



The
Good
fight

a TIME SERVED novel

JULIANNA KEYES

Chapter One

Sometimes I forget how good it feels to get hit. The way the pain fuels you, wakes you up, makes you want it. Makes you need it.

Makes it okay to hit back.

Right now, eyes stinging, ears ringing, Manny's mantra-like apology circling my brain, I don't want more. I want him to shut the fuck up.

"Manny," I manage, holding up a gloved hand to silence him. "Shut the fuck up."

"OhmyGodOzI'msosorryIdidn'tmeantoIjustmissedIswearIdidn'tOhmyGod." The broken record squeaks to an uncertain halt as he peers at me, concerned and unconvinced. I'm bent over, one hand braced on my knee, and now I straighten to my full 6'4", expression serious as I stare down at Manny's 5'8".

Still he asks, "Are you sure you're okay?"

I run my tongue over my teeth, but it's just for show. He caught me in the cheek with a pretty decent roundhouse, snapping my head and torquing my neck. It's not that I haven't been hit a thousand times before, a hundred times harder. It's just always been during a fight, not an impromptu training session I got roped into by the gym's owner, Oreo.

"You girls done?" Oreo asks, looking bored. He's on the floor below us, arms folded on the mat as he peers up through the ropes with his one good eye. He lost his other in a fight more than twenty years ago, and now wears an honest to God pirate patch. "I've got people waiting."

"You do not," Manny says, frowning as he looks around the mostly empty gym.

I smile to myself as they begin to bicker, using the tips of my fingers to press gingerly on my already-swelling cheek. It's going to leave a bruise, and I'm going to put on a suit and tie and go into work tomorrow, the only accountant in this shithole town with a black eye.

Or a suit.

Or a tie.

"We're not done," I say, tuning back into the argument.

Manny looks up at me in surprise. "We're not?"

"No." I flick a glance at Oreo. "Get out of here. We're not done."

Oreo makes a face at me like, "Ooh, look who thinks he's in charge," but wanders off, mumbling to himself, green track suit rustling.

"He can't decide if he's a leprechaun or a pirate," Manny mutters.

I get back in position. "Let's go."

"You sure? I didn't hit you too—"

I lock my foot behind his calf and yank hard, dropping him to the mat. He looks dazed for a second, staring up at me, then slowly starts to smile. "I heard about you, man. You used to be a mean motherfucker."

I extend a hand and help him to his feet. "Don't believe everything you hear," I tell him. Then I squeeze his fingers hard enough he hisses in a pained breath. "Except that," I add.

Oreo's laughter echoes through the cavernous gym, and Manny looks around doubtfully, not sure what the joke is. I make sure he doesn't see me smile as we square off again. I've got a reputation to uphold.

After a shower and some ibuprofen, I leave the gym and climb in my car to make the forty minute drive into the city. Born and raised in Camden, I feel a strange allegiance to the place, despite its visible decay and much-deserved nickname of Crime Central.

Unlike most of the people who live here, I got out. A gift for fighting earned me a wrestling scholarship to Boston University, and a head for numbers saw me climb the ranks of traders on Wall Street. I pulled in six, then seven, figures a year, until I'd had enough, both literally and figuratively. Enough money, enough stress. After a decade in New York, I packed my bags and came back to Camden, determined not to be one of the fat, rich white guys who looked down their noses at those less fortunate. I wanted to do something. Give back.

Easier said than done, it turns out.

I bought out Fitzgibbons & Sons, an optimistically named accounting firm run by Lance Fitzgibbons and the only one of his three sons who'd managed to stay out of prison. That son had no interest in the business, and I eventually assembled a small staff of non-Fitzgibbonses who regularly field questions about why, exactly, there are no people named Fitzgibbons working at the firm. The truth is, no Fitzgibbons want to work here, but the signage out front is so enormous that it would cost more to remove it than buy a new sign. So the name stays.

On the plus side, the building is on the east side of town, closest to Chicago, in an area that's slightly less depressed than the north, south, and west. The more recent developments have also sprung up in this section, making business good, if not great. But despite a career as an accountant, money doesn't really matter to me. I made lots, invested wisely, and have plenty to spare. I own a decent house a short ride from the

office, work out at a gym nearby, and, for the most part, mind my own business, a key survival skill in these parts.

Because Camden is a town that will kill you if you let it. It's been called a concrete city, and the name is pretty apt. It looks like someone took a bucket of concrete, dumped it over everything, and let it dry. The buildings, sidewalks and roads are the same shade of ancient gray, cracked and crumbling. There are gangs and prostitutes, drugs and crime, anything and everything someone looking to get into trouble could possibly ask for. We even had a factory that employed a quarter of the town, then accidentally poisoned its workers before shutting its doors and trying to deny its role in hundreds of deaths. They had to build a whole new cemetery to account for the increased death rate. That's Camden's idea of development.

What we don't have is a single acre of green space, a park, or a pond. It's dark and desolate, which hasn't always been the case. We didn't have the biggest houses or the nicest schools growing up, but we had grass in the yards and birds in the trees, a few safe places to ride our bikes and run around. Not anymore. While there are plenty of restaurants and a few grocery stores, the selection is limited, the food fried or pre-packaged, and what few fresh meats, fruits, and vegetables they carry is not quite so fresh when it arrives. This is why I drive to the city a couple nights each week to stock up. That and no matter how much I tell myself my roots are in Camden, sometimes I just need to get the hell out.

I'm done reminiscing by the time I pull into the parking lot of the organic supermarket in downtown Chicago. It's seven o'clock on Sunday evening, the summer sky still bright and warm as I climb out of the car and approach the building. I come here

regularly enough that I say good evening to Alfonso, the guy responsible for stocking the displays at the front entrance, and wave to Beth and Alisha, the girls who work at the juice bar just inside the door.

Sunday evening is the best time to shop, especially in the summer, because the store's fairly quiet, most people home having dinner or out with friends or loved ones. I choose not to dwell on the obvious implications of that observation as I stop to pick up a basket, all by my lonesome.

“Look out!”

The cry comes too late. I barely have time to glance over my shoulder before the runaway pallet, laden with an enormous crate of watermelons, crashes into me. It feels like being hit by a slow-moving locomotive, hard and heavy and never-ending. I hit the floor and feel my wrist twist as it tries to bear the combined weight of my oversized body and the unforgiving pull of gravity. The pain sets off warning bells in my brain, the familiar fear of an athlete when something hurts in a way it shouldn't.

For a minute everything flashes with white spots, there's a tinny ringing in my ears, and I think I might throw up. It hurts more than when Manny's foot connected with my face ninety minutes earlier. A surge of adrenaline hits fast, masking the pain as best it can. Then it fades, replaced with Alfonso and Beth and Alisha and two men in pressed white shirts, their concerned faces too close to mine.

“...hear me?” someone is asking.

“Does it hurt?” someone else wants to know.

I use my good arm to push myself to a sitting position, carefully lifting my left arm to study my wrist. It's already swelling, but it's straight. No blood, no bones, no

strange protrusions or angles. A sprain, if I'm lucky. Tentatively I flex my fingers, gently prodding here and there, wincing at the nauseating pain.

A serious sprain, maybe. But not broken.

"Are you okay, Oz?" Beth this time. I manage to focus on her, forcing a dismissive smile.

"I'm fine."

"Your wrist doesn't look good," one of the white shirts says. "It's swollen. Do you think it's broken?"

"We should call an ambulance," someone suggests.

"No," I say, a little too loudly. My ears are still clogged as though I've been swimming in deep water, and the last thing I want is for anybody else to know I got taken out by a kamikaze pallet of watermelons.

"We're so sorry," the second white shirt says. "They were unloading the pallet and turned for a minute, then someone bumped it and it just took off."

"Unlucky," I say, grimacing as I force myself to my feet. So, maybe a sprained wrist and a few additional bruises.

"We're going to have to fill out a report," the first white shirt says. "Can you stay here? Then we can take you to the hospital—"

"I'm not going to the hospital," I interrupt. "And I'm not going to sue you. It was an accident." I hold up my wrist. "And this is a sprain. No big deal. I've had worse. It's fine." Except when I take a deep breath I feel like I might pass out, and the pain in my wrist is more than the three ibuprofen I'd popped earlier can handle.

“Sit down, sit down,” Beth says, dragging up one of the chairs from the juice bar. “You’re too pale. You’re not okay.”

“Go to the hospital,” Alfonso says, glancing over at the white shirts, who have huddled nearby to confer. “The store can pay,” he adds in a low voice.

“The money’s not the issue,” I tell him. “It’s fucking embarrassing to say I got run down by watermelons.”

“You want to say it was cantaloupe?” he asks. “Because you’re going to the hospital.”

* * *

Despite my protests, I get a five hundred dollar voucher to the store and a ride to Chicago-Davis Hospital from Alfonso, who’s barely tall enough to see over the steering wheel as he tries to figure out how to drive my SUV. I grip the passenger side door with my uninjured hand as he navigates the light traffic, his good intentions not quite measuring up to his driving skills. When we arrive I brush off the offer to accompany me inside. I’m pretty sure he’s been ordered to make sure I actually seek treatment, but the attention is making me more uncomfortable than the now-dull throbbing in my wrist. It hurts to move it, but otherwise it’s not too bad. Some ice and a few days taking it easy and I’ll be good to go.

Still, I pause at the entrance to the emergency room and wave goodbye to Alfonso, who lives nearby and will presumably now walk home. I wouldn’t be surprised to find him camped out behind an azalea bush in an hour, snapping photos of my freshly-bandaged arm for his bosses’ peace of mind.

After a ten minute wait, a nurse leads me to a small, curtained exam area, gives me an ice pack, and tells me to have a seat on the bed. I sigh and boost myself up, feeling the unsteady construction creak beneath my weight, wishing I was at home in my own sturdy bed. I wouldn't mind having someone to nurse me back to health tonight, but at the rate things are going, that person will be Alfonso.

"Oh, ah, hello," comes a timid female voice.

I look up as a very tall, very thin doctor enters the room, her blond hair piled on top of her head in a sloppy bun, glasses dipping low on her nose. She could be twelve or twenty, but not a day over.

"Hi," I say, my tone as doubtful as she looks.

"Um, I'm Doctor Keaton," she adds, staring at me awkwardly. "You're Oscar Hall?"

"Yeah."

"Date of birth?"

I sigh. "Yesterday."

She squints at the chart in her hands. "Oh. Happy birthday. That makes you...thirty-four?"

Well, at least she can do math. "That's right."

"Did you do anything special?"

Made dinner, watched an old television rerun, jerked off, went to sleep. "Not really."

She shoots me a wavery smile and I'm ready to bolt. Something tells me I have more experience doctoring up people than she does. "Okay... So it says here you injured your wrist?"

The one I'm cradling in my lap, covered in an ice pack? "That's right."

"And that's your...left wrist." She makes a note on the chart, but even as she says the words she's peering at the darkening bruise on my cheekbone.

"Okay." I stand up, quick enough I get dizzy and have to sit back down. "This is a waste of time. It's a sprain. There's nothing I need here."

That's when the curtains jerk open and *she* walks in. "Hello," she says, staring at me, head tilted slightly to the side, assessing. She closes the curtains behind her, the material the same shade of blue as her scrubs. Her dark brown hair is pulled back in a stubby ponytail, bangs swept to the side, and she's got the darkest, thickest eyelashes I've ever seen outside of a magazine. She doesn't need the ID card hanging on a lanyard around her neck to tell me she's a doctor, but still she does. "I'm Dr. Susan Jones. If you don't mind, I'll be supervising Dr. Keaton."

Do I mind? Hell, I'm relieved. If Dr. Keaton comes near me with anything sharper than a pen, I'm taking off. "No, that's fine."

"Great." With a cursory nod she takes a seat in the lone chair in the corner of the tiny space and gets out her phone, ignoring us. So much for supervising.

Dr. Keaton pulls in a breath. "Great. Now where were we?"

I answer her tentative questions with as much patience as I can muster, but half my attention is on Dr. Jones. She's about 5'7", a hundred and thirty pounds, not a trace of

makeup in sight. She's got a pretty, angular face, with a square jaw and straight nose. Everything about her is sharp, no-nonsense, and entirely uninterested.

I'm interested.

Women tend to have one of three reactions to me. One: Wow, he's big. That's hot. Two: Wow, he's big. That's terrifying. Three: Hmm. He's of marrying age and has a good job—is he single?

I've gone out with these women. I've gone out with the ones who like fighters, the ones who like Wall Street guys, the ones looking for a husband. I've dated nice women, not-so-nice women, and those that fall squarely in between. For a while I've been kind of going through the motions, hooking up with women I know don't want more than a couple of hours and a couple of orgasms. The encounters are sweet and easy, a way to take the edge off, and nobody leaves wanting or expecting anything more.

Something tells me that when it comes to Dr. Jones, I'm going to want a whole lot more. I hiss in a breath when Dr. Keaton turns my wrist, fiery pain rocketing up my arm. The gesture is gentle but everything hurts so much it feels like torture. She leaps away like she's been burned, banging into the counter behind her and knocking a plastic bin of syringes onto the floor.

Dr. Jones glances up at the scene and frowns. "Problem, Dr. Keaton?"

"It's, um... It's a serious sprain," she answers.

I try not to roll my eyes.

"Does it require an x-ray?"

"Ah, no. No, I don't think so."

"Then what do you suggest?"

“Um...” Dr. Keaton has crouched down to pick up the syringes, avoiding Dr. Jones’ penetrating stare as she thinks.

“Ice?” I offer.

Dr. Jones shifts her attention me.

“Ibuprofen,” I add. “Rest, compression, and elevation.”

“Well...” Dr. Keaton begins, returning the syringes to the counter.

I stand up, more carefully this time, relieved I don’t embarrass myself by keeling over. “I’ll see myself out.”

“Have a seat,” Dr. Jones says, also rising. “Dr. Keaton’s going to wrap up your wrist, check out this recent injury to your face, and give you some sound medical advice. Then you’ll be free to go. Isn’t that right, Dr. Keaton?”

Dr. Keaton actually flinches. “Yes?”

Dr. Jones turns that same stare back to me, her eyes the darkest shade of blue I’ve ever seen, the look in them telling both Dr. Keaton and I that we’re not going anywhere until she gives the okay.

She’s gorgeous.

I sit down.

* * *

Thirty minutes later I exit through the sliding glass doors, back into the rapidly dwindling sunshine. My arm wrapped, instructions about ice, rest, and elevation tucked into my pocket, I head for the coffee cart parked a few yards away, still doing good business despite the late hour. I skim the lengthy menu for something without sugar or caffeine,

settling on a decaf green iced tea and taking it with me to a nearby bench to get some fresh air before I begin the ride home, sans groceries.

I sigh heavily as I sit, cursing my luck. And here I thought spending my birthday jerking off to a *Baywatch* rerun would be the most humiliating part of my weekend. How do I tell the guys at the gym I got taken out by a fucking melon?

I wince as I watch the barista whip up one of those sugary, chocolate concoctions people still try to call coffee. There's so much whipped cream piled on top it needs a special domed lid to contain it all. On top of that she adds chocolate syrup and shavings. My teeth ache just seeing it.

"Perfect," Dr. Susan Jones says, striding up and collecting the enormous cup. "Right on time."

"Nine-fifteen, Dr. Jones. As always."

"Thank you, Paulette."

She takes the drink, stirs it briefly with a straw that's at least a foot long, then glances around for a place to sit. There are a few other benches, all occupied. The only remaining space is next to me. Our eyes meet and she hesitates, obviously reluctant to be stuck next to someone who might badger her for free medical advice. Still, I arch a brow and nod at the vacant seat, suppressing a smile as she fails to suppress a grimace, then approaches and sits down.

"Hello again," I say.

She sips the...thing. "Hello." A pause. "How are you?" She could not possibly be any less reluctant to ask. She's sitting on the very edge of the bench as though poised to run, focused on the drink, cheeks hollowed as she sucks on the straw.

“Better than ever,” I reply. I sip my tea and ignore her. After a minute I feel her glance my way, slowly edging back on the bench when I make no effort to engage her in conversation.

There’s a full foot of space between us, and for the next little bit there’s only the sound of her slowly rotting her teeth, the click of her fingernail on her phone as she types, and the gradual drop in temperature as the sun descends behind the skyscrapers.

“Do you live in the area?” she asks eventually.

“Camden,” I say.

Her eyebrows raise. “Camden.”

“That’s right.”

She looks apologetic, the normal reaction when someone hears I live in Camden. It’s like saying you choose to live in prison. It’s not really a choice.

“You know how many chemicals are in there?” I ask when she pulls out the straw and licks up the excess whipped cream. For some women this might come across as sexual, but Dr. Jones just looks determined to poison herself.

“In here?” A faint smile plays across her lips as she scoops up another mountain of whipped cream and pops it into her mouth. “Of course I do.”

“You’re a doctor,” I remind her.

“A surgeon,” she corrects me. “Not a dentist.”

I turn slightly so I can face her straight on. In the gilded sunset she looks softer, the stern set of her features less intimidating. Or maybe it’s the smudge of whipped cream she licks off her top lip that makes her seem like someone I want to get close to. Still, I

err on the side of caution and ask a less dangerous question. “What’s a surgeon doing treating a sprained wrist?”

She makes a disgusted face. “I lost a bet.”

I try not to laugh at her disgruntlement. “What was the bet?”

“Not telling.” What is telling, however, is the way she slips her phone back into her pocket as she utters the word, gaze catching on someone approaching from the hospital. “What, um...” She turns too, one leg bending slightly, and looks at me, her expression suddenly more engaged, more friendly. And entirely strange. “What happened to your wrist?” she asks. There’s a pause, then she carefully reaches over to tap the bandage with one finger. “What did you do?”

I try not to stare at the older man nearing the coffee cart, his eyes flickering between Dr. Jones, me, and the barista.

In the ER I’d summed up the injury by saying I had an accident at the grocery store, and I’m not about to elaborate now. The good doctor doesn’t seem like the type of woman to go for a man who got bowled over by fruit. “Not telling,” I say. “Who is that?”

She stares innocently. “Who is who?”

“Susan.” We both look up at the older man when he speaks. He wears a white lab coat over his scrubs, a steaming coffee cup now in hand.

She nods politely. “William.”

He looks at me.

“Oscar Hall,” I supply after an awkward pause. We shake hands even more awkwardly, and he glances between Susan and me, assessing.

“Very nice to meet you,” he says finally. “I’ll let you get back to your...drinks.”

We're quiet as he goes. When he's far enough away not to overhear, I stare at Susan. "What was that?"

She's trying to polish off her beverage as quickly as possible, wincing when she gets brain freeze. "What was what?"

The question fades away when she presses her free hand to her forehead and I see the crisp white line at the base of her ring finger. She's married. Or very recently not, I suppose. I shake my head to clear it of any ridiculous disappointment. "That exchange," I say, struggling to recall my question.

But Susan's now holding out her left hand the way one would when showing off an engagement ring, except for the opposite reason. "Divorced," she says, answering the real question. "Well, nearly. Three quarters of the way, I guess."

"You guess?"

"It takes forever. You?"

"Not divorced."

She slurps up the last of her drink. "Lucky you."

I sip my iced tea and wait. The area is busy, people in brightly colored scrubs and rumpled lab coats coming and going. Many look at Susan, then me, then look away as though they've stumbled across a great secret. Many more look at Susan, frown, then look away. And the men who don't appear to work at the hospital or already know Susan look at her, then look at me, then look at her again. She's worth a second look, and she knows it. And she's waiting for me to ask what I'll bet every man she's met since that wedding ring came off has asked.

"Nine-fifteen?" I say instead.

She frowns. “Excuse me?”

“Nine-fifteen,” I repeat. “That’s what the barista said when you picked up your drink. Do you have a standing order?”

“Oh.” She flushes slightly. “Yes. A standing order, a tab. Three-fifteen, six-fifteen, and nine-fifteen, on the days I’m working.”

“You drink three of those a day?” I try not to gawk at her. The scrubs disguise her figure, but as far as I can tell she’s slender and still has all her teeth.

She shrugs. “Could be worse.”

“Could be so much better.”

She laughs a little. “The guy who came into the ER with two mystery injuries is trying to give me health advice?”

I smirk and lean in slightly. “Tell me what bet you lost and I’ll tell you about one of the injuries.”

She blinks, those long lashes brushing her cheekbones, casting a tiny spray of shadows on her smooth skin. “I’m winning a battle with a phone addiction,” she says finally, “but lately I’ve been busy and things have gotten a little out of hand. The bet was that I couldn’t go half an hour without checking my messages.”

“How long did you last?”

Her lips twitch and her eyes flit away. “Six.”

“Six *minutes*?”

“There’s been a lot going on.” She manages to look a little embarrassed, something I don’t think happens to her very often. “Anyway, if I lost I had to cover his—another doctor’s—shift in the ER for an hour.”

“Why? What’s he doing?”

The twitch turns into a half-smile. “One of the pediatric nurses.”

My cock starts to find the conversation interesting. We haven’t known each other long enough for me to bring up sex, but if she initiates it... “Is that for real then? What we see on TV? Doctors and nurses hooking up in the on-call room?”

She’s pretty when she laughs. “It’s true for some people.”

“Not you?”

She lifts a shoulder but doesn’t answer, choosing instead to fix me with the same steady stare she’d pinned me with in the exam room. “Your turn.”

I blow out a disappointed breath. I was hoping she’d forget. And we could talk about sex. “What do you want to know?” I hold up my bandaged wrist. “This...” I imbue the word with as much boredom as possible, “or this?” I point to my swollen cheek and waggle my eyebrows for good, enticing measure. *Please pick the face. Please pick the face.*

Susan’s not fooled. “Wrist.”

Dammit. I sip my tea and look away. “I got run down by some fruit.”

“What?”

The sharp note in her voice makes me turn back, and I see that her dark brows are narrowed, her mouth turned down at the edges. The whole thing makes me want to run a thumb across her mouth, smoothing away the frown, repeating the action with my lips, my tongue. The apathy I’d been feeling before tonight is quickly being replaced by a very strong sense of curiosity. And lust.

“What?” I echo.

“Some *fruit*?”

I roll my eyes. God, she’s tough. “A crate of watermelons.” And it’s only when I see the understanding dawn in her eyes that I realize she thought I was being homophobic. I laugh, hard enough it makes my already sore face hurt even more, and she has to try to hide her own smile.

“Well,” I say, finishing my drink and standing. “Thank you for tonight. Maybe laughter *is* the best medicine.”

She looks up—way up, her eyes sliding from my hips over my stomach and my chest before finally meeting mine. Then she stands, too, and silently we measure each other. Her slight build is dwarfed beside me, but even with a nine-inch height difference, nothing about her feels small.

In fact, everything about her says she gives as good as she gets, that she can take a roundhouse kick to the face and get right back up. And damned if that doesn’t turn me on more than it should. Because I like fighters, always have.

The glint in Susan’s eye says she doesn’t hate what she’s seeing, either, and I know she’s waiting for the pick up line that would typically follow this conversation. And I want to give it to her. I want to ask for her number, make plans to meet up when she’s not working and I’m not in dire need of additional painkillers.

But I don’t.

Because something tells me Dr. Jones is used to getting exactly what she wants, when she wants it, and I’m not that guy. I want a fight, and if I’m not mistaken, she could use one, too. “Good night, doc.”

One eyebrow lifts slightly as she recognizes the dismissal. I wait for her to say something but she doesn't, sticking her hands in her pockets and staring up at me, stubborn.

And beautiful.

“Good night, Oscar,” she says. “Drive safe.”

I nod once and walk away, knowing she's looking. At least, I hope she's looking. Because I want her to remember this when I come back.

GLOVES OFF

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