

Chapter 1: The First Game of the Season

Jana sat with her friend, Megan, who was cheering loudly for the school basketball team.

“Put that down and watch,” Megan scolded. “It’s a close game.”

Since she insisted, Jana put her notebook down. What did Megan see in basketball anyway? All of the games looked alike, and honestly, the story she was writing was much more interesting than the basketball game.

“Who’s winning?” Jana asked as she looked up.

“It’s tied,” Megan explained. “Haven’t you paid any attention? The score is tied 65 all. There’s twenty seconds on the clock, and we have the ball.”

“We’re the blue team, aren’t we?” Jana asked.

“Oh!” Megan huffed. “Don’t you keep up at all? Of course we are. Now watch.”

Ok, she’d watch, not that she cared. , if it made Megan that happy, she could do it.

Number 23, Nate Taylor, stood on the sideline looking desperately for an open teammate to throw the ball to, but there seemed to be white jerseys in the way of all his teammates in blue. His five seconds to throw the ball were almost up, and his panic level was rising, so out of desperation, he threw the ball in the direction of his teammate, number 15, Zack Grayson. There were two men guarding him, who both dove for the ball,

which seemed to be headed straight for them, but somehow Zack jumped in front and grabbed the ball.

He dribbled down the court with a full court press against him, but he easily dribbled around his opponents, despite their desperate attempts to take the ball away. He glanced at the scoreboard, sixteen seconds left. Zack looked around for someone to pass to, then he threw the ball to number 45, Mike Hansen. Zack always liked to throw the ball to his friend, number 32, Sam Wilde, in that type of situation, but Sam missed the game that day. Zack watched as Mike caught the ball, but he cringed as Mike shot, only to be stuffed by his defender.

The opposing team's side of the gym went crazy yelling, and the noise crescendoed as the same defender grabbed the ball and ran down the court. Zack would have stopped him, but he didn't want to go through his own teammates who were between him and the opponent with the ball.

He hoped they would block the shot, but his hope fell as the opponent made a lay-up. The other team was up by two with only four seconds left on the clock. As their fans cheered wildly, Zack noticed the look of despair on Mike's face. Mike felt horrible for getting stuffed and losing the game.

As Mike stepped out of bounds to throw the ball in, Zack knew he had to win the game for him.

"Here," Zack called, but Mike had already thrown the ball toward Nate. Zack was almost relieved when an opposing player intercepted the ball.

The player beamed, knowing they'd won the game, until suddenly he found his hands empty.

Zack had jumped across the floor and stripped the ball from him. He glanced up to see the clock with only one second left, and he was near the top of the other team's key, surrounded by defenders. He hated to try a shot like that; showing off was not his style, but he thought of Mike and threw the ball.

The ball started into the air above his defenders just before the buzzer buzzed. The entire crowd, and the players, all stood frozen, silently holding their breath as they watched the ball fly toward the goal. All eyes went wide as the ball stripped through the net without even touching the backboard or rim.

A frenzied excitement rose as the realization of what happened sunk in, and the scoreboard registered three more points. The Colfax Knights had just won, 68 to 67!

The team jumped up and down excitedly as they exchanged high-fives and slaps on the back, all except Zack, who seemed very calm and unaffected by the boisterous crowd.

Amid her screaming cheers, Megan put her hand on Jana's shoulder and shook her.

"Get excited!" Megan insisted. "That was a great game. That last basket of Zack's was amazing! He was three quarters of the way across the court."

Jana smiled. "That was very impressive," she admitted.

"Yes," Megan added. "Let's go congratulate him!" She began to pull Jana by the arm to drag her over, but Jana broke free.

She calmly picked up her notebook, put it in her bag, and followed after Megan, who had already run ahead. She

wouldn't be hard to find. It was just a matter of searching through the crowd around Zack.

Jana approached the swarming sea of girls who was squealing excitedly. She just didn't understand this. Why would all these girls go crazy over some guy who probably didn't even know more than their names? Oh, he was handsome, and he could play basketball, but there were so many other, more important things, in Jana's mind.

She turned away from the crowd, figuring that Megan could find her when she was ready to go home. How did Megan even convince her to take her to the game in the first place? Jana's younger sister, Anne, her cousin Lauren, and their friend, Beth, were working tech for a theater that night. Jana and Megan usually hung out with them, but that night Megan had no one, so she begged Jana to take her to the game.

Jana sat down quietly against the wall and started writing in her notebook, engrossed in her story. Fantasy was often so much better than reality for Jana, even if in reality her school just won their first basketball game of the pre-season. Why were they even playing basketball in the beginning of November? Football season hadn't even ended yet.

She didn't let it worry her. She sat quietly writing, lost in her world of noble knights, wizards, and dragons, until something around her caught her attention. Coach Miller had Zack by the arm and was pulling him to the side of the gym. He stopped about a foot from Jana and looked around to make sure no one could hear. He didn't notice Jana sitting below him.

Zack noticed. He looked down at her and tensed. He then looked away quickly. Jana didn't notice, for she was too busy looking down, pretending not to listen.

"What happened tonight?" the coach asked, his tone angry but controlled. "You weren't even trying. Only 26 points." His voice started to rise. "That game didn't need to be so close. You need to shoot the ball!" He started to clench his fists, but forced them open and threw them down.

Zack very calmly explained, "I didn't want to hog the ball. The other guys want the glory. I don't." He glanced quickly at Jana, so quickly that Coach Miller didn't notice her, but Zack was well aware of her presence. It distracted him from the coach's lecture, not that Zack cared that the coach was angry. Coach Miller was always angry about something.

Coach Miller took a breath and bit his bottom lip to try to maintain control and keep his volume down, but he clenched his fists at his side. "We almost lost!"

Zack looked him straight in the eyes. "I'm sorry. I just really don't care. It's just a game. I only saved it because I didn't want Mike to feel bad."

Coach Miller put a finger in Zack's face. "I ought to bench you," he fumed.

Zack nodded at him. "If you wish. Go ahead. I understand, but your threats won't change the way I play."

There was no come back to that. Coach Miller tried to find one, but he couldn't. He knew he couldn't bench Zack, his star player. He grunted something about practice on Monday and walked away.

As the coach left, Zack looked down, straight at Jana. His dark hair and tanned muscles made him look as though he were posing for a sports magazine. She intended to look away, but his eyes caught hers with a hungry stare. She couldn't make out the thought behind them. They were the deepest blue eyes she'd ever seen, and they seemed to pierce right through her. Jana stared back at him curiously.

“Do you need something?” she finally asked.

His expression softened. “No,” he answered. “But you didn't hear that.” He winked at her.

She thought she saw a slight smile, but she couldn't tell if it was playful, sinister, or conceited. She decided not to worry about it and played along. “Hear what? I was writing my story.”

He smiled at her, took a deep breath, and turned around. The harem of frenzied girls was waiting for him. They wouldn't dare approach with the coach near, but now Zack was free game. They crowded around him, all vying for his attention.

Zack very politely responded to the girls, although Jana noted that he never bragged about his success, despite the girl's insistence to give every detail, and he never accepted any of their advances, as several girls tried to get him to go out with them the next night.

Jana gave them a mocking smirk as she picked up her notebook and left. How could girls be desperate enough to fawn all over some guy like that? She went out to the hallway and sat on the bench, waiting for Megan and writing.

The world once again became dragons and wizards as she tried to write down the story running through her head as quickly as she could. She wasn't sure how long it had been since the game ended when Megan finally came out, but she must have been writing for a while because there was almost no one there anymore. Less than twenty people remained in the lobby, and a janitor was sweeping.

Megan's face was beaming.

"What happened?" Jana asked.

Megan sighed. "He spoke to me."

Jana raised an eyebrow. "He spoke to you?" she asked incredulously. "What did he say?"

"Hi!" Megan answered, glassy-eyed and staring into space.

Jana raised an eyebrow. "Just hi?"

Megan broke her trance and looked straight at Jana. "No, he also called me a lady and said 'thank you' when I told him he played well."

Jana stifled a laugh and tried to sound interested. "Oh, is that all?"

Megan began to bounce. "No. It gets better. I asked if he'd like to do something with me sometimes, and he said 'perhaps.' I think he likes me."

Jana looked down so Megan couldn't see her expression. Once she regained a straight face, she looked up. "Does Zack even know your name?"

Megan thought for a moment. Finally she came to the brilliant conclusion, "I don't know."

The discussion was pointless; that was obvious. Megan was an idiot; that was obvious too. “Let’s go,” Jana insisted. “I’m not used to staying up late, and I want to get to bed.”

Jana reached for her bag to get her keys, but noticed it wasn’t there. She smacked her pencil against her notebook. “Drat! I must have left it in the gym,” she complained as she got up. “Megan, wait here, and I’ll go find it.”

Megan sat on the bench. “Maybe I’ll see him again. He went in the locker room, and he might leave out this way.”

When Jana walked into the gym, it was almost empty. The bleachers had been pushed back and no one was there except the janitor, who was sweeping, but he took no notice of her from across the room.

Jana looked around, but saw no sign of her bag. It had to be by the wall where she’d been sitting. Yet it wasn’t. That just wouldn’t do. Her car keys, her journal, and several of her stories were in it. She paced nervously.

A tap on her shoulder made her jump and swing around into a defensive position. Something must be wrong. No one had been near her.

She breathed in relief when she realized it was just Zack. That was odd. How did he materialize behind her? He hadn’t made a sound. Perhaps she’d been concentrating so hard on finding her bag that she just wasn’t being very observant.

“Are you looking for this?” Zack asked, holding the bag out in one hand and the journal in the other.

“Yes,” Jana said excitedly as she reached for them. “Thank you so much.” She instinctively curtsied to him because she worked at a Renaissance Festival and was used to curtsying.

As she reached for the bag’s handle, her hand touched his. She was surprised that his hand was so cold after a game.

He pulled his hand back. “Sorry, I stepped outside,” he explained. He then handed her the journal.

When he did, his eyes caught hers again with the same captivating, unreadable smile, which sent a shiver through her. Was it a shiver of excitement or a shiver of fear? Her curiosity overpowered both emotions. It didn’t matter. The journal being out was curious. That could matter.

“I’m very sorry,” he explained, answering her unasked question. “I didn’t mean to make you nervous or pry into your personal things. I was merely looking for a name to see who to return the bag to. I believe this is yours – Jana Kennedy, right?”

Jana stood, staring. How could he possibly have found her name in her journal? For years she’d written in it in code to keep her younger sister from reading it. No one could have broken the code that quickly.

Again he answered her unasked question. “Dragon-script I believe it’s called these days, but originally it was known as Anglo-Saxon.”

Jana stared into his eyes, stunned, speechless. This boy was determined to send her on the fastest emotional roller coaster she’d ever been on. Something was odd about the situation. No one read Anglo-Saxon. There was much more to this boy than

basketball. Perhaps she'd underestimated him. Finally she managed to get out a weak, "Yes, how did you know?"

"A hobby," Zack answered.

His eyes stayed locked with hers a moment more with the same hungry stare that she'd seen before. It still seemed as mesmerizing. What was it about him that seemed to captivate her so? How could he startle her without setting off her alarms? Something about him was so mysterious. Yet, she still felt comfortable around him.

"Perhaps I'll see you around," he said. Then he turned and walked toward the locker room.

Jana broke the daze and called out, "Thank you!" after him.

"You're very welcome," he called back before he stepped out of sight.

Jana left the gym to find Megan still waiting on the bench.

"What took so long?" Megan asked.

Jana wasn't about to tell her about Zack. "My bag wasn't where I left it," she answered.

They both went out to Jana's car. As they were getting in, they noticed Zack getting into his car a few cars down. He stopped and looked at them before he got in.

"See," Megan said smugly, hitting Jana in the arm. "Did you see him looking at me? I told you he likes me."