high school holding his brother on his lap, and both were slightly in front of their sister who was standing. Annabel had been in second grade at the time and Melvin Jr. wasn't even in school yet. The enormity of how time passed by faster and faster every year made my shoulders feel heavy. I glanced at the photo of my children's faces again, marveling that there was no mistaking that they were siblings. They had the same dark hair, same light eyes, the same oval face. Gabriel, though—he always looked serious, choosing to shoulder more responsibility than he needed to.

Oh, my boy.

"Yes," I answered, recognizing the catch in my throat for what it was—more emotion threatening to gush. I swallowed to regain my composure. After all, I did have two other beautiful, healthy, *live* children who needed my continued love and nurturing. "That's Annabel and JR." I was *not* going to explain how I refused to call my son by his given name, considering he was his father's namesake. That my husband had bailed before his youngest was old enough to walk created a need for me to refuse to say his name except when necessary, especially when an innocent, sweet infant could potentially sense how much I loathed it. Little Melvin Jr. had become JR—as in the two separate initials, as if they stood for something like *James Richard* or *John Robert*, but they instead symbolized my refusal to call him *Junior*—before he had his first birthday cake. "They should be home from school in the next hour."

"I should probably go then."

"Oh, no. Please don't. Not yet. I'd love to hear your favorite moments with my son—over a glass of iced tea."

He nodded after seeming to give it some thought. "All right."

I poured tea over one of the glasses filled with ice and then handed it to Brandon. He took a lemon wedge off the small plate on the tray and then poured a spoonful of sugar in it, stirring it. I poured some tea for myself and sat down. "Thank you for indulging me."

He smiled, taking my cue and sitting down too. "I'm sure it must be difficult for you."

Oh, he had no idea, but I wasn't going to burden him with it. As they always said, *life is for the living*. Or something like that. He also undoubtedly felt the hole Gabriel's passing had left in his life, because my son was just one of those kinds of people. He filled rooms with warmth, love, and laughter, and those same rooms felt very empty after he left them. I nodded but kept my mouth shut. Brandon said, "So you wanted to hear a story about Gabe and me?"

"Yes, if you don't mind."

"No, not at all." His voice was soft as he seemed to ponder my words. "There's one story I can think of." He took a drink of his tea before continuing. "So...you might not know it, but there's a lot of hazing that goes on in the military—especially with new recruits. People don't talk about it and it's not supposed to happen, but it does. It happens with the new guys, and it's all part of the experience. The idea is to either toughen a guy up or push him out—because,

either way, he doesn't belong the way he is. A huge part of military is belonging and oneness and becoming a team. It's drilled in early on, so much that you don't question it.

"Anyway, that means that when established guys start picking on a newer guy, for whatever reason, you tend to turn a blind eye. It's not that you outright condone it. But by allowing it to happen, you are. And this poor kid—for days, he was picked on, and it was relentless. I don't get why, 'cause he'd made it through boot camp. That alone proves something. But they made fun of everything about him—the pitch of his voice and the twang in it, his name, his height. I think his constant torment was putting us all on edge. Well, we were all returning from mess one night, and the three main guys who'd been egging each other on decided they were gonna give Edgar a swirlie. You could see it on the kid's face that night, that they'd just about broke him. But Gabe—he stood up from his bunk, walking over to Edgar's before the three troublemakers got there, and he said, 'I don't think so.' That made them angry, of course, because Gabe was ruining their evening's entertainment. Never mind that they could have gone to the movie showing on post. They wanted to make this guy's life miserable. The leader of the bullies said something like, 'Oh, yeah, whatcha gonna do about it?' Gabe was cool as a cucumber. 'You wanna find out?' I scrambled down off my bunk then so I could get his back."

"That was very kind of you," I said.

"No, not really. I'd been one of the ones content to let the kid get bullied and turn a blind eye. Your son, he was a leader. I tell you what, Mrs.—sorry—Kimberly, that wasn't the only time he inspired me to act. He was that kind of guy."

I felt the tears well up in my eyes again. Yes, I'd always known my son was a leader as well as caring and compassionate. He'd always been that way. That was why he'd been the perfect big brother. "Thank you for sharing that with me, Brandon. It's good to know that he made others' lives better while he was still here."

The young man across from me on the sofa nodded. "That he did." He took another drink of tea and then said, "I should probably go now. I just wanted to let you know how much you meant to your son."

I wasn't quite ready to let go yet. Brandon was like the only connection I had to my deceased firstborn. Yes, it was irrational, but that was how my mind saw it. "Why don't you stay for dinner? I know Gabriel's sister and brother would love to meet you."

"I'd hate to impose."

"It's not an imposition. I promise. I *know* Annabel and JR would love to visit with you."

He seemed to grapple with it before saying, "Okay. Thank you for your hospitality."

"You're more than welcome. I just need to decide what to make for dinner. Do you have any food allergies or preferences?" I almost enjoyed the idea of making a special dinner—I hadn't liked cooking in a long time, partly because it felt like no one appreciated it.

"No, m—" He caught himself before once more using the overpolite address I disliked. "Kimberly. Sorry, that's hard after being drilled in the services for so long. Anyway, I'm just grateful for a hot meal. They say not to look a gift horse in the mouth."

My mind was already probing the contents of my refrigerator, freezer, and pantry, trying to think of something I could make that Gabriel would have wanted to come home to. My boy always liked steak and potatoes like his father, but he also had favorite "mom recipes," like chicken and dumplings and chili con carne, both throwbacks from my southern mother. Thanks to her, most of the meals I prepared had some sort of southern flair, not because I'd been raised there, but because my mother had, and she'd cooked like she still lived a couple hundred miles north of the border. But I also had my own specialties that I'd learned since being on my own

and raising a family. I thought of another favorite of all my children, something I thought I had all the ingredients on hand for. “Do you like spaghetti?”

“Yes. As I said, I’ll gladly eat whatever you feed me. Marine food isn’t known for being palatable.”

Another memory pained me at that thought. A few months before Gabriel had passed, he’d told me he couldn’t wait for his furlough because he wanted to taste home cooking again. I could feel my throat constrict with emotion again, but that was when I heard JR crashing through the front door.

“Hey, mom! Guess who made the baseball team?” JR bounded through the door and then paused upon seeing Brandon. “Oh, hey.” Who knew where Annabel was?

“JR, this is Brandon, a Marine friend of Gabriel’s who’s stopped by to pay us a visit.”

“Gabe?” My youngest seemed confused at first but he was my hyperactive social butterfly and quickly rebounded. “Nice to meet you.”

“You as well.” So polite. Brandon was like Gabriel in that respect.

“So you made the baseball team, son?”

“Yeah. They posted the results of yesterday’s tryouts during lunch today. And, if I read it right, I was their first pick.”

“They were wise to choose you.” I wanted to hug JR, but I knew he’d have none of it, especially in front of a stranger. “I’m so proud of you, son.”

Finally, Annabel walked through the door, but she was on her cell phone. She waved, acknowledging our existence, but she charged up the stairs toward her bedroom without so much as a *hello*. “Teenagers,” I offered as an apology. “I’m sure you figured out that was my daughter.”

“Annabel, you said?”

“Yes.”

“She looks a lot like you.”

I laughed, because she did not, and I didn’t think he’d seen enough of her to make a fair judgment. Aside from a mane that flowed to her shoulder blades, she was the spitting image of her father. That probably would seem rude to point out, though, so I simply said, “She might not like hearing that.”

“I doubt it.” He acted like he wanted to say something else but stopped himself.

JR jumped in the wake left behind our dwindling conversation. “Can I go to Joey’s to play games till dinner?”

Ah, my son thought he was catching me in a weak parenting moment—*mom won’t ride my butt and make me do homework or chores when we have company*. But he’d thought wrong. “Honey, since we have a guest, why don’t you either get your homework done or help me entertain while I make dinner?”

He didn’t seem too upset by the prospect and I was grateful, because I’d always found it easier to maintain composure when my children were close by. No more weepy Kimberly...for now. It was my job to keep my head on, because they too were feeling the vacuum that Gabriel’s death had created and were hurting just like I’d been. They didn’t need the additional burden of a teary mom who couldn’t keep herself together.

I saw a twinkle flash in JR’s eyes, and I expected him to say something smart, like “Why don’t you have Annabel do it?” I braced myself for the inevitable chafe when he instead said, “I’d rather show him the Xbox if that’s okay.”

“The—JR, our guest doesn’t want to watch you play a videogame.”

“Actually,”—Brandon paused to say my name; he was getting better at catching himself—
“Kimberly, I wouldn’t mind *playing* a game with your son if that’s what he had in mind.”

“Oh, hell, yeah!”

“JR, watch your mouth.”

“Sorry, mom.” He faced Brandon. “C’mon. It’s in the living room.” Our guest stood and smiled—the biggest one I’d seen on his face since his arrival. Maybe playing a game would be best for both the males. As they walked out of earshot, I heard JR start to ask, “Have you ever played...”

And they left me alone with my weighty thoughts.

