

GUARDED



Dreams

LJ EVANS



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PLAYLIST

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GUARDED *Dreams*

Part 1 - Chasing

Sunrise, Sunburn, Sunset - Luke Bryan
Fly - Maddie & Tae
I Met a Girl - William Michael Morgan
Groovy Little Summer Song - James Otto
Speechless - Dan + Shay
Perfect Day - Lady Antebellum
Wild Child - Kenny Chesney w/ Grace Potter
Kiss You Tonight - David Nail
Little More Summertime - Jason Aldean
Breathe - Taylor Swift

Part 2 - Falling

Craving You - Thomas Rhett
Whatever It Is - Zac Brown Band
Get To You - Michael Ray
Blue Ain't Your Color - Keith Urban
Love Is Looking For You - Miranda Lambert
Singles You Up - Jordan Davis
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Just a Kiss - Lady Antebellum
I Think I Fell In Love Today - Kelsea Ballerini
I Run To You - Lady Antebellum
Heaven - Kane Brown

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Bless the Broken Road - Rascal Flatts
Written In Sand - Old Dominion
Words Are Medicine - Tim McGraw
The Stars - Lady Antebellum
In Case You Didn't Know - Brett Young
This Kiss - Faith Hill
Die A Happy Man - Thomas Rhett
Girl - Maren Morris
Sweetheart - Thomas Rhett
Oh, What a World - Kacey Musgraves
Once In a Lifetime - Keith Urban
The Rest of Our Life - Tim McGraw & Faith Hill

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Chasing

Sunrise, Sunburn, Sunset

*“Sunrise, sunburn, sunset, repeat,
Moonlight, all night, crashing into me,
Nothing will ever be easy as you and me,
Tangled up with nowhere to be.”*

— Performed by Luke Bryan

— Written by Crowell / McGill / Hurd



Chapter One

Eli

GIRL LIKE YOU

*“Turn out the lights and let me breathe you in,
Your eyes are so diamond, body so gold,
And I don’t want to let you go,
I’ve never met a girl like you.”*

—Performed by Jason Aldean

—Written by Boyer / Mirenda / Tyler

The heat and humidity assaulted me as I stepped out of the rented truck and looked up at the house on the shore of Aransas Bay. I groaned inwardly. I was so screwed. The guys weren’t going to let me live this down.

Somehow, the house had escaped Hurricane Harvey with only a few dents and bruises, but there’d been some reconstruction needed. The remnants of that renovation were obvious in the oversized trash container full of debris outside the two-car garage that took up the bottom floor of the home.

The house desperately needed a paint job. The color was, at the moment, a crazy mix of beaten yellow, raw wood, and left-over white. That was what the guys and I were here to do: paint the house.

I heard Mac and Truck grumble as they slammed the doors behind me.

“Holy fuck, Els-worth, what have you gotten us into?” Mac threw out. He only broke out the Els-worth when he wanted to make a point. He knew I hated it. Call me Eli, or Wyatt, or hell, even my full name of Elijah James Wyatt, but just don’t call me what the asshole lieutenant had our freshman year.

I turned to both of them. Mac was built like a linebacker. He barely fit in the cargo shorts and t-shirt he was wearing, looking as if he might go all Hulk any moment and tear the things

apart. You could barely see his normally black hair under the crew cut he sported. His muscles flexed as he reached into the bed of the truck to pull out the military-style bag that we all had with us.

Truck—well, really Travis, but no one had called him that since freshman year—just shook his head at me. But his brown eyes were already flashing with mischief beneath the shaved head that made his ice-blond hair practically invisible. His square frame was just as built as Mac's, but he'd earned the name Truck for a reason. He blew through anyone and everyone that challenged him...just like a semi-truck. Together, they were Mac Truck. No one messed with them.

Except me. I couldn't help it. I'd been born to razz them. Especially with their "ship-like" nickname that everyone called them when they were definitely not in a relationship.

If I harassed them too much, they'd try to give me shit back, and my frame might not be as thick as theirs, but I had enough of my own muscles to more than hold my own. For some reason, neither of them felt it a requirement to challenge me very often. But this...this house was going to make them challenge me for the entire eight days we were there.

"You said you wanted to stay on the beach as cheap as possible. Free is as cheap as it gets," I retorted.

"But I didn't say I wanted to work my ass off for eight days. We'll be doing enough of that on the Kennedy," Mac said.

He was right that the cadet cruise on the TS Kennedy that Texas A&M's Maritime Academy made mandatory during the summers was nonstop work. I loved it, but not everyone did. For me, it was a glimpse at what I'd been striving and hoping for since I was a kid...to be on a boat, with a unit, making a difference.

I shrugged. "It's a little paint. We'll do a couple hours in the mornings and then take the afternoons off."

"You think eight mornings are going to get this job done?" Travis stared at me incredulously.

I had to admit, now that I saw the house, I had my own doubts. Two stories. Two thousand square feet on the top floor where three bedrooms and two baths stared out at the bay. But the supplies were already here, including a spray gun, so I thought we could manage it.

Professor Abrams had insisted we could do the job in the days we were here while still having time to decompress before the summer "cruise" took off. It was debatable if he was right, but if I needed to put in some extra hours while the guys played, I didn't really mind. I'd rather keep myself busy than sit at a bar drinking and eyeing the local girls, anyway.

We headed up the stairs, and I opened the door with the key that Abrams had given me before we'd departed.

Inside, it smelled like new paint and new furniture. Because everything *was* sparkling new.

The wood floors were polished to a shine you could see yourself in. The walls were a mix of white shiplap and gray paint, and the kitchen spoke of money and trend all rolled into one.

Truck whistled.

“Didn’t know Abrams had this kind of dough.”

“Just don’t break anything, asswipes. We don’t have the nickels and dimes to pay for any repairs.”

I headed down the hall to the bedrooms. Two shared a Jack and Jill bathroom. The third was the master suite that stared out at the bay. I put my bag down by the dresser in the suite.

“Why do you get the master, Els-worth? It’s not like you’re going to be bringing any girls back here to show off.” Mac was still whining and still using the damn nickname, grating on my nerves.

“Did you make the arrangements? Do you want to suck face with gratitude to Abrams when we get back to school in August?” I asked.

Mac scoffed. “He’s the one who should suck up to us for doing this job for free.”

“In your wet dreams, douche,” I said.

He walked out to pick a room off the Jack and Jill.

I left my bag where it landed and went to the French doors. I opened them, stepping outside so I could breathe in the salty air and hear the waves crashing on the shoreline.

The ocean and me, we’d always been a thing. Twined together like almost nothing else in my life. It talked to my soul like some people said music or art talked to theirs.

I’d been on the water with my dad since I could crawl. And after...when he was gone, it was still the place I felt closest to him. It wasn’t the entire reason that my life goals surrounded the Coast Guard, but it was an undeniably large part of it.

“We need supplies,” Truck said, joining me on the deck.

“Abrams already bought everything we need. It’s in the garage.”

Truck laughed. “Not those kinds of supplies, asshole. We need food. Beer. You know, the two necessities.”

I sighed and headed back into the bedroom.

“Let me unpack, and then we’ll go into town.”

♪ ♪ ♪

When I pulled the black rental into the driveway of Abrams’ house after getting groceries, there was a beat-up red Honda sitting there.

We all grabbed the bags from the back and headed up the stairs. Truck and Mac were already discussing the grilling duties for the night. I was still eyeing the car that they didn’t seem to have noticed or cared about.

We heard the music before we even hit the top of the stairs. Loud. Country music. It was blaring out the open windows, letting the air conditioning cool the humidity instead of the other way around.

The guys and I exchanged a curious look.

I opened the door in time to see a blur of dark hair and tan skin jump off the coffee table, guitar in hand, strumming and screaming along to the lyrics.

Except it wasn't really screaming. It was the huskiest, sexiest female voice I'd ever heard. Her hair was a tumble of dark curls and waves that flung out about her as she continued to move, swaying with the guitar and the lyrics. Her frame was all lean muscle with small curves in all the right places.

Her shorts barely covered those curves on her rear end, and a striped shirt was tied so that it bared her midriff, showing off more bronzed skin and muscles.

She was dancer and singer and girl all rolled into one. She hit me to my core and wouldn't let me move. The guys were equally stunned, standing behind me, watching her perform for an audience she hadn't even registered was there yet.

When she finally turned, mid-strum and mid-word, I was hit once more. This time by the intensity of her eyes that stared at me beneath dark lashes. One eye was as blue-green as a Caribbean island bay, while the other was almost muddy green like a Louisiana swamp. They didn't match. And yet, they fit her perfectly.

The joy that radiated across her face from her performance slid off, just as her hand slid off her guitar at the sight of us.

"What the hell?" Her husky voice, full of surprise, washed over me in a wave that told of unsteady seas. Of beauty and desire and storms. And I knew I was in trouble.

"Who the hell are you?" Mac asked, and I had to put a hand holding a bag of groceries out to prevent him from striding toward her.

Her face had closed down, the moment of joy disappearing behind a stone wall. A beautiful stone wall.

She slid the guitar behind her, the strap emphasizing her breasts that were small and pert and barely hidden by the knot of the shirt that sat below them. Tempting me. Tempting all of us.

She should have been intimidated by three muscled men at the door. She should have been unsure and maybe a little shaky, but she wasn't.

Instead, she climbed back onto the coffee table and, from there, stepped onto the couch so that she could get closer. She glared down at me from over the back of it. On the couch, she was barely taller than my six foot three. She put her hands on her hips, balancing on the soft cushions as if she owned it.

“Great. My dad’s asshole recruits. Did he send you to retrieve me like some AWOL cadet?” she asked.

I heard her words, but it was difficult to register them because I was still awash in the waves of emotion that she’d sent through my body. Like being tipped over in an unseen current when you swam into a wave.

“Your dad? You mean Abrams is your father?” Truck asked.

Mac started laughing. “Holy shit, that would mean someone was actually brave enough to have sex with that bastard.”

I dropped the groceries and slammed a fist into his shoulder—not hard enough to be a threat, but hard enough to make a point. “Asshole, that would be her dad you’re talking about.”

She laughed. A sound that was reminiscent of wind chimes lost inside a windstorm, muffled, but still strident. Sinking into your soul. “It’s okay. I often wonder the same thing. What must my mom have been like if she was really willing to put up with him for eight years?”

We all just continued to stare at each other—her on the couch, us with our groceries by the door. “You’ll literally have to drug and hog-tie me if you expect to take me back. Or you can just tell him you failed in your mission and enjoy the ocean view.”

There was a moment where I think uncertainty crossed her face, a flash of something that wasn’t confidence, but it was so quickly replaced with a rebellious look that I wasn’t sure I’d even seen it.

“We weren’t told you’d be here at all.” I finally found my voice.

“I mean it. I’m not—Wait. What?”

“Professor Abrams gave us the place for eight days before our summer cruise in exchange for painting it,” I explained.

She took me in then, really seeing me for the first time. She started at the top with my short hair that needed a cut, then traveled down to my hazel eyes before moving down to my snug t-shirt and tan skin from being near the sea. Once she’d traveled the length of me with her eyes, she returned them to mine, and my stomach flopped over. I wondered, vaguely, if this was how girls felt when my asshole friends looked them up and down in a bar.

She laughed, that husky tone reverberating down my spine once more. “Figures. Just my luck.”

She flung herself down on the couch, her mirth filling the air. Truck, Mac, and I all exchanged a look. We weren’t sure if she was an angel, or a demon, or just simply crazy.

Finally, she seemed to get ahold of herself, and she sat back up, her dark locks of hair swinging wildly about her face, her two-tone eyes taking in the three of us again. A smile

brought her pink lips up at the edges in a way that made me want to touch them.

"I'm Ava. And it seems I've run away from home at the worst possible time."

Run away. Shit.

"How old are you exactly?" I growled. I didn't know if I was growling at her, or my own body's reaction to her, or at the guys who were staring at her like she was the best thing since dry clothes.

She waved at me like I was asking something inconsequential. "Don't worry. I'm not jailbait. I'm nineteen."

That didn't make her less jailbait in my mind. Messing with a professor's daughter was always out of the question. No cadet would ever look at a faculty member's child—girl, guy, or otherwise. It was the unspoken rule. You didn't shit where you slept.

More than that, though, I wasn't going to do anything that would get in the way of the life I saw for myself. Nothing.

"Not that I plan on sleeping with any of you, so y'all can pick your chins up off the floor," she said.

"What exactly did you mean by running away then?" Truck asked.

She looked at our supplies.

"Is that Corona?"

She leaped over the back of the couch, snagged one from the bags I'd dropped, and headed to the kitchen before any of us could really register that she'd even moved. Or that she'd ignored Truck's question.

It was evident that we were still in shock, because we just let her take the beer. At nineteen. Beer that we'd bought. That was a hell of a lot higher on the list of to-not-be-dones than sleeping with a professor's daughter. Aiding and abetting the delinquency of a minor. No. Not minor, but underage? All my knowledge of the law was stuck in a no-man's-land that was called Ava.

She turned back, the Corona open at her lips. "Do you have any limes in there?"

"Duh," Truck said. He was the first of us to move. He dropped his bags on the kitchen counter and started unloading them. When he found the bag of limes, he handed them to her.

She smiled at him, that gorgeous smile with lifted corners twitching, and I almost wanted to slam my best friend into the cabinets—for getting the smile, and for handing her the limes instead of taking the drink back.

Mac exchanged a look with me before shrugging and taking his bags into the kitchen. I was the last to follow. I was still lost in curled lips and a sexy voice and the threat to my unstarted career in the U.S. Coast Guard that was going to have me reaching for her beer and pulling it from those gorgeous lips.

About LJ Evans



Award winning author, LJ Evans, lives in the California Central Valley with her husband, daughter, and the three terrors called cats. She's been writing, almost as a compulsion, since she was a little girl and will often pull the car over to write when a song lyric strikes her. While she currently spends her days teaching 1st grade in a local public school, she spends her free time reading and writing, as well as binge watching original shows like *The Crown*, *Victoria*, and *Stranger Things*.

If you ask her the one thing she won't do, it's pretty much anything that involves dirt—sports, gardening, or otherwise. But she loves to write about all of those things, and her first published heroine was pretty much involved with dirt on a daily basis. Which is exactly what LJ loves about fiction novels—the characters can be everything you're not and still make their way into your heart.

Find out more about LJ and her books at www.ljevansbooks.com

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