



## Tall, Dark and Fearless: Frisco's Kid / Everyday, Average Jones

By Suzanne Brockmann

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### **EVERYDAY, AVERAGE JONES**

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**Editorial Review**

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Frisco's knee was on fire.

He had to lean heavily on his cane to get from the shower to the room he shared with three other vets, and still his leg hurt like hell with every step he took.

But pain was no big deal. Pain had been part of Navy Lt. Alan "Frisco" Francisco's everyday life since his leg had damn near been blown off more than five years ago during a covert rescue operation. The pain he could handle.

It was this cane that he couldn't stand.

It was the fact that his knee wouldn't—couldn't— support his full weight or fully extend that made him crazy.

It was a warm California day, so he pulled on a pair of shorts, well aware that they wouldn't hide the raw, ugly scars on his knee.

His latest surgery had been attempted only a few months ago. They'd cut him open all over again, trying, like Humpty Dumpty, to put all the pieces back together. After the required hospital stay, he'd been sent here, to this physical therapy center, to build up strength in his leg, and to see if the operation had worked—to see if he had more flexibility in his injured joint.

But his doctor had been no more successful than the legendary King's horses and King's men. The operation hadn't improved Frisco's knee. His doctor couldn't put Frisco together again.

There was a knock on the door, and it opened a crack.

"Yo, Frisco, you in here?"

It was Lt. Joe Catalanotto, the commander of SEAL Team Ten's Alpha Squad—the squad to which, an aeon of pain and frustration and crushed hopes ago, Frisco had once belonged.

"Where else would I be?" Frisco said.

He saw Joe react to his bitter words, saw the bigger man's jaw tighten as he came into the room, closing the door behind him. He could see the look in Joe's dark eyes—a look of wary reserve. Frisco had always been the optimist of Alpha Squad. His attitude had always been upbeat and friendly. Wherever they went, Frisco had been out in the street, making friends with the locals. He'd been the first one smiling, the man who'd make jokes before a high-altitude parachute jump, relieving the tension, making everyone laugh.

But Frisco wasn't laughing now. He'd stopped laughing five years ago, when the doctors had walked into his hospital room and told him his leg would never be the same. He'd never walk again.

At first he'd approached it with the same upbeat, optimistic attitude he'd always had. *He'd never walk again? Wanna make a bet?* He was going to do more than walk again. He was going to bring himself back to active

duty as a SEAL. He was going to run and jump and dive. No question.

It had taken years of intense focus, operations and physical therapy. He'd been bounced back and forth from hospitals to physical therapy centers to hospitals and back again. He'd fought long and hard, and he *could* walk again.

But he couldn't run. He could do little more than limp along with his cane—and his doctors warned him against doing too much of that. His knee couldn't support his weight, they told him. The pain that he stoically ignored was a warning signal. If he wasn't careful, he'd lose what little use he did have of his leg.

And that wasn't good enough.

Because until he could run, he couldn't be a SEAL again.

Five years of disappointment and frustration and failure had worn at Frisco's optimism and upbeat attitude. Five years of itching to return to the excitement of his life as a Navy SEAL; of being placed into temporary retirement with no real, honest hope of being put back into active duty; of watching as Alpha Squad replaced him—*replaced* him; of shuffling along when he *burned* to run. All those years had worn him down. He wasn't upbeat anymore. He was depressed. And frustrated. And angry as hell.

Joe Catalanotto didn't bother to answer Frisco's question. His hawklike gaze took in Frisco's well-muscled body, lingering for a moment on the scars on his leg. "You look good," Joe said. "You're keeping in shape. That's good. That's real good."

"Is this a social call?" Frisco asked bluntly.

"Partly," Joe said. His rugged face relaxed into a smile. "I've got some good news I wanted to share with you."

Good news. Damn, when was the last time Frisco had gotten *good* news?

One of Frisco's roommates, stretched out on his bed, glanced up from the book he was reading.

Joe didn't seem to mind. His smile just got broader.

"Ronnie's pregnant," he said. "We're going to have a kid."

"No way." Frisco couldn't help smiling. It felt odd, unnatural. It had been too long since he'd used those muscles in his face. Five years ago, he'd have been pounding Joe on the back, cracking ribald jokes about masculinity and procreation and laughing like a damn fool. But now the best he could muster up was a smile. He held out his hand and clasped Joe's in a handshake of congratulations. "I'll be damned. Who would've ever thought *you'd* become a family man? Are you terrified?"

Joe grinned. "I'm actually okay about it. Ronnie's the one who's scared to death. She's reading every book she can get her hands on about pregnancy and babies. I think the books are scaring her even more."

"God, a *kid*," Frisco said again. "You going to call him Joe Cat, Junior?"

"I want a girl," Joe admitted. His smile softened. "A redhead, like her mother."

"So what's the other part?" Frisco asked. At Joe's blank look, he added, "You said this was partly a social call. That means it's also partly something else. Why else are you here?"

"Oh. Yeah. Steve Horowitz called me and asked me to come sit in while he talked to you."

Frisco slipped on a T-shirt, instantly wary. Steve Horowitz was his doctor. Why would his doctor want *Joe* around when he talked to Frisco? "What about?"

Joe wouldn't say, but his smile faded. "There's an officer's lounge at the end of the hall," he said. "Steve said he'd meet us there."

A talk in the officer's lounge. This was even more serious than Frisco had guessed. "All right," he said evenly. It was pointless to pressure Joe. Frisco knew his former commander wouldn't tell him a thing until Steve showed up.

"How's the knee?" Joe asked as they headed down the corridor. He purposely kept his pace slow and easy so that Frisco could keep up.

Frisco felt a familiar surge of frustration. He hated the fact that he couldn't move quickly. Damn, he used to break the sprint records during physical training.

"It's feeling better today," he lied. Every step he took hurt like hell. The really stupid thing was that Joe knew damn well how much pain he was in.

He pushed open the door to the officer's lounge. It was a pleasant enough room, with big, overstuffed furniture and a huge picture window overlooking the gardens. The carpet was a slightly lighter shade of blue than the sky, and the green of the furniture upholstery matched the abundant life growing outside the window. The colors surprised him. Most of the time Frisco had spent in here was late at night, when he couldn't sleep. In the shadowy darkness, the walls and furniture had looked gray.

Steven Horowitz came into the room, a step behind them. "Good," he said in his brisk, efficient manner. "Good, you're here." He nodded to Joe. "Thank you, Lieutenant, for coming by. I know your schedule's heavy, too."

"Not too heavy for this, Captain," Joe said evenly.

"What exactly is 'this'?" Frisco asked. He hadn't felt this uneasy since he'd last gone out on a sneak-and-peek—an information-gathering expedition behind enemy lines.

The doctor gestured to the couch. "Why don't we sit down?"

"I'll stand, thanks." Frisco had sat long enough during those first few years after he'd been injured. He'd spent far too much time in a wheelchair. If he had his choice, he'd never sit again.

Joe made himself comfortable on the couch, his long legs sprawled out in front of him. The doctor perched on the edge of an armchair, his body language announcing that he wasn't intending to stay long.

"You're not going to be happy about this," Horowitz said bluntly to Frisco, "but yesterday I signed papers releasing you from this facility."

Frisco couldn't believe what he was hearing. "You did *what*?"

"You're out of here," the doctor said, not unkindly. "As of fourteen hundred hours today."

Frisco looked from the doctor to Joe and back. Joe's eyes were dark with unhappiness, but he didn't

contradict the doctor's words. "But my physical therapy sessions—"

"Have ended," Horowitz said. "You've regained sufficient use of your knee and—"

"Sufficient for *what*?" Frisco asked, outraged. "For hobbling around? That's not good enough, dammit! I need to be able to run. I need to be able to—"

Joe sat up. "Steve told me he's been watching your chart for weeks," the commander of Alpha Squad told Frisco quietly. "Apparently, there's been no improvement—"

"So I'm in a temporary slump. It happens in this kind of—"

"Your therapist has expressed concern that you're overdoing it." Horowitz interrupted him. "You're pushing yourself too hard."

"Cut the crap." Frisco's knuckles were white as he gripped his cane. "My time is up. That's what this is about, isn't it? " He looked back at Joe. "Someone upstairs decided that I've had my share of the benefits. Someone upstairs wants my bed emptied, so that it can be filled by some other poor son of a bitch who has no real hope of a full recovery, right?"

"Yeah, they want your bed," Joe said, nodding. "That's certainly part of it. There's limited bed space in every VA facility. You know that."

"Your progress has begun to decline," the doctor added. "I've told you this before, but you haven't seemed to catch on. Pain is a signal from your body to your brain telling you that somethin..."

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