

She struggled as the darkness threatened to overwhelm her. She tried to push it out of her mind but it was persistent, encroaching as it always did. Their faces swam in front of her, invisible hands reaching for her. She fought back the panic but it was no use, her breathing laboured, she succumbed to the darkness once more.

“She’s lost Ry,” Jack heard one of the men say.

“I know Lachy but all we can do is try and support her.”

“She needs some balance back in her life. She needs to get back into training, and not just in our garage,” the man named Lachy stated.

Ryan nodded in agreement, “I know, but no dojo will let her train after hours. They all want her to come to classes.”

Lachy snorted, “She needs to get comfortable being in a dojo again before she can start training with others.” He shook his head. “I guess we just keep looking.”

Jack’s ears pricked up at the word dojo. Potentially a new student? He could work with what they were asking. Before he had a chance to introduce himself someone called his name and he turned around. By the time he turned back the men had left the mall.

Jess looked up at the entrance to her new school, fear gripping her. Her stomach turned in knots and her palms grew sweaty. She desperately hoped no one would notice her but she knew it was inevitable. She was the new girl. She tugged her oversized shirt down further

over her baggy jeans and walked up the steps, hugging her books tightly to her chest like a security blanket.

She was lucky that most of the students weren't curious about the new kid, and the ones who were gave her the 'once over' and decided she was not worth any more than a glance. This suited Jess just fine. Then on her way to the library during lunch, knowing it would be the best place to stay invisible, she made a rookie mistake. A cute guy happened to catch her eye, something that hadn't happened in a long time, and she glanced in his direction. As she did so she made eye contact with the girl talking him. Jess knew her type immediately, the type who thrived on drama and popularity. The queen bee. Every school had one. The girl smirked, and with her groupies in tow made a direct beeline for Jess. When she was close enough, she pretended to trip and as she did so pushed Jess' books from her hands onto the floor.

"Oh I'm sorry," she said with mock sincerity as Jess bent to pick her books up, "I didn't see you there." She cocked her head. "You must be new. I'm Bridget. And you are?" She looked down at Jess as she spoke, taking in the baggy clothes, thick glasses and pulled back hair. "You know what, I don't really care," she said with a shrug and dismissive wave of her fingers. "Come on girls. Bye Jack."

Not caring what Bridget thought of her and relieved that she hadn't pursued their interaction any further, Jess made a beeline for the library in a desperate bid to get away from all the attention. She found an empty cubicle, sat down and pulled out her novel, glad to be invisible once more.

Jack looked up from the dojo mat he was sweeping to see the two men from the mall, Ryan and Lachlan outside the dojo, deep in conversation. He walked outside.

“Hey guys, can I help you with anything?”

They looked at him and then back to each other, holding a silent conversation with their eyes before they both turned to him and nodded. They held out their hands and introduced themselves. Lachy was looking at his uniform intently.

“Aren’t you a little young to be sensei?” he asked.

Jack laughed. “I’m only a junior sensei because I’m only 17. Come in.”

They sat on the couch and Lachy took a deep breath, trying to collect his thoughts before starting.

“I apologise if this doesn’t make sense. It’s hard to know what to say.” He sighed. “Basically, our niece needs somewhere to train. But not train as in do classes, but train somewhere with space and equipment where she can practice by herself. She currently trains in our garage but it’s not big enough and we don’t have all the equipment she need. It’s an unusual request we know but there was an incident at her last dojo which has led to this.”

He paused, unsure of how much to share.

“Just tell him Lachy. It will help him understand if he knows the whole story.”

“A few years ago we had to move away from our home town for work, and as much as Jess loved her first dojo, she couldn’t keep going there as we were just too far away. So we enrolled her in a new dojo that came highly recommended. But it was...different. There

were fewer girls and it was more of a boys' club. Their focus was on tournaments, rankings and competition. They ran internal tournaments all the time as a way to rank the students. They saw it as way of encouraging them to do better. Jess didn't really like the ranking system but loved the physical challenge of competition. Because she was the only girl with a black belt, she competed against the guys. Then she started winning. And that's when the trouble started."

Lachlan took over, "It all came to a head when she met Clint in a tournament. He was the unofficial leader of the group at the dojo. She didn't expect to win, no one expected her to. Clint was higher ranked and more experienced. But she did win, and she won fair and square. Clint didn't take it very well at all. A few days after the tournament, they were packing away after practise like usual and they jumped her. Six guys with black belts against one 15 year old girl. They just started beating her." Lachy paused and Ryan placed a hand on his knee in comfort.

"One of the guys must have realised things were going too far because he ran to get help. We were waiting in the car to pick Jess up and saw him running out of the dojo calling for help, so we ran in. We got there just in time to see Clint..." Ryan suddenly stopped him with a quick shake of his head.

"Needless to say, she never went back. She hasn't stepped foot in a dojo since."

Lachlan spread his hands, "So here is our dilemma. We want to try and get her back into training because she loves it so much but without having to be around others. Not until she's ready at least. We're hoping if she starts training on her own in an actual dojo it might help boost her confidence. She's so different now. She used to smile and laugh all the time. She was well liked, had heaps of friends. She used to dress like a normal teenage girl. Now

she's lost all trust in people and tries to hide herself from the world. She's not, she doesn't..." Lachlan stopped, obviously distressed at the changes in his niece.

Jack had already made his mind up before they had finished speaking.

"Look our dojo is small and I'm often left in charge. I'm happy to stay back a few nights a week and let her in after hours to train if you want to give it a go. I do have to stay in the dojo with her though, that's the only thing."

The relief on Lachy and Ryan's face was palpable. As they turned to leave Ryan turned to Jack hesitantly, "Please don't be offended if she doesn't talk to you. She shuts down and doesn't engage. She wasn't always like this and..."

Jack nodded in understanding, "It's OK, I won't take offence," and with that was left to wonder what he'd got himself into.

She couldn't get up. The invisible hands held her down. She pushed against them but it was no use. She knew what was coming next. She tried to protect herself from the invisible strikes but she couldn't move. She woke up screaming, falling into the arms of her uncles as they held her and rocked her, telling her everything was OK.

She looked at the entrance of the dojo, willing herself to walk through the door. *It's OK.*

*They aren't there. They aren't there. There's no one there. It's OK. You can do this. Breathe!*

she told herself as spots started forming in front of her eyes. Her chest felt heavy and she was about to turn away when the door opened. When she saw who was at the door she died a little inside and she wanted the Earth to swallow her where she stood. It was the cute

guy that had been talking to Bridget on day one. *How humiliating!* She found herself starting to gasp for air. She was about to run when Jack started speaking.

“You must be Jess. I’m Jack.” His voice was warm and friendly and she found herself calming at the sound of it. “Come in and feel free to get started. Change rooms are through the back. Use whatever you need. I’ll just be in the office doing some homework if you need anything.” He made no mention of what happened with Bridget and gave no indication that he cared. She didn’t know what to say or where to look so she gave him a small nod and stepped through the door.

Jess felt at home the instant she stepped through the door. It reminded her so much of her first dojo that she couldn’t help but feel comfortable. She took a moment to look around and get a feel for the place. She liked what she saw and for the first time in nearly two years, didn’t feel fear at the thought of being in a dojo.

Jack was mildly surprised to see that Jess was the new girl from school. He had only seen her on day one with Bridget and hadn’t seen her since. He studied her as she stood outside. She was about his age, slimly built with blonde hair pulled back harshly from her face. He watched as she pushed the thick glasses she wore up her nose and took a deep breath. He saw her hesitation and took it upon himself to act before she could walk away. He opened the door and invited her in.

He had told himself he was going to give her some space and not watch, but professional curiosity got the better of him. He peeked through the blinds as she bowed before stepping onto the dojo floor. He was not disappointed when she began working through her kata. Her form was immaculate and her moves were executed with precision and finesse. He watched her entire training session, mesmerised, and only realised she had finished when she started sweeping the floor. When she was finished she looked around hesitantly before walking towards the office. He ran from his place at the window to look like he'd been sitting behind his desk the whole time before saying, "Come in."

She opened the door and he could tell she didn't quite know what to say. He saved her the trouble by telling her he would lock up and see her tomorrow.

Over the next few weeks Jack witnessed Jess practising with a bo staff, sais, a set of nunchaku and a wooden katana. Her uncles hadn't been exaggerating, she was amazing. The more he watched, the more intrigued he became at how well she could spar. She was in the middle of completing a complex manoeuvre one day when he stepped onto the mat and blocked her strike. She looked at him, eyes narrowed, waiting to see what he would do next. He grinned at her and made his move. For the next few minutes they were a blur of motion, exchanging strike for strike, evenly matched. They reached a natural impasse, breathing heavily, staring into each other's eyes. *Blue*, thought Jack as he stared at her. *Her eyes are really blue*. She gave him a small smile, the first he had ever seen and nodded her head in thanks before retreating to the change room.

She was running late for class so she had no choice but to take the only seat available, which just happened to be the one next to Jack. With no way to avoid him, she stifled a sigh and sat down just before the bell went. He looked at her in surprise. He'd been looking for her every lunch time but could never find her. He offered her a small smile in greeting, noticing the gentle smell of strawberries surrounding her. She returned his smile quickly and buried her head in her book. Throughout the lesson she couldn't help but cast side-ways glances at him. The blue shirt he was wearing really brought out the colour of his eyes and he smelt so good. At the end of the lesson as Mr Simpson handed back their last paper, she couldn't help but notice Jack received a D. She heard him bite back a curse before he got up and walked out.

"Jack?" said a quiet voice. He was so surprised he nearly fell off the chair he was sitting on. He was just finishing off some homework before his sparring session with Jess when she suddenly appeared next to him, moving so quietly he didn't even notice.

"Um, hi, hey," he stammered, not sure how to react to her talking.

"Hey, I was wondering if maybe you would like some help with Science?" she put her head down shyly and nervously drew circles on the floor with her foot. "I couldn't help but notice your grade today and I thought maybe as a way of thanking you for letting me train and spar I could help you?"

Jack studied her, realising what it must have cost her to make this generous offer. "You know what, that would be great. My dad said if my grades don't get any better I won't be able to work here anymore. And I really suck at Chemistry."



Jess laughed lightly. "Well I happen to be pretty good at Chemistry and if you don't train I don't train so let's get those grades up."

They fell into an easy and comfortable friendship over the next few weeks with studying and training. Jack found her funny and intelligent. She was quick to laugh and had a unique sense of humour. He felt so comfortable around her and found himself always looking for her when they were apart. Meanwhile, Jess found herself opening up in Jack's company. She laughed more often and found herself always wondering what he was doing. Her feelings scared her. She had survived the last two and half years by being invisible. Being invisible didn't draw attention. Being invisible was safe. But the more time they spent together, the harder it was to hide from him.

They were blocking out some moves on a Saturday afternoon when a young man of about 18 walked into the dojo. Upon seeing him, Jess felt the world around her come crashing down. Immobilised by fear, she couldn't breathe, couldn't move, couldn't escape. The darkness came to claim her.

Jack immediately saw the change in Jess. He saw her eyes glaze over and her breathing become short and sharp. Jack grabbed her face with his hands, looking directly into her eyes, trying to get her to focus on his voice and his face.

"Jess! Jess! Jess! Breathe Jess, breathe. Come on, breathe. It's me Jack. Come back to me. It's Jack. Come back to me."

She heard a dim echo in the darkness and saw two blue stars swimming in front of her. She stared at the stars, hoping to find her way out of the darkness. The longer she stared at the stars, the more in focus they became until she was staring into Jack's eyes. She reached up and put her hands over Jack's and gripped like she was never letting go.

"Jack!" she whispered, recognition dawning across her face. "Jack!"

"I'm here, I'm here. Just breathe," and he pulled her close into a tight embrace, protecting from the darkness.

Time stood still as he held her whilst she calmed down. Finally, he felt her body relax and he slowly let her go, looking intently at her to make sure she was truly OK.

"I am so sorry. I had no idea." They heard the young man say from the couch in the foyer. He sat with his heads in his hands, crying softly. Jess stepped out from behind Jack.

"What are you doing here Toby?" she asked him quietly.

"I came to apologise," came the muffled reply through Toby's hands. "I felt so bad after what happened that night. Things got so out of hand and I wish I could take it all back. Clint said we needed to teach you a lesson but it went way too far. I haven't been able to stop thinking about it. I haven't been able to eat, to sleep. All I've wanted to do is make things right."

"You can't take it back and you can't fix it Toby!"

"I know. I totally know. I'm so sorry for coming. I didn't think seeing me would make you react like that. It's been nearly two years. I just, I just wanted to apologise."

Jess was silent for a long time as she watched him cry. It had been almost two years. Seeing Toby brought it all to the forefront of her mind again. A range of emotions flickered her face as she a silent war raged inside her. Finally, she nodded. "I understand why you're here and I do appreciate it. You can't change what happened Toby, no one can. But we can at least try and move on." She took a deep breath. "I accept your apology."

Toby broke down sobbing, so relieved to hear the words he desperately needed to hear.

"Thank you, thank you so much."

She fought back against the darkness and could have sworn she felt it give a little. Their faces swam in front of her but today they didn't feel as menacing. She waited for the beating to come. When it started this time, it didn't seem to hurt quite so much.

The days following the incident with Toby were awkward for Jess and she went out of her way to avoid Jack. No one except her uncles had seen her so vulnerable and it made her uncomfortable. She felt so exposed, like the whole world could see her. She was sitting in the corner of the library with her back to the entrance when she heard a quiet "Hey," behind her. She didn't need turn around to know who it was.

"How did you know I would be here?"

Jack moved so he was sitting in front of her. "I figured you would be in the one place where there were the least people."

She nodded but couldn't bring herself to look at him.

“Jess, about the other day...”

“Don’t Jack. Please. Just don’t. Listen, I’ve been thinking. I’m just going to go back to training by myself for a little while.” She stood up to leave. “Thanks for everything,” she added awkwardly before walking off.

Jack watched her leave, feeling like a part of him was leaving to.

The darkness was back, blacker than it had ever been before. The hands pushed, the heaviest they had ever felt and her breathing felt so laboured. Defeated, she let them come. She saw each of their faces, as they hit her and taunted her, the blows continuing one after the other.

She woke with a start and looked at the clock. 10pm. She must have fallen asleep. She thought back over the events of the day and winced at the tight feeling in her chest. Feeling restless, she decided to head to the dojo and work out some of her frustration and hurt. It was dark when she arrived and she let herself in with the spare key Jack had given her. She turned on the office light but left the main lights off and started working through some exercises, trying to discipline her mind. As she worked, she repeated her mantra over and over, “Be invisible! Be invisible!”

Jack saw the office light on as he approached the dojo and figured he must have forgotten to turn it off. He couldn’t stop thinking about Jess and he needed a distraction. He had gone

for a walk and found himself outside the dojo. Noticing the office light on he let himself in. He heard her before he saw her. ““Be invisible! Be invisible!”

Each repetition got faster and faster until it was coming out as a sob. He listened, his heart breaking for her and rage filling him against those who had hurt her. He stepped onto the dojo floor just in time to see her collapse, sobbing uncontrollably as all the hurt from the last two years came to a head. He ran to her and held her as she cried into his shoulder. He held her for what felt like hours. He didn't care. He needed her to know that he was here for her, he wasn't going to let anyone else hurt her. He rocked her and gradually her sobbing subsided.

“What are you doing here?” she asked.

“I could ask you the same question, you know, it is my dojo.”

“I needed to get out of the house. I ended up here.”

“Me too.” He paused.

“Jack.” “Jess” They began at the same time.

Jess shifted so she was facing Jack. He put his arms around her waist and drew her in.

“You first,” Jack indicated to Jess.

“I'm sorry you had to see all that. See me like that. I'm broken Jack. I'm broken into so many pieces I don't even know if I can be put back together again. That's why I just want to be invisible. I don't want the world to see how broken I am.”

Jack cupped her face in his hands gently. “Jess, I see you. You’re not broken. You want to know what I see? I see a beautiful, kind, funny smart girl who has been hiding for too long. I see a girl who makes me laugh and makes me happy.”

“Jack, ...I can’t. I can’t ask anyone else to take this on, to take me on. It’s not fair.”

“Isn’t that my choice to make? Don’t I get a say in this? I want to be with you. I know you feel the same.” He looked deep into her eyes. “I love you Jess.”

“Jack, I...” She didn’t get to finish what she was going to say as Jack reached down and kissed her deeply.

The darkness started to consume her again. But this time it was different. The hands didn’t feel quite so heavy and the darkness didn’t seem so black. And then she saw it, there in the corner. A tiny speck of light. Her mind raced toward it and away from the darkness and when she burst through, she saw Jack’s face looking back at her smiling. She woke up feeling different. Two years ago, six boys put her through hell and almost destroyed her, but today for the first time she didn’t feel like they were winning. Today she didn’t feel like being invisible.