

Every Day is Your Last

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Jack Dunning was just a poor kid from Pittsburgh, no better or worse than any other. When he met Richard, it seemed to be a one-sided friendship; Jack needing Richard much more than the other way around. As the years passed however, it became clear to them both just how important their friendship was, eventually culminating in both learning the hardest lesson in life; that every day is a gift and you should treat each one as though it were your last.

Spanning half a dozen different locations throughout the United States and a few around the world, *Every Day is Your Last* follows the lives of two boys, their friends, and their families. Combining the elements of a 'buddy story' and romance novel in an exhaustively researched period piece covering twenty-five years, the story describes average American life in the latter part of the twentieth century through the beginning of the twenty-first. It's written as a companion story to the novel, *Lost Faith*.

This book is dedicated to my father Gerry, who volunteered and twice put his life in harm's way for the freedoms we take for granted.

He is, and forever will be, the hero of this daughter's heart.

It's not *'just a job'*, Daddy. Semper Fi.

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122,995 words

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Prologue

Erica Bella Dunning sat in her office, typing a memo to one of her editors regarding changes to her publishing company's latest soon-to-be-released novel. Nearly done, her intercom buzzed.

"Miss *Dunning*?" June, her secretary interrupted. "Brooke Hathaway is here to see you."

"Send her right in, June." Erica said distractedly. While she finished typing her interoffice email, she put her pencil in her teeth to free her hands to type faster. Brooke came in through the main doors and walked over to the other side of Erica's large oak desk.

"Jus' a schec." Erica mumbled around the worn wooden instrument. Taking it from her mouth and setting it aside, she suggested, "Go ahead and make yourself *comfortable*, Aunt Brooke. I'll be *right* with you!" Typing quickly while Brooke sank into the chair in front of her desk, she finally hit send and smiled, turning to one of her father's dearest friends. She was no blood relation at all, but she still was 'Aunt Brooke' to Erica.

Standing and circling around the desk, she watched the older woman stand back up wearily. Embracing her and kissing her cheek, Erica greeted her properly. "*Hi!* I'm *so* glad you could come see me! Can I *get* you anything? Coffee? Tea? *Rum and Coke*?" Erica knew full well that Brooke was in AA.

Brooke smiled, her dark hair only just beginning to show the edges of gray. "*Hi*, sweetie! No, nothing for *me*! How's the family?"

Erica sat in a chair next to Brooke rather than talk to her over the huge desk. "Mamma's good." she said, referring to her aunt Heather, her mother in all but the legal sense. "Same for April and everyone... except *me*."

"Not *you*?" Brooke asked. "What's *wrong*?"

"Between my *work* schedule and trying to find the time to spend at *home*..." Erica looked at her with a blasé expression of exhaustion. "I'm *pooped*!" The two laughed together a moment before Erica continued. "I haven't even had time to write in a *month*, which for *me* is a *long* time!"

Glad to catch up with her best friend's daughter, Brooke frowned teasingly. "Aww! Having to live in that *penthouse* must be *dreadful*!"

"Very *funny*!" Erica laughed with her. "My 'poor, rich lifestyle'! It's not the *money*, it's the cost to my *sanity*! I'm going *nuts*!"

"So? How can *I* help?" she asked seriously.

"I don't *need* help! I'm going crazy just *fine* on my *own*, thank you!" Erica teased.

"Oh *God*, Erica!" Brooke said through her chuckles. "You sound *so* much like *Jack*, sometimes!"

"Funny you should mention *Dad*, Aunt Brooke." Erica segued. "*He's* the reason I wanted to *talk* to you. Do you remember the day we met and you told me you'd tell me about him and Uncle Richard someday?"

"*Wow*! That was nine *years* ago!" Brooke commented. "But to answer your question, yeah... I remember."

"Well, I was *hoping* to take you up on your offer."

Brooke balked. "*What*, did you want to talk about him right *now*? I thought you were really *busy*?"

"I *am*, but I had an idea, and I was hoping you could *help*. I want to write my father's story, *and* Uncle Richard's... as told by *you*!"

The retired Marine scoffed at the suggestion. "*Erica!* I'm no *writer!*"

"But I *am!*" Erica retorted. "See, I got this idea to tell their story as a *novel*. Since you were there for *most* of it, it would also be *your* story... *and* my mother's, *and* Mamma's. *You* tell me things that happened to my father and uncle and yourself and Mamma and my mom, and *I* write it in story form. I think it's a story that would really help a lot of people, especially *Vets*. To see two of their *own*, depicted *realistically* and *respectfully*, as *told* by one of their own... *you!*"

Brooke looked askance at her honorary niece. "So, you want *war* stories? I don't think..."

"*No!* Not at *all*, Aunt Brooke!" she interrupted to prevent confusion. "I want to tell the story of two *average* guys who also *happen* to be patriots. I... I want the world to know my father's *story* Aunt Brooke, *and* Uncle Richard's. I want to tell the story of how they *met*, how they *lived*, how they *loved*, how they *felt*... *everything!*"

Brooke was stunned. She moved her mouth in an effort to respond, but she couldn't manage to find the words. Finally, she gathered her wits. "*Erica*, that's a lot to *ask!* I don't know that you *can* capture the essence of those two in a simple *novel*. It's... it's..."

"...it's the job of a *storyteller*." she interrupted. "And that's what I *am!* Aunt Brooke, I've been making up stories since I was three years *old!* I'm pretty good at it *too*, if I *do* say so myself, at least my *readers* seem to agree. Now I want to tell *Dad's* story, *and* Uncle Richard's, yours, Mom's, and *Mamma's!* *Trust* me, Aunt Brooke. This story will be *good!*"

Seeing that she was still skeptical, she tried once more. "I'll tell you *what*. If after I'm *done*, if *you* don't like it, I won't *publish* it. I'll just keep it as a family heirloom. At least *then* their grandchildren and great grandchildren will know their stories... and that'll be good *enough*."

Chapter 1 - Where It All Began

I met Jack and Rich when we were all three posted at Alameda Naval Air Station just across the bay from San Francisco. Jack was a total *clown* who hit on everything with *breasts!* We called him Corporal *Strikeout* because he couldn't get a date to save his *life*, but just kept right on *swinging!* From what everyone *told* me, it'd *always* been that way, too. *Rich*, on the other hand, was attractive, smooth, and *never* lacked for female attention. I would have *hated* him, except he was just so *nice!*

They both grew up in the suburbs of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, which is *funny* when you consider that later Rich would move into a house near Pittsberg, *New Hampshire*, but I'm getting ahead of myself! Rich used to tell this funny story about how he met Jack. Of course, Jack being *Jack*, he had to add his *own* twist to it every time Rich would tell it. Rich's story would *always* be the same, but Jack added bits that were always *different*. Not that he would change his *story* mind you, but it was like each time Rich *told* it, Jack would remember some *new* little tidbit to *add* to it.

So *this* is how it all began.

Richard Hargrave was standing in line for lunch as usual. It was the first week of his freshman year in High School and he was starting to really like it. It wasn't as though he was always serious about school before, but he did get decent enough grades. To his mind though, the school's sports were more important, and he'd developed well from many years of football, baseball, and hockey. His natural athleticism and youthful good looks, as well as his above-average five-foot ten height, made him popular and a natural leader.

While waiting, he spotted a scrawny kid sitting at a table trying to eat while three jocks were standing over him. Ox, a nickname the boy had gotten due to his heavy and extremely muscular physique, yelled down at the poor kid.

"Move it or lose it, dork!"

The small boy just kept eating as though Ox wasn't there. Getting impatient, his tormenter shoved him and Richard just couldn't stand by and do nothing. Jumping out of line, he hurried over next to the kid, plopping down right next to him as though they knew each other.

"Hey, Ox! How was your *summer*?"

The bully was flummoxed. He *knew* Richard. They played football together and had been casual friends growing up, so Ox looked at him and shrugged. "*Summer* was OK, Rich... but *fall* is shaping up to be a *problem*. We have a severe case of loose *leaves*. *This* one fell onto our table and it doesn't seem to *realize* that it's gonna get *squashed* if it doesn't... *leave*!"

"Who, *this* guy? Ox! You got your *signals* crossed! This is my *buddy*! My buddy..." Richard patted him discretely on the shoulder and looked at him in that way that says, 'Insert blank'.

"Jack." he said flatly.

"*Jack*! Jack's *cool*, Ox! Come on and *sit* with us!"

The jock wasn't *totally* stupid. He knew Richard was joking, but he couldn't figure why he was hanging around a kid that looked like he'd never even *seen* a football, let alone *played*. After a moment he shrugged and said, "Uh, I think we'll go sit over *there* for a change." indicating a table over by the windows. "Better *light*. Come *on*, guys. See you at *practice*, Rich."

After they left, Richard found himself sitting next to Jack alone. Finally, the boy stopped eating, turned to him and said, "Ya know, if you sit there *next* to me, not even having a *lunch*, people are gonna think you're *hitting* on me."

Richard busted up laughing, turned to him, and held out his hand. "I'm *Rich*."

"So I *gathered* from what *lum-Ox* said." the scrawny boy rolled his eyes toward the departing bully. "*How* rich? 'Cuz I could *use* a loan."

The pun made him chuckle a little and he found he was starting to like this funny little guy. Slapping him gently on the back, Richard stood and started back to the lunch line saying, "Catch ya' 'round then, Jack. *Try* to stay out of *trouble*. I might not *be* there next time to get you *out* of it!"

The next day he was in line again when he felt a tap on his shoulder. Turning around, he saw Jack there, this time in line behind him.

"So I was thinking..." Jack started in as though resuming the conversation from the day before. "Since you seem to have an influence over the muscle-for-brains set, it would be good for me to stick around you."

Turning forward again, Richard asked, "What makes you think I want *you* hanging around *me*?"

"Isn't it *obvious*?" Jack replied condescendingly. "You *need* me because I need *you*! You can't *help* yourself! I'm all weak and helpless and you're the strong *hero* type. So, you *need* me to stick around you so you have someone to be a hero *for*. What good's a *hero* without someone to *save*? Besides, I have many *other* fine qualities that don't relate to the physical, as I'm sure you noticed that I'm quite *lacking* in that department."

"I *did*." he smirked. "So what're these qualities you have that defy detection?"

"I'm *funny*!" he answered quickly. "I can bust a gut on a gutless *toad*! I got a quick wit and naturally *perfect* comic timing!"

"Anything *else*?" he said, chuckling.

"I'm *reliable*! You can *always* rely on having to get me out of a jam. I seem to be a jam-magnet at times. See? You *need* me! What's your next class?"

As Richard took a tray, he looked over his shoulder at Jack, who stood easily a foot and a half shorter than him. "R.O.T.C.. *You?*"

Taking his own tray, Jack looked down. "Phys Ed. I'm thinking I should see the counselor and transfer to R.O.T.C.. It might be *good* for me!"

Filling his tray, Richard shook his head and laughed. "*Why?* Because *I'm* in R.O.?"

"Not *entirely*. After the last few days I can tell that I'm just not cut out for the type of activities they *do* in Phys Ed. I seem to lack the qualities the coaches are looking for, namely any sort of *muscle* tone."

"You should *stay* in Phys Ed. It'll build you *up*. You *need* it!" Richard moved down the line.

"*What!* And ruin this fine *physique* with bulgy *muscles*?" He gestured to his thin frame as he moved along the line behind Richard before pushing his blonde hair that needed a trim out of his hazel eyes. "Surely you *jest!* That's like saying the Mona Lisa could use a *makeover* and Madonna's *wardrobe!* How can I *deny* the girls of this world the *beauty* that is *this* body?"

Looking down at the scrawny boy next to him, Richard finished filling his tray. "So, you've actually *gotten* a girl to *date* you before?"

"Not as *such*." Jack responded as he followed Richard to a table. "Girls *our* age are flighty, finicky, and too easily swayed by *peer* pressure. They *want* me, but they let their *girlfriends* talk them out of it so *they* can have me for *themselves*. It's *obvious!*"

After Richard sat and stuffed part of a roll in his mouth, he chewed it and shook his head. "Sounds *perfect*. They *want* you, but you never have to be bothered with things like *dates* or stuff."

"*Exactly*, my boy! It's the *perfect* set up! I *know* they find me *irresistible*, but I never have to settle *down*!" Taking a bite, Jack stopped eating as he saw a group of four girls walk close by their table looking at the two of them before giggling to each other and walking toward an empty table.

Swallowing quickly, he stood up and tapped Richard on the shoulder. "Just *watch*." Striding over to the where the girls had taken their seats, Jack leaned on it with one arm and smiled. "*Ladies*! I couldn't help but *notice* you back there."

The girls sat and looked at each other in stunned silence. Beth, a cute blonde who seemed to be the spokesperson of the bunch, looked over at the table where Jack had been sitting. "Do you *know* Richard? He's *cute*! Can you *introduce* me?"

Jack looked over at Richard, who seemed to be trying to ignore the whole situation. "Who, *Rich*? *Sure*! We're old *buddies*!" Turning back to the girls, he sat on the edge of their table. "But as I was *saying*..." As he sat, his weight tipped the surface off balance and it toppled over, sending most the girls' lunches down on him as he hit the floor with an earsplitting crash.

"You *idiot*!" Beth screamed at him, her skirt covered in her own soup. "*Now* look at what you've done!" Running off in tears, the other girls followed as everyone around Jack started to applaud his clumsiness.

Richard shook his head and stood up, walking over to the mess as the kids around Jack were laughing and clapping.

Jumping up, Jack smiled and bowed to the kids around him as though he'd done it all on purpose to entertain them. "*Thank* you! *Thank* you! *No*! *No more*! You've been a *great* crowd! Tip your *waitresses*, but not your *tables*!"

"Well, I can admit when I'm wrong. It seems you certainly *do* have a *way* with the ladies, Jack." Richard said sarcastically as he picked a shredded

lettuce leaf off Jack's shoulder. "One thing's for certain, they're sure never to *forget* you!"

The scrawny boy smiled, still covered in scattered and spattered food. "You *see*? It's *perfect*!"

After the janitor came up dragging his cart, the three spent several minutes cleaning up the mess. Soon the two boys were back at their own table.

Chewing on a french fry, Richard got a grossed out look on his face. "You know, I think you may be *right*. I *do* need you around. Who *else* could ruin my appetite so fast?" tossing the half-eaten fry back onto his plate.

Meanwhile, Jack ate with gusto, seemingly unfazed by the gross mix of odors emanating from his food-stained shirt and pants. "*See*? I *knew* you'd come around to *my* way of seeing things! You eat too much, *anyway*. I noticed it *yesterday*. With *my* help, I'll have you down to fighting trim in *no* time! So, can I have your *fries* then?"

When the two finished and dropped their trays off, Richard headed for the JROTC building with Jack following. Noticing his shadow, he shook his head. "Don't you have Phys Ed to get to?"

"First, I wanna see what all the *fuss* is about. We have fifteen minutes 'til lunch is over. Why are you in so much of a hurry to get to *class*?"

"Because I *like* school!" Richard replied. "R.O. *especially*. I think I'm gonna join up after high school."

"Join up *what*?" Jack scoffed. "Two ends of a broken *pencil*? Surely you don't mean the *military*!"

"Why *not*?" he asked. "It's an honorable *profession*! Sergeant Egman, my instructor, was in the Marine Corps. So was my dad. Sergeant's been telling

us all the basics of the military and it seems like a *really* good idea. They'll pay for *college* ya' know."

Jack furrowed his brow. "But you could end up someplace like *Vietnam* or something!"

"We're not *fighting* in Vietnam anymore, *Jack!*" Richard barked. "*Jeez!* It's nineteen *eighty*-five for crying out loud, not nineteen *sixty*-five! We're not *in* any wars! Only war *we* have to worry about involves someone pushing a button and then... *Boom!* So it doesn't matter *anyway!*"

Biting his lower lip, Jack puzzled the issue out. "Well, I *guess* it could be OK. I mean, I should at least check it *out*, right?"

"Suit *yourself*, dumpster top. If *I* were you, I'd get cleaned up before next *period*, though."

"Oh, *yeah*. Can I meet you after school then? I wanna talk about this some more. Takes a lot of thought to *commit* to something like this!"

Richard rolled his eyes. "*Look* Jack, if you wanna join R.O., *fine*. *Maybe* it'll do you some *good*, but it's not like you're signing up to get shipped *out* next week! It's friggin' High School *R.O.T.C.*, not the *Army!* Anyway, I have *football* practice after school."

"Alright, I'll see you *there* then!"

Stopping just outside the ROTC building, Richard turned to the boy. "*You?* At *football* practice? As *what?* The *football?*"

"*Moral* support!" Jack cried out as he slugged Richard's shoulder. Shaking his hand, he murmured, "*Ow!*"

A single chuckle escaped Richard's lips. "That's why we have *cheerleaders!*"

Jack's head perked up. "Do they come to the *practices*?"

"*Sure*, but they're busy doing their *own* thing. Anyway, I gotta go. See ya' 'round Jack."

His eyes widened and a half-smile crept across his face as Jack turned to head for his locker. "*Yeah! Cheerleader! I could do that! They have male cheerleaders! How hard could it be?*"

That afternoon, Jack sat on the bleachers watching football practice as well as the cheerleaders. He'd always considered sports to be a waste of time practiced by dullards who couldn't think beyond 'smash geek', but he was beginning to see the benefits, especially the company jocks got to keep. He'd quickly disabused himself of any idea of becoming a male cheerleader when he saw how much actual physical *work* was involved, but he had definitely enjoyed the show. When he saw Richard starting to gather up his things, he headed down the benches and ran up to him.

"*Hiya, Rich! Say, you looked good out there!*"

Richard laughed as the two walked together. "So good of you to *say*! So now you're some kind of *football* expert as opposed to just a professional *victim*?"

"So, about this R.O.T.C. thing." Jack changed the subject. "I talked to my counselor and he switched me starting tomorrow. We're in the same period!"

"*Wonderful.*" Richard said deadpan as he started to walk off the practice field. "*Just* what I needed."

"You *do*! Soon, you won't be able to function *without* me." Jack handed him the helmet that he'd forgotten on the bench. "*See? You need me!*"

"Well, how about coming over to my house for a snack then? You any good at *math*?"

Jack laughed maniacally. "Are you *kidding*? Why, last year I turned down the Nobel *Prize* for mathematics!"

"There *is* no Nobel Prize for math, *dummy*!" Richard pointed out.

"Of *course* there isn't, not *anymore*. They already *did* all the math there is. To answer your question though, it's an absolute unmodified negative, but I'm a quick *learner* and can be a *great* study partner. You taking Algebra?"

"Yeah. Maybe we can help each *other*. *Hi*, Anne." Richard raised his helmet toward one of the cheerleaders who was walking past them.

"*Hi*, Rich!" she replied bubbly. "Looking *good* out there!"

Jack turned and walked backwards to face her as he continued along with Richard. "*See*? That's what *I* told him, but he wouldn't *believe* me!"

Anne stopped and looked back at Jack, looking him up and down like she was examining an insect. "I can see *why*!" At that she turned and jogged to a group of other girls.

Jack turned around and sighed. "*Ah*! What *is* this power I have over ladies! Did you *see* they way she looked me over? And *you* said I should bulk *up*!"

"She probably couldn't believe her *eyes*!" Richard shot back with a sly grin.

After changing in the locker room and a short walk, Richard walked in his front door a short distance from the school, Jack still tagging along behind him. "*Mom*! I'm *home*!" he shouted as he dropped his helmet off at the door before walking toward the kitchen. "I brought *company* over!"

Judith Hargrave met her son at the entrance to the kitchen. "Welcome *home*, sweetie. Who's your new *friend*?"

Richard gestured between the two. "*Jack*, this is my mom, Judith Hargrave. *Mom?* This is Jack, *Jack...?*"

"*Dunning!*" Jack replied wiping his hand on his faded jeans before he held it out to her. "Pleasure to *meet* you, Mrs. Hargrave! *My*, you have a *lovely* home! Must be hard work for such a *young* lady for it to *look* so nice!"

The woman blushed almost as red as her hair as she shook the boy's hand. "Oh, *stop* it! You better keep an *eye* on this boy, Richard. He's a little Eddie *Haskell!* Would you two like a *snack?*"

Grabbing a handful of cookies from the jar, Richard headed back out of the kitchen. "*Sure*, Mom. Jack and I are going to go study Algebra. Could you bring it in my room? *Thanks!*"

"It was a pleasure *meeting* you, Mrs. Hargrave!" Jack bowed at the waist, folding one arm under his belly and the other behind his back before he ran to catch up with Richard. "Hey, *Rich!* Wait *up!*"

Running up the hallway toward the room that he'd seen Richard enter, a girl came out of another doorway. "*Richie?* Could you... *AH!*"

Jack ran straight into her. As he began to stumble, his left foot caught on her right, twisting him in place and making Jack grab for her instinctually to try and prevent his fall. However, he only succeeded in dragging her down with him, such that as he hit the floor, she landed on top of him. Her notebook full of papers flew into the air to come fluttering down around them both like leaves in autumn.

Erica Hargrave looked down at the strange boy who she was laying on top of and who was holding her waist. Shock turned to fury inside her toward this boy who not only ran right into her and made her fall, but also had just ruined her carefully organized folder. "Will you let *go* of me!" she yelled.

Immediately, Jack released the girl. "S-*sorry!*" he exclaimed as she got up off of him. Crab-walking backwards to get away quickly, he turned as he stood up and ran into the room he'd seen Richard duck into.

"You could at *least* help me pick up the *mess!*" Erica yelled down the hall as Richard closed the door behind Jack.

"*Sorry.*" Richard explained as he dropped heavily onto his bed. "That's my ten-year-old sister, Erica. She can be sort of a *pain* sometimes, all the time pestering me for *something*. Anyway, we should get started."

A pounding sounded on Richard's door a moment later. From behind it they heard, "*Richie! Your clumsy friend just ruined all my homework! Fix it!*"

Richard rolled his eyes and got back up. "If we don't *help*, she'll just keep *pounding!*"

"*Sorry!*" Jack shrugged. "Just for the *record* though, she walked *right* out in front of me!"

Opening the door, Richard saw his sister standing with her hands on her hips and full of indignation. Storming down the hall she stood by her bedroom door, folded her arms, and waited for Richard to pick up her scattered papers.

While he started picking up the papers closest to him, Jack stuck his hands in his front pockets and turned on the charm. "*Well*, Erica! It's nice to meet you! Sorry we had to meet under these circumstances, but *you* know how it is!"

"*I* know how it is." Richard grumbled. "*I'm* cleaning up *your* mess again, Jack. You wanna *help?*"

"*Oh!* Certainly, Rich!" Jack said apologetically as he picked up a few papers and stepped over the others that were scattered around to hand them to Erica. "*Here* you go! Nice *penmanship*, by the way!"

"*Jack!*" Richard nagged, dragging out his name.

Sighing, Jack started gathering papers while Erica stood and waited. Shortly, they had them all gathered up and handed back to Richard's sister. Jack bowed to her and smiled his half-smile. "Why don't you let me straighten those out for you, Erica! It's the *least* I can do!"

She eyed him suspiciously, even as his smile turned her knees to jelly. "Well, OK. I suppose you *should*. It's *your* fault they got all messed up!"

Looking at her, Richard again tried to rescue Jack from his own disasters. "*Erica!* We need to *study!* *Jack* can't waste his time on this *kid* stuff!"

Gallantly, Jack held up a hand toward Richard. "Now-*now*, Rich! I *owe* it to her! It'll just take a *sec!*" Ten minutes later, Erica sat on her bed as he sat at her desk and finished sorting out the mess. "*There!* All *fixed*, Buttons!"

Erica sighed. "*Took* you long enough! Why did you call me *Buttons?*"

The boy turned and smiled at her with his cute half-smile, making the girl's heart flutter. "*Red* hair? Red *Buttons?* Plus *cute-as-a... Buttons!*"

She almost smiled giddily at him saying she was cute, but stopped herself. "*Fine.* Now get out of my *room!*"

He turned and bowed at her once more as he left. Erica couldn't figure this boy out. He was cute and funny, and he'd even made her laugh a few times while he fixed her papers with his little jokes. She'd tried to stay mad at him, but somehow she just couldn't. Once gone, she finally allowed herself to smile at his compliment as she moved to her desk and started her homework, completely forgetting the question that she was going to ask her brother.

Entering Richard's room, Jack let out a breath. "*Whew!* Your sister can really be a *grouch*, Rich! Remind me never to *cross* her!"

"No worries, Jack. Come on, Mom brought us some sandwiches. We can eat while we go over this stuff."

After Jack had gone home, Erica knocked on her brother's open door. "So, Richie? That *boy* that was here. His name's *Jack*?"

Richard turned a page of his comic book. "Yeah. Jack Dunning."

Leaning against his doorway, Erica fidgeted with her fingers. "He's kinda *small* for *high school*. How *old* is he? Is he really *smart* or something? Did he skip *grades*?"

"Who? *Jack*?" he asked as he put his comic down. "Really *smart*? No! He's just small for his age. He turns fourteen next week. *Why*?"

She shrugged and looked at the floor. "No reason. He's kinda *weird*! Why is he *your* friend? There's no *way* he plays *football*!"

"He *could*, if he *wanted* to." Richard noted, picking up his comic again. "He could be a running back or slot back. Guy that small could be hard to *catch*, but I don't think he *likes* football."

"So why is he *your* friend, then?" she persisted.

Putting down his comic once more, Richard sighed. "'Cuz he's funny and fun to hang out with! Plus he's *kinda* smart, in his *own* way. *Jeez*, Erica! What's *with* you today? Why the third degree? You still mad at him for an honest *mistake*? He *fixed* all your *papers*, didn't he?"

"It's just that he's so *different* from your other friends!" she scowled at him. "I mean, *usually* you hang out with guys like Hank or Ox. Jack is just..." she sighed almost wistfully. "...so *different*!" she repeated herself. "He *is* funny, but you've *never* had a friend like *him* before."

"What, so I can only hang out with *jocks*? I have a few brains *too*, ya' know. Someday, I'm gonna go to college and study business like Dad."

Wandering into his room, Erica sat at the desk where Jack was earlier. She looked at her brother on his bed. "Is *that* why you play football? So you can go to college?"

Putting down the comic again, he rolled over and looked at her. "No, I'm not good enough for like a *scholarship* or something. I think I might join the Marines like Dad did. They'll pay for college if you serve long enough. I play football because it's fun and I know Dad did when he was my age."

"Oh." Erica replied, seeming disappointed over something. "I'd miss you if you went away a long time."

Her brother laughed. "I'm not leaving *tomorrow*, ya' *goof!*"

Standing up suddenly, Erica felt insulted. "*Fine!* I *won't* miss you then!" At that she stormed out of his room.

Picking up his comic once more, Richard shook his head dismissively and sighed. "Girls are *weird!*"

Chapter 2 - The Dance

When Jack used to talk about high school, it was always on the same subject. *Girls!* Jack would say he took a different girl to every school dance or party, but then Rich would point out that it was because he could never get a girl to say yes *twice!* Poor *Jack!* He tried *so* hard to fit in with the popular kids that Rich hung out with, and Rich would always make sure that Jack was included.

See, pretty soon, the other kids figured out that if you wanted Rich to come to your party, *Jack* had to be invited, too. Rich would say Jack never held him back though... he still was invited to all the parties and dances and they still hung out with his regular crowd, so you can't say Jack hurt Rich's social life, but Rich's friendship almost *certainly* helped *Jack's*, *immensely*.

I remember this story that Jack used to tell about their Junior Prom. Rich denied *parts* of it, but I think Jack was telling the truth. I could always tell when Jack was BSing his way through a story. Erica told me a lot of things about that night that tell me it was Jack that was being honest. It started a chain of events that would have life-changing effects, but then Jack would say that was true about *everything* that happens to a person.

Jack tried once more to knot his bow tie. He loved getting dressed up nicely and he wore it well, in the last two-and-a-half years having grown over a foot. Giving up on tying it himself, he headed out of his room.

"*Mom!* Can you help me *please?* I can't get this stupid thing to *cooperate!*"

Mary Dunning walked over to her sixteen-year-old son. "Here, let me get that for you. Put your *hands* down, dear!" Her old fingers tied the knot easily and quickly, smiling as she did so. "You look so much like your *father* in this!" she said wistfully. "I remember when he took me to our *Senior Prom!*"

It was right before the War. He looked so *handsome!*" she said, looking off in the distance. Returning from her memory, she looked back at Jack. "And now here *you* are! You're growing up so *fast!*"

Jack sighed as he waited for his widowed mother to finish. "*Hurry, Mom! I need to get over to Rich's before five!* We still need to make it to Anne's to pick up her and Wendy, then to dinner, and then the Prom! We don't wanna be *late!*"

Mary finished futzing with her son's tie and smoothed his jacket down with a smile. "*There! All done! You're such a catch!*"

He dismissed his mother's compliment out of hand. "*Ah! Wendy's just going with me because Anne is going with Rich, and Anne and Wendy are best friends. It's just a date of convenience. Pity date, really.*"

"Don't you *like* her?" she asked concernedly.

"Oh, she's *nice* and all, but she's just too flighty and fickle for me. *All* the popular girls are, Mom."

"*She* might like *you*, Jack. Girls don't *usually* go to a dance with a boy just because it's *convenient*. I noticed her *looking* at you when I saw her last month at the store. Oh, never *mind!* *You* do what *you* think is best! If *you* say it's just *friends* going together, then that's what it *is*. You have *lots* of options... *maybe* more than you *think!*"

"*Mom!*" he dragged out the word. "*Stop* it already! Look, I *gotta* run! I'll see you *tomorrow*, OK? Don't wait *up!*" Jack kissed his mother goodbye and ran out the door yelling, "*Love* you!" as he left.

Mary stood at the screen door, watching him jog down the street. Finally she went to her chair and sat down. Looking at her black and white wedding photo sitting on the end table next to her, the youth it captured long gone,

she sighed. *I miss you, Danny. Watch over our boy tonight? I know it's silly, but I worry about him. I love you!*

Jack ran part of the way from his house in North Oakland to Richard's house in Squirrel Hill. It was only a few blocks away, but was a much more upscale suburb of Pittsburgh. As he reached the border between the two, he slowed to a walk, noting the almost unmistakable line that separated his own poorer neighborhood from Richard's wealthier one. Finally reaching his best friend's house, he rang the bell and waited, thankful that the afternoon weather was not too warm.

After a moment, the door opened and he saw Erica behind the screen looking up at him with an expression of irritation. Opening the screen, Jack waited for her to move. "*Well? Aren't I allowed in, Buttons? I got dressed up nice and everything! Just tell Rich his date is here!*"

Erica rolled her eyes and stalked away from the open door.

"Who *is* it?" Judith called from somewhere down the hallway.

"It's *Jack!*" Erica yelled back as she dropped onto the couch and crossed her arms.

Frank Hargrave came out into the living room from his den, fiddling with his camera. "Oh, *hi* Jack!" he said, his teeth clenching his pipe. Removing it, he smiled at the boy. "Big *night*, eh?"

Nodding, Jack looked at his feet. "*I suppose* so, Mr. Hargrave. I sure hope *Rich* is ready soon. Anne and Wendy won't want to be kept waiting!"

His friend's father sat in the big leather recliner and tapped his pipe against a large glass ashtray. "Oh, don't worry about *that*. They'll leave you two cooling your heels while they finish *primping!* Got my camera ready! You sure you know how to use a *Nikon?*"

He nodded and took the offered camera. "Yes, *sir!* I took Photography last year, *remember?*"

"*That's* right!" he mentioned. "You took a lot of the *yearbook* photos last year, *didn't* you?"

"Not *that* many sir, only a few *dozen*, but they were the *best* ones!" Jack smirked.

Erica rolled her eyes and huffed. "*Excuse* me, I think I'm gonna go *barf* or something!" she groaned as she got up and stormed off to her room.

Watching her leave, Jack finally turned to look at her father. "What's up with *her?* She's been acting *weird* lately."

Shrugging his shoulders, Frank re-lit his pipe. "Who knows the mind of a thirteen-year-old girl?" he asked rhetorically.

A moment later, Judith came down the hall, looking back toward Erica's door. Shaking her head, she smiled when she saw Jack. "You look *great*, Jack! You and Wendy are going to have a *lot* of fun tonight! Richard will be out in a minute!"

Lifting a foot, Jack shined his shoe on the back of his pant leg. "*Thank* you, Mrs. Hargrave! I'll try not to *disappoint!*" He noticed Judith look at Frank sternly, glance at him, then she turned and disappeared into the kitchen.

Frank cleared his throat. "Sit down, Jack. Take a load off." When Jack sat on the arm of the couch, he scowled. "The arm isn't for *sitting* on, boy!"

"Oh! *Sorry*, sir!" he apologized as he moved to the couch seat.

Tapping his pipe again, Frank scraped out the ash, looked up at Jack, and sighed. "*Look*, son. I know your old man passed on quite a few years back,

and... well... I guess these last years I've felt like a sort of surrogate *father* to you." He looked down as he nervously re-stuffed his pipe. "If you have any *questions... you know... the things a young man wants to know about that he usually asks his father?*" He looked up at Jack with just his eyes, his head still looking down.

Jack almost laughed. "Um... *no!* It's *fine*, sir... Mr. Hargrave. I... I'm *good!*"

The older man leaned forward. "Look *here*, boy. There are some things you *need* to know and it's *my* responsibility to make sure you *know* them! Do you know what I'm *getting* at? You treat your date *right!* No *funny* business! Even if *she* says she wants to, it's *your* responsibility to say no for the *both* of you! *Got* it? I don't wanna hear about you causing her any *embarrassment!* You're a fine *boy*, so I don't *think* it'll be a problem, but it needed to be *said*. Now that *I've* said my piece, you got any *questions?*"

"*N-no*, sir!" Jack stammered. "I'll do *just* as you say!"

Frank sat back and re-lit his pipe. "*Good!* Now I want you to have a good time tonight, so I want to give you *this*." Reaching into his pocket, he pulled out a twenty dollar bill from his wallet and held it out toward Jack.

Jack looked at the money as though it were some sort of a trick. "No... it's OK, sir. You don't *have* to..."

"*Damn* it, boy! I *know* I don't *have* to! I *want* to! Now *take* it!" Once Jack got up and took the money, Frank sat back and grimaced. Lowering his voice to a conspiratorial tone, he added, "Besides, if I *didn't* give you that talk and some money, Judy would *throttle* me!"

Richard came out, dressed in his tuxedo. "*Well?* How do I *look?*"

Frank nodded as he puffed his pipe. "Very *smart*, boy! Looking *good!* You have the *corsages?*"

He looked toward the kitchen and then back to his father. "*Oh!* Mom put 'em in the fridge so they'd *keep* better!"

Jack smiled. "*I'll* get 'em, *sport!* Just leave it ta' ol' *Jack!*" Heading into the kitchen, he saw Judith doing dishes. "*Hi* again, Mrs. H! I'm just getting the corsages and we'll..." He saw her shoulders shake and knew something was wrong. "Mrs. Hargrave? You *alright?*"

Judith shook her head, forcing the guilty tears to stop. "No, I'm *fine* Jack. It's just..." She paused, thinking what to say. "It's just hard to watch Richard going off to Prom is all. I know *next* year you two'll be *seniors*, and then..." Her voice trailed off.

"Oh, it'll be *fine*, Mrs. H!" Jack tried to comfort her. "That's a whole *year* away! *Lots* of time until then!" He opened the fridge and took out the two corsages. "Don't *worry!* I'll take *good* care of him for ya' tonight! That boy still *needs* me, ya' know!"

She laughed and sniffed, wiping away a tear. "*Thank* you, Jack! *Here.*" She walked over to him, straightened his tie some, and smiled at him. "You're like a *brother* to Richard. I'm glad he has you *around!* Wendy's a *lucky* girl to be getting someone like you, *too!* You might be just the right sort of young man she needs to... to be *happy!* I know *any* girl *your* age that gets you will be *very* blessed!" She reached into the pocket of her housedress and pulled out another twenty. "*Here.* Take this and have *fun* tonight!"

Jack tried to refuse it. "Oh *no*, Mrs. H! Mr. Hargrave *already...*"

She put her finger up. "*Shush!* I *know* he did, but *he* thinks twenty dollars is still a lot of money!" She smiled at him and took a breath. "Now, let's get you two on your way! Tonight's a big *night* for you... *and* Richard!"

They headed back out into the living room where Richard was talking with his father. "So anyway, Hank fades back and he's about to pass when... *Oh!*

Hey, Jack! Took you long enough! Get lost somewhere between here and the fridge?"

Jack half-grinned. "*Nah!* I was just telling your mom all the things I *do* for you! You know, like remembering your date's name, warning you when you have bad breath, distracting the sales clerk while you lift our dates' corsages... things like *that!*"

"*Jack!* That's *terrible!*" Judith said feigning shock as though she wasn't used to his quirky humor. She looked at her husband. "*Frank?*"

"What? Oh, *yes* dear... *terrible!*" Frank commented absently.

"*No* dear, your *son* is about to *leave?*" she hinted.

"*Oh!* Yes... um... *here*, Rich. Your mother and I want you to have a good time so..." He handed Richard forty dollars. "Don't stay out *too* late!"

Richard took the offered money and smiled at him. "*Thanks*, Dad! Come on, Jack. The girls might be *waiting* already! *Night*, Mom!"

"Now you be *careful*, dears!" she called after them from the porch as they headed down the short walkway in front of the house. "Watch out for drunk drivers!" Watching the boys get into their family's station wagon, she sighed. Turning back toward the house, she spotted Erica watching from behind the screen door, only to duck away when she saw that her mother had caught her watching them leave.

Sitting in the passenger seat while Richard drove them to Anne's house, Jack looked over at his best friend. "So how much did your mom give *you* on top of what your dad knows about?"

"Twenty, on top of the fifty that you and I saved from mowing lawns. How about *you?*"

"The same... plus your old *man* gave me twenty. That gives us a hundred and fifty bucks! What do you want to *do* with it?"

"*Us!* Why should *I* share? I have *eighty-five* and you only have *sixty-five!*"

"Because you're bad with *money!* *That's* why. You know *I* can make it go farther for the *four* of us than *you* can make *yours* go for just you and *Anne!*"

Richard stopped at a light. "I am *not* bad with money! You just want your hooks in my *eighty bucks!*"

"Look, when we were at the movies last month, how much did you spend on snacks? Ten bucks? I spent *three fifty* at the store and just snuck 'em in! Come *on!* You *know* me, Rich!"

Pulling through the intersection, Richard shook his head. "Yeah, I *do* know you, Jack. I should probably get my *head* examined for listening to you, but *OK.* We'll pool our funds and ask the girls what *they* want to do, then *you* figure out what we can *afford.* Alright?"

"Don't *worry!* I've got it all planned *out!*" Jack said smugly.

They pulled in front of Anne's house and parked on the curb just after five. Climbing out, Jack grabbed the corsages and tossed one to Richard as they headed up the walkway.

"Not your *best* throw Jack, but you didn't send it into the *bushes.*"

"So I've never been a *football* player... or *baseball...* or *basketball...* or *hockey...*"

"...or *table* tennis!" Richard finished for him as he rang the bell. "Is there *anything* your good at?"

"I seem to be good at weaseling money out of my *friend!*" Jack shot back.

The door opened and the two boys were shown in by Anne's mother Lydia. Standing at the foot of the stairs and waiting for their dates to come down, Richard could feel Anne's father John burning a hole in the back of his head with his eyes. Clearing his throat nervously, he adjusted his tie.

Jack could see his friend's nervousness, so he thought he'd help defuse the tension, or at very least take the attention off Richard. He turned and faced the older man who was standing in the hallway behind them. "*Hi, sir! I'm Jack, Wendy's date. Your daughter Anne is in good hands tonight, sir! My buddy Rich is the safest driver in Pittsburgh! Modest and upstanding, too! The girls all call him 'Respectful Richard'! You won't hear stories about ol' Rich embarrassing any young ladies or taking any advantages! No, sir!*"

Anne's father just stared at Jack unblinking.

Not to be intimidated, Jack flew into his second line of defense. "*Oh, you'll also note that I have a camera with me to fully document the evening! So afterwards, you can look at the pictures and see for yourself that Anne had a good time and was always safe, secure, and well taken care of!*"

He looked at the man who in turn returned his gaze with cold, dead eyes.

Falling back to his final line of defense, Jack cleared his throat. "We have a hundred fifty dollars that Rich and I saved from work we did over the year! Yes, *sir!* Rich is a *responsible* young man! Why, everything I *know* about being a good responsible citizen is due to *his* good *influence* on me! I bet if it weren't for *Rich*, I'd probably be making bad *decisions!* Doing the *drugs* and... um... *stuff.*"

Finally, he saw the man crack a smile. Unfortunately it was more menacing than friendly or jovial before the man turned and walked down the hallway away from the two teens.

Breathing a sigh of relief, Jack turned back around to face the stairs again. "*Told* you! I got you covered! You *need* me!"

"My *hero*!" Richard mumbled sarcastically.

Half a minute later, Anne's father came back into the living room carrying a cleaning kit and a holstered Colt Forty-five. After he sat on the couch, he opened the kit on the coffee table, unholstered and unloaded the weapon, and started cleaning it right there.

Glancing at the man's activities, Jack turned back around, lowering his voice to a whisper. "OK, *don't* freak out. Her *dad* has a *gun* and he's cleaning it right *now*! So don't *freak* when you *see* it, *OK*? See? You *need* me!"

After a short wait longer, Anne came down the stairs wearing a white off the shoulder drop-lace gown with an empire waist that hugged her tightly, while the skirt flared to emphasize her nearly perfect figure. Her hair hung down and loose, her natural curl flattened to let it fall just behind her shoulders. It was simple and elegant, and Richard was stunned at how beautifully grown-up she looked.

Wendy followed her down, dressed in a hot pink satin-lame dress with off the shoulder sleeves, a low cut neckline, an even lower back, and a flirty knee-length hemline that dropped to just above her ankles in the back. Her curly strawberry-blonde hair was sprayed up to leave her neck and shoulders bare. She smiled seductively at Jack as she reached the bottom of the stairs, making him unusually speechless for a moment. Just about to recover, they were interrupted.

"*Daddy*!" Anne yelled. "Put that stupid thing *away*!"

"*What*, pumpkin? I'm just *cleaning* it!" her father said innocently.

"I *know* what you're *doing*, Daddy! Now *stop* it! I'm almost *seventeen*!"

Just then, Anne's mother came back into the room. "Oh, for heaven's *sake*, John! Take that out of here this *instant!*" Turning to Anne, she smiled. "You look *beautiful*, darling! Here, I want you to take *this* for tonight!" She turned Anne around and wrapped a beautiful set of pearls around her neck. "*There!* It's *perfect!*"

The boys both gave their dates their corsages, Anne having asked for a wrist corsage and Wendy a pin-on type.

"Jack? Would *you* pin mine on me, please?" Wendy asked boldly.

"Well... uh... maybe Anne's *mom* should do it. I... I might pin it *on* wrong or *stick* you with it! Besides, I have a *job* to do!" he excused himself, holding up the camera. Her smile dropped as he turned toward Richard.

Clearing his throat, Jack got Richard's attention. "*Rich?* Why don't you and Anne stand in front of the fireplace and I'll get your picture!" he suggested as Wendy pinned her own corsage in place.

Afterwards, Richard returned the favor and took pictures of Jack and Wendy. While Jack smiled happily, Wendy only smiled vacantly, still upset that Jack hadn't taken the invitation to pin her corsage next to her exposed chest.

When the four finally headed for the car, Wendy's mood seemed to lift as she spoke up. "*Anne?* Why don't *you* ride up front with Rich. *Jack* and I can take the *back* seat!"

Jack cleared his throat nervously. "Sounds good to *me!* *Oh!* Rich and I were wondering what you'd like to *do* this evening. I mean, *before* the Prom, of course! Dinner? Movies? You *name* it!"

Anne looked at Wendy, who only smiled back and shrugged. "Well, *dinner* sounds nice! Can we go someplace *fancy?*"

"It just so happens I *already* made reservations at a very *fine* establishment!" Jack grinned his usual half-smile. "I think it just *might* fit the bill!"

Riding in the back to a local upscale restaurant after telling Richard where to go, Jack noticed Wendy's hand move to his knee. Making him nervous, he put his hand on hers, looked over at her, and smiled. When he noticed the mischievous grin on her face, it made him certain that one way or another he was in for a memorable evening.

Judith knocked on Erica's door, opening it slowly into the darkened room. Entering quietly, she could hear her daughter crying on her bed. Closing the door behind her, she silently crossed the room and sat next to her youngest child, rubbing her back until Erica got up and hugged her, still crying.

"Want to *talk*, dear?" she asked gently, already knowing what was wrong.

"Boys are *stupid!*" Erica said between sobs.

She laughed lightly. "Sometimes, yes they *are!* That's why we *women* have to push them in the right *direction* most of the time!" Waiting for her to stop crying, Judith held her and rubbed her back like she'd done when Erica was little. It worked, as it wasn't long before Erica was sniffing back tears. "Let me guess. *Jack?*"

Erica nodded shyly. "I... *I* wanted to go to the Prom with him, but... I'm just a little *girl* to him. He doesn't even *notice* me!"

"*Oh!* It's *alright!* You may be a little girl *now*, but soon you'll be all grown up. I'll bet *lots* of nice boys will notice you *then!*"

"But... but what if it's too *late?*" Erica nearly began to sob again. "What... what if... what if Jack falls in love with some *other* girl before I can finish growing *up?*"

"Well dear, you'll just have to trust that it'll work out the way it's *supposed* to. You'll meet *another* boy that you'll like even *better* than Jack!"

Her daughter shook her head slowly and sadly. "I can't imagine liking *any* boy better than *Jack*, Mom!" she sighed lovingly as she spoke his name. Suddenly, she got an angry look on her face and her tone turned cold. "And tonight he's taking that floozy *Wendy* to the Prom!"

"*Erica!*" Judith chided her. "*That's* not a very nice thing to say about anyone! She's Jack's *date*. If they *like* each other and decide to *date*, well then that's just *that*. They're nearly grown *adults*." Cautiously she asked, "Why *did* you say that about Wendy, dear?"

"*All* the girls *say* so, Mom!" the girl rolled her eyes. "Her younger sister Ruth is in my music class and *she* told me that Wendy flirts with all the boys *all* the time... and *kisses* them and does *other* things, too! Things I'm too young to *talk* about."

Judith swallowed hard. "It can't be *that* bad, dear!"

"She puts out and then she *dumps* 'em." Erica said sadly. "She broke Jimmy Mason's heart *last* year! Now she's gonna do the same thing to *Jack!*"

"Now *stop* that!" Judith admonished. "It's a *sin* to circulate *rumors* like that! Now you forget all about *Jack!* I know it hurts a little *now*, but soon this will all be *behind* you!"

Perturbed, Jack stood by the punch bowl getting his and Wendy's second cup. Richard stood next to him just shaking his head. All around them their class talked, laughed, and danced to '*I've Had the Time of My Life*'.

"I don't *get* it, Jack! Wendy's *hot*, and for *some* strange reason known only to *her* seems to think you're... well... not *repulsive*. What's the *problem?*"

"It's too *easy*, Rich!" Jack griped. "It makes me *suspicious*, like she's *up* to something. It's like shooting fish in a *barrel*! Like fishing with a *grenade*! Like..."

"I *get* it!" Richard rolled his eyes. "So... what're you gonna *do* about it?"

Jack smiled as he picked up the cups. "Go *fishing*!" he replied. "Hey, just 'cuz it's *easy*, doesn't make it any less *fun*! I mean, I *know* I'm *irresistible*, but it's just a little... *boring*! No *challenge* to it! Plus it makes me wonder what she's *really* after!"

When they returned to their dates, Jack handed Wendy her punch. She took it and eyed him like a hungry animal, making Jack sweat like he'd just run the half mile. As the song ended and the next one started, Wendy stood and walked over to him, putting down her cup.

"*Dance* with me?" she said to make him understand it was *not* a request.

As Madonna's '*Crazy for You*' played, they reached the dance floor and he nervously took her into his arms. "Are you having a good time?" he asked looking into her eyes, their height the same with Wendy's three-inch heels.

Slowly swaying to the music, she pressed her curvaceous body against his. "Mmm-hmm!" she replied with a smile. "*Jack*? Can I *ask* you something?"

"S-sure! Anything you *like*!"

"Do I make you *nervous*?"

"W-who? *Me*? Don't be *silly*!" He paused. "Why? Do I *seem* nervous?"

She laughed and lowered her head against his shoulder, pressing her ample chest against his. "*Yes*! And I think it's *adorable*!"

Closing his eyes, Jack tried to steady his breathing. As they danced though, his mind would not let go of the question that he had been dying to know for over a month; ever since Wendy had not so subtly hinted that he should ask her to the Prom. "Can... can I ask *you* a question?"

"Mmm-hmm!" she replied, breathing on his neck.

Jack breathed heavily for a moment, trying to keep his mind clear. Finally his need to know overpowered his teenage hormones and angst. "Why *me*? I mean, don't get me *wrong*, I... I'm *grateful*! You're *easily* one of the prettiest girls in *school*, probably *thee* prettiest! You *must* have had a literal *ton* of guys asking you to go, so... so why did you want *me* to ask you?"

"Why *not* you?" she countered.

"Well... *OK*, can we just be *honest* for a second?" Jack sighed. "I *know* the only reason I get to go anywhere *near* the parties and stuff that *you* all have is because of *Rich*. And he's *great*! He *never* makes me feel like he's... well... propping me *up*, but I *know* he is, and so does everyone *else*. I have like, *no* doubt that if I weren't *his* friend you probably wouldn't even know my *name*, let alone consider going to the *Prom* with me. I... I *know* you *know* all this, but I think it's important that I *say* it. I *talk* big and all, but I think you know I'm just a geek with a *really* nice popular friend. So, all that *said*, why *me*?"

Having raised her head up to really listen as Jack admitted what they both knew to be true, Wendy took a moment before answering. "Well, I... I guess I just wanted to know... I wanted to go out with a guy who was *different*. I..." She leaned her head against his shoulder again.

"Oh. *OK*. I just... Well, I was afraid that maybe you only came with me 'cuz you lost a *bet* or something... or were planning something *Carrie*-like!"

Wendy laughed. "*No*, Jack! I didn't lose a *bet*! In fact, I think I might have *won*! You make me feel like you *respect* me! Like... like I'm *safe*."

Jack felt simultaneously flattered and insulted; flattered that she trusted him to be a gentleman, and insulted for the same reason. A moment later, all he felt was lucky, her hands sliding up his back to hook onto his shoulders as she pressed tightly against him, contentedly humming the tune they danced to. Closing his eyes, he just enjoyed the moment.

Suddenly Jack felt Wendy pull away from him. Just as he opened his eyes, he doubled over as a fist slammed into his belly.

"Stay away from my *girl, twerp!*" Ox snarled. "Come *on*, Wendy!" Pulling the shocked girl to the side of the dance floor, he held up his hands. "*Look, I know!* I blew off asking you 'til the last minute, but come *on!* I have a big *game* coming up! You don't have to *pity* date Rich's 'help the needy' project to show me I messed *up!* Lets just *forget* all this and spend the rest of the night *making up!*" At that he started to reach out for her.

Richard shoved himself between Ox and Wendy. "She's not *your* date, *Ox!* Now *beat* it before *I* do to *you* what *you* just did to my *friend!*"

"*Rich!*" Ox scoffed. "Don't be such a *goodie-two-shoes*, man! Haven't you had *enough* of playing 'fairy godmother' to the kid from *North Oakland?* Come *on!* He doesn't *belong!* *You* know it, *I* know it, *everyone* knows it!"

Just then, Vice-Principal Ford walked his heavy form up to them. "*Alright, Oscar. I saw that. You're done.*" He waved his chubby hand toward the door and smiled. "*You're suspended!*"

Grinning, Ox tried to smooth-talk his way out of it. "No, see here's the *thing*, Mr. F! See, this *loser* was *horn-dogging* on my *date* so..."

At last coming to her senses again, Wendy stormed up to him. "You're *not* my *date*, *Ox!* Nor are you ever *going* to be *again!* Don't *call* me anymore, don't even bother *talking* to me!"

Holding his hands up again in mock surrender, his voice turned patronizing. "OK! I *get* it! You're *mad*! You want me to *apologize* to the little dork?"

"No, you big *oaf*!" she yelled. "I want you to *drop dead*!"

Ox's expression turned sour. "*Fine*! Who needs an easy *lay* like you *anyway*! I'm *outta* here! Bunch a' *wimps*!"

While Ox was escorted from the room, Wendy ran to Jack and helped him to their table. "Are you *alright*, Jack?"

Holding his stomach, he nodded. "*I'm fine*! Nothing a little internal surgery and new *kidneys* won't fix! *Oh*!" He winced as he sat.

"*Jack*!" Wendy giggled. "You're such a *clown*!"

He smiled, the pain slowly subsiding. "I'm sorry we're going to miss a few dances tonight, Wendy. I don't think I can do any fast ones! Might sprain my *spleen*! You can dance with someone *else* if you want. *I* don't mind."

Scooting her chair over until it was right up next to Jack's, Wendy shook her head dismissively. "But I don't *want* to dance with anyone else! So, we'll just dance to the *slow* songs!" she said seductively.

At once Jack felt very little pain as her hand sensuously caressed his inner thigh. "Uh... *Wendy*? I... I thought you came with *me* because I was... um... *safe*... because I *respected* you and wouldn't want to... *ya' know*..."

"*True*, I know *you* won't pressure *me*!" she admitted. Leaning in close to his ear, she whispered, "That doesn't mean that *I* can't pressure *you*!"

After the song ended came the crowning of the King and Queen and other events. Later, when they announced the final song of the evening, Wendy looked over at Jack. "Do you feel up to one more?" she asked.

"If you had to pull me around the floor in a *wheelchair* I'd be ready!" Jack quipped. "Just... Can you give me a hand *up*?"

While everyone made their way to the floor, '*Take My Breath Away*' started playing. Wendy groaned, "Oh *no!* Not *this* one!"

Jack looked at her in surprise. "What's *wrong*?"

Wendy draped her arms over Jack's shoulders. "Like getting a punch in the *gut!* Take my *breath* away? *Get* it?" She smiled a goofy open mouth smile as she pressed her forehead against his.

Laughter wracked Jack's bruised body, causing him to wince. "*Ow!* Don't make me *laugh*, Wendy! *Ow!*"

After the two started dancing to the song, their mood changed dramatically. Swaying slowly and feeling each other, Jack knew that the night would end soon and their time together would come to a close.

"*Jack?* Can I ask you something?"

"*Anything,* Wendy." he almost purred.

"After the dance, would you want to... I mean... oh, *shoot!*" She buried her face in his shoulder.

Jack was confused. "What *is* it? You can ask me anything you *like,* Wendy. You don't have to be *embarrassed!*"

Wendy looked at him. "Well, as you put it, can we just be *honest* for a sec? I... I *originally* agreed to go with you because I wanted you to be my first... um... *virgin.*" She was quiet for a moment, but then continued. "I... I've never been a guy's *first* before... and... um... I wanted... I wanted to know what it was *like* to be a guy's... *God!* You must think I'm a *slut!*"

Stunned, Jack stared off in the distance. *She wanted to... Oh, Wow!* Pulling himself together, he reached up with a hand and lifted her chin so he could look in her eyes. "I kinda *figured* it had to be *something*. I mean, don't get me *wrong*, I'm *flattered* that you would want to with *me*, but... I... uh... *wow!*" He held her close as he tried to think. "I really *want* to, more than you *know!*"

"Wanna *bet?*" she asked, smiling knowingly.

"*Oh!*" Jack backed up so his hips weren't pressed into hers anymore. "*Sorry!*"

Closing the gap, Wendy pressed herself against him, still smiling. "*Don't* be!"

Jack's head was spinning and he felt like he might faint. Taking a deep breath he let it out slowly. "I... I *want* to Wendy, a *lot!* But... I... I want something else *more*. I... I want... Would you be my *girlfriend?* I mean, *after* tonight? You don't *have* to decide right now. I mean, take your *time!* But if... if I had the choice of *having* you *tonight*, or *seeing* you *tomorrow?* I... I'd *wait.*"

The song ending, she looked at him softly. "Who says you can't have *both?*" She pulled her body tightly against his, pressing her soft lips to his mouth, opening hers as she did, prompting him to do the same. It wasn't anything more than an open mouth kiss, but it was his first and enough to send Jack's head spinning again.

After a moment, their kiss and the song ended and she smiled. "I *like* you, Jack. You're *more* than just *sweet!* You're funny, smart, cute, and I... *Yes!*"

Shaking his head, he tried to regain his ability to think. "*Yes?* Yes, *what?*"

She laughed. "Yes, I'll be your *girlfriend!*"

Jack's eyes bulged out. "*Really?* I think I feel like *dancing!*"

She looked around at the other kids leaving the floor. "But the dance is *over!*"

Slowly, they started to walk back to their table, hand in hand. Seeing Richard and Anne there gathering their things, Jack half-smiled. "You guys *ready*?"

Nodding, Richard smirked. "Hey, *Jack*? Your *lipstick's* smudged! You might wanna *touch up*!"

Jack blushed and picked up a napkin, wiping his mouth. "*Sorry! Good* one though, Rich! You're getting *better*, but you're still just a *straight* man! Leave the *real* comedy to the *professionals*!" He looked at his watch. "Well, it's only *eleven*. What would you girls like to do?"

Grinning happily, Anne looked at Wendy. "Beth's parents are throwing an after-party!" Looking at Jack, her grin vanished. "Beth still doesn't like *you* though, and I think even *you* would agree she has a good reason *not* to, so *you'd* have to bow out *gracefully*!"

Her friend shrugged. "No, I'd be happy just going someplace like Frick Park. It's a *beautiful* night for a walk!"

Anne glared at her for not taking the hint. "*Wendy!* You may be willing to blow off your social obligations, but *I'm* not! The dance is *over*, so he's not your *date* anymore! Maybe you might find a guy to replace Ox at the party!"

Glaring back, Wendy growled. "It's not *like* that, Anne!" She looked at her date. "*Jack* and I are *dating*!"

Her eyes slowly widened. "Like... *dating*, dating? Like after *tonight*? Like for all *summer*?"

Sighing as she turned back to look at Anne, Wendy's arms held Jack tightly. "Maybe *longer*, if I'm lucky!"

Chapter 3 - Bumps and Bruises

I think Jack was really in love with Wendy. They dated almost four months before she ended it. Rich said that he thought Jack would never recover. It absolutely *destroyed* him. Jack just never talked about it. I think... I think it just *hurt* too much, even *years* later. He *never* would say her name, even when he *would* talk about it.

Rich told me what happened though. Wendy dated Jack through the rest of May and June and into July. Then her parents took her on a month-long trip to Florida. When she got back, right before school started, she told him that she'd found someone else and broke up with him. Rich said she was *cruel* about it, telling him that he was too much of a wimp for her and she needed a strong man. I don't know if it's true or not. Rich *hated* her for hurting him, so he might have just been bitter and wanted to say mean things about her. I guess now only *one* person knows the truth... and *she'll* never tell.

So Jack and Rich started their senior year of high school on a bad note, and it just kept getting *worse* from there.

Richard knocked on Jack's door for the third time. Inside he could hear the muffled strains of '*Take My Breath Away*' playing.

"*Jack!* Come *on*, dang it! Open the *door!*"

"Go *away*, Rich. Just leave me *alone!*"

Trying the knob, he found it locked. Pulling his keys out, he flipped until he got to his screwdriver and shoved it in the hole in the doorknob. Twisting until he felt the tip slide into the tiny screw end slot, he turned it and the knob came loose. Opening the door, he looked around the room, taking a moment for his eyes to adjust to the darkness. Seeing Jack lying on his bed still in his

pajamas, his shades drawn, Richard stepped over and stopped the tape player, throwing up the shades before turning back to his miserable friend.

"Alright, *Jack*. Enough *moping*. You missed the *first* day of school! I won't *let* you miss the *second*!" He ripped the sheets down and saw his best friend lying there with the eight-by-ten Prom photo of him and Wendy held to his chest. His eyes looked puffy and swollen, as though Ox had finished what he'd started; his body drawn and weak. "*Damn, Jack! Come on! Get a hold of yourself!*"

While he just lay there, Mary Dunning came in and stood next to the older teen. "I... I don't know what to *do*, Richard! He's not *eating*! He never gets up except to use the *bathroom*! He won't *talk*! He just *lays* here and keeps playing that *awful* song!" She turned and buried her face in Richard's chest.

Trying his best to console her, he led her out of the room and into the front room. "Uh... I have an *idea*, but there may be some... *difficulties*."

Drying her eyes, she looked at him cautiously. "Like *what*?"

"Nothing that isn't worth seeing him up and *moving* again. Will you *trust* me? I'll... I'll have to *yell* and use some harsh *language*. It's the only way to get *through* to him right now."

Mary nodded fervently. "I... I *trust* you Richard! You're a good and smart young man and I know you only want to *help*. Do what you *have* to."

With a nod, Richard walked back into Jack's room, stormed up to his bed, snatched the photo from his grasp, and quickly tore it in half.

Up in a flash, Jack's puffy eyes were full of rage. "You son of a *bitch*!"

Richard smirked. "*Well!* Lover boy *lives*! What's the *matter*, little man! Did the mean *girl* break you wittle *heart*? Too fucking *bad*! *Deal* with it! The

bitch *dumped* you like a bad habit and you sit here *pinning* for her like a dog that runs back to its master for another *kick*! I bet if she *called* you, you'd be back up and running to her in no time *flat*, huh? I thought girls were too *fickle* and *flighty*, so *that's* why you never let any *get* to you! What a sad and sick little *wimp* you turned out to be! Oh, I don't mean your *muscles*, I mean your *heart*, maggot!" At the final word, he poked Jack in the chest.

"*Fuck* you, asshole!" Jack growled as he tried to throw a punch, but Richard caught it mid-throw. He tried to throw his other fist, but Richard caught it as well, now restraining Jack by his hands.

"Let me *go*, muscle head!" Jack screamed.

"*No!*" Richard shouted back. "*Damn* it, *Jack!* I'm your *friend!* You wouldn't *let* me help, so I'm doing what I *have* to do!" He let Jack go and pushed him backward. "Listen *up*, half-pint! Yeah, Wendy broke your *heart!* Well guess *what?* Anne broke *mine!* She *dumped* me while you were still writing love letters to your cheating girlfriend in *Florida!* But do *you* care? *No!* You wanna know *why* she dumped me? Because of *you!*"

Jack furrowed his brow. "What the hell are you *talking* about!"

"*Anne!* Dumping *me!* Because of *you!*"

Confused, Jack flopped back to sit on his bed. "I... I don't *get* it!"

Richard looked down at his friend. "She *dumped* me because she wanted me to do things like going to parties or movies *without* you and I *wouldn't!*"

"Well that's *normal!*" Jack screwed up his face. "*Jesus*, Rich! You could do those things without *me* sometimes! Anne probably just..."

"*No*, you *idiot!*" he interrupted. "She wanted you *out!* Completely *gone* from my life! She didn't even want me to hang around you when she *wasn't* there!"

She said you were a *leach*, just *using* me to make rich friends and get to *Wendy*! She thinks Wendy made a *mistake* when she didn't just *dump* you at the Prom and take *Ox* back after he laid you out with one punch!"

"So... she dumped *you* because..."

"Because I wouldn't dump *you* as a *friend*! She gave me an ultimatum... *you* or *her*!"

Jack looked up at Rich. "And you picked *me*?"

Richard nodded. "*Yeah*!"

"*Why*?"

He leaned back against the wall. "Right *now* I couldn't *tell* you. You're a self-centered *jerk* who's just feeling *sorry* for himself and doesn't give a rat's *ass* about anyone else! Your *mom* was about to call the *cops*, or the *ambulance*, or the guys from the *nut* hut to come and pump *fluids* in you! You've got her scared *shitless* and you don't even *care*! So right now I figure *you* can just go to *hell*! I *guess* I made the wrong *choice*!"

Jack looked at the torn photo on the floor. "Thanks." he mumbled.

"For *what*?" Richard yelled.

"For being a good friend... my *best* friend... my *only* real friend."

Looking down at Jack, he felt tears well up. Taking a breath, he blew it out slowly and brought down his anger. "You're *welcome*. And thank *you*."

"For *what*?" Jack looked up at him.

"For always getting into jams so I can be the hero and get you *out* of them!"

"Yeah!" Jack chuckled. "That's what I'm *here* for! Make *you* look good and keep your date's *name* straight!"

"Don't forget about warning me when I have bad breath and distracting the sales clerk while I lift our dates' corsages!"

The two young men laughed together. Richard sat on Jack's bed and put an arm around him. "Feeling *better*?"

Nodding, Jack shrugged Richard's arm off. "Yeah, but it's creepy as *hell* you puttin' your arm around me while we're sitting on my *bed*!"

Grinning, Richard helped Jack to his feet. "*Jeez*, dude! You weigh like eighty pounds *wet*! You need to *eat* something!"

Jack patted his empty stomach and lowered his voice. "Yeah, first I need to go apologize to *Mom*, though. I shouldn't *worry* her like that. You know, I don't think I ever *said*, I know it's sorta *obvious*, but she and Dad had me when they were *old*, like almost *fifty*! They were told she couldn't *have* kids, so I was kind of a surprise! That's why she's a lot older than most moms. I shouldn't stress her out this way. She might have a *stroke* or something."

The two came out talking about Richard's first day at school as a senior when they heard a gasp.

"*Jack*! You're *up*! Oh, thank *God*!" She ran to her only child and hugged him, then surprising Richard, she hugged and kissed him on the cheek. "*Thank you! Thank you, Richard!*"

He blushed and nodded to her. "It's *fine*, Mrs. Dunning! Sorry about the rude language."

She wiped her tears away. "*No*! You did what you *had* to do. Men *know* these things about each other. Now, let me get you boys something to *eat*. You

look half *starved*, baby! Richard, you're welcome, *too*! It's the very *least* I can do!"

He thought about refusing, knowing that Mary was a single mother working a low-skill job as a cashier at the local supermarket for even lower wages, but thought better of it and sat with the Dunnings for dinner.

The next day when Jack came to school, he noticed a lot of the other kids were whispering and giggling to each other as he walked by. Confused, he quickly walked to his locker. There he found, spray-painted across it, the words '*Couldn't Score With Slut Wendy!*' Squaring his shoulders as the kids around him laughed, he opened his locker as usual, put in everything but his first period books, and closed it. When he turned to walk away, he saw that Wendy had moved up to stand behind him.

He was just about to say something when she slapped him, her face a mask of rage. "How could you *write* that!? Don't *ever* speak to me *again*, jerk!" She turned and stormed off, close to tears.

As she did so, Jack saw Ox grinning, wiping his hands clean, and nodding before the football player turned and walked away.

He didn't see Richard until lunch. When the two sat down together, Jack asked, "So... did you *see* it?"

"Yeah." Richard nodded. "I *know* it wasn't *you*. You know *who*?"

He shook his head as they started eating. "*Ox*."

Nodding around a fry, Richard's voice turned cold. "*Figures*. Something will have to be done."

"No *use*. Damage is *done*." A long silence followed before Jack continued. "*Still*... it would feel *really* good!"

"Come to practice this afternoon." Richard smiled.

That was all that was spoken of it beforehand. That afternoon, Jack was sitting in the bleachers again watching Richard. He also saw Ox, and then Wendy at cheerleader practice. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary until practice ended. When the players started gathering up their things, Ox ran up to Wendy. She only talked to him for a few seconds, for when he took off his helmet, she suddenly slapped him and stormed off; Ox standing there dumbfounded.

Turning toward his friends, he held out his hands in a wide shrug, only to see them laughing. Ox looked around confusedly before Jerry ran up to him. Ox put his hands on his forehead, then along his cheeks, wiping like mad. When Richard climbed the bleachers, he was smiling and chuckling.

With a confused look, Jack shrugged. "What *gives*?"

Laughing as he sat next to Jack, Richard calmed himself down enough to talk. "I have *art* for last period. While there, I grabbed some indelible black *ink* and painted the inside of Ox's *helmet*!"

Jack half-smiled. "OK, so he's in black-face for a few days. Why'd Wendy..."

His laughter growing, Richard put his hand on Jack's shoulder. "I painted *words*..."

"*Well*? What did it *say*?"

"On his forehead were the words 'Locker Artist'... *that's* what got *Wendy*! She knows who *did* it, and soon everyone else will, *too*! Then... on each cheek..." He couldn't stop giggling as he added, "I drew limp-dicks!"

Jack started laughing along with Richard before he noticed Ox coming and several others standing back on the field watching. Tapping Richard on the

shoulder as the younger boy's laughter died, they both got up quickly to face his wrath.

"You little *weasel!*" he screamed as he got close to the bleachers. "You're *dead!* Dead *meat* when I get up there!"

"*I* did it, *Ox!*" Richard barked back at him. "Serves you *right!* I hope you *never* live it down! You wanna take it out on *me?*"

"How long are you gonna keep standing up for this little *nobody*, Rich! The rest of your *life?* Why don't you let him fight his *own* battles!"

"Oh, I *do!*" Richard replied. "He fights *his* own battles... *and* mine... and I fight *my* own battles... *and* his! It's called *teamwork*, you *Neanderthal!* You should *try* it! You might be a better *player!*"

"What're you *queer* for this little *dork*, Rich? Is *that* it? Is *that* why Anne *dumped* you? 'Cuz you can only get it *up* for your *boyfriend?*"

"No, but I'd rather be queer for *Jack* than be as sick and sad as *your* lard ass!"

"You think this is *over?* Tomorrow it'll just be *worse!* I'll spray-paint the whole fucking *school* if I have to! And your queer little *boyfriend* will take the blame!"

While the two exchanged words, Ox was slowly climbing the bleachers while Richard was holding fast. He knew if Ox tried to start something, he and Jack had the advantage.

"Go ahead, *Lum-Ox!* Start something with someone that is in your *own* weight class! The two of us *combined* ought to match your fat ass! But fair warning, we've got the high ground and two-to-one odds! Just walk away!"

Ox looked at the two, both in a defensive stance. Surveying his surroundings, he realized he didn't stand a chance against both of them there. Grinning, he turned his face slightly. "*Jerry? Mike? Brad?* You guys go around in *behind* 'em! We'll squeeze 'em though the bleachers into paste!" He turned his head to look and saw that the only one standing behind him was their coach.

"I don't *think* so, Ox!" Coach Greg shouted up. "Get your fat ass *down* here!"

Defeated, Ox slumped his shoulders and slowly descended the bleachers. "Yes, Coach."

As the two smiled at each other, Coach Greg called them down while Ox walked toward the locker room. "Rich, I hate to do this, but I'm gonna have to drop you from the team. What you did, even if you had a good *reason*, can't be tolerated. I'm *sorry*."

Rich sighed. "It's *OK*, Coach. I was thinking of dropping this year *anyway*. Football isn't in my future, I think we *both* know that."

The two reached the field, Coach Greg nodding in agreement. "I think I understand. Look, I'll need to *report* this incident, but it means we know who the vandal was, so Ox won't get away scott-free. You can grab your stuff tomorrow. I don't want you in the locker room with Ox. Is that *clear*?"

"Yes, Coach." Richard said. "I know it's against some *rule* somewhere, but I just need you to know it was the right thing to *do*. *Do* you? *Know*, I mean?"

He reseated his cap before answering. "Well, I don't know if it was the *right* thing to do, but it sure was damn *funny*! See you *'round*, Rich!"

After that Richard and Jack headed home. When they arrived at Richard's house, he asked, "*Jack?* Could you come *in* with me? I... I don't wanna tell Dad *alone*."

Jack smiled. "I keep *telling* you! You *need* me!"

They walked in smiling as Richard called out, "*Mom!* I'm *home!* *Jack's* with me!"

Judith came out from the hallway. "*Richard!* I just got off the phone with your *coach!* He called me to tell me you've been *cut?*"

"Yeah." Richard nodded. "It's *OK,* though. I've had *enough* of football."

She turned to Jack. "Oh, and I heard about you and *Wendy,* Jack! I'm *sorry!* Still, there's lots of *other* girls at your *school!*"

"It's *fine,* Mrs. Hargrave." Jack half-smiled. "I'll get over it. Can I use your *phone?* I wanna call my mom and let her know I'm here so she won't worry."

"That's *fine,* dear. Use the one in *Richard's* room. Come with me, dear. Tell me what happened."

As Jack headed down the hall, he saw Erica looking out at him from her bedroom door.

"I... I'm sorry you got *hurt,* Jack." she offered as he passed her.

"*Thanks,* Buttons." Jack replied sadly. "I... I gotta call my *mom.*"

Erica watched him go into her brother's room through eyes that were starting to wet with tears, her heart breaking for Jack's sake.

"You *what?*" Judith asked.

Richard sighed as he paced the kitchen. "You don't *understand,* Mom! You don't know what he *did!*"

"What could Oscar have *possibly* done to deserve *that!*" she demanded.

"I'll *tell* you what! He spray-painted Jack's locker with the words, 'Couldn't Score With Slut Wendy!' So it makes it look like *Jack* wrote it to spite her by calling her a slut and frigid at the same time! Plus it makes *him* look like a loser! When Wendy saw it, she slapped *Jack!*"

Judith sat back down. "Oh, *Richard!* That's too *bad* about them, but what does that have to do with *you?*"

"His heart's *broken* and the whole school was *laughing* at him, Mom! I had to do *something* to even things up! So I set Ox *up*... made it so he would *confess* to the spray-painting in front of coach, *plus* get even with Wendy!"

"I can't conscience anything against the *Evans* girl, dear!" Judith shouted. "What's *her* comeuppance supposed to be for?"

"She *dumped* Jack for another *guy*, Mom! She filled his head with her *lies*, wrapped him around her little *finger*, *made* him fall for her, then *dumped* him when it got *boring!* She *deserves* to be called a *slut!*"

"She *is* a slut, Mom! I *told* you!" Erica growled from the kitchen entryway.

Judith was shocked. "*Erica!* Don't you *dare* use such language in this house! And you *either*, young man!"

The seventeen-year-old looked at his mother with a shocked expression, his voice dropping to a hush. "You *knew?*"

Their mother was struck speechless. "I... wh... a... *What?* Of *course* not! How could *anybody* know what would happen?"

Erica crossed her arms. "Because I *told* you it would, Mom! I told you on their *Prom* night!"

Judith stood up. "That's *enough!* I will *not* be spoken to in such a way! Now Erica you did *no* such thing! You repeated a *rumor*, which is bad *enough!* I want you to go to your room and *stay* there until Jack goes home and your *father* gets here!"

"*Mom!* I told you it was Wendy's *sister* who told me! She should *know!* She *lives* with her!"

"That's *beside* the point!" she defended her actions. "Nobody *knew* it would happen! I thought Jack would be *good* for the Evans girl, and *her* for *him!* Help settle her *down* and give him someone to *date* so..." She glanced at Erica and paused a moment to think of an excuse. "...so he wouldn't be *alone!* So, I put a bug in her ear about Jack and said that if she settled *down* with him, I'd see to it she had money for the summer to spend on their dates! You know her family goes to our *church* and I told them I'd help..."

"*What?*" Jack said, standing at the kitchen entrance next to Erica.

"*Jack!*" Judith gasped. "Oh, *dear!* I..." She tried to come up with another excuse, but Jack ran out their door before anyone could say another word.

Glaring at his mother, Richard's voice dropped to a growl. "My eighteenth birthday is in six *weeks.* I'll be out in *seven.*" At that he stormed out of the house to catch up with Jack.

Erica just glared at her mother. "You already *knew, didn't* you? Before I even *told* you that night! You *knew* and you let Jack go *months* thinking Wendy really *liked* him!" She shook her head and quickly stomped to her room, slammed the door, and began to cry for Jack, thoughts flitting through her mind and wondering if her mother had not interfered if he might have asked *her* to go with him to the Prom.

Richard ran toward Jack's house as fast as he could move. When he caught sight of him, he yelled out, "*Jack! Wait up!*"

Slowing his pace, Jack's whole worldview had exploded and all he wanted to do was go home and stay there.

"*Jack!*" Richard caught up with him and stood in front of him. "Please *stop!*"

"Get out of my *way*, Rich! You can *all* just go to *hell!*"

"You're *right!*" he agreed. Seeing that it had the effect he wanted, confusion, he waited a moment until he could catch his breath. "Mom... Mom *knew!* She knew... Wendy... was a flirt... and *God!*... She didn't... say anything... I don't... think I can... ever... forgive her for that!"

Jack started to understand more of the half conversation he'd overheard. "So, she... she tried to *use* me? To help Wendy's mom not be embarrassed at *church?*"

"Yeah." Richard nodded. "Erica knows Wendy's sister, Ruth. Ruth *told* her, and Erica told *Mom...* on *Prom* Night, Jack! She knew all *along!* When you came *over?* She could have told you *then!* She could have *warned* you, but she *didn't...* to help Wendy's parents be less embarrassed at *church!* She *used* you!"

Taking another moment to try and slow his breathing, Richard continued. "I... I told her that after my birthday, I'm moving *out.* They can't *stop* me once I'm eighteen. I'll be a legal adult."

"You... you're leaving home while still in school?"

Looking over his shoulder at Jack's house just down the block, he asked, "Why don't we go to your place?"

"Sure. Come on." Jack sighed.

The two walking in the door, Mary looked up at them as she sat crocheting in the front room. "*Jack, baby? Are you OK? You sounded so upset over the phone! I thought you were going to be at Richard's for a while.*"

Jack shrugged. "*I was, but then something... happened. I... I don't know if I can go back there again.*"

Mary looked at Richard for some explanation.

"It seems my mom *knew* that Wendy was a flighty slut, pardon the language Mrs. Dunning, and she could have *warned* Jack or me, but she goes to church with Wendy's parents and wanted to help them not be so embarrassed by their slutty daughter. So she set Jack up to date her by bribing Wendy, hoping Jack would make her settle down. It's like Mom didn't even *care* that it would hurt him if she dumped him like she did a lot of guys before!"

Slowly, Jack realized the context of the talk he'd had with Judith in her kitchen on Prom Night and just what was really going on. Just why she'd been so generous to make sure they had a good time, and why she had made Frank give him 'the talk' and all that extra money.

"Son of a..." Jack stopped himself. "*Sorry, Mom.*" Going to the kitchen table, they sat while Jack explained everything that had gone on that night.

"I can't *believe* it!" Mary said. "*Judith? Are you certain, sweetie?*"

Jack nodded. "*Positive. I remember that night perfectly. Every detail perfectly stored in my big, stupid head!*"

Chapter 4 - How Low Can You Go

Richard moved out of his parent's house in October of eighty-eight, just a few days after his eighteenth birthday while he still had most of his senior year left. He moved into Jack's house and got a part-time job after school to help with money. Jack used to say that after they moved in together was when their friendship saw its first real test.

It was a *really* hard time for them. Rich was working, Jack was depressed a lot of the time, and Rich's parents were calling him every day asking him to come home. Rich told me that by Christmas break things had hit their lowest point. Most of the details though I got from Jack and Erica.

High school is *supposed* to be about *learning* to deal with real life. Jack and Richard only got three years of that before they had to start *living* it. That year seemed to be a living hell that nearly ruined their friendship, and *more*.

Jack was brooding on the couch again. The last day before Christmas break he'd learned that Wendy was changing classes and she would be moved to his Government class at the start of the last semester. To make matters worse, his teacher Mr. Anderson always paired students for study and discussion. The first semester had been great. He'd been the odd student out, so he was solo and didn't *have* a partner. With Wendy joining the class, Mr. Anderson wouldn't want to split any of the existing study pairs, so he was *certain* he would end up being assigned as her partner.

"So much for *graduating!*" Jack grumbled.

Shaking his head, Richard was finishing getting ready for work at a local tire store. "*Look*, Jack. Why borrow trouble? If you end up being assigned together, there's nothing you can *do* about it! You'll just have to learn to *live* with it. It's only for a few *months*, then you'll never have to see her *again*."

"How would *you* like it if you got paired with *Anne*? Sound like a *picnic*?"

"Damn it, *Jack*! Quit *sulking* and grow *up*! I gotta *go*! See you *tomorrow*!"
Richard barked before slamming the front door on his way out.

Mary quietly came out of her bedroom. Since her schedule had changed to swing shift, she usually slept while the boys were at school. "Good afternoon, dear. I hear school was bad. Is there anything *I* can do?"

"No, Mom. I guess I just have to suck it up if I want to graduate in June."

"Are you still looking at joining the Marines with Richard after graduation?"

Jack stared at the living room ceiling. "I don't *know* anymore, Mom. I don't even know if Rich will stick around *that* long. I've sort of been getting on his nerves lately. I know I should try *harder*, but..." Jack sighed. "...I just... I don't *care* about anything anymore."

Sitting next to him, her voice trembled. "Sit up, Jack. I want to *talk* to you."

Without much enthusiasm, he slowly sat up. "*OK*, Mom. Let me *have* it."

"*No*, dear. This isn't a *lecture*. I want to talk to you about when your father died. Do you *remember* that?"

"How could I ever *forget*." he replied sarcastically.

Looking away from her son, Mary swallowed hard. "After the funeral, I... I knew I had to get a job, but I just couldn't seem to get out of the house to *do* it. It was... just too *hard*! I... I couldn't see the *point*. Why face that *hardship*? What made it *worthwhile*?" She looked back at him. "Sound *familiar*?"

"*Vaguely*." he quipped. "So how'd *you* do it, Mom? What magic gave *you* a purpose?"

"*You.*" she said simply.

"*Oh.* So, you saw I needed to be taken care of and did what you had to do?"

"*No,* I saw you needed the same thing *I* did... *purpose.* You were just as lost as I was. So I left the house so you *had* to do things for yourself."

"I don't see how this *helps.*" Jack sat back. "I mean, I *get* it. I was important enough to you that you had to make me find a purpose, which gave *you* a purpose, but how can *I* do the same thing?"

Mary's voice quivered again. "Jack, I'm not as young as I *used* to be. I... I'm getting *old* dear. I... I can't keep *working* much longer."

Sitting up, Jack really looked at his mother for the first time in many years. Intellectually, he knew she was sixty-five, but he'd never seen her look it so much as she did now. "*Mom?* I... I'm *sorry!* Sorry that I was ever even *born!* You shouldn't have had to put up with a *baby* at your age!"

"*No,* dear!" she cried. "I wouldn't trade being your mother for all the youth in the *world!* You were a true gift from *God!* Your father and I loved every *second* we had together with you! Don't *ever* think otherwise!"

Taking a deep breath, Jack began trying not to care about his own problems. All that mattered was his mother and seeing to it she was taken care of. "I... I'm *sorry,* Mom. I'm *really* glad you and Dad got to have your baby, and by *lucky* coincidence, it's was *me!*"

"Oh, *Jack!*" Mary laughed. "You always *could* make me smile! It's your *gift.* You know *just* what to say to put a little laughter in people's lives when they *need* it!"

"Comes from watching all those old TV shows with you and Dad! Comedy hasn't been the same since they took Uncle Miltie off the air!"

"So *that's* where you get it!" she joked.

"*OK, Mom. I get it. Turn that frown upside down, make lemons into lemon pie, make my smile my umbrella, put my shoulder to the wheel, get those high apple pie in the sky hopes, and so on, and so on.*" Taking another deep breath, he stood up, stretched, and headed for his room. "I have semester finals to study for, so I better get *cracking!*"

Mary smiled as she heard his door close. *Danny? He's hurting so badly. If there's anything you can do for our boy, he surely could use it soon!*

Jack dropped into his desk chair, his false optimism spent in his display for his mother's benefit. Thinking how he could help her with Wendy about to become his study partner only led to one conclusion. *I'm not gonna graduate anyway, so I might as well drop out and get a full time job so she can finally retire.* Failing to graduate was a huge blow to his ego. If there was a certainty in his life, it was that he would get his diploma and see Mary sitting there proud of him, but that was gone. They needed money and she couldn't earn it much longer. Richard's part time job only offset the higher cost of food and utilities he'd added to the household, so they were no better off than before.

Doing some quick math, he determined that the start of the spring semester should be his target for having a full time job that paid at least ten dollars per hour. Any less and they wouldn't be able to get by, let alone deal with emergencies. Jack then spotted the discrepancy. *There's no way for a high school dropout to get a ten-dollar job!*

A new despair straddled his shoulders. *Nice little catch-twenty-two! If I quit school, I can't get a good enough job for her to retire. If she doesn't retire, then I don't need to quit high school, but if I don't quit high school, I'll flunk out anyway and Mom can't retire.*

Now even more depressed, he sank into an apathy that would take a near catastrophe to shake him from it.

Richard walked in the front door to the Dunning home at eleven. Bone tired, he dragged his body down the dark hallway to the room he and Jack shared. When he opened the door and saw Jack passed out on *his* bed, not Jack's, it was the final straw. He kicked his bed.

"*Get up!*" he shouted. "*Jack!* Get your lazy *ass* out of my *bed!*" He reached down and jerked his friend up by the hair.

Jack was awake in the blink of an eye. "What the *hell!* Let go! That *hurts!*"

"That's *it!*" he yelled. "I've *had* it! I'm moving out of this *shit hole* and into somewhere *decent* enough to shower and *sleep* in!"

Only vaguely aware of his surroundings, Jack only knew that Richard was pulling his hair. Fighting back, he elbowed Richard in the kidneys, making him let go. The two boys stumbled in the mess of their room for a minute, each trying to punch the other's lights out. The only advantage Jack had was familiarity. He knew where to step in the clutter, while Richard scrambled for footing. The outcome was inevitable though.

Jack felt Richard's fist connect as he tried to escape over his bed. He had a feeling of falling, then he noticed that he really *was* falling. The last thing he saw was the corner of his nightstand racing towards his head.

Richard watched himself deck his best friend as if it were a scene in a movie that he was idly watching. When the blood splattered out of Jack's nose and he fell face first into the nightstand, Richard felt a moment of terror. The two blows *had* to have killed his only true friend.

He backed away from the body, every instinct in his brain telling him to run away as far and as fast as he could. Back to his parent's house, steal their car since it would have more than the five gallons of gas in his own used vehicle, drive all night, then just before they got up in the morning, abandon it somewhere out of sight and run until he dropped from exhaustion.

The only thing that stopped his flight was the desperate need to stand up to the worst enemy his best friend had ever faced; *him*. Looking down at his bloody fist and then his friend's apparently lifeless body, he saw Jack move. Just a ragged breath, but it told him that Jack was still alive and needed help.

Carefully, he moved Jack to the floor while supporting his neck and head. Remembering the first aid training they'd both received in ROTC, he knew what to do, making an improvised cervical collar by tearing up his pillow. Once Jack's neck was immobilized, he checked all his vital signs. He was breathing and he had a pulse, but he was unconscious; probably with a severe concussion.

He lifted Jack up off the floor gently, making sure to keep his neck and back straight, and carried him out to the station wagon he'd bought from his father the previous year for five hundred dollars. Sliding him carefully into the back seat, he buckled him down and got behind the wheel. Driving as fast as he could, he got Jack to the hospital in less than five minutes. The story he told them was the truth; they'd been fighting and he'd knocked Jack out. Confused by the obvious concern that Richard was showing to his alleged victim, they nevertheless followed procedure and called the police.

When Jack woke up, he knew something was wrong. His room was never this bright. The world now just consisted of a blanket of whiteness with nothing visible, not even himself. He vaguely recalled the nightmare he'd had of fighting Richard. He knew it couldn't have been real because if he ever fought his best friend, it wouldn't have lasted that long. Slowly, he became aware that his nightmare had turned into reality.

Or is this still part of the nightmare? he wondered.

He existed nowhere for an unknown amount of time with minutes seeming to stretch on for centuries. It let him think. He thought about his father, his mother, Richard, Buttons, Frank, Judith, Wendy... *everyone*. He seemed to have all the time in the world with nothing to do but think. He went over all

the things that had led him to that fatal point in his life where he'd driven his best friend to turn against him.

After spending a seeming eternity mulling it over, he eventually saw clearly that his entire life had turned on a single point; the day Richard stopped Ox from pummeling him in the lunchroom. Remove that one event and the entire thread of his life came apart. Then it was joined by millions of other events, each just as important as the rest.

He thought about God, his mind drifting aimlessly through scripture, some of which he was sure he'd never read before. He thought about his problems; school, work, and his mother's retirement. Then oddly enough, his thoughts drifted back to Buttons. *Always* around, always *underfoot*, always... *there*. She seemed one of the few constants in his life, as constant as his mother, Richard, or sunrise. Sometimes he could almost hear her voice, but then he would drift again and be thinking about Wendy or his mom.

When he thought about God, he wondered what He was waiting for. If this nightmare was real, then he must be in limbo waiting God's judgement. *But I've already been waiting forever. How much longer will it be?* he wondered. He tried talking to God. He asked questions that received no answers. He asked for an end to his unending nothing of an existence, but it never came. He thought about his life and all the bad things he'd ever done to anyone, and then he thought about all the good things he *could* have done and *didn't*. And his bodiless life wept.

Once during his eternal drifting, he thought he heard a voice. Not really a voice, but a half-remembered dream of a voice. It spoke nonsense, but it was definitely *there*. When it went away he drifted once more. Then it came back and it sounded somehow *familiar*, like remembering the voice of a person that only exists in your dreams. The words were *audible*, but too faint to *understand*. Listening to it, he tried moving towards it. Lacking anything to move, he tried just drifting towards it. It got clearer the more he did, but then the voice stopped and he would drift for another eternity.

When he'd almost convinced himself that the voice had never really been there, suddenly it was back again, but different... smaller... like he'd drifted too far away to hear it clearly anymore. So he tried again. He was sure that if he found the voice it would end his torment of eternity, but every time he tried to follow it, the voice would vanish once more.

The next time he heard it he ignored it. Then again... and again. When he couldn't stand it anymore, he begged for help from anybody that could, but nothing changed. Drifting once more, things became fainter... darker... and the voices disappeared. He figured that finally his eternity of torment was coming to an end and he was going to be allowed to drift off into oblivion; a fitting end for a boy who had cared so little for anyone but himself.

Eventually, the darkness took him and he was no more.

Jack stood in emptiness. It was different this time. It wasn't eternal drifting. It was more like a dream. He wasn't sure if the dead ever dreamed, but here he was, so they must.

"It's not a *dream*, son. And you're not *dead*!" the man's voice said.

Looking around, Jack couldn't see him. He couldn't even hear him. It was as though he just knew what the man was saying.

"You *can*." the voice said.

He tried to speak, but nothing worked. He was a nothing; not even a drifting consciousness.

"You *can* wake *up*, ya' know."

Finally able to recognize the voice of his dead father, he wanted to ask how to wake up, but didn't know how to even ask how.

"You just *did*."

Before he could even formulate the idea of a question, the answer was there.

"I *told* you! You're not *dead*, ya' *igit*! Don't you *wanna* wake up, Jack?"

"Yes." his thoughts formed.

"Then *do* it!"

"How?"

"*Want* to!"

"I *do*."

"*Horsefeathers*! If you *did*, you *would*!"

Suddenly, Jack saw his father, but it wasn't as he remembered him. It was more like an idealized version of him. He wasn't sure when the man appeared in front of him. It was almost as though he'd always *been* there, but he'd just failed to notice him.

"So what's holding you *back*, son?"

"Pain." Jack replied.

"*So what*! Push through it and it'll be *behind* you."

"Dad? Are you *sure* this isn't a dream? It *feels* like one... and you're *dead*."

"*So*? You think *that* matters, Jack?"

"You're saying I can wake up anytime I *want* to?"

"*Yup.*"

"So that means I don't *want* to."

"Now you've *got* it!"

The distant voice returned. It was small again.

"It's *people.*" his father told him, looking upward at the darkness as though he could see someone who wasn't there.

"*Real* ones?"

"*Yep...* and no, not *dead* ones!"

"So if I can..."

"You can't *will* it boy! You have to *want* it!"

"What if I want to be here with *you*?"

"Then eventually you'll *die*, and your life will have been a *waste*. That's not what I *raised* ya' for, *Jack!*"

"What did..."

"To *live*, dag *nabbit!* You *did*, for a *while*, but then you got *hurt* and you *died* again! People think living and dying are something ya' do only *once*, but there are a whole heap of people that're dead inside that walk around every *day!* They forgot how ta' *live!* Damn walking *corpses* with not a shred of life *in 'em!*"

"Will waking up and living *hurt*?"

"Like the *dickens*, kid! But it'll be *worth* it! 'Sides, you got *things* ta' do! So *git!*"

Jack listened to the voice again and for the first time, *wanted* to be with it.

"so... .. school... .. mom... .. Richie... .. trouble. I guess... love... .. never know."

Jack opened his eyes and they were stabbed with a light that cut like a knife. He quickly shut them again to try and stop the pain.

"*Jack?*"

He tried to speak, felt his tongue move, and was stabbed again by a knife, this time in his throat.

"I'll go get the doctor!"

With the voice gone and the light too painful to look at, Jack thought he'd drifted to the nothing place again. Then he heard footsteps and the voice.

"*See? Look! He's moving!*"

A sea of sounds assaulted his ears and he couldn't stop them. He wanted desperately to have the ability to close his ears the way he'd closed his eyes. The sounds blasted his eardrums until he thought he'd gone deaf. Then he noticed he hadn't. The sounds were just finally tolerable and sounded normal once more.

"*BP?*"

"One hundred over sixty."

"He's trying to talk. *Jack*? I'm Doctor *Marks*. You're in the *hospital*. You've suffered a severe concussion and neck injury. If you can understand me, try to open your eyes."

Jack tried to shake his head no, that he didn't want to open his eyes because of the pain, but his head wouldn't budge.

"He's getting agitated, Doctor. Pulse one fifty."

"Very well. Administer five CCs morphine."

Knowing that would knock him out, he forced himself to calm down.

"His rate's dropping."

Gathering all his nerve, he opened his eyes.

"*Jack!*" the small voice cried out. He was finally able to recognize that it was Erica Hargrave. *Buttons!*

"*Nurse!* Get her *out* of here, please!" the man's voice spat harshly.

Terrified that if Erica left he'd lose her voice and fall back into the nothing, Jack began to panic.

"Pulse rising *rapidly*, doctor. One forty."

"Wait! Nurse, bring her *back*."

"Pulse dropping."

"You want her to *stay*?"

He tried to nod, to no avail. He blinked.

"OK, once for yes, twice for no. Do you want the girl to stay?"

Blink.

"The *girl* has a *name*!" Erica snapped.

Blink.

"Do you *know* her name?" the doctor asked probingly.

Blink.

"Do you know who *you* are."

Blink.

"Do you know how you *got* here?"

Blink... blink.

"Do you know the *date*?"

Blink... blink.

"Alright he's breathing on his own. Let's remove the breathing tube. Nurse?
Alright... hold his head steady..."

The knife was carving into his throat again, and then just as suddenly it was gone. He moved his mouth ineffectually, trying to form words, but they wouldn't come out.

"Is... is Jack trying to *talk*?" Erica asked.

"*Yes* sweetie, but his throat is sore... very, *very* sore!"

Jack looked down with his eyes and for the first time could see something. Not exactly faces, but the sort of images that you think are faces but are just random patterns in things. Then the faces started clearing and Jack could make out details. Glasses over eyes. The one on the right was a woman. There was another face... smaller and farther away.

"Try to make a sound with your mouth. *Whisper*. Not your *speaking* voice."

"*Ouch!*" Jack whispered.

"*Jack!*" Erica giggled.

Smiling, Jack knew he'd used his gift the way God had intended him to. Becoming very tired, his eyes closed.

Some time later he woke up to the sound of his mother's voice.

"Thou hast set our iniquities before thee, our secret sins in the light of thy countenance. For all our days are passed away in thy wrath: we spend our years as a tale that is told."

"Thirsty." Jack whispered.

"*Jack!?* Here..."

Wetness touched his tongue again, slowly loosening it. "Thanks."

"*Jack* baby, do you know where you *are*?"

"Hospital."

"Do you know what *happened*?"

"Rich."

"Yes." she said, her voice hard. "He's under arrest for attempted murder."

"No!" he almost spoke.

"Jack, he tried to *kill* you!"

"No!"

"Well, what *happened* then?"

"Me."

"*You?*" she asked confusedly.

"*My* fault. *Selfish.*"

"*Jack*, someone being *selfish* isn't a reason to..."

"*Both...* fighting."

"You... you *hit* him?"

"*Poorly.*" he smiled.

Hearing his mother laugh brought tears to his eyes. "*Jack!*"

He tried nodding, but couldn't. "Can't move."

"You're immobilized, dear. Your neck was nearly broken. Richard... he immobilized you before bringing you to the hospital."

"Good thinking." Once more exhaustion overcame him and he fell asleep.

When Jack next awoke, he was alone. When he tried to move he found this time he was able to, lifting his head and looking around his room. Seeing he was in a private room with the second bed empty, he looked down and saw a remote control with a red button on it. He chuckled when it made him think of Erica. Reaching slowly, he grasped it and pressed, hoping that it was a nurse call button and not a trigger for an infusion pump. When he didn't fall asleep, he waited until the nurse came.

"Good afternoon!" she said cheerily. "I'm *Maggie*. You *need* something?"

"Water." he whispered. Once she'd handed him a cup, he tried swallowing. It hurt badly, but he endured it and it went away. "*Thank you.*"

"You're welcome..." she paused and looked at the foot of his bed. "*Jack!*"

"Where's my mom?"

"I believe your mother's gone home to rest. She's spent a *lot* of time here. A *lot* of people have."

"Phone?"

Maggie retrieved it for him and set it next to his right hand. It was an older phone with a rotary dial instead of touch-tone buttons. "Dial nine to get an outside line. Anything *else*?"

"No, thank you." he whispered.

After she left, he tried dialing his mother's phone number. It rang until he'd figured if anyone was home that they would have answered. Hanging up, he tried the Hargrave's house. This time, it connected.

"*Hello?*" Erica answered.

"Buttons!" he croaked.

"*Jack! Dad! It's Jack! You're all the way awake?*" she asked.

"*Ouch!*" he croaked again.

Hearing her giggle was like the ringing of angelic bells, until they stopped.

"*Jack? This is Frank. You alright, boy?*"

"Hurting. Where's *Rich?*"

"He... uh... he's in *jail*, Jack. Under arrest for attempted murder."

"Not *true*. He *saved* me."

"Jack, he *confessed!*"

"He *lied.*"

"*Listen*, Jack. I know you two had a row about something. That's none of my business, but he says he tried to *kill* you and was going to flee prosecution. He's being held without bail."

"But he *didn't*. He lied when he confessed. I hit him *first.*"

"Where? The police found no marks on him except on his right knuckles where he... well... bashed your face in."

"Elbow... kidney..."

"Hmm... he's been hit there so many times I doubt a single hit *would* show. Jack, are you saying it was self *defense?*"

"Yes... and an *accident*. Hit *nightstand*. Rich *saved* me."

"I'm going to talk with our lawyer. Would you *swear* to what you're saying?"

"Not *polite* to swear!"

"Alright, boy." Frank laughed. "I have to go. Do you *need* anything?"

"Mom? No *answer*."

"Oh. I... I think she's down in the chapel, there at the hospital. She spends a *lot* of time there. Anything *else*?"

"Buttons."

"You want *what*? Oh! Erica! Jack wants to talk to *you*, sweetie. Daddy's gonna make a phone call in the office. Talk to Jack."

"*Jack*?" she asked.

"*Hey* ya, Buttons. Wanted to ask you something."

"What?"

"Did you come in my hospital room and talk to me a lot?"

Silence filled the space between them. "Yeah." she finally said shyly.

"You *helped*."

"I *did*?"

"Uh-*huh*! You're my miracle girl! I *heard* you."

Again dead air filled the void. "Um... *all* of it?"

"No, just *pieces*. Couldn't tell it *was* you, at first. I think I heard *Mom* talking once, and a doctor... I *think*. Who all came to *see* me?"

"Um... a *lot* of people. Dad, Mom, me, *your* mom, they let Richie in once before he went to jail, and that *Wendy* twice, I think."

He heard the disdain in her voice at the mention of Wendy. "Don't *like* her?"

"She... she *hurt* you, Jack! Maybe even worse than *Richie* did!"

"Richie didn't *mean* to hurt me, Buttons. I told your dad that. He's calling his lawyer to try and get your brother out of jail."

"But Richie *told* me..."

"He *lied*. I hit *him* and then *fell*. Rich *saved* me."

"Jack, I... I told Richie that I *hated* him and never wanted to *see* him again because of what he told me he did to *you*."

"He'll *forgive* you, Buttons. He always *will*." Jack coughed painfully. Taking a sip of water, he said, "Can't talk much longer. How's everyone?"

"Mom moved out. Her and Dad had a *big* fight. She's staying with Aunt Edina. I... I think she went a little *crazy* after you got hurt."

"OK. I hope she's better soon."

"I thought you *hated* her, after she let Wendy hurt *you*."

"I want to forgive her. She didn't *mean* for me to get hurt."

"I don't know if I *can*. I *warned* her, and she let you date Wendy *anyway*."

"Buttons, I know you may not understand this now, but someday you will understand, I... I *had* to get hurt."

"*Why?*"

"I don't *know*. I just know I *had* to."

"Oh. Alright. If you *say* so. Doesn't mean I have to *like* it!"

"That's OK. I have to go, Buttons. Thanks again for helping me get better."

"*Jack?*"

"Yeah?"

"Can you just call me *Erica* from now on? *Buttons* is so... *childish*. After all, I'm *fourteen* now."

Jack did an unconscious double take. "Wait, *what?*"

"Could you just call me..."

"*No!* You're *how* old?"

"*Fourteen*. You were asleep through my birthday."

Afraid to ask, but more afraid of not knowing, he forced himself to ask the question. "How long... what *day* is it?"

"It's Sunday... um... February twelfth."

Slowly it came to him that he'd missed nearly two months of his life. "Gotta go, B... *Erica*. Bye." At that he hung up.

Erica heard him hang up before she dared say it. "I *love* you, Jack. I'll *always* love you! *Bye*."

Chapter 5 - Back to School

Rich didn't ever tell me much about the time he spent in jail. He just would say, 'It wasn't that bad, really.' and change the subject. When Jack told the police that he hit Rich first and refused to press charges on the assault, the DA dropped the pending charges. Jack told me he was contacted by the DA while in the hospital saying they had filed assault charges against *him*, but Rich pled the fifth because testifying against Jack would incriminate *himself*, leaving no witnesses and a really weak case. So in the end, the whole matter was dropped and neither one was convicted of anything.

Jack spent the next three months in physical therapy. The only thing that kept them afloat was the money that Frank Hargrave gave them to help out. Rich said his dad felt responsible for the whole thing because he did nothing to stop Judith from playing matchmaker with the neighborhood floozy, not caring if Jack got hurt in the process.

He took classes between therapy sessions by state appointed tutor until he was able to come back to school, but by then it was early April and there was less than ten weeks of school left. Richard had classes to make up from his jail time, so he had to quit his job and go back home to have any chance of graduating with his class.

Rich told me the most about when Jack finally was able to go back to school. Jack didn't like talking about it, but he had the best stories about the things going on *outside* of school.

Richard waited in his car. *If we don't leave soon we're gonna be late.* He was just about to go back in and check on Jack when he came hobbling out on his cane. The neck injury damaged some nerves and it was taking extra effort to get full mobility back in his legs, but the prognosis was good that he would be able to walk down the aisle for his diploma unassisted.

Richard got out and opened the car door for him.

"You don't need to *do* that, Rich. I'm not an *invalid*! Just a *cripple*!"

"I do if we want to make it on *time*. Hurry *up*!"

Jack slowly lowered himself into the seat of Richard's station wagon. Pulling the cane in, Richard slammed the door and ran to the other side. Jumping in, he sped off down the road toward their school.

"I know you're the *criminal* type, but I *would* like to get there in one *piece*!"

"Fine, *grandma*!" Richard smiled as he slowed to the posted speed and turned to look at Jack. "*Better*?"

"*Great*! Now just watch where you're *going*."

Parking in one of the school's handicapped spaces, Richard jumped out and helped Jack up on his feet and stayed with him until he reached the office.

"Are you OK from here?" he asked.

"*Yeah*, Rich! Go *on*! You don't want to be late, *too*! See you at lunch."

Waiting in the office to be admitted back into school, the recently promoted Principal Ford came out to greet him.

"Welcome *back*, son. Getting *around* OK?"

"Good as can be *expected*, sir. Had a little trouble getting ready this morning, so I'm running behind. Well, not *running*..."

Harry Ford laughed, his obese form shaking slightly. It was a simple deep laugh that was barely noticeable, but sincere. "That's *OK*, Jack. We'll see to

it you get where you need to go." He turned and snapped his bulky fingers. "Angie! Get Mr. Dunning here his re-admittance papers." He nodded slightly to Jack before slowly returning to his office.

Angie Green had been the school secretary for more years than anyone could remember. She quickly found the file and walked over to the desk. "Here's the form. Do you have your notice from the school district for your missed time?"

Slowly, Jack pulled it out of his pocket and handed it to her. "Sorry." he said as she impatiently snatched it from his fingers.

She looked him over. "You *seem* healthy enough. No *casts*."

Jack slowly shook his head. "Nerve damage, Ms. Green."

"What, were you hit by a speeding car?"

"Nightstand." Jack retorted with a smile.

She almost just accepted the answer, but then did a double take. "You were hit by a speeding *nightstand*?"

"Fell on it. Almost broke my *neck*." he answered seriously.

"Oh." she replied. "Well, give me a minute and I'll get your pass and you can run off to class."

"Nice trick if you can manage it!" Jack yelled after her.

The rest of the morning passed uneventfully. Getting around was slow, but Jack had gotten used to that. He was beginning to wonder if he would ever be fully mobile again as he made his way to the lunchroom, finally seeing Richard sitting at their usual table with three trays.

"*Jack!* I already have your lunch!" he yelled.

Lowering himself into his seat, he looked at the trays. "*Hungry* much, Rich? I know *I* can't eat all that! You need me to do something to curb your appetite again?"

"No." Richard looked down. "I got you your usual and this tray's mine."

Jack looked at the third tray curiously. "Will our mystery guest enter, and sign in, please?" he said, quoting a line from an old TV show.

"*Jack?*"

Turning slowly to look behind him, Jack's heart fluttered. "*Wendy.*" he said coolly, turning back to his tray.

The girl sat down with space between them, not wanting to sit too close. "Jack, I... I wanted to talk to you. I hope you don't *mind*. I asked Rich to arrange it."

"Well, I seem to be a captive audience, seeing as I can't outrun either of you two." He picked up a fry and slowly chewed it.

She laughed a little, but soon the awkwardness started to build.

"Jack, I wanted to tell you I'm sorry." she began. "I... I was *really* upset when I heard you got hurt. I went to the hospital a couple times to see you. I've been doing a *lot* of soul searching and... well... I was *really* unfair to you! When I got back from my vacation last year, I... I *lied* to you. I never *found* anyone in Florida. I let Anne and Beth talk me into dumping you."

Jack dropped his half-eaten fry. "*Anne*. Figures. That girl is like Typhoid Mary. Everywhere she goes she spreads just a little ray of her particular brand of sunshine."

Richard sighed. "I know you have a lot of reasons to *hate* her Jack, but..."

"I *don't* hate her." he said emotionlessly as he resumed eating.

"Well it sure *sounds* like it! Typhoid *Mary*?"

"I'm out of *practice*. I'll come up with a funnier joke on next week's show."

"Jack, I... I wouldn't *blame* you if you hated *me*." Wendy looked down ashamedly. "I guess I was just too willing to go along with whatever other people think, but I hope someday you can forgive me for being so *stupid*."

"You're forgiven, Wendy. And I *don't* hate you." Jack said around a fry. "I don't have the strength to be carrying around all the grudges I *could*. I... I owe *you* an apology, *too*."

She looked at Jack in surprise. "You have *nothing* to apologize for, *Jack*! You didn't do *anything* to deserve the way I treated you!"

"It's not about what *you* did, it's about what *I* did, and what I *didn't* do that I *should* have." Jack sighed. "When I asked you to be my girlfriend, I *knew* you only said yes to go along, but I didn't try and stop you. I *let* it happen when I *knew* I shouldn't because I *wanted* to believe it. Then when you broke up with me, I took a *grotesque* amount of joy at you being *humiliated* by Ox. I hope you can forgive me."

Wendy was taken aback. "Well, I... uh... I guess I can forgive that. I hurt you pretty *bad*, so I *understand*. I thought some pretty horrible things about you too, and I... um... well... I *said* some pretty bad things, *too*."

"Anything I can't live *down*?"

"*Probably*." she answered honestly. "I don't think you'll be getting a date for Senior Prom, and *that's* my fault, *too*."

"That's OK, I probably won't be able to dance by then anyway." he joked.

Deciding it was his turn to speak, Richard was much less forgiving. "Wendy, *he* may forgive you, but I *don't*. I don't think I *ever* will. I had to sit by and watch as Jack spiraled down into the *worst* state of depression *possible* and not be looking to eat a *bullet*. First of all, I don't *believe* you when you say you're sorry. If you really *were*, you'd ask for him *back*. I think you were just *bored* with Jack because he didn't have a fancy car or lots of dough to throw at your feet after my *Mom* stopped *paying* you to date him."

He took a moment to let what he was saying sink in. "Second, even if what you say is *true*, your inability to just tell Anne to 'ef off' like *I* did when she made *me* chose between her and Jack caused him *so* much pain and suffering that I don't think there's enough forgiveness in the *world* for you. I honestly hope you rot in *Hell* for what you did to him!"

Wendy held back her tears. "I... I understand. I don't *blame* you. You're *right*. I'm *still* letting her tell me what to do. Why did you even set this up for me?"

He stared across the table at her with boiling anger in his eyes. Keeping his voice low, Richard practically growled his response. "Because this isn't about *you*, Wendy! It's about *Jack*! *He* needed closure and told me last week that he wanted to apologize to *you* for giving you what *I* think you *deserved*! I may think he's *crazy* for wanting to apologize, but I'll be *damned* if I was gonna stand in his *way*! He *deserved* it!"

Standing slowly, Wendy picked up her tray. "I... I guess I deserved that, *too*." Turning to Jack, she smiled slightly. "I do *honestly* wish you all the best, Jack. Just for the record though, I said yes because I really *wanted* to. It... it was the *one* time I did something because it was what *I* wanted to do, not because someone *else* did, and *not* just because Mrs. Hargrave offered to pay me. I... I know I took her *money*, and then broke up when she *stopped*, but I really did *want* to like you. I won't bother you anymore." Carrying her tray away, she dumped it in the trash uneaten, running from the cafeteria in tears.

"You should *forgive* her, Rich. If not for *her* sake then for *yours*." Jack said.

"I don't *get* it!" Richard answered back. "You spend four months in *misery* because she *flakes* on you, and now you're all *philosophical* about it?"

"A little thing called perspective." he answered, pushing his pizza around with a fry. "When I was *out*, I was still *thinking*. I could even sometimes *hear* people. Couldn't *understand* them for shit, but I *heard* them. It was like a hundred eternities there. You can do a *lot* of thinking in *that* much time."

"So, *Dali Lama*. What's the word from on high then?"

"Drop your baggage. A laugh is worth more than gold. Forgiveness isn't for the person that *screwed* with you, it's for *you*. When you see a chance to do some good, don't pass it up. When you have the chance to get even, don't."

Richard shook his head. "Sounds *easy*, but also sounds *impossible*."

"That's when you forgive *yourself*, for the crime of being an imperfect and flawed human being." Jack smiled. "To boil it all down, cut yourself and everyone else some *slack*!"

As time wore on however, Jack started to find it harder and harder to keep his new outlook. It seemed the stronger his body got, the weaker his new attitude became. He became increasingly agitated over a very short time, and after six weeks Richard sat with him to talk again.

Hearing a knock on the garage door, Jack turned to look and saw Richard smirking at him.

"What's so damn *funny*?" Jack asked as he put down the five-pound weight.

"*You!* *That's* what. Working *out*? Aren't you afraid you're going to ruin that marvelously gelatinous *physique* of yours?"

Jack shook his head. "*Can* it, Rich! I need to do my P.T. if I ever wanna be *normal* again."

"*Bull!*" Richard laughed as he walked into the garage that had become Jack's physical therapy room. "You're doing *way* more than the therapist required. Free-weights? Who do you think you're *kidding?*"

"*OK!* So I want to be more than a ninety pound weakling my entire life! Is that so *terrible?* Besides, I need to be in *some* sort of decent shape to pass MEPS." Jack said between breaths. Wrapping a towel around his neck, he walked over to the weight machine that Richard's father had bought him.

Richard stood and walked around the garage, seemingly at random. "No, I suppose it's fine, but your attitude is changing with your newly discovered muscles. Just a few weeks ago you were all Zen and *peaceful*. Now you bite my head off for a simple *question*."

Lying down, Jack started leg lifts. "You want to talk about *my* attitude? *Fine*. Lets talk about *yours* while we're at it. Don't you think you're about done walking on *eggshells* around me all the time?"

"*Fine!*" Richard barked. "Let's drag it all out then! I nearly *killed* you, Jack! Over you falling asleep on my bed! What does that *say* about me?"

He stopped lifting and looked at Richard. "Well, for starters it says no one should *ever* screw with your sleeping arrangements!"

"Knock it off, Jack! I'm being *serious!* Can't *you* be? Does everything always have to be one big freaking *joke* to you?"

Jack stood up slowly. "OK, lets *be* serious. You nearly killed me. OK. So *now* what? What to you want me to *do*, Rich? *Hate* you for it? *Yell* at you? *Punch* you? I was being a self-centered bum and you *know* it!"

"Alright *fine*, Jack! *Yes!* I *want* you to hate me! I want you to *yell* at me! Hell, *take* a free punch! You *owe* me one! But your Zen halo is slipping and that self-centered jerk is starting to come back!"

"*Bum*, not *jerk*." Jack nit-picked.

"*Whatever!* God! Jack, you can't turn it off, *can* you? Always the *comedian!* Always need to go for the quick laugh!"

"It's who I *am*, Rich! Haven't you figured that *out* by now?"

"What are you *hiding* from, Jack!?"

"*What? Now* what are you going on about?" Jack looked at him perplexed.

"I'm talking about *you!* About your always-on *comedy* routine! You're *hiding*, Jack! Hiding from something that's been scaring you since before I even *met* you! Now the comedy bit isn't *enough!* You're hiding in this *room!* Hiding behind physical *therapy!* Hiding behind your near-death experience that *seemed* to put you at peace for a while, but now you act like you've totally *forgotten* about it!"

"Hard to forget an eternity floating around with nothing to do but *think.*"

"So *talk* to me about it!"

Jack laughed. "*Sure*, pull up a chair! Have ya got a few thousand years to spare? That'll cover the *beginning.*"

"It was an *illusion*, Jack! Drugs messing with your head and sense of time!"

He stormed up to Richard, his eyes burning with anger. "No it *wasn't*, Rich! Drugs can't let you contemplate your life a few hundred times! It was *real!*" He stared at his friend a moment before turning away. "It was *terrifying.*"

"What was so damn *scary*?"

"*Me! That's* what! I looked my life over a hundred ways and it all added up to one thing! *Nothing!* Just a big waste of time!"

Sitting down on the free weight bench, Richard looked at Jack. "What did you *expect*? You're only *seventeen*, dude! What, you thought by now you'd have cured *cancer* or something?"

"It's not *just* that!" Jack snapped back. "It's like my whole life is just some big *joke!* Joke of the universe! The world's biggest situation comedy! God wanted to see what would happen if he gave an old infertile couple a baby! *Hilarity* ensues! Ha! *Ha!*"

Sighing, Richard stood up. "So *that's* it? *That's* what's been eating you up? You were born to an *old* couple?"

"Mom's *sick*, Rich!" Jack barked. "She won't tell me what's wrong, but I can see it in her eyes! She's *dying!* Dying of old age or something and her only child isn't even out of *high school* yet!"

Silence hung in the air while the two friends looked at one another, whole volumes being spoken without a word.

Walking over to Jack, Richard put a hand on his shoulder. "I... I'm sorry, Jack." He wrapped his arms around his buddy and hugged him. "Is there anything I can *do*?"

Jack strained just trying to not cry. "No. I don't even know what *can* be done. Like I *said*, she won't *talk* to me about it." Jack let Richard go and walked around the room like a caged animal. "I just feel so... so *useless!* On top of all *that*, I have no outlet! Nothing *fun* to look forward to! *Ever!*" Jack sat and looked at the floor. "So anyway, how've *you* been?"

"Can't complain." Richard shot back. "Oh, there's the *usual* things. Money, girls, school, girls, graduation..."

"...girls!" they said together.

"Have a date for the *Prom*?" Jack wondered.

"No." Richard shook his head. "Doesn't seem to be in the cards, anyway. *Ah!* It's not important. Just the end-all be-all that everyone and their mother has been hammering on for *weeks* about. Nothing *too* important, though."

"*Yammering*, not *hammering*. Don't corrupt the language." Jack half-smiled.

"No, I mean *hammering*! After the *thousandth* time someone asks you '*Have a date for the Prom?*' the words start to feel like a hammer beating into your *skull!*"

"Guess I'm *lucky*." Jack commented. "No one has even brought it up to me."

"Think they're afraid how you'll *react*. You tend to have a viscerally negative response to any and all mention of the word 'Prom', for *some* reason."

"Gee, can't imagine *why!* My *last* one ended just *marvelously*, didn't it?"

"You seemed to think so at the *time*, gut punches excluded, of course."

"Hindsight, my boy. *Hindsight*. If I had to do it all over again... Ah, hell! Who am I kidding? I wouldn't change a *thing!*" he laughed.

"*Really?* Why not?"

"Part of my eternal self analysis." Jack looked over at Richard. "I figured out that *every* part of my life was important, *especially* the bad stuff. I *need* it or else I wouldn't be *me*, I'd be someone else... and I *like* me."

"Wow, Jack! That's... *profound!*"

"I'll try not to make a habit of it. The wear and tear on my poor bruised body to *get* me there is *murder!*"

"So then... *not* going?" Richard asked nonchalantly.

"Going?"

"To... the... Prom!" Richard sounded out each word slowly.

Flinching like he'd just been slapped, Jack looked away. "Oh, *that!* Well let's see... I don't have a *date*, I don't have a *tux*, I don't have *tickets*, I don't have money to *get* tickets, don't have a way to *get* there or *back*... There's literally no end to the list of things I *don't* have in order to go to this clam bake, so... *maybe?*"

"I was talking to your mom the other day and she's worried about you. She seems to think you *should* go."

Picking up the five-pound weight again, Jack started exercising his other arm. "I really don't want to disappoint her, but I just don't see it *happening*, Rich. I would have had to start preparing for it a while ago. *Days* even!" He stopped working out and looked at Richard. "You're *driving* at something."

"Who? *Me?*" Richard looked astonished.

"OK, let's start with who."

"*What* who?"

"You expect me to go *stag* to this thing? *Who?* You obviously have *someone* in mind or you wouldn't have brought it up. A *name!* I assume this girl *has* one." Jack looked sideways at Richard. "It is a *girl*, isn't it?"

"If you asked her, I bet your dear *Wendy* would go with you." Richard's voice dripped with loathing as he spoke her name.

"*Ugh!* No more *pity* dates! You don't have to say her name like it's 'Hitler', either. You gotta let that *go*, man. It'll eat ya' up inside."

"Fine. Is there anyone you *want* to go with?"

Jack sighed as he put the weight down once more and stretched his arm. "I'm sorta out of the *loop*. I don't know who's *available* to turn me down. So... no, but like I said, I *know* you, Rich. You already *have* someone in mind, don't you."

"You wouldn't consider a blind date would you?"

"Oh, that would be *great!* I can see it now. '*Daddy? Who did you take to the Senior Prom?*' '*Well, I never really caught her name, sweetie.*' I don't *think* so."

"And stag's *right* out?"

"With the *trash.*" Jack answered as he started to put away the weights.

"You could always go with my *sister!*" Richard joked.

"*Buttons!* Don't be *grotesque*, Rich! She's not a *girl!* Not one someone *my* age should be staying out *late* with, anyway. Or *any* age really until she's at least *eighteen!* I'd get arrested for violating her *curfew* or contributing to the delinquency of a *minor* or something! I mean, don't get me wrong... I *love* Buttons... but she's your *sister!* Taking Buttons would make me one of those *creepy* guys! Besides, she just thinks I'm her brother's weirdo friend! *Next?*"

"Hmm... it *does* present a problem. I don't suppose you could, ya know, *trust* me or anything." Richard asked.

"Of *course* I would!" Jack stated obviously. "Who is the *hero* in this story? *You!* I'm just your professional *victim*, remember?"

"So that's it then. You're going to the Prom and I'll take care of *everything*."

"With a date, that's not a blind date, and actually *wants* to go with me?"

"Yep."

"Tickets? Dinner? *Money*?"

"Yep, yep, and yep."

"*Transportation*? That clunker of yours won't *cut* it. If you are so fired up for me to go to this dog and pony show, I want a *nice* ride. Go in *style* for once!" Jack walked toward the door to the garage.

"Doable. So it's settled, then?"

"One other thing..."

"Oh, here it comes! The *caveat*. I *knew* you wouldn't make it *that* easy."

Jack stood next to the door, blocking it. "Nothing like *that*. It's just..."

"Spit it out, boy!"

"When *is* Prom? Honestly, I don't *know*! I've been a little... *preoccupied*."
Jack gestured to the collection of weight machines.

"Oh! It's tomorrow night." Richard said nonchalantly.

Jack chuckled. "*Pushing* it a little aren't you? What if I'd said *no*?"

"Never would have *happened*." he dismissed the idea. "What? You think I didn't know I could needle you into it when I came *in* here?"

"I suppose you're *right*. After all, you *did*!"

After a Saturday afternoon trip to the barber, Jack was pleasantly surprised that by four Richard had brought him his tuxedo. By five Jack was sitting in his living room ready to be picked up. He found himself wishing Mary was up, knowing she would be getting more out of this than *he* was, but she'd been in her bedroom all day, only coming out to have breakfast. She seemed tired, distracted, and unfocused. Jack wondered how long it would be before she wouldn't even be able to take care of *herself*, let alone *him*.

Hearing a car pull up, he looked out the window to see a black limousine parked in front of his house. Richard had come though so far and now Jack found himself anxious to find out who his 'not a blind date' was. He figured it *must* be a girl he knew, but had never considered, but he quickly dismissed that idea as he believed there was no such thing as a girl he didn't consider.

When he heard Richard knock, he quickly opened the door. "*Rich!* Looking *good!* Where's the *girl?* We need to go pick her up?"

"*Anxious* much, Jack?" Richard shook his head. "And no, we don't need to go get her. She's here."

"Well, why didn't you ask her *in?*" Jack scowled at him.

"Because you need to ask her *out*, dear!"

Jack turned at his mother's voice and was stunned by the sight that greeted him. His mother was wearing a beautiful pink satin gown. It was obviously not a modern design, one that was more reminiscent of the fifties than the eighties. Gone was the gray of her hair, now tinted the blonde he'd seen in pictures of her from before he was old enough to remember, and she'd done

her makeup beautifully. Altogether she looked twenty-five years younger, and she looked stunning.

"Well, dear? How do I *look*?" she asked, turning in place.

Jack smiled his half-smile and turned to Richard. "My mother. *My* mother. *My mother!* No matter how I *say* it, it keeps coming out the *same!*"

Mary frowned, thinking that she'd made a horrible mistake in agreeing to this with Richard. "Dear, if you'd..."

Jack turned around and looked at her. "It keeps coming out '*wonderful!*' Mom, you look *beautiful!*"

"Thank you, dear." she smiled, blushing at the compliment. "So you wouldn't *mind* taking your Senior Mom to the Senior Prom?"

"Oh, *Mom!* You need to quit stealing my *jokes!* You keep this up and I'll have to start stealing *Berl's* stolen material to *impress* you! Where did you get the *dress?*"

"Do you *like* it? I haven't worn this since my fifteenth high school reunion! I know it's sort of old-fashioned. Will it *do?*"

"It looks *beautiful* on you, Mom! Don't *you* think so, Rich?"

He nodded. "So you two about ready?"

Slipping her arm around her son's, Mary nodded. "Whenever *you* are, dear."

The three made their way to the waiting limo. Climbing in and waiting to be taken to the dance, Jack turned to his mother. "Well, I won't have a girl I can make out with, but I think I'd rather be going with *you* than anyone I know." He sighed sadly. *At least I know she won't break my heart.*

"You better *not* try anything!" his mother joked, nodding toward Richard. "Our chaperone would be *quite* put out!"

"To say the *least*!" Richard added. "You two start *kissing* and I might just blow a *gasket*!"

"No worries *there*, Rich." Jack chuckled. "Don't get me *wrong* Mom, you look *gorgeous* tonight, but I just don't think I could look past the whole *Mom* thing. Oedipus, I *ain't*!"

"Can we change the *subject*, please?" Richard begged.

Arriving at the two teens' Prom, the three were shown to their table, each guest being grouped by request for the dinner that would precede the dance. Several of Richard's friends came by, offering for him to join them, but he kept refusing, choosing instead to stay with Jack and Mary no matter what.

After dinner, when Richard declined a dance for the third time, Jack scooted over to him and lowered his voice. "*Look* Rich, it's OK to have fun *without* me. This is your Senior Prom, *too*! You should *enjoy* it! After all, you're *paying* for it!"

"It *fine*, Jack." Richard insisted. "I just wanna make sure you're having a good time, is all."

"Richard?" Mary interrupted. "Go tell that pretty brunette that was just here that you've changed your mind and would *love* a dance." When the two of them looked at her surprised, she blinked back at them. "*What?* You two aren't *nearly* as sly as you *think* you are!"

After Richard got up and left to ask Sherry for a dance, Mary looked at her son. "You know, it's OK for *you* to ask someone to dance, *too*. Don't let *me* being here stop you from having a good time. I think you *deserve* it after all you've been through."

"Mom," Jack began. "I'm *glad* you're here! I want to spend time with *you*, not *these* jerks. Besides, I've wanted to talk to you for a while now." Taking a breath, he let it out slowly. "When I was in the coma, I... I saw *Dad*."

Mary drew in a sharp breath. "*Jack!* Why didn't you *tell* me?"

"Because I didn't want you to think your son had stripped his *gears*, Mom!"

"*Nonsense!*" she slapped his hand lightly with her gloved hand. "I would *never* think that!" Sighing, she looked at him. "Did he *say* anything?"

"Sorta." he replied shyly. "He... he helped me get *back* to you. I was *lost*, for a *really* long time. It... it felt like forever a dozen times *over*. I did a *lot* of thinking, not much *else* to do for eternity, and I... I learned a lot about myself. I haven't been a very good son to you over the years. I... I was... *embarrassed*... by *you*. I feel so ashamed for even *admitting* that."

"Jack, it's *alright*." she said, taking his hand in hers. "I... I *understand*. Your father and I were a *lot* older than your classmates' parents. It's part of the reason we never got involved in your school activities. We didn't... didn't want to *embarrass* you. So we let you do your *own* thing. I was so *happy* when you became friends with Richard! Your father and I were worried that we'd raised you such that you wouldn't be able to relate to your peers."

"You don't need to worry about it, Mom. I *don't* relate to them, but I don't *care!* I don't *want* to dance with any of these girls! They're all vapid and as shallow as a sidewalk puddle! I'm happy being *me*, and I wouldn't change it for *anything!* I think you and Dad did a *great* job of raising me, and even after Dad..." Pausing, he cleared his throat. "Well anyway, you're the *perfect* mother!" Hearing '*Songbird*' begin, he stood and extended his hand to her. "And I would *love* a dance with my perfect mom!"

"Are you *sure*, dear?" she asked concerned. "I... I wouldn't want you to *hurt* yourself. I know even *walking* is still hard for you."

Jack looked at the dance floor. "I *think* I can manage a dance or two, so long as it's slow like *this!*" He looked back at her. "*Please?*"

Taking his hand, Mary rose graciously. "I'd be *delighted*, young man!" she sighed as she followed him out onto the dance floor. As they danced together simply, she sighed. "You're a *fine* dancer, dear. How did you get to *be* so good? I know *I* didn't teach it to you! I'm *terrible!*"

"You're a *great* dancer, Mom!" Jack said defensively. "Are *you* having a good time? I know the songs they're playing aren't exactly off the *Hit Parade*, but *some* are kinda nice, don't you think?"

"Well, I like *this* one!" she smiled. "Reminds me of Benny Goodman!"

Continuing to dance, Jack laughed. "You know it's funny? I feel more at home with Benny Goodman, Uncle Miltie, Burns and Allan, Bing Crosby, Bob Cummings, and *those* people than *anyone* today. It's like I can *relate* to them better!"

Smiling, Mary shrugged. "*Well* then, I guess it was right when your father and I named you *Jack!* Did we ever tell you who you're named for?" Seeing him shake his head curiously, she laughed. "It was your *father's* idea! You're named after Jack Benny!"

"Funny, I feel more like Jack *Lemon!*" he chuckled, making Mary laugh along.

Swaying slowly to the tenor sax, Mary's smile slowly melted. "Thank you for tonight, Jack! I... I really wasn't sure about Richard's idea to have me be your Prom date, but I'm *glad* he talked us into it! I... I think we *both* needed it more than either of us will ever admit, each for our *own* reasons."

Furrowing his brow, Jack looked at her quizzically. "OK, I'll bite. I know why *I'm* happy to be here with you. Why did *you* need tonight?"

Gulping, Mary couldn't look her son in the eyes as she said it. "I... I saw the doctor a few days ago, Jack. I... I'm in the early stages of *Alzheimer's*, dear. Very soon, I... I won't be *able* to do things like this anymore. I just hope I can still *remember* tonight! It's been *wonderful*, Jack!"

Stunned at the revelation, Jack stopped dancing a moment before picking up again. "OK, Mom. Did... did the doctor give you any sort of idea how long before..." stammering to a stop, he couldn't ask without breaking down.

"It's *OK*, Jack!" Mary comforted him. "I have a while left! *Years*, with any luck! I might still be able to see my *grandchildren*, if you hurry!"

"Fat chance of *that*, Mom!" Jack chuckled. "Not with *these* girls, anyway! I'd have to meet someone *really* special. Someone who *gets* me and doesn't have any ulterior motives. I... I just want a girl that loves *me*... not what they can *get* out of me or who thinks they can make me *better*. None of the girls *my* age fit the bill."

"Then maybe you need to broaden your *horizons*, Jack." Mary offered.

"What?" he asked with a half-grin. "Date *older* women? No *offense* Mom, but I need to stick to girls between the ages of fifteen and twenty! You don't want your son to be accused of *cradle robbing* or falling for *Mrs. Robinson*, would you?"

"That's not what I *mean*, dear." she admonished his jumping to conclusions. "I mean, maybe there's *someone* for you that you've never *considered*, for one reason or another. Men *often* think a girl is unattainable or uninterested, even when all she wants is *him*. Your *father* was that way. I practically had to club him over the head before he realized I was in *love* with him!"

"*OK*, Mom!" Jack conceded. "I *promise* I won't put *any* girl on my 'out of bounds' list!"

When the song ended, they made their way back to the table, seeing Richard there with Sherry. Jack's benefactor stood for Mary as she sat back down, noting his friend's limp. "Do you need me to run back home and get your cane, Jack?"

Shaking his head, Jack grimaced as he sat back down. "It's *fine*, Rich. I don't know that I'll be dancing much more tonight, though."

"Oh, by the way." Richard noted. "This is Sherry. Sherry? Jack and Mary."

"Mary and Sherry," Jack commented. "Sounds like a *vaudeville* team!"

Sherry looked at him with a puzzled expression as Mary laughed. "A... *huh*?"

"Never *mind*." Jack shook his head. "Before your *time*."

"Yours *too*, dear." his mother added mirthfully.

"Not in my *heart*, Mom."

When the next song began, Richard and Sherry headed for the dance floor once more. Dancing together, Sherry asked, "So why is Jack here with his *grandmother*? Isn't that a little... *odd*?"

Defensive of Jack, Richard stopped dancing. "No it's *not*. And she's his *mom*, not *grandmother*." Taking a moment, he started dancing again and tried to explain. "Jack was in the hospital from December until last month, so he never got a *chance* to ask anyone. Besides, his mom isn't *doing* well. She... well, let's just say this might be her last chance at a fun night *out*."

"*Oh!* I didn't mean... oh, *shoot!*" Sherry admonished herself.

"Don't beat yourself up over it. You're *new*. Jack and I have been friends all through high school. He's a good guy."

"He *seems* sort of... well... *different*. I don't mean in a *bad* way, just... kind of... *geeky*!"

"He's just *Jack*." Richard shrugged. He spent the rest of the dance telling her how they'd become friends, Jack's unusual upbringing, and by the time they were heading back to the table, had just explained about Wendy.

"He must be pretty torn up." Sherry commented as they stopped near their table. She looked over at her other new friends. "Say, listen. I... I need to spend some time with the girls, but I'd like to get *together* sometime, if *you* would."

Jack smirked. "He says 'Yes'! *Right*, Rich?"

Turning from Sherry to Jack, Richard scowled. "I can answer for *myself*, thank you!" Looking back at her, he nodded and smiled. "I'd *like* that!"

While Sherry left to join her friends and Richard started to sit down, Mary stopped him. "*Richard*, you should go *with* her."

"But..."

With an exasperated sigh, Mary explained things to him. "*Richard*, when a girl says she wants to spend time with you, then leaves, she wants you to *follow her*! *Trust* me on this! I used to *be* a girl!"

"Get *lost*, Rich!" Jack smiled. "Go *on*! Who *needs* ya'!"

"*You* do, remember?" Richard shot back. "Who *else* is going to bail you out of trouble all the time?" he quipped before turning to follow her.

Chapter 6 - Graduation and Beyond

Jack told me a story once about things that he said happened later that night, but Rich insisted that he was exaggerating, so I don't know *what* happened after that, really. Jack says Anne made a scene, trying to tell Jack to leave and quit *embarrassing* himself by taking his mother to the Prom, but Rich says she only wanted to make peace now that school was ending. I don't know what the truth is, but I suspect Rich was just defending her out of his sense of loyalty. He could be like that sometimes. Besides, he still put almost all the blame on Wendy and his mom. He never *said* so, but *I* think he always believed that Wendy broke up he and *Anne*, not vice versa.

Their graduation was apparently as uneventful as they usually are. There was apparently a party afterwards, but both of them said it was boring and not worthy of a story. Just things that happened, but then I think a lot of life is that way... just things that *happen*.

In the weeks that followed, Jack was working at his physical therapy. He said he was concerned that the Corps wouldn't *take* him due to his injury, but in the end, with Rich's help, he passed MEPS and, with his mother's signature, headed off to Paris Island in July while he was still seventeen.

Boot is Boot, so telling you what it would have been like for them isn't really telling you about *them*. It wasn't until they came home after MCRD and before heading out for SOI that things got interesting.

Jack walked in the front door of his mother's home, shuddering from the cold October morning. He was in his uniform and wanted Mary to see him since she couldn't be there for his graduation from Boot Camp. "*Mom! I'm home!*"

Mary walked out from her bedroom in a state of confusion. "*Danny? Is that you?*"

His smile disappeared in a heartbeat. "Mom? It's *me*. Jack."

She looked at him as though he were a stranger, then realization came to her. "Oh... Oh, *Jack*! My, you look handsome! Are... are you staying long? You... you went into the military, didn't you? At least, I *think* I remember you doing that." She looked at him with terrified eyes. "I... I don't *remember*!"

"It's alright, Mom." Jack hugged her comfortingly. "I... I was looking for a place that can take care of you while I'm deployed. I'd like to take you there to see it, if that's alright."

She looked at him with terror. "I don't *want* to go anywhere else, Jack! I... I want to stay here at *home*!"

"Tell you what, Mom. I'll take you to see it and if you don't like it you don't have to stay. Is *that* fair?"

"Well, I *suppose* that's only fair, but... why bother? Why can't we just stay *here*?" she asked confusedly.

"You have Alzheimer's, Mom. Pretty soon you won't be able to remember if you *ate* a few minutes ago. You're going to need people to help you."

"Can't... can't *you* help me, Jack?"

"I'm going in the service. I won't be back for a few years at *least*. Who'll take care of you until then?"

"I don't need anyone to take care of me, Jack! I've taken care of the *both* of us for *years*!"

Resignedly, Jack finally accepted that she just couldn't understand. "I know, Mom. Say, I was thinking. You need a *nicer* place to live! Now that I can afford it, I want us to move into a nice apartment! Someplace where you

don't have to cook and clean all the time! No yard to weed, no bad plumbing to fix! How does that sound?"

Mary smiled. "That sounds *wonderful*, Jack! Where is it?"

He barely was able to hold back the tears as he lied to her. "Not far, just east of here. I think we'll *love* it! Come on, let's pack a bag and I'll show it to you! It's fully furnished! If you want, we can even stay there tonight to try it out!"

She patted him on the cheek. "You're such a *good* boy, Jack! I'll go pack an overnight bag!" She started down the hall and Jack followed.

"Let me give you a hand, Mom." he said, wiping a tear away.

That night, as Jack drove Richard's borrowed station wagon back home, he felt like he'd betrayed his mother; abandoning her in a strange place with people she didn't know. Intellectually, he *knew* it was what she needed. He'd talked with the staff for a good long time and *liked* them. This was his third trip out there, the first two just to see if he could trust them with Mary.

Pulling up out in front of the Hargrave's home, he sighed and walked up the few steps, beating himself up inside for the tenth time. Letting himself in, he flopped on their couch, emotionally exhausted.

"*Jack?* Are you alright?" Erica asked from the hallway.

"*Huh?* Oh, hey Bu.... um... *Erica*. No, but I *will* be."

She walked into the living room and sat down across from him in the smaller loveseat that faced the couch. "Richie told me you had to take your mom to an old-age home. I'm *sorry*, Jack. You must feel *awful!*"

Sighing, he just stared at the ceiling. "Well, it wasn't a trip to *Cedar Point*, that's for sure, but it's what she needs now. Even if she doesn't understand

it, she needs people that can take care of her, and I just *can't*. I feel like an absolute heel!"

Moving to the couch, Erica took his hand. "No! I *know* you, Jack! You love your mom more than *anything*! I don't think you have any reason to feel bad! I bet the place she's staying is *awesome*!" She desperately wanted to soothe his troubles however she could.

Jack patted her hand. "Yeah, it's a *great* jail. Twenty-four hour security so she doesn't wander off somewhere she *wants* to go, doctors available at all hours to pump her full of *drugs*, orderlies to boss her around when she wants to do something they don't feel like putting up with, and every one of them a total *stranger* to her so she'll feel like she's been *kidnapped*! It's *perfect*!"

"I don't think you'd let your mom stay there if it was like *that*, Jack." she challenged him.

"No. It's not. It really *is* a great place. The staff are all nice, dedicated, and really want to help her as much as they can. Maybe in a few years I can get a long-term posting and move her in with me so I can take care of her myself, but for now, it's a *good* place. At least I don't have to worry about her being all *alone*."

Erica loved sitting this close to him, sharing in his troubles, and helping to ease his suffering, even if only a little. Her heart raced as she fought the urge to lean over and kiss him, unleashing four years worth of built-up yearning, but it was about the hardest thing she'd ever had to do. She knew she had bad news to deliver. "I... I need to tell you something, Jack. *Mom's* back."

"*Brilliant*! What a perfect capper for a day of absolute *betrayal*." He stood up and dropped Richard's car keys on the coffee table. "Tell Rich I'll be by Sunday at four to take him out for his birthday. I don't think *I'll* be coming to his party, though. Not with *her* here. Can you tell him I'm sorry I'm going to miss it?"

"Sure thing, Jack." she accepted, rising to stand close next to him. "I'll tell him anything you *like*. I'll miss *you* not being there. I mean, *Richie* is sure to miss you."

Giving her a one-armed hug, he smiled down at her. "Thanks, Erica. I... I *appreciate* that."

His smile had her completely undone. She decided in that moment to throw caution to the wind and follow her heart. Just as she was about to grab the back of his neck and pull him down to kiss her, he pulled away and walked out the door, oblivious of her aborted intents. Near to tears, she composed herself and decided that by Sunday she was *going* to get his attention and show him that she wasn't a little girl anymore.

The day of Richard's nineteenth birthday came and, as his guests started to arrive, he found himself completely bored. Going into the house, he sat in his room and started going through things to select what he would take with him and what could be packed away. All his crowd of high school friends wished him their best, but without Jack the party seemed dull and lifeless. Worst of all was his mother. Judith had come back and picked up her role as though no time had passed; like the entire ordeal had been nothing more than a bad dream.

"*Richard!* You're neglecting your *guests!*" Judith admonished him from his doorway.

"*So?*" he said harshly. "I'll be out in a while, but I need to get this done before four. I need to be ready to *leave* tomorrow, first thing."

"Oh, *nonsense!* You can do all this *after* the party! You're not doing anything *tonight*, so you'll have time later! Now put that down and come along."

"*No!*" he growled, continuing to go through his things. "Jack's taking me out tonight! *That's* what I'm looking forward to, not those idiots *you* invited."

"But they're your *friends*, Richard! Besides, you *can't* go out tonight, dear. You spend too much time with Jack as it *is*, and you'll have *plenty* of time together after you leave! I've not had a chance to spend any time with you!"

Stopping for a moment, Richard walked to his door and glared down at his mother. "That's because I've been *avoiding* you! Take a *hint*! As for those *yahoos* you invited, they *aren't* my friends. *Jack* is my friend, and the only reason *he's* not here is because *you* are! I'll waste time with them once I've made *damn* sure I'm not losing any time with *Jack* tonight! Now if you'll excuse me... *Judith*... I have *things* to do!" He then slammed the door in his mother's face and returned to his task.

"Well of all the...! *Richard*! You apologize to me at *once* or so help me I'll... I'll..."

"You'll *what*, Mom?" Erica said snidely from her doorway. "Throw him out? He's *leaving* tomorrow! *Forever*!"

Judith turned to face her daughter to see that Erica was wearing a skirt and a cute sweater; her hair nicely styled with her usual curls mostly flattened and makeup in a style that made her look seventeen rather than three months shy of her fifteenth birthday.

"This is none of your concern, young lady! Your brother is behaving very disrespectfully and I *will not have it*! I'm glad to see you looking *presentable*, though. Go and play hostess for our guests while I deal with your brother."

"The way you dealt with *Jack*, Mom? What? You gonna try and set Richie up with a *hooker* to make an honest *woman* of her?" She rolled her eyes and stormed out of the house.

Judith was speechless. "Why, I... I... I..." Finally overcome with emotion, she broke down and sobbed.

She was collapsed on the floor in front of Richard's door crying when Frank walked up. "Come on, Judy. Let me help you up."

"I... I don't know what to *do*, Frank! Richard won't *talk* to me, and Erica *hates* me!" she sobbed as she was pulled to her feet.

Leading her into the living room, he sighed and shook his head. "Judy, you have a *lot* of apologizing to do before *either* of them will forgive you."

"What do *I* have to apologize for? I've done nothing wrong! Oh, *Frank!*" She fell into his arms sobbing once more. "I... I... Frank? Am I a *bad* woman for wanting to help the Evans girl? I... I just don't understand why Richard *hates* me so much for it!" Sitting her down on the couch, her husband patiently tried to calm her down. "You just don't *understand*, Frank! I... I *had* to!"

While she resumed sobbing, Erica walked back in the house. When she saw her parents sitting on the couch together, her mother crying and father consoling her, her anger intensified. "Pardon the *interruption*, but Hank just threw up on the back lawn. I think he's *drunk*."

Frank shook his head. "I'll be out in a sec, sweet pea." Once she'd left, he stood up and looked down at his wife. "I don't know what you *can* do, but apologizing to Jack would be a good *start*, if he'll *let* you. I'll be outside if you need me, hun."

Having finished sorting everything, Richard had managed to reduce his 'must take' things down to just one seabag. The rest he didn't care about. Sighing in satisfaction, he glanced at his watch and saw that Jack would be there in about half an hour. "Just enough time to make a sociable appearance and then go have some *actual* fun!"

Going out into the back yard, he saw Hank, the quarterback of the football team, passed out face-first on the lawn. Shaking his head, he pasted a smile on and made small talk, continually glancing at his watch.

Erica brought him a paper plate with a hamburger, hot dog, and chips just about the time he was checking it for the third time. "When's *Jack* supposed to get here?" she asked almost desperately.

"Four. Thanks, sis." he said, taking the plate. When he did, he noticed she was dressed a lot nicer than her usual jeans and top. "Did Mom make you wear that? You can go change and be yourself if you want to. This is *my* birthday, not *hers*."

"Don't I look *nice*?" she asked, self-consciously.

He looked at her again. "Oh, *sure!* I just figured..." Realizing he'd goofed, he lowered his head and laughed. "Sorry, sis! I thought... You look *great!*" Seeing her smile and walk away happy, he shook his head, thinking Erica had gotten dressed up just for his birthday. "Goofy kid!" he said to himself.

While he could tell she was going for 'grown up', and if he'd looked with unbiased eyes he would have seen just how well she'd pulled it off, all he could see was his baby sister, but he wouldn't dare tell her. *I already have enough trouble with women in this family without starting a fight with Erica!*

Jack walked up to the Hargrave's home promptly at four. He'd spent most of the last few days getting his mother's power of attorney turned over to himself, then listing their home on the market, and finally getting as many personal effects moved to his mother's nursing home as possible. Seeing her there so many times, starting to settle in, made him feel easier about his decision. He still didn't *like* it, but he'd quit beating himself up over it. She actually looked happier and healthier than she had in a while.

Walking around through the side gate, he let himself in and slapped a smile on his face for Richard's sake. "Hey, bud!" he shouted.

Genuinely smiling as Jack came walking into his back yard, Richard ran up to him. "*Jack!* Get things taken care of?"

"Yeah, all done. *You?*" Jack asked as he stopped next to Richard, looking at the lawn.

"Junk on the Bunk!" Richard replied before he took another bite of hot dog. Talking around a mouthful, he asked, "*Wan'* some?"

"No thanks, Rich. I'll have *this* though." he said, grabbing Richard's burger off his plate. "Mmm! *Charcoal* burger!"

"Mom didn't make these." Richard joked. "*Dad* did."

Taking a bite, Jack nodded in appreciation. "I can *tell*. They're *edible*. You about done here? I've got the whole evening planned!"

Richard nodded as well, swallowing another bite of hotdog. "Just about. Already did cake and stuff. Sorry you missed it."

"*Ah!* You know me! I'd have just ended up falling in the cake or something to make you have to get me out of another mess." He looked around at the guests and shook his head. "Don't know how soft they got it, *do* they?"

Shrugging, Richard finished his last bite and wiped his hands. "Yeah. Well, let me make polite and then we'll get outta here."

Going around, Richard thanking and saying goodbye to their guests, Jack stood behind him the whole way. He nodded as people he never liked, and who he knew had never liked him, gave him backhanded compliments and congratulations for getting through Boot Camp; their every word screaming that the only things they knew about it came out of Hollywood. About halfway done, Frank stopped Jack at the grill.

"I... I wanted to say, I'm *proud* of you, boy." he said earnestly. "The Corps will do good things for you, and you for the *Corps*." he spoke through gritted teeth; his pipe clenched tightly out of the corner of his mouth.

Jack smiled genuinely. "*Thanks, Mr. H.! That means a lot coming from you. I... You're a good dad. Rich is lucky to have ya'.*"

Slapping him on the back firmly, Frank genuinely smiled. "Call me *Frank!* You're a *man* now. You've *earned* the right."

He shook his head and chuckled. "I *dunno*. You once said you were like a surrogate father to me! Maybe I should call you *Dad!*" When he saw the older man glare at him, he cleared his throat. "Frank it *is!*"

Erica came up to her father and he wrapped an arm around her shoulders. "*Hey, sweet pea! You had a chance to say hi to your brother or Jack yet?*"

Shaking her head, she looked over at Jack, batting her eyes. "*Hi, Jack! It's really good to see you! Can I get you anything? A drink? Some food?*" *Me?* she wanted to add.

Jack smiled down at her. "That's OK, Bu... um... *Erica*. I'm good. Rich and I'll be stepping out in a few." He noticed she was dressed up and realized he ought to say something. "You look nice!" he complimented her.

Blushing as her heart raced at the thought that Jack had finally noticed her as more than just a little girl, she looked down. "Thank you... *Jack!*" she said coyly. When she looked up again however, he was gone. Looking around, she saw him next to her brother once more, smiling and talking to a few other people.

Noticing her unusual behavior, Frank was finally starting to understand some of what was going on. "*Listen, sweet pea. You think you could run to the fridge and get me a beer? Thanks!*"

About to go over to Jack and ask to speak to him privately, she was irritated with her father for interfering in her attempts at catching Jack's eye. "*Fine!*" she scowled at him. Storming off toward the house, she simply *had* to get

back before Jack left. When she did a minute later, handing her father his beer bottle, she looked around. "Where's *Jack*... and um... Richie?" she asked him, adding her brother as an afterthought.

"They left for the evening, sweetie." he answered flatly. "Don't worry, you can still see your brother off tomorrow morning."

"But..." She paused, reformulating how to ask without being obvious. "Is *Jack* coming over tomorrow? I know he and Richie are leaving together."

He shook his head. "Rich is heading over to his place to pick him up after Rich leaves from here. I... I don't think Jack wants to see your mother and she'll be unavoidable tomorrow morning." He poured some of his beer over a burger, causing the flames to flare up.

"Oh." she said sadly, unable to hide her disappointment as tears began to form in her eyes. "I... I never even got a chance to say *goodbye*."

Nodding, Frank saw he was going to have to have a talk with his daughter.

Jack drove while Richard sat next to him in the passenger seat. "So, what's the plan?" the nineteen-year-old asked curiously.

"The plan is we're going to *Ohio*." Jack stated matter-of-factly.

"So what's in Ohio?" Richard asked suspiciously. "I mean, *besides* cows and Cleveland."

"The Keaton Family Bar and Grill." Jack answered as he drove down the highway, smiling. "Remember Doug from Boot? Well, his old man owns the place. Doug invited us to stop by."

Only vaguely remembering the other Marine recruit, Richard shrugged.

"Oh. Sounds like it *could* be fun, I guess."

After driving for just over an hour, the two pulled up in front of a building out in the middle of nowhere.

"Jack, we can't go in *there*." Richard warned wide-eyed.

"Why not? We were *invited*!"

"That's not a *grill*, Jack!" Richard said obviously as he looked at the building.
"That's a *strip* club!"

"*So*? They have *food*! Doug says their steaks are the best in the state!" Jack pointed out.

"*Jack*! We could get *arrested*! We're both under twenty-one!"

The younger Marine looked at his best friend as he opened his car door and climbed out. "Come *on*, Rich! No one but Doug *knows* us here and we *both* look over twenty-one! *Live* a little!"

He shook his head as he opened the car door and climbed out. "I should have my *head* examined for *ever* listening to you!"

As the two walked up to the front door, a large man stopped them. "*IDs*?"

Jack clapped his hand on the man's shoulder. "We're here to see *Doug*! Can you tell him Jack and Rich are here to see him?"

Eyeing the two youths suspiciously, he grumbled, "Wait here." Going in the building, music poured out the door as he entered, Jack rubbing his hands together.

"*You'll* see! Tonight's gonna be a *blast*!"

An hour later, Jack sat with Richard and Doug in the restaurant side of the establishment, the thump of music from the next room ever present. "Doug, I have to admit, that was the best steak I've ever eaten!" Jack grinned as their barely clothed waitress dropped off another beer for Richard and a soda for him, watching her every move. "I think it's the service!" he said distractedly, noting her smile at his compliment.

Doug Keaton shrugged. "Not the *best*. It was a little off tonight. Pete must be having a bad day in the kitchen. You two still planning on driving down to Geiger?"

Noticing the way Richard was eyeing their waitress, Jack smiled. "Yeah, we leave tomorrow morning. Say, Doug. Seeing as it's Rich's birthday and our last night home, I was hoping to treat him to a *really* good time tonight. Alright if I take him next door?"

He shrugged. "None of *my* business. I just invited you over for a good steak dinner. What you do *after* that... well... I can't be blamed for anything you two get into on your own. No one'll be calling the cops on you, if *that's* what you're asking." He winked at Jack as he stood up. "Well, Dad'll be wanting me to help behind the bar tonight. He don't care that I'm leaving in a few days. He's just miffed he's losing a bartender that works for *free*. Catch you guys later!"

Jack half-grinned as he stood up, dropping a twenty on the table. "Come on, Rich! Let's see if we can find you a nice girl your *mom* would approve of!"

Richard awoke the next morning slowly, the pounding in his head so loud he was sure Jack could hear it from his house. Starting to roll out of bed, he noticed he wasn't alone, and that he wasn't in his bed. Looking around, he determined he must be in a hotel; the queen bed taking up most of the small space while the only doors appeared to be for a bathroom and the door to the outside. He held his head, trying to keep it from falling off as he slowly stood up and headed for the bathroom.

When he came out a minute later, he saw a vaguely familiar looking woman sitting up in the middle of the bed. "Um... need the restroom?" he asked nonchalantly.

She shook her head slowly, her frizzy light brown hair twisting freely. "I was hoping I could coax you back into bed!" she said seductively.

Looking at her naked body, her firm muscle tone and long luscious legs gave her away as a dancer. He had vague recollections of her undulating body against his and her legs wrapped around him. One thing he wished he *could* remember that he couldn't though was her name. Looking at his watch, he saw it was only six in the morning, explaining why the only light in the room was from the dim light of a street lamp filtering in through a curtain.

"I... uh... I feel bad!" he said looking down at the grungy and cheep carpet covering the floor. "I... uh... I can't remember... well, much of *anything* from last night! I hope you're not mad at me for that!"

She smiled at him and knee-walked to the edge of the bed, sliding off to walk up to him. "I appreciate your honesty, Richard. I'm *Cindi*... with an *i*."

Seeing her intent, he asked, "I take it you had as much fun as I apparently did last night?" As she nodded slowly, he smiled and said, "I think I can spare *some* time!" while she wrapped her arms around him once more.

Jack pounded on the door as the sun was rising. "*Rich!* Reveille, buddy! It's oh-seven thirty and we have an hour's drive ahead!" He started knocking continuously until Richard flung the door open.

"*Jack!* Can you give me a *minute*?" Richard barked at him.

Looking at his best friend standing at the door wearing nothing but a sheet held at his waist, he half-smiled. "Good *morning*?" he asked inquisitively.

"It *will* be if you come back in about *ten minutes!*" Richard said, pushing his friend away from the door and slamming it in his face.

"If you're done *that* quick, you really should see a *doctor* about it!" he yelled through the door with a half-grin. Returning to Richard's station wagon, he sat in the driver's seat and spent the next fifteen minutes looking over the map of their nine-hour drive to Camp Geiger in North Carolina where they would spend sixty days going through Marine School of Infantry. They had two more days to arrive and report, and intended to make the most of it.

Just as he was about to go up and knock again, Richard came running out, tucking his shirt in as he left. As the hung-over young Marine opened the car door and climbed in, Jack saw Cindi standing in the doorway, a smile on her face and a sheet wrapped around her, waving goodbye to his best friend.

Pulling out of the parking lot, he glanced over at Richard. "So, you gonna see her again?"

"*Nope!*" he replied. "I offered gallantly, she rejected politely, we're cool."

Glancing once more at his watch, Jack started going over their plan. "It's oh-seven fifty. We'll be home by oh-nine hundred, stop at my place, you drop me off so I can pack my gear while you head home to do likewise, then come get me by oh-nine thirty and we'll only be running ninety minutes behind schedule. *Plan?*"

"Plan." he replied absently. "*Thanks.*" he added after a moment of silence between the two.

"For *what?* Getting you plastered and hooking you up with Cindi with an i? What *else* are best friends *for?*"

Chapter 7 - What's a Nice Girl Like You Doing

I came out of MCRD Paris Island in January of ninety-one, days before the start of *Operation Desert Storm*. From there I went to Camp Geiger for MCT and Lejeune for MOS. By the time I got my first posting later that year, the war was over and the country had a different attitude toward the military.

Before the Gulf, most people looked down on a military career, leftover crap from *Vietnam*, I guess. *After* the Gulf though, the country almost seemed to be on *overkill* trying to *apologize* to every service member for the treatment of Vets after Vietnam by being *overly* proud of them. I hadn't even gotten a posting outside the *US* yet and I had people thanking me for my service! It was *bizarre* when you think that just a year *earlier* I had every friend I ever *knew* telling me what a *mistake* it was to join up.

I was posted to The Bricks... Marine Barracks, Alameda Naval Air Station as an eleven forty-two, Electrical Equipment Repair Specialist, about July of that year. I met Jack about a week later. At first I thought he was rude, boisterous, pigheaded, and inconsiderate. Later I found out he was all that and *so much more!*

Jack cocked his half-smile at the Electronics Specialist as she examined his handheld radio. "I just don't *get* it. Every time it gets jostled I get static. Goes away if I tap it on the bottom." He bit his lower lip to make himself not make an inappropriate joke.

PFC Brooke Hathaway cocked her eyebrow at the Lance Corporal. It was the third time this week he'd come in to the Ground Equipment Maintenance Shop with the exact same radio, and she'd yet to find anything wrong with it. She started to believe he was just building up the nerve to ask her out. "Well, I *still* can't find anything wrong with it, Corporal Dunning. You sure you're *using* it right?"

Somewhat insulted, he took the radio back. "Here! *Watch!*" He clipped the radio to his belt and started jumping in place.

Just when she was about to tell him off, she heard the horrible static emanate from the radio. "*OK, Corporal! Hand it over!*" she shouted over the noise.

Half-smiling at her again, Jack handed it to her. "See? *Told* you! Now if you just tap it on the bottom..." He reached his hand toward the radio to silence it, when she slapped it away. "*Hey!*"

"Now that it's in a fault condition I can diagnose it, Corporal! If you *fix* it, I still won't know what's wrong!" With the static blaring through the shop, she carefully removed the back cover as though the noise didn't exist.

"How can you stand letting it *blare* like that!?" Jack shouted.

Touching a probe to a few places, she smiled. "*Got* it!" she shouted. Pressing on a spot, the noise vanished. "Cold solder joint. I can fix this right here."

"Thanks." Jack said, sticking a finger in his ear and shaking it around. "I think I was about to go deaf!" Watching her press the soldering gun to the joint, smoke streaming up away from it and into her face and around her safety glasses unnoticed, he admired her focus.

"Done." she said proudly. Blowing on the joint to cool it without creating a new fracture, she touched the joint and used her finger to soak away the last of the heat. Closing the cover, she shook her head. "I was starting to doubt your *veracity*, Corporal." she admitted.

Jack pressed his fingertips to his chest. "*Moi?* Dishonest? Skating? Epithets! *Rude* ones, even!" He finished with his fists on his hips.

She couldn't help herself as she started to laugh, a snort coming out before she could prevent it. Suddenly very self-conscious, she covered her mouth

with one hand. "*Stop* it!" she said just above a whisper. Handing him back the radio, she couldn't restrain the smirk.

"Say listen, we have Liberty this weekend and I was thinking, since you're *new* and all, that maybe you might want to..." His voice trailed off as he saw her shaking her head. "*No?*"

"No." she replied with a smile.

Jack took on an offended expression. "Look, if you think I was just trying to get you alone and in a compromising position, well then..." He blew out a breath exasperatedly. "...you... you... you'd be *right!* But I only have the *lowest* of expectations! *Hand-holding* is a big deal for me!"

Brooke tried to be angry with him, but his comical response was insidious. "*Look, Corporal Dunning...*"

"Jack!" he replied happily.

"Jack... you look like a nice guy and all, but I've made it my policy not to date at *all* while I'm in."

He stood slowly, having started to lean on her desk. "Not at *all?*" he said slowly. Watching her head shake slowly, a smile barely restrained on her lips, he whistled low. "Lady, that's just not *normal!* You're in for what, four years *minimum?*" She nodded just as slowly. "Well that's just... uh... it's just *wrong!* How can you deny mankind a beauty like yours for that *long?*"

"Mankind will just have to do *without!* My *ass* belongs to the *Corps!*" she stated boldly as she handed him the paperwork she'd signed off on. "Here you are. The door is *that* way." she said emphatically as she pointed off to her right. "*Goodbye, Corporal Jack Dunning!*" she finished with a wicked smile and a wave.

Sitting on Richard's rack later that evening, Jack looked distracted. Richard noticed and nudged his arm. "Hey? You awake?"

"Huh?" Jack snapped out of his thoughts. "No, I just was thinking. Say, Rich. You ever hear of someone not dating for their entire *cruise*?"

Richard smirked as he pulled out a fresh uniform blouse. "Yeah, *you*! People are starting to *talk*."

Jack waved his hand dismissively. "Ah! You think you're so *funny*! I *date*! I just... I haven't met the right *girl* yet."

"So, now you found some *new* woman to bother? What's her name?" he asked impatiently.

"*Brooke*! She's this POG at the electronics shop! *Man*, Rich! You oughta *see* this girl! Long dark hair, luscious lips, *great* figure, trim, athletic... I tell you, she can't *do* it!"

"Do *what*?" he asked as he continued to dress.

"This girl is intent on not dating for her entire active duty *cruise*, Rich!" he said as though he were reporting a crime. "I tell you, she can't *do* this to me! It's *unhuman*!"

"*Inhuman*, Jack." he corrected as he slammed his locker shut. "So what's it to *you*, anyway? She can do her own thing if she wants."

"True, but... *jeez*, Rich! You should *see* this girl! She's a total *knockout*! A *ten*! *Perfect*!"

"Then you have nothing to worry about!" Richard quipped. "You never stood a chance *anyway*! Leg it! Fire Watch in three minutes!"

The next six weeks saw Jack volunteering to run equipment to and from the electronics shop as often as possible, each time trying to befriend the woman who had him so mystified. Finally, while waiting to pick up PFC Rogers' night vision equipment, Brooke spoke to him first for once.

"Say, Jack. You have Liberty this weekend?"

Seeing a crack in her armor, Jack smiled. "Oh! Uh... yeah. How'd you know? You been checkin' up on me?" She started to answer when he rapped her desk. "I *knew* it! You can't *stand* it, can you? Oh, Jack! What *is* this power you have over women? No, but seriously. Yeah I have Liberty, *you*?" He leaned on her desk nonchalantly.

The woman Marine nearly changed her mind, but something told her to take a chance. "Yeah. I haven't taken any since I got stationed, and this weekend my CO is *making* me take it. Says I'll burn out if I don't. I'm *too* gung-ho or something, as if there *were* such a thing." Looking up at Jack who looked overly interested, she shook her head. "Maybe this is a bad idea."

He stood up and straightened his uniform blouse. "*No!* No! Not at all! I think he's *right!* You *can* be too gung-ho! What did you have in mind?" he said, trying to act only vaguely interested.

"Anything's fine. What were *you* planning?"

"Not much. Usually my buddy Rich and me go see a movie or something, or a party if there's one he knows about. He's hooked in with the college set around here, but I can find out!"

Sighing, Brooke shook her head amusedly. "Alright. Well, I'll meet you guys at Main Gate then." She looked up at him. "You *do* have a car, right?"

"No." he said bashfully, but recovered quickly. "But *Rich* does! We drove The Beast, that's what he calls it, here from our last posting with the First

MEF at Pendleton, after driving it *there* from Geiger, and *there* all the way from Pittsburgh. That's where we're from, Rich and me."

"Oklahoma City." she replied simply.

Jack picked up the night vision goggles, walking slowly backwards toward the door. "OK, then! See you Saturday!" He backed into a table and slapped it before turning to leave, like it was the table's fault for getting in his way.

Brooke shook her head and sighed once more. "Somehow, I get the feeling I'm in for a weird evening."

Saturday came and Richard sat behind the wheel of his old station wagon with Jack in the back seat. Checking his watch as they continued to wait, he looked over at Jack. "I think she was jerking your chain, Jack."

"You'll see Rich! She'll be..." Without warning, he reached over Richard's shoulder and honked the horn twice.

"Hey! *I* can do that!" Richard said, pushing Jack back into his seat. Looking out the windshield, he shook his head. "I don't frigging *believe* it! Jack, you don't stand a *chance*!"

"Why not?" he answered defensively. "She asked *me* out!"

"I don't care if she got down on her knees and *begged* you, Jack! You *aren't* gonna get this girl!"

"What makes you so *sure*?" he asked.

"Because *I'm* going to!" he said as he jumped out of the car and ran around to open the front passenger door for her.

"Hey! Rich! Don't... *Rich!*" he was flummoxed while Brooke got in.

"So where're we off to?" she asked, turning in her seat to look at Jack while Richard went around to get back in.

"Someplace to hide a *body*." Jack retorted as Richard got behind the wheel.

Brooke looked confused as she turned and sat facing forward. "Hi, I'm..."

"...*Brooke*, Brooke Hathaway from Oklahoma City." Richard finished for her. "Richard Hargrave, and it's a *pleasure* to meet you!" he said as he pulled out into traffic. "Jack told me a lot about you already! It's great to put a face to all that *stammering*."

"Stammering!?" Jack said defensively. "Maybe *gushing* a little bit, but not *stammering*! I'm like a *rock*, Brooke! This guy is just trying to make me look bad so he looks better by *comparison*! But to answer your question, we're headed to a party at a friend's place just outside of Oakland."

"Sounds fun!" Brooke smiled at the two. "I guess I really *did* need a break."

"Of *course* you did!" Jack exclaimed. "Recharges the ol' batteries!"

"In your case, I think it's time for an *overhaul*, Jack." Richard quipped as he pulled onto the freeway. "Yours are looking awfully worn out, what with all the girls you've been seeing."

"*What* girls? The ones *you* keep setting me up with so you can date their friend?" Jack shot back. "The last one was a *real* piece of work! She spent the entire time harping about the terrible state of women in the military!"

Brooke turned her head toward Jack. "And *you* would be some sort of expert in that area? What do *you* know about it?"

Jack blinked at her. "Well, I know a little! More than *she* ever could! She's a *civilian*!"

While the two debated about women in the military, Richard shook his head with a smile. After driving for fifteen minutes, he pulled up in front of a large house, the two still going at it. "We're here!" he interrupted Jack.

"Oh!" Jumping from his seat, he ran out and held the car door for Brooke just as she was climbing out. Closing it behind her, he gently escorted her toward the house. "This way, lovely lady!"

Looking at her, Richard smiled. "You know, if he gets to be a bother, just let *me* know! Jack has a way of getting on a girl's nerves after a while... say after about five *minutes*!"

"I can take care of *myself*, thank you." Brooke admonished.

Standing next to Richard some time later, Jack got a beer while he looked over at Brooke. "I don't know about this girl, Rich. She doesn't seem to find me *nearly* as witty, charming, and irresistible as she should!"

"Maybe she has good taste." Richard quipped wryly. "Maybe you should make yourself scarce for about fifteen minutes while you let *me* have a crack at her. You keep horning in on my best stories!"

"You've dozens of girls *dying* to go out with you! Whadaya want with mine?"

"She isn't yours until *she* says so." Richard said taking a swig of his beer. Looking over his shoulder at Brooke, he saw she was talking with Fern, the girl who's house they were in. While watching, one of the college boys came up to Brooke, tried to talk to her, and Richard smiled when she gave him the brush off. "Well, good news is she's not into *college* boys!"

Jack nodded. "Good thing, too. I was about to get *rid* of him for her."

"*Sure* you were, Jack. What were you gonna do? Threaten to tire him out from beating you to a pulp? You gonna back off and give *me* a shot?"

"Not a *chance*, Rich! I'm sticking to you like rubber cement! Come *on!*"

As the evening wore on, the two shared a few of their stories with Brooke. She liked their camaraderie, making her a little jealous of it at times. They talked about their deployment with the First Marine Expeditionary Force to the Gulf, sharing some stories, but it was their time back home that she found most interesting.

"So did you get even?" she asked.

"I don't *get* even." Jack shook his head. "I live a more *elevated* existence, but that didn't stop Rich! *God!* You shoulda *seen* what he did!"

Looking down as he sat across from Brooke, Richard blushed embarrassedly. "Jack! I was a stupid kid and I *regret* it now, so can we just drop it?"

"Alright, alright. Suffice it to say, Rich gave Ox what *he* thought was coming to him." Taking a drink, he looked at Brooke. "So how about you? Got any interesting and colorful people you wanna talk badly about? Ex-boyfriends, *current* boyfriends, anything like that?"

"*Subtle*, Jack!" she laughed as she shook her head. "No, no boyfriends, ex or otherwise. Dad was a Corps lifer, so we bounced from base to base a lot. Okinawa, Germany, all over stateside. Folks moved back to their hometown when he got transferred to the First Couch Company. Now he's in the sheet metal business. He'll probably retire pretty soon, though."

Richard nodded. "You never had a steady boyfriend then. Understandable. Any *temporary* ones of note? You know, the one that got away?"

"*Rich!*" Jack admonished his friend. "No need to bring up her past mistakes! You've done enough of *that* already tonight. Don't make me bring up Cindi with an i!"

Groaning as he leaned back, Richard flopped onto the back of the couch. "Oh, Jack! *Please* don't!"

"Don't worry, buddy. I won't... for *now*." he jokingly threatened. "Besides, you know where all *my* bodies are buried! But all that doesn't matter now, now that I've found true beauty in my life!" He turned and looked at Brooke with a grin, making her look away.

"Look, guys. I'm *flattered* and all, I can tell you're *both* interested, but I *meant* it when I said I'm not dating while I'm in the Corps. I... I *can't*." She looked back at them, one to the other, hoping they would back off.

Jack furrowed his brow. "Of *course* you can, beautiful! There are no regs against Enlisted dating each other!"

Looking at Brooke carefully, Richard could see that she was intentionally not saying something. After a moment, he sat up and looked at her curiously.

Brooke only nodded imperceptibly in response. Glancing at Jack, she shook her head toward Richard just as subtly.

"Now if you were an officer, it would be *different*, but we're not even *NCOs* yet!" Jack continued, not having noticed their exchange of looks. Seeing neither of them listening, he looked over at Brooke, then to Richard before he shrugged. "Did I *miss* something?" Pausing a moment, he looked hard at Richard. "Rich! Come *on*, man! Cut me a break! You *owe* me! You can't be taking *every* girl I like!"

Standing up slowly, Richard shook his head. "No, Jack. Not *this* time. I'm gonna head out for a breath of fresh air."

Watching Richard walk toward the back door, Jack smiled. "Well I'll be a... That Rich sure can be a heck of a guy, sometimes! Ya' know, for a *minute* there I thought you two were..." Even as he spoke, he watched Brooke get

up and follow him out the door, not even hearing what he was saying. "Son of a..." Jack sat on the couch, fuming that even when Richard stepped aside, the girls *still* wanted his best friend more.

Leaning forward against the railing of the second story back porch, Richard looked at the skyline across the bay. The salt air filled his nostrils, clearing his thoughts and helping him to re-center. He heard her follow behind him, closing the sliding glass door as the sound of the party grew and then faded. Dropping his head to look over the rail, he picked it back up and took a drink from his beer.

Coming up alongside of him, Brooke leaned on the railing as he had done. "You won't say anything, will you?" she begged.

"I'm *supposed* to, if I know, but then I don't *actually* know, *do* I?" he shook his head. "You didn't *say* anything, and I haven't seen you *do* anything, so..." He took another drink and turned around smiling, shaking his head and leaning back. "Poor Jack!"

Mimicking his turn, she leaned on her elbows. "Poor Jack! Just can't win with the ladies, *can* he?" Laughing, she shook her head. "Look who's talking!"

"Not much luck there?" he asked.

"No, but *that's* OK." Brooke shook her head. "I'm a patient girl." she sighed before taking another drink. "*You* seem to do alright."

"I suppose." Richard shrugged. "About average, I guess... but I've had my share of heartbreak, just like everyone else."

"Cindi with an i?" she probed.

"*No!*" he laughed. "She was just a lady that shared a good time with me!" His laughter died slowly, thinking of Anne. "But there were times..."

She looked back toward the party inside. "Would Jack say anything if he knew?"

Looking over at her, Richard shook his head and turned to face the water again. "No. Jack won't say anything. He'd lie his *ass* off for you! He's like that. Don't get me wrong, he can be a *pain*, but when push comes to shove, I don't think he has it in him to be vindictive or mean, to *anyone*. He won't hold it against you." Taking a drink, he chuckled. "He might spend the next three years trying to get you to change your *mind*, though!"

Laughing, Brooke looked away. "I can see that he just might!" Glancing back in, she sighed. "Would you ask him to come out here for me? I... I want to break it to him without a crowd."

Letting out a breath, Richard turned to her. "You don't *have* to, you know. I could do it. That way you have deniability. You still haven't actually *said* anything to either of us. If you like, it can *stay* that way."

"No. I... I think he might *believe* me more easily. He might think you're just trying to throw him off me so *you* could have a shot!"

"You're not wrong!" Richard chuckled. "I'll get him and see to it you two are left alone for a bit." Going back in, Brooke turned towards the bay.

"*Jack!*" Richard shouted when he saw his best friend brooding just where he'd left him. Making his way through the crowd, he sat next to him. "Jack, Brooke wanted me to tell you..."

"It's *fine*, Rich!" Jack interrupted. "I know how it is. She likes you and that's all there is *to* it."

"Jack..."

"You can't help it! You're the *hero* type who gets all the girls!"

"*Jack...*" he dragged the name out.

"It's just how the story always goes! I mean, *look* at you! And then look at *me*! You, with all those bulging..."

"*Jack!*" Richard shouted.

"What?"

"Brooke wants you to go out on the porch to talk to her... *alone*. I *swear* to you, I have *zero* chance with her!"

"Huh? *Really?*" Jack perked up, looking at the back door and then back at Richard. Seeing his best friend nod toward the door, he practically leapt up to run outside.

Rising slowly, Richard stretched his body as he did so. "Poor Jack!" he said as he went to stand watch over the door, ensuring they would be left alone.

Slowing to a cool pace as he came out, Jack quietly closed the sliding glass door behind him and turned to see Brooke leaning against the rail, looking upset. Clearing his throat, he came up along beside her, just as she had done earlier with Richard. "I... uh... Rich said you wanted to talk to me."

Nodding, Brooke wiped a fearful tear away. "Yeah. *Listen*, Jack. I..."

"You don't need to explain!" he interrupted. "I understand! You've never had a serious boyfriend! So what!"

"Jack..."

"*Lots* of girls your age haven't! That's *OK!*"

"Jack...!" she dragged his name out the same way Richard had done.

"I don't think it's anything to be *ashamed* of! In fact, I think it's sort of..."

"*Jack!* Will you shut *up* a minute!" Brooke yelled.

Shocked into silence once more, Jack turned and looked out over the rail.
"Well, I could offer to *jump* if you like..."

She couldn't help but laugh. "*Jack*, I... I need to *tell* you something, OK? I just... I don't want you to freak *out* or anything, alright? I *like* you, and I..."

Whipping his head around, Jack looked at her. "You *like* me?" he interrupted.

"*Jack!*" she growled through gritted teeth.

Turning back towards the water, flinching at her verbal assault, he held up his hands in mock surrender. "*OK! OK!* Shutting up!"

Frustrated, Brooke started pacing along the porch. "As I was *saying*, I like you and I don't want to lose you as a *friend*, but there's something you have to understand about me."

Jack turned around and saw she was seriously agitated and scared. "Hey! It's OK!" He reached out a hand to her, Brooke looking at it like it was an animal about to attack. Seeing her reaction, he held up his hands defensively once more. "It's fine! I wasn't going to *try* anything! I just wanted to help ease whatever it is that's making you so *nervous* is all. It can't be *that* bad! What, are you an escapee from a *mental* institution or something?" Then his smile melted. "You didn't used to be a *dude*, did you?"

She laughed once more at his disarming humor. "*No!*" Brooke looked at his perplexed expression. "Um... well... You know how you're always looking for the right *girl*?" Seeing him nod curiously, she took a breath. "Well, I *understand* that, *really* well."

Puzzled at first, after a moment his expression turned rapidly from confusion, to realization, and finally to shock. "What *you*? A..." He paused, unable to bring himself to say the word out loud. "*No!*" he dismissed the idea. "You're too *pretty!*" he said absently. "I mean..." Looking over at her and seeing her cross her arms indignantly, he arched a brow. "*Really?*"

"What?" Brooke countered, offendedly. "Let me guess. My *hair's* too long, I'm wearing too much *makeup*, and there's not enough *flannel*, right?"

Swallowing hard, Jack looked her up and down. Realizing he had hurt her feelings unintentionally, he lowered his voice. "*Look*, Brooke. I... I didn't mean to *offend* you or anything! I just... I thought you were *joking!*" Seeing her attitude shift, she suddenly looked small and helpless. "Seriously, I... just ignore me! I was just trying for a laugh is all. You... are we *OK?*"

Nodding shyly, Brooke looked at her fingers as they twisted themselves in knots. "I'm trusting that you won't *say* anything!" she looked up at him. "So you see, *that's* why I can't date while I'm in! Being in the Corps is much too *important* to me! I... I can't risk getting thrown out!"

Straightening himself up, Jack stepped over and hugged her, noticing for the first time how much taller she was than he; at least two inches.

When she finally relaxed into the friendly hug, she let out a relieved sigh. "I just... I wanted you to understand *why* I won't go out with you. You're nice and I didn't want you thinking it was because of *you*, OK? I hope you don't think any less of me."

Holding her at arm's length, Jack turned serious. "You don't ever have to worry about *that*, Brooke. I think you're *great!* I think it's a crying shame what you're denying to all mankind, but who am *I* to say it's wrong or a sin or something!" Wrapping an arm around her shoulder, he walked her over to the railing. "I... uh... I think I might even be able to *help* you."

Brooke looked over at him suspiciously. "Jack, don't even *think* about trying to kiss me! It's not a *phase* I'm going through!"

"No! No! No!" he stopped her. "Nothing like that! I was just... I think it's unrealistic of you to say you're not going to see *anyone* for the next four years, is all. You'll go *bananas!*" He paused a moment to let his thoughts sink in. "I... I could *cover* for you. We let everyone think *we're* dating, you can go out with Rich and me, and if you have a date, either Rich or I can say she's with one of us if anyone sees anything."

She shook her head and turned out toward the sea. "No. I can't risk it. It's not *worth* it!"

Mimicking her posture, he shook his head. "See, that's where you're *wrong*. I went through *hell* over that girl we were telling you about, more than you know, but you know what? It was *worth* it! Four months where I truly felt *alive*, against a year of *misery*? I... I wouldn't trade it for *anything!*" His voice trailed off as he remembered how happy he'd been with Wendy.

"I don't know, Jack." she sighed. "The Old Man would have a *coronary* if I got caught!"

"Then we make sure you never *get* caught!" Jack held out his arm. "We can start with me being your *beard* tonight! Come on! At least the guys inside will leave you *alone* for the rest of the night!"

Turning, Brooke slipped her arm in his. "Alright, but don't get any ideas! I'm *bigger* than you and could easily kick your skinny ass all the way back to The Bricks!"

Gulping, Jack nodded at her. "Yes, *ma'am!*"

Chapter 8 - Fate or Chance

After that day, Jack, Rich, and I were inseparable. There were rumors that I was dating Jack while sleeping with Rich, but we didn't care. Rich about *killed* PFC Ricks the one time he called Jack a cuck and wasn't just shitting around. We had lots of fun and I never got caught. *Jack* made sure of that.

Not that I was sleeping around a lot, mind you, but I went on a *few* dates, mostly with college girls. I *never* risked dating a fellow W-M. While Rich and Jack were running cover for me, I couldn't count on any of *them* having similar arrangements. We also never went anywhere that was near the base.

If I had a date, which was *rare*, it was always somewhere remote and out of the way... never any of the usual places the Hellcats or anchor-clankers might go. The only times we'd go places like the Warf or any place we could get seen it was the *three* of us, sometimes with a girl Rich was seeing, but never with a girl *Jack* was seeing. That wasn't often and *never* the same girl more than once, for *any* of us!

By ninety-four, things got easier with 'don't ask, don't tell', but we kept up the pretense of Jack being my boyfriend because it just made things *easier*. For *me*, anyway. Most W-Ms got hit on all the time, but once it got around that Jack and I were an item, I was off limits. Grunts had no qualms about hitting on W-Ms if they we're seeing a civi or were even *married* to one, but they'd rarely turn on a fellow member of the Corps. I felt bad for Jack, though. It made his success rate with the ladies track nearly to *zero*.

Even when it looked like maybe Jack had a shot at a terrific girl, *something* would always screw it up.

Jack was bored, waiting in the quiet of the library as Richard got yet another book on business management. Ever since he'd enrolled in Menlo Collage,

Richard had spent all his free time studying for his night classes, which was why they were wasting the Saturday before Labor Day weekend in a library. Jack didn't care when Brooke was available, but today she had duty and he was bored out of his mind.

"Come *on*, Rich!" he whispered. "Haven't you found what you need *yet*?"

"No." Richard whispered back. "If you hate it here, why did you come?"

"Because you have the *car*!" he retorted quietly. Raising his voice to a low talk, he grumbled. "I'd get my *own* if I had any dough, but..."

"*Shhhhhh!*" the old man sitting across from them shushed him angrily.

Glaring back at the man with eyes crossed and lips pursed, Jack lowered to a whisper again. "Rich, this is no way to spend *Liberty*! Do you know how long it's been since we did something *fun*? Saw a movie? Went clubbing? On a *date*? You remember *dates*, right? With *girls*? Those soft, round, luscious things you want to earn all your *riches* for?"

Rolling his eyes, Richard tried to keep from laughing. "Jack, why don't you find a nice book and *read* for once." he whispered.

"They don't *have* nice books here! Only *knowledge*!" Jack quipped. Seeing that he was getting nowhere, he wandered through the library. After fifteen minutes of poking at books and putting them back, he turned a corner and literally bumped into a girl, sending the books she had loudly to the floor.

"*Sorry!*" he said, prompting people around them to shush him. Shushing them right back, he started to help pick up the books she'd been carrying that were now scattered around their feet. "*Sorry!*" he whispered. "Let me help!" As he did so, he got his first real look at the girl. She was blonde and uncommonly beautiful. Her hauntingly vibrant blue eyes caught him by such surprise that he stopped helping and just stared.

Taking the book that he held loosely in his hands as he crouched numbly, she glared at him. "*Thanks!*" she whispered. "But I can get it *myself!*"

Shaken back to awareness, Jack grabbed the last book and stood up. "Um... *here!*" he whispered, handing her the book as she stood and snatched it from his fingers. "Fancy meeting *you* here!" he joked. "You may not remember me, but I remember *you!*" he whispered to her as she tried to walk away, Jack following closely. "The name's Jack! Jack *Dunning!*" he held his hand out as she stopped and glared at him.

With her arms full of books, she was quite incapable of returning the offered hand. Instead she just glared at his hand until he lowered it. Whispering, she asked as she started toward her table again, "*Well, Jack... Jack Dunning. Where was it we supposedly met?*"

"*My dreams!*" he answered. "Only every one since the day I was *born!*"

Rolling her eyes at his bad pickup line, she looked askance at the seemingly crazy young man. "Then what's my *name?*"

Thinking quickly, he guessed, "*Beauty?* No, too obvious! Uh..."

She stopped and turned to stand in front of him. "Tell you *what*, lover boy." she whispered. "You tell me my *name* and I'll go out with you. Until *then...*" Leaving her sentence unfinished, she turned and walked away smartly.

Watching her depart, Jack was entranced. "*Wow!*" he whispered. Running off back to Richard, he skidded to a stop next to him. "Rich! *Rich!* You gotta check this out! I think I'm in *love!*" he whispered.

Not even looking up, Richard sighed. "So what's *new?*" he whispered back.

Undeterred, Jack started tugging on Richard's sleeve. "No *seriously*, Rich! This *girl!* She's..." His voice having raised to a low talk again, the old man

once more shushed him. Turning to him, Jack whispered angrily, "Oh, hush yourself!" As the man moved to another table, Jack continued to pester his best friend. "*Rich!* Won't you at *least* come over and *look?* I need to figure out her name!"

"*No!*" Richard shouted quietly. "Now *beat* it, Jack! I have to get this down before Monday night or I'm gonna *flunk!*"

Frustrated by Richard's total lack of interest, he looked around helplessly and sighed. Finally sitting down next to him again, he leaned an elbow on the table with his fist against his cheek, trying to think of what her name might be. Realizing there was no way to know, he formulated a new plan. Tapping Richard on the shoulder as he stared off in the distance, a smile forming on his lips, he rose and whispered, "I'll see ya' 'round, Rich!" and quickly left.

Shaking his head, Richard tried to go back to his book. "He's gonna need me to rescue him again!" he said absently to no one, looking up embarrassedly when several people nearby shushed him.

Not seeing his best friend for the rest of the weekend, Richard was worried. When he got back to the Barracks on Sunday night, Jack was finally there. "*Jack!* Where you been? I was starting to think you went U-A!"

Jack had a smile on his face. "Naw! I'd *never* do that! Too easy to get caught and you never get good dates in Leavenworth."

"So where you *been* all weekend?" he asked, already having a good idea.

"*Research*, my boy! *Research!*" Jack smiled as he turned a chair around and straddled it backwards. "Remember that girl?"

"The one you're in love with *this* week?" he needed.

"That's the one!" he answered. "I *followed* her. Subtly! She's a *Stanford* girl!"

Looking up at Jack from shining his brass, Richard was stunned. "You... you *followed* her? Isn't that a little *creepy*, Jack?"

"*No!* See, here's the thing. She told me that if I can tell her what her name is, she'll go out with me! She *invited* me to look into her! It's *fine!*"

"Ask Brooke if *she* thinks it's fine. If she says it is, I'll agree." Richard said as he went back to his polishing.

"Here's the kicker, Rich!" he beamed. "I *know* her name! It's Heather Moore! She's a psych major in her junior year, twenty, five-five, one-ten, blonde, and has the *bluest* eyes you've ever *seen!*"

Looking up at Jack, Richard paused his work. "*So?* You make it sound like she's the greatest thing since sliced bread. What's the *catch?*"

"There *is* no catch!" Jack shook his head. "She's smart, beautiful, and I have a *guaranteed* date with her! I'm *so* confident, I think I'll let *you* tag along! There's a party she's going to on the fourth and I ganked an invitation. Wanna go? You can bring *Brooke!*"

"*Speaking* of Brooke, isn't it going to be a little *hard* dating Ms. Wonderful if you're already 'dating' Brooke?" he said in a more hushed tone.

"You're up, Rich!" Jack said slapping him on the back. "She's all *yours!* I've been keeping myself out of the game for *three years*. It's *your* turn to keep the field clear for Brooke while *I* take a turn at romance!"

"Jack?" Richard looked at his friend. "Have you even *considered* what you're gonna do in a couple years? I mean, we've already shipped over *twice*. You thinking of lifeing or are you a Terminal Lance?"

"*Nah!*" Jack shook his head dismissively. "I'm *done* after this cruise. When I didn't make the cutting score, I decided then. They might not even *offer* it.

Nope, it's back to Pittsburgh for me! Only reason I haven't moved Mom close is that I knew I'd be going *back* soon. How about you?"

"*Me?* I've been busting my rump getting my *degree!*" he bragged. "After I graduate, I'm transferring to the First-Civ-Div and get me a nice cushy *office* job somewhere, maybe someplace like New York or LA! Something where the heaviest thing I have to hump is my *checkbook!*"

The two looked at each other, for the first time aware that in two years they would be going their separate ways after practically living in each other's pockets half their lives. Neither one said anything, but they both knew what the other was thinking. Finally, Richard broke the silence.

"*Look* Jack, you haven't done anything with your GI bill. Don't you *want* to go to college? *Make* something of yourself?"

"*Me?* Joe *College?*" Jack shook his head. "*Please!* I'll be twenty-five by the time I'm Outside! After college I'd be pushing *thirty!*"

"Forty, the way *you* study." Richard quipped.

"Ha, *ha!*" Jack stood up and paced the room. "Besides, what would *I* get a degree in? *Women's Studies?* No. No, I see myself maybe starting my *own* business. Maybe a *car* lot, or something."

"*You?* Run a *car* lot? You've never even *owned* a car!"

"Or a dry-cleaning place! That's what my old man did after the war!" He paused, his back to Richard. "I might just marry money." Jack smirked as he looked over his shoulder with a mischievous grin.

"So I take it then that this Heather Moore, or should I say the future Mrs. Heather Dunning, isn't *hurting?*"

"That's what people say." Jack resumed his seat next to Richard. "Story is, her folks were old money with a mansion in New Hampshire or Vermont or something and they both passed a year or so ago. I don't know the details yet, but..."

"What happened to your research? Or did you stop your investigation when you found out she was loaded?"

"*Rich!*" Jack stood up. "I'm *insulted!* I just felt that knowing *too* much would be bad! Wouldn't leave us anything to talk about on our first *date!*"

"And you *know* she's interested?" he asked dubiously.

"Rich, she *told* me to learn about her, and guaranteed me a date if I *did!* It's a *sure thing!*" he said, spreading his arms wide.

"Alright. I'll go along with the gag." Richard shook his head. "Just remember, *you* invited *me*, so I don't wanna hear it from you when she embarrasses you with Brooke and I there to witness it, or she passes on *you* to go for *me!*"

Jack patted Richard on the shoulder. "You're a good man, Rich! I'll name my second boy after you! The first will be Jack Junior, of course!"

"Of *course!*" Richard rolled his eyes and resumed his work.

Monday the fifth of September came and the three Marines managed to get a day of Leave together. When at last they parked in front of the strange house, Jack practically ran inside, leaving his friends to their own devices.

"Rich? You said this girl *told* him to look into her, and that if he did she'd *date* him?" Brooke asked. "Doesn't that sound a little..."

"...impossible? Weird? *Crazy?*" Richard finished for her. Laughing, he shook his head as he opened his car door. "Yeah. Something tells me I'm gonna

be pulling his butt out of the fire *again!* *No* woman invites a guy to become her stalker!"

Brooke opened her door and the two climbed out. "Well, it is *your* turn to rescue him, Rich. Remember *last* time? I kept that thug from ripping Jack's throat out for hitting on his girlfriend!"

"I know." he said walking toward the door. "It'd be nice if Jack returned the *favor* once in a while, though!"

"You never *need* it, and he's always doing *me* the biggest favor anyone ever *has*, so I figure I *owe* him."

"Then you can take a double-turn." Richard suggested, opening the door for her. "Shall we see if he needs rescuing already?"

Brooke shook her head as she entered the room filled with loud music and louder people. Shouting, she answered, "It's early yet! He can't *possibly* have screwed it up *this* fast!"

Heather Moore slapped Jack as hard as she could, fury burning in her eyes. "You've been *spying* on me?" she shouted, seemingly loud enough that he thought Richard and Brooke might hear her from over by the front door.

Jack was dumbfounded. What he had thought was a sure thing had instantly dissolved into a disaster. "Look, Heather. I... I thought you *wanted* me to..."

She reached her hand back to slap him again when Jack stopped explaining and backed away. "*OK! OK!* I can take a hint!"

"Obviously not, you *cretin!*" she growled, this time her voice not carrying far. "I was politely brushing you *off!* So brush *off!*" As Jack walked away sadly and so obviously hurt, Heather genuinely felt sorry for him. Taken literally, she saw how her words could have been mistaken for a veiled offer,

but the thought that he'd pried into her life enough to know she'd been raised in New Hampshire left her feeling she was better off without her dejected harasser.

Seeing Jack heading back towards him and Brooke, having heard the end of the all-too-brief conversation between he and Heather, Richard tried to console his best friend. "Hey, Jack..."

"*Save it!*" he shot back as he reached them. "Let's just get *outta* here!"

Determined to try and earn his buddy a second chance, Richard stopped him. "Hang on, Jack. Let *me* talk to her."

Jack waved at him dismissively. "Fine! *You* want her, be my guest!"

"*No!*" he replied, grabbing Jack's arm to stop his retreat again. "I mean for *you!* Lemme see if I can get *you* a second shot at her, a fair shake! You at least deserve *that* much!"

"Yeah?" he smiled at his best friend. "You think she *might?*"

"Only one way to find out!" he said, heading off towards where he saw she was sitting with a group of girls.

Heather was trying to put the whole thing out of her mind when she saw a man approaching her who took her breath away at first sight. *Now this is more like it!* she was thinking as he sat next to her. "Hi!" she said coyly, glad that she'd gotten rid of Jack just in time.

Coming over to her with the best of intentions, when Richard looked at her though, her deep gaze penetrating through to his bones, he sat beside her and smiled; Jack a distant memory. "Hi! I'm Richard, Richard *Hargrave.*" He held out a hand and almost kissed hers when she took it daintily.

Feeling the heat flushing to her cheeks as he spoke, Heather's pulse pounded in her throat as he took her hand. "I... I don't think I've seen *you* around the college. Are you taking your post-grad?"

Shaking his head, Richard laughed lightly. "*No!* I don't go to Stanford! I'm studying business at Menlo while stationed at The Barracks in Alameda."

"Oh?" she inquired breathily. "I don't think I've ever met a *sailor* before!"

Richard's smile melted instantly. "I'm a *Marine!* Not a *squid!*"

"*Oh!* I... I'm sorry!" Heather flushed embarrassedly. "I think that's even *more* interesting!" she said, trying to salvage her *faux pax*.

Finding himself utterly unable to be angered at her ignorance, Richard's smile returned quickly. "*That's* OK! It's an honest mistake!"

"You're too kind!" she said demurely. Looking back up at him slowly, she couldn't help but return his smile. "So, how do you know Melody?"

"*Who?*" Richard asked innocently.

"Melody? The girl who's *party* this is?" Seeing his confusion, she smiled wickedly and asked, "Did you just crash or are you somebody's guest?"

Suddenly remembering how he'd gotten here and why, he was overcome with guilt. "Huh? *Oh!* Um... well..." He laughed, trying to find something funny about the situation. "Well... uh... see, here's the *thing...*"

Standing next to Brooke by the bar, Jack took a drink from his scotch and soda. "So how's it look?" he asked her. He'd asked Brooke to watch Heather and Richard for him so he wouldn't look too desperate. "Does it look like it's going the same way it did earlier?"

She didn't have the heart to tell him. "Well, *no*. It... it's going... um... *OK*." Sighing, she decided that the news was better told to him elsewhere. "Come with me!" she said, grabbing his hand and dragging him out the front door.

"So that's why I came over to talk to you." Richard sighed. "To... uh... see if you'd give him a second *chance*." he smiled at her.

The college girl bit her lower lip, uncertain what to do about it. "So, Jack got an invitation from *Eddie*, who got one from *Melody*, and you and your friend are here with *him* for...?"

"Moral support?" Richard half-answered. "Honestly, Jack is about as good a guy as they *come*. He and I have been best friends since high school." He sighed heavily. "And that's why I feel so *bad*."

She furrowed her brow at him. "Why?"

Scooting closer, he looked deeply in her eyes. "Because I don't think he's going to *get* a second chance. *Is* he?"

Her breath caught as she felt his knee touch hers. Flushing, she suddenly felt dizzy and out of breath. Almost giddy, she giggled, "Um... I... I don't *think* so!"

"Poor *Jack*!" Richard laughed lightly.

She nodded. "Poor *Jack*!"

"God damn, son-of-a-bitching, cock-sucking, mother..." Jack fumed around the front yard next to Richard's car. "I'm gonna *kill* that son-of-a-..."

"*Jack*!" Brooke tried to steady him. "You have to calm down! You're gonna cause a *scene*! There are *kids* in this neighborhood! Ease it down!"

Pacing like a caged animal, he fumed. "Some best friend! Every time I like someone, *boom!* There he is trying to take her for *himself!* *God damn...*" he censored himself and took a breath. "OK! Alright! *Fine!* He can *have* her! He *deserves* the stuck-up....! *Ugh!* I'm *outta* here!" Jack spat, starting to walk back down the street they'd come up.

"*Jack!*" Brooke called after him, but he only waved her off and kept walking. "Damn it, Rich! Why did you have to..." She put her hand on her forehead, trying to think what to do to salvage their nearly life-long friendship. Finally, she ran back in the house to look for Richard. She found him happily talking and holding Heather's hand when she came running up.

"Rich! You *gotta* come! Jack took off! I think he might go U-A! For *real* this time!"

Standing quickly as Heather did, he looked at the door. "Oh, *crap!* Jack!" Turning to her, he stammered, "Um... I... I gotta... uh..."

Practically dragging him to the front door, Heather didn't need explanation. "Come *on!* Let's go find your friend!"

The three piled into Richard's station wagon, Brooke sitting in the front with Richard behind the wheel. Heather took a seat in the back just as Brooke pointed back down the street. "He took off *that* way!"

Turning the car around, Richard sped down the street quickly.

"*Richard!*" Heather warned. "This is a residential street! *Slow down!*"

Backing off his pursuit, Richard slowed to the legal limit. "Sorry, I..."

"...you just want to find Jack. We *know.*" Brooke finished for him. "So do I, but let's not *kill* anyone in the process! Ourselves *included!*"

Making their way down the street, Heather and Brooke looked down side streets while Richard drove a search pattern. After looking for half an hour, Richard returned to the party.

"Look, I'm sorry for all this." Heather apologized. "I... I guess I was sort of *cruel* to him."

"He has that effect on people." Richard excused as he parked out in front of the house again. "It's *fine*." Taking a breath, he got out and opened Heather's door for her.

Climbing out, she looked up at him. "Are you *sure* you wouldn't like my help to keep looking for him?"

"No." Richard shook his head slowly. "Jack'll do what he needs to do to cool off. He'll be back at The Bricks on time. I'm sure of *that*." He looked around the neighborhood. "I'm just *worried* about him is all. I've been doing it so long it's become a *habit*!" he laughed.

Laughing with him a moment before their mirth died, Heather took a chance. Reaching up, she pulled him into a kiss. Making it quick, she backed off and sighed. "*Call* me?" she asked. "Let me know he's alright?"

Collecting himself from the kiss, he smiled at her as he got back in the car. "I will. Promise."

After he got in, she came up to the window. "You'll give him my message?"

He nodded before he pulled away from the house, leaving Heather to watch them disappear into the distance.

Jack walked for hours. Eventually his anger melted away, replaced with a sick feeling, the same as the day Ox sucker-punched him or the day Wendy dumped him. He felt betrayed, but knew he had nothing to blame but his own

hubris this time. Eventually, he found he'd walked back to the Barracks while not even being aware of it. By nine he was walking in through the front gate and headed toward his rack.

He undressed and hit the bed like a hammer, his body shaking it as he came to rest with a shudder. Closing his eyes, he heard movement from the foot of his rack. Turning in place, he looked down to see Richard standing there.

"Come to rub it in?" he growled.

"Nope." Richard said earnestly. "To apologize, and deliver a message. *Two*, actually, one from Brooke and one from Heather."

Turning over in his bed, he looked up at Richard. "*Well?*"

He stopped pacing and faced Jack. "Well, Brooke said to say you're an a-hole and she hopes you rot in the brig when they drag your sorry carcass in here tomorrow morning. You can tell her she lost our bet."

Jack chuckled once, then twice. "She should know better than to bet against *you* when it's about *me*! And the other?"

"Heather said to tell you that her offer still stands, the one she made to you in the library. She also said to tell you that she's sorry she reacted so badly, that she's willing to make it up to you, and to give you her phone number."

Sitting up in his rack so quickly he nearly bounced out of it, Jack looked at him in confusion. "*Really?* I mean, you and she didn't...?"

Richard looked his friend straight in the eyes. "Yeah, we *did*! We hit it off! *Marvelously!* But she *still* wants to give you your shot. I do, too."

Sitting back, Jack thought about it a moment. "Whoa! *Dude!* That's..." His words failed him as he considered what Richard was saying.

"It's a serious offer, Jack." he said. "She *means* it, and so do I. I honestly wish you the best. She... she'd be a lucky girl if she ended up with you. I *mean* it." He stuffed his hands in his front pockets, biting off the desire to push his friend aside and take Heather for himself. He'd never fallen so completely in love with a woman so quickly before; not like this. He'd swallow it and risk losing her for Jack's sake, though.

Looking deep within himself, Jack knew what he should do. "No." he said, turning over and lying back down in his rack.

"Jack! I *mean* it!" Richard half laughed. "I'm *serious*, bud! She's willing to give you a chance and I *want* you to take it!"

"*Nope!*" Jack said, turning back over to face the man standing over him. "No thanks. Call her and give her my regards."

Insulted that Jack would turn down the woman he found so alluring, Richard nearly barked back at him. "Why *not*? This afternoon you were..."

"This afternoon you weren't in *love* with her." Jack interrupted him.

Stepping back, almost as though Jack had slugged him, Richard was shocked. "In *what*?" he asked incredulously.

Standing up, Jack faced him. "*You! In Love! With Heather! This afternoon!* Do I need to draw you a logic diagram? Get you a sign language interpreter?"

"*No!*" Richard balked. "What in *God's* name makes you think..."

Walking up in front of Richard, Jack started ticking off his fingers. "One, you have *never* offered to step aside for me before, because you always knew the girl wasn't serious and I'd end up getting my heart broken all over again, which means Heather's the real deal, at least as far as you can see. Two, you spent enough time with her, I'd guess looking for me, that she got to know

me enough *through* you that she's willing to give me another shot. *Three...*" he paused, his voice lowering. "I... I can see it in your eyes. You fell for her *hard*. Didn't you?"

Stunned, Richard nodded and looked down. "Yeah, I kinda *did*. And I feel like a total *jerk* for it!"

Turning away, Jack wandered. "Oh, and four, your *lipstick's* smudged."

Reaching up, Richard wiped his lips and looked at his fingers unconsciously.

Turning in place, Jack faced him. "Ah, *ha!* She *did* kiss you! Five! She feels the same way about *you!*" Seeing Richard's shocked expression, Jack smiled and pointed it him. "*Gotcha!*"

He couldn't help it. Richard burst out laughing and walked over to Jack. "You *a-hole!*" he said, wrapping him in a bear hug. Slapping Jack on the back, he backed off and shook his head. "I guess you know me pretty well. Better than *me* sometimes."

"I keep *telling* you, but you never listen." Jack shrugged. "You *need* me!"

Chapter 9 - Christmas Gifts

The next day Rich called Heather and told her that Jack stepped aside, but Heather wouldn't have it. She *insisted* on a date with Jack and wouldn't take no for an answer. Jack said it was good, friendly and warm, but they quickly learned that he and Heather would never have worked out in the end. She was *made* for Rich and Jack could already see she was in love with him.

Heather and Rich were inseparable after that. For about six weeks, every minute of Liberty Rich had was spent with her, leaving Jack and I to fumble around on our own. It wasn't until Rich's twenty-fourth birthday that Jack and I got to spend any time with him again, but by then it was a foursome.

Rich was done dating and Jack was stuck as my 'boyfriend' for the interim. We went on a triple date once. Rich and Heather, Jack and... *Marie* I think her name was... and me and Julie. It was awkward because they were first dates for Jack and me, but Heather and Rich were a permanent couple, so I think it made our dates a little uncomfortable. We never did it again.

By the end of the following year, Jack was in a bit of a depression. He was *happy* for Rich and Heather, but he'd begun to feel like he was never going to find anyone that would love him. It was shortly before Christmas ninety-five that I found myself in a position to repay all the help Jack had ever given me, *plus* interest.

Brooke leaned against a rack of cards while Heather was crouched next to another rack. "Come *on*, Heather! Just pick something and get it *over* with!"

Heather wouldn't be rushed. She wanted to get the perfect card to go with her gift of a Rolex this year. She'd decided on something sweet and loving, but nothing said just what she felt. "Brooke, if you want to speed things up, help me find a Christmas card for Richard!"

Standing up, she stretched and wandered around. "Heather, I *can't* pick your card to Rich! It would be... *weird!* And *gross!*"

Laughing at her commentary, Heather stood back up and stopped suddenly. Picking up a card, she read it quickly and smiled. "*Found* it!" she gushed, running over to Brooke with it.

Reading the card, Brooke stuck out her tongue. "*Blech!* Disgustingly sappy! It's perfect for you two! Can we *go* now?"

"*Jealous*, much?" Heather teased. "Come on! I still need a ride to the library so I can get the book I need for French Literature."

Driving Heather to the campus library, Brooke enjoyed driving her white Firebird she'd bought new the previous fall. Even though it was the first day of winter, she had the top down and they both enjoyed the sunny weather; a significant improvement from the devastating storm only ten days earlier.

When they got to the campus, Brooke opted to wait in the car while Heather went in search of her book. Some time later, while lying back in the reclined driver's seat, she heard a woman clearing her throat. Opening her eyes and peering over her sunglasses at her intruder, she smiled. "Can I help you?" Brooke asked, sitting her head up slightly.

"Possibly." the girl replied. "I... I don't mean to be overly inquisitive, but I couldn't help but notice your car has a military base sticker on it. Are you from the Naval Base or is this someone *else's* car? Your *boyfriend's*, maybe?"

Brooke had thought she'd heard it all when it came to subtle inquiries about her availability and sexuality, but this one took the cake. "No, it's mine. I'm a Marine stationed at Alameda NAS. Why do you ask?" She shifted in her seat to get more comfortable and expose a little more cleavage to the college girl.

"I... I was just wondering, could I ask you a few questions?" the girl asked. "I'm a psychology major and I have to do a dumb report on women in male-dominated occupations. Would it be alright? It would only take about ten minutes or so. It won't include your name or anything! Just an anonymous set of answers!"

Taking a deep breath, Brooke watched the girl's body language. She was shy, but cute. Her wavy red hair, green eyes, and fair complexion made for a sexy combination. Clearing her throat, she sat up. "Sure. Take a seat... I'm just waiting for a friend of mine to get a book."

She came around the car, opened the passenger door, and sat with her legs outside. "*Thanks!* Who's your friend? Are they a student here?"

"Her name's Heather, Heather *Moore*. Maybe you know her? She's a psych major, too."

Shaking her head, she looked down at her paper. "The name *sounds* familiar, but I can't place it. I'm *new!* Alright, first question. '*Are you ever made to feel inferior by any of the men in your occupation?*'"

Laughing, Brooke tossed her head back. "That's half their *job* description, honey! I'm an Enlisted *Marine*, not a Girl Scout! But to answer simply, *yes*. My *superiors*, most of whom are male, make me feel *inferior*. I don't think it could *work* any other way, though!"

"Good point." she replied. Jotting down some notes, she sighed. "Alright, question two. '*Have you ever been sexually harassed in the workplace?*' It means only in your *current* occupation where men are prevalent, not any previous job."

Brooke shook her head. "No, but I know it's happened to *other* W-Ms. Just not to me personally."

"W-Ms?" she asked innocently.

"Women Marines. Sorry, the jargon is *unavoidable*. I'm a third-gen Marine."

"I see." Taking more notes, she sighed heavily as she read the next question to herself before asking it. "Some of the questions are a little leading!" she commented. "Alright, question three. '*How often have you been passed over for advancement due to your gender?*'"

Brooke nodded. "Just a *little* leading, but I can still answer it. Never. Next?"

The girl made notes and pressed on. "Question four. '*On the occasions you were passed over, were you offered the opportunity to advance if...*'" She sat back. "OK, this is stupid! This isn't *applicable* to you! They just *assume* the answer to three is yes! We'll skip it!"

Noting that the girl was getting frustrated, Brooke reached over and touched her shoulder. Seeing her reaction, the Marine realized that maybe her first impression of the girl was incorrect. "It's *fine*, really!" she said, drawing her hand back. "If you want, you can continue. I know you *have* to do the paper, so maybe with my help you can still do it, just with a twist your professor wasn't expecting!"

The girl shook her head. "You're *very* nice, but... Ugh! They expect that *every* woman is being sexually harassed all the *time*! Half these won't even *apply* to you! There's one that asks if you could ever feel *physically threatened* in the normal course of your work!"

Brooke laughed loudly, the girl joining her after a moment. Finally, Brooke managed to get out, "It goes with the territory! Warning! If you become a *Marine*, people may try to *kill* you!" The two ladies were laughing so hard that neither saw Heather walk up.

"Is this a private joke?" she asked, making the two laugh even harder.

Finally getting control of herself, Brooke wiped a tear of laughter from her eye. "Sorry, Heather! You had to *be* there!" She turned to the girl. "Heather? This is..." Pausing, she stopped laughing. "Oh! I don't believe you ever *said* your name!"

The girl stood up, closing her notebook. "It's Erica, Erica Hargrave! Are you her... um... *girlfriend*?" She'd had suspicions about Brooke from her body language and the way the Marine had looked at her.

Sitting up in her car, Brooke stopped laughing. "*Wait* a minute! Did you say Erica *Hargrave*? You wouldn't be *Richard* Hargrave's *sister*, would you?" she asked, stepping out and around her car.

Looking at the two women nervously, Erica stepped back. "Um... yes? Do you two *know* Richie?" She paused a moment and looked at Brooke. "He... When he's home for holidays, he's told us about a woman he serves with. Your name wouldn't be *Brooke*, would it?"

"Last I checked!" she answered. "Damn! This is just too *wild*!"

Erica slowly turned to look at the other woman with Brooke. "*Wait* a minute! H-Heather? Heather *Moore*?" Her eyes widened in sudden realization as she nodded with a smile. "*Oh... my... God!* Richie *wrote* me about you! He... he doesn't know that I got into Stanford or that Daddy's paying for my college yet! I only transferred here this semester!"

Heather looked at her and smiled. "Well this *will* be a big surprise for him, then! I've heard so much about you, Erica! I've been looking forward to meeting you for over a year!"

Leaning on her car, Brooke nodded. "*I've* been hearing about you for over *four* years! I expected you to be some mousy little girl! Rich talks about you like you're still *twelve*!"

Rolling her eyes, she looked at Brooke. "You know big brothers! They think little sisters are children *forever!*" Looking down, she cleared her throat and lowered her voice to just above a whisper. "Is... is *Jack* still around? I haven't seen him in *years*. When he gets vacation time, he never comes to visit with Richie."

"Marines get *Leave*, not *vacation*." Brooke corrected. "But yeah, Jack's still around. We hang out all the time! Doesn't Rich tell you about him?"

"Richie *never* talks about him at home." Erica shook her head sadly. "Jack and Mom don't get along, so Richie stopped talking about him *years* ago." She looked up at the two. "Is he doing OK? Does... does he have a... a *girl?*"

Heather and Brooke looked at each other with a knowing glance. Finally, Brooke suggested, "Why don't we go somewhere and talk a bit. It's about lunch time and I could use a few thousand Calories."

Nodding, Heather turned to Erica. "Do you have time? We don't want to get in the way of your class work."

"Oh, *no!*" Erica shook her head. "I can do this *anytime!* I have until middle of January to get it done, and lunch sounds *divine!*"

The three decided on a restaurant in walking distance, so very shortly they had a table and were sitting around and chatting like old friends.

Brooke looked down at her half-eaten burger, trying to formulate how to ask Erica what was on her mind. She'd been telling the girl about Jack for an hour and Erica never seemed to get enough, with hardly a word asked about her own brother. "Um... *Erica?* Can I ask you something?"

"*Anything*, Brooke!" Erica answered, taking a bite of her Caesar salad.

"Um... do you *like* Jack?" she asked delicately.

Erica flushed with embarrassment. She swallowed her bite hard and nodded shyly. "I... I've been in love with Jack for over ten years!" Turning sad, she sighed forlornly. "But he never noticed me. To *him* I'm just..." she sighed again, "...just *Buttons!*"

"*Buttons?*" they both asked together.

"Jack's old nickname for me." she answered with a wistful smile. When she saw they didn't get it, she explained. "Red hair? Red *Buttons?* Cute-as-a-button? It's OK, I didn't get it at first, *either*. But see? It's just like *Richie!* Jack will only ever see me as... as just a little *girl!*"

Looking Erica over, Brooke shook her head. "Speaking as an expert in the attractiveness of women, if you'll pardon me saying so Erica, if Jack saw you *now?*" She wolf whistled quietly. "You're no little girl anymore!"

Nodding, Heather agreed. "I may not be so inclined, but I can tell that you would be *serious* competition if you and I were both interested in Jack!"

Perking up, Erica smiled gaily. "*Really?* Do you think Jack..." Swiftly, she dismissed the idea. "No! It's *stupid!* Why should someone like *Jack* want someone like *me?*" speaking Jack's name almost reverently.

"Would you like a chance, though?" Brooke asked before she took a bite.

"If you think it would be alright! When can I *see* him? Is he busy tonight?"

"Slow down!" Heather advised with a laugh. "*First* of all, you need to appear not so anxious. All men get suspicious when a woman takes *too* much of an interest. They think she *wants* something out of him."

Brooke shoved a half-eaten bite of her burger into her cheek. "Besides, Jack doesn't have Liberty coming until New Years Eve, and *that's* only a forty-eight with the first half covering for Rogers." Seeing Erica's confusion she

explained, "He has the weekend off, but Saturday he's covering for Corporal Rogers, so all he gets is Sunday."

"Oh." Erica said disappointedly, but she perked up quickly. "Does he have plans for New Years, do you know?"

Looking at Erica, Brooke swallowed. "Jack and I will be at our New Years party that night. You can *come* if you like!" She noticed Heather giving her a look, but Brooke shook her head subtly.

"Alright! Is it formal or casual?" Erica was hoping for something romantic.

"Casual... Jeans and shirt kind of thing." Brooke answered. "Whatever's comfortable. It's just a New Years house party. You twenty-one?"

Erica slumped back in her seat. "I... I won't be until January ninth."

Brooke shrugged. "Close enough!" she smiled. Glancing at her watch, she winced. "*Damn!* It's already fourteen hundred! I gotta get back! Look, call me and I'll give you the details." She grabbed Erica's notebook, scribbling her number in one of the margins. "*Sorry*, Heather! You're gonna have to bum a ride from someone else or cab-it back to your place!" Heading for her car, she heard Erica running after her. Stopping just outside the restaurant, she was surprised when Erica hugged her and kissed her on the cheek.

"Thank you *so* much, Brooke! Oh, and thank you for your service, too!"

Stunned for a moment, she cocked an eyebrow at Erica. "You know, when you first came up to me, I was *sure* you were hitting on me. I was actually a little disappointed when I figured out you *weren't*." She smiled at the girl after a moment. "Now I'm *glad* you weren't! See, I couldn't figure what to get Jack for Christmas this year. He's in *so* much trouble when he sees you!"

"Why?" Erica asked innocently.

"Because, he doesn't stand a *chance* against you! *You* being at the party is gonna be my present to you *both*! Merry Christmas!"

"Merry Christmas..." Erica replied confusedly as Brooke ran for her car.

With New Years Eve approaching, Erica was frantically trying to pick the perfect outfit. "Too casual, too obvious, too dressy... *Ugh!*" she screamed. Dialing Brooke's number, she waited for her to answer.

"Maintenance Shop, Hathaway." Brooke answered.

"*Brooke?* This is Erica. Is this a bad time?"

"No!" she replied happily. "What can I do for you?"

"Do you have time to come over and help me pick something for Sunday? I can't figure out what to wear and it's driving me *crazy!*"

Laughing, it took a moment for Brooke to compose herself. "Look, whatever you wear will be *fine!* He won't be looking at your *clothes!*"

"*Brooke!*" she whined. "I need your *help!* Please? This is *really* important to me! I just *have* to get it right!"

"Alright! Alright! I can't come over until Saturday, though." She heard the young woman squeal with delight. "So I'll see you then!"

When Brooke finally arrived Saturday afternoon, Erica had narrowed her choices down to three outfits: a green satin evening gown, a little black dress, and tight jeans with a T-shirt and white see through jacket.

Holding each up to herself, Erica looked at Brooke. "OK, so which one? The green dress, the black one, or just jeans?"

Pursing her lips, Brooke thought about it seriously, using everything she new about Jack and her own sense of attractiveness, she nodded. "OK, the green dress is right out. You'd look *beautiful* in it, but this isn't Prom, it's a house party. That leaves the dress or the jeans."

"OK, so which one makes me look *hotter*?" Erica asked directly.

Laughing, Brooke shook her head. "Jack isn't looking for hot! He probably won't even *notice* your outfit. All he'll see is *you*! Of course, I'm also biased. I don't care for dresses, but I know *Jack* and..." Looking at the two options, she pointed at the coordinate set. "Jeans! Don't get me wrong, you'd look *smokin'* in that dress, but the casual look will draw more attention to your face and..." She trailed off and blushed slightly.

"My chest?" Erica finished for her.

"Yeah! *That!*" she said, glad to not have to say it out loud about Richard's sister. "Seriously though, with an outfit like that you *really* need to hit your hair out of the park to dress it up." Picking at Erica's hair, Brooke hummed quietly. "Well, you could hit it with highlights, really bring out the color, use a curling solution and set and spray, light hold since you got fine hair, Yeah!" She looked at Erica. "I don't think any of the salons around town will have any openings this close to New Years, though."

Erica's hopes sagged. "You're *right*! I... I didn't think to make an appointment for one!" She dropped onto her bed feeling hopeless.

"So that's why I'm going to do you up *myself*!" Brooke smiled.

Erica sat up eagerly, but with a confused look. "*You*?"

"Don't act so surprised!" Brooke said defensively. "Mom was a beautician! She taught me everything she knows about it and I even worked in her salon as a beautician myself for most of a year. She figured someday it might come

in handy, and it looks like today's the day!" Brooke sat next to Erica on her bed. "Between you and me, I think she figured it would give me a backup career because she didn't think I could 'Pack the Gear' in the Corps!"

Leaning over, she hugged Brooke. "You're the *best!*" After a moment, she felt the older woman stiffen. "Oh! I'm sorry!" she said embarrassedly.

Brooke took a breath and stood up. "It's *fine*, Erica! It's nothing! It's just... I haven't had a date in a while is all, and... well... you're *cute*, OK?" Letting out a breath, she turned to her. "...and *taken*. *Very* taken if I read you right! Are you sure that we're talking about the same Jack? Jack *Dunning*? Short guy? Skinny? Thinks he's *funny*?"

"He *is* funny!" Erica laughed. "He's been making me laugh since the first day I *met* him!" Turning sullen, Erica looked at the floor. "I think the only time he didn't make me laugh was the time he was in the hospital when I thought he was going to *die*." Her smile returning, she looked up at Brooke. "Then he woke up and the first thing he *did* was to make me laugh again!"

"Don't think I've heard *this* story." Brooke noted as she sat back down. "What happened to him?"

Erica started to tell a brief version, then found herself needing to backtrack through it, finally just telling the whole thing. "So I went to see him every day. Daddy told me that talking to him might help, so I did. I talked to him about school, about my friends, about everything I could think of! I even did my homework out loud next to him! And every day before I went home, I... I'd tell him I *loved* him, even though he would probably never know it."

Her mind a jumble of thoughts, Brooke found the story finally filled in some missing pieces to the puzzle that was Jack Dunning.

Taking a breath, Erica smiled. "And then on the last day, just after I said '*I love you*', I saw him *move*! Eight weeks of talking to him every day and I

finally saw him move! Oh, *Brooke*! You know what the first thing he said was? He told me, '*Ouch!*' so it would make me laugh! I wanted to kiss him right *then!*'"

Laughing, she looked at the younger girl. "Wait, how old would you have been then? Thirteen?"

"*Fourteen.*" Erica blushed. "I... I tried to kiss him twice more before he left home. By then I was *almost* fifteen, and after my sixteenth birthday I wanted *so much* to just run away to California, find him, and marry him!"

"What stopped you?"

"*Daddy.*" Erica said sadly. "Mom knew for longer, ever since I was thirteen, but Daddy figured it out the day Richie left home. He... after they left... he took me aside and I told him how I felt about Jack, how I've *always* felt about him. He held me and let me cry in his shoulder because I didn't get to say goodbye to him. Daddy told me if I ran away to be with him, I'd be on my own, but if I worked hard in school and got into college, he'd *pay* to send me to a college that was close enough to Jack that I would have my chance!"

She stood up proudly. "So here I am! I wasn't in a *rush* though, I wanted to do it *right*. I graduated, got accepted to Stanford, but I went to two years of Community College first. Getting a lot of core classes out of the way there meant Daddy could *afford* two years at Stanford! Pretty smart, huh?"

Brooke nodded. "Smarter than *me*! I won't get started with college until I'm Outside in two years!"

Sighing at the thought of seeing Jack the next day, Erica's expression became dreamy and far away.

"Wow! You've got it *bad*, girl!"

"Don't I *know* it!" she giggled. "I love him *so much*, Brooke! I just *have* to try! So you'll help me?"

She smiled. "When I get through with you, Jack won't know what *hit* him!"

Turning around, Heather smiled as she saw the three people she was waiting for enter. Making her way to the door, she saw Richard notice her approach and her heart fluttered with anticipation.

"*Richard!* I'm so *glad* you could make it!" she said as she got close enough for him to hear.

He smiled as he saw her approaching. Removing his cover, Richard ran his free hand through his short-cropped red hair. "*Hey*, beautiful! Couldn't leave *you* alone! You might come to your senses and realize you could do *way* better than *me!*"

Heather smiled coyly as she wound her arms around his waist. "Better than *you?* Who? Adonis? Apollo? *John Wayne?*"

Jack peered around him, having been standing next to him and being quietly ignored by the two lovebirds. "Ah, come *on!* *This* jarhead? I just don't get why you threw *me* over for *that!* What do you see in *him* when there's *me* to be had!"

Brooke tapped him on the shoulder. When Jack turned and faced her, she looked him up and down, then did the same with Richard, and simply shook her head. "*Sorry* Charlie, but even *I* can tell he's got you beat."

Jack, ever the comedian, took off his cover and held it to his heart. "*Brooke!* My *sweetness!* Say it ain't so!"

Pushing past Jack and snaking around Richard, Brooke smiled and hugged Heather. "*Hey*, beautiful! Still sure I can't tear you away from this clown? I

can *really* make it worth your while!" She arched her eyebrows at Heather in a comically seductive way.

"You make an awfully tempting offer, Brooke..." she said in her low throaty voice. Releasing her and returning to Richard, she hooked an arm through one of his. "...but alas my heart is already *spoken* for."

Jack turned to his best friend. "Say *Rich*, you wouldn't mind if Heather took a little *break* from you, would you? Just a *short* one? Like say for an hour? Oh, I don't mean for *myself*, but think of poor *Brooke*!"

Turning to his best friend, Richard smirked at him. "Yeah, I know who *you're* looking out for, Jack."

Pleading as the four made their way through the other guests, Jack begged, "Oh, come *on*, Rich! Give a guy a *break*! Just let them go upstairs, alone, for *ten minutes*! I swear, you can even handcuff me to the front door! I just wanna know it *happened*!"

Brooke slugged Jack in the arm hard enough to bruise. "*Can* it, clown! I'm not your personal masturbation material."

"OK, OK. You know I was only kidding around." Turning to Heather, Jack smiled sincerely. "So how've you been?"

She put her other arm through Jack's as they walked slowly. "Can't complain, Jack." Thinking of how to segue into what Brooke wanted to talk about, she asked innocently, "*Seeing* anyone?"

He jerked his thumb at Brooke and Richard. "No one but *these* two yahoos. Alas, you were my last and final hope. My heart can *never* love another!"

Smiling, Brooke hoped to not give too much away. "Well, that's too bad. I *was* hoping you could help me with a little problem."

His smile melted immediately. "What's her name?"

Laughing, Heather reached the end table where she'd put her drink and the ones she'd already gotten for the trio. "Oh, *Jack!* Here I thought I'd ruined you for *all* other women!"

He nodded. "True, true, but what's her *name*, Brooke? Her *name!*"

Looking at him, Brooke smiled. "Her name's Erica. She's sweet, but shy. I met her while waiting for Heather at the campus library. I kind of got my signals crossed and thought she was hitting on me, but she was really just wanting to ask about my service. She was doing some psychology paper on the effect of women in predominantly male occupied professions."

Wincing as he picked up a beer bottle, he opened it, and handed it to her. "*Please!* Not another she-woman man-hater! I don't care *how* cute she is, they're more trouble than they're *worth!* You sure she wasn't hitting on *you?*"

Taking a drink, Brooke shook her head. "*Positive.* And she's not a left-wing wacko feminist, either. Her *professor* probably is, so it's the assignment she *got*, but she's actually quite nice, *loves* the armed forces, and even thanked me for my service."

Shaking his head as he took his own beer, Jack swigged it. "Then her old man's probably a swabbie at the base."

While Brooke laughed, Richard, who'd not been listening to the conversation, asked, "What about swabbies?"

Taking another drink, Jack grinned. "Nothing, Rich. Just go back to ogling your girlfriend."

Picking up his own beer, Richard glared at him. "I wasn't *ogling* her, I was admiring her beautiful eyes!"

Nudging him in the shoulder, Jack quipped, "*Sure, sure, Rich. Increase your scanning elevation about twenty-five degrees to find her eyes.*"

His comment brought a laugh to the three and a blush to Heather's cheeks before Brooke turned and looked toward the door and checked her watch.

Noticing the action, Jack shook his head. "Oh, *no! You didn't! Brooke! Say it ain't so! You set me up without even asking?*"

She shrugged as she took another drink. "You'll *love* her, Jack. I *swear.*"

He nodded. "Uh-huh. How many *eyebrows* does she have?"

"Three, one for each eye." Brooke smiled sweetly. "But you'll never notice because the hump on her back will draw all your attention." Almost sensing more than hearing the front door open over the clamor of conversations and the music, she turned and smiled when she saw Erica look into the throng of partygoers. Handing her beer over to Heather, she didn't even look back. "Excuse me." she said as she headed for the door.

Thinking she might've come to the wrong address before she spotted Brooke coming toward her, Erica smiled and embraced her. "*Hi! I thought I got the wrong place. This is your party?*"

Slinging her arm over Erica's shoulders, Brooke grimaced. "Not exactly *my* party, but I was *invited*, so the invitation is yours as well. Come on!" She leaned in close to whisper, "Keep *calm*, girl!"

Making their way through the crowd, Brooke walked toward the trio with her guest. Heather and Richard were looking at each other with stars in their eyes; Richard's back turned to their approach.

Jack was the only one who saw them coming. The two getting closer, his heart skipped a beat. Suddenly the room seemed very quiet, the noise and

laughter seeming to fade into the background. He wasn't even seeing Brooke anymore, just the girl she was with. She was thin, but not skinny, with well-rounded hips and bust and a narrow tapering waist. The T-shirt she wore under a see-through white jacket emphasized her gracious curves, and her jeans covered long legs that Jack could tell were well formed and sexy. Her shoulder-length red hair bounced with every step, framing her beautiful face and haunting green eyes.

For her part, Erica saw Jack at the same moment and her breath caught. It wasn't his looks that had always taken her breath away. It was *him*. Most especially now, with a room full of half naked women surrounding *her* Jack, his eyes were locked on her and only her as though she, Erica Hargrave, were the best looking woman in the room.

Brooke stopped in front of him. "Jack? This is Erica." Seeing the two staring into each other's eyes and not even noticing her, Brooke pursed her lips. "Well, I can see you two don't have any further need of *me*." she said as she turned toward Richard and Heather, trying keep them distracted to give the two a moment alone in a crowded room.

Erica spoke first. "*Hi*."

"Um... *hi!*" Jack swallowed hard. Gathering his composure, but still unable to tear his eyes away from hers, he stammered as he held out his hand. "*Jack, Jack Dunning. Lance Corporal, USMC.*"

She smiled and took his hand gently, only just then realizing that he didn't know who she was. "Erica, Erica *Hargrave*. Student. Stanford." Her eyes smiled along with her lips, but she could feel her hand nervously sweating in his.

Just then Jack heard from behind him, "*Erica!?*"

The young woman's eyes were torn away from Jack's enchanting stare when she heard the one voice that had been catching her attention her entire life. Looking over Jack's shoulder, she saw her brother looking at her in sheer astonishment. "*Richie!*? Brooke didn't say *you* were going to be here!"

Jack was confused as her full name hadn't even processed in his mind yet. In point of fact, Jack hadn't done much actual thinking since he first saw her. Suddenly, it all dawned on him, his eyes grew wide, and he looked at her again. "Erica... *Hargrave*? But... *Rich's* Erica?" What he remembered of her was the image of a little girl. Now before him stood a vision of lovely young womanhood.

Her brother pushed Jack aside. "What are you *doing* here, Erica? You're not twenty-one yet! You can't *be* here!"

Brooke halfway interposed between the siblings. "She's *my* guest, Rich! And she turns legal in like a *week*, so *back off!*"

"That's OK, Brooke." Erica's eyes flared. "I can see I'm not going to be allowed to have any fun *here* tonight. Maybe you can take me to *another* party! I can be your *date!*"

Pulling Richard aside, Jack tried to convince him to let her stay. "Listen, Rich! Come *on*, man! Let it *be!* If she stays *here*, you can keep an *eye* on her, and so can Heather, Brooke, and I, *right?* If she *leaves*, God knows *what* trouble she could get into! *Think*, man!"

Turning back to his sister, Richard lowered his gaze. "Look, Erica. I'm sorry. Just forget I said *anything*, OK? I... I overreacted. *Please* stay." He looked up at her as he finished his plea.

Her fury at still being treated like a child by her older brother melted quickly. Never one to carry a grudge long, she eyed him suspiciously. "*Fine!* But I

don't want *Sergeant Ramrod* killing my good time, is that *clear*?" She poked him in the chest as she finished.

Raising his hands defensively, Richard backed away. "I give! I give! Why don't I get you a beer?"

"*I'll* get it!" Jack offered, his voice nearly cracking comically. Turning to Erica, he smiled. "Don't move a *muscle*, my angel! I'll be back to worship the ground you walk on in a flash!"

Erica looked to Brooke and her brother with a wistful smile as Jack ran to the bar. "Isn't he *funny*?"

Brooke tousled her hair. "Unfortunately, looks aren't *everything*."

"Don't let his outward clownish charm *fool* you, sis." Richard warned. "He's still the same Jack Dunning you've known for *years*."

Biting her lower lip, Erica swayed gently. "He always seemed really *sweet* to *me*."

"The word you're looking for is 'desperate'." Brooke said as she took another drink. "We call him Corporal Strikeout for a reason."

Erica shook her head, inwardly hopeful. "Doesn't do well with the ladies then?"

"He does *fine* at first." Heather interjected. "But once girls stop laughing at his jokes, his lack of things like a car or money, and thereby his ability to take them out, tends to make them lose interest quickly."

Furrowing her brow, Erica fumed. "Well that's awfully *shallow* of them!" Pausing, she asked, "Is he very *bad* with money?"

"Not *really*." Brooke shook her head. "He's just overly *generous*. He sends most of his pay to the place that's taking care of his mom."

Her heart melted, remembering the few times she'd met Mary Dunning and how torn up Jack had been about moving her into a home before he'd left Pittsburgh. "*Oh!* That's so *sweet!*"

"Yeah, other girls think its sweet too." Richard smiled. "Until it's time for their second date and he *still* can't afford to take them anywhere, let alone have a car to take them in."

She slapped her brother in the chest. "You know, *you* could be a little more generous with your dough back home, *Sergeant!* Daddy's not getting any younger, and he's about *killing* himself trying to put me through school!"

He nearly choked on his beer. "*Hey!* I send what I can! More than *Jack!*"

His sister crossed her arms. "But he *makes* less! I bet he leaves less to spend on himself than *you* do!"

"You're right, he does!" Heather nodded. Turning to Richard, she smiled as she draped her arms over his shoulders and around his neck. "You really *should* help your family more, Richard. Your money doesn't impress me!"

"Good *lord!*" Brooke rolled her eyes. "If this gets sweeter, I'm gonna *barf!*"

Nearly running back to the foursome, Jack handed Erica a beer and smiled. "*Here!* My treat, my beauty!"

Nodding at Erica, Brooke joked, "If she's Beauty that makes you The Beast."

Putting the drink down, Erica smiled. "That's *very* sweet of you, but you don't need to buy me drinks! I think I'd like to stay clear-headed." Slipping her arm into Jack's, she looked around. "Is there someplace *quiet* we could talk?"

"You could take him upstairs!" Brooke smirked.

"*Brooke!*" Richard barked as he nearly turned white, knowing what most couples went upstairs to do. "Over my dead *body!*"

Erica stiffened her back. "Is that *so*, Richie?"

Lowering his voice desperately, he leaned in toward his sister's ear. "Are you *crazy*? Do you know what Mom and Dad would do to me if they found out I let you 'go upstairs' with *Jack*?" he emphasized with air quotes. "I'd never live to see *morning!* Mom'd kill me over the *phone!*"

Erica tilted her nose up. "Well, Mom and Dad aren't *here*, Richie! So unless you want me to just leave and take Jack somewhere more *private*, he and I are *going* to go upstairs!" She paused to let her brother squirm. "...and *talk!*"

At that, Erica took her brother's beer, took a swig from it, handed it back to him, and practically dragged Jack toward the staircase.

Looking back at his best friend, Jack just shrugged. "What can I *do*, Rich? *Buttons'* got me *hooked!*"

Richard looked over at Brooke as the two disappeared up the stairs. "What the *hell*, Brooke? You set my *sister* up with *Jack*?"

"Would you rather I set her up with Corporal Strikeout, or have her end up with someone like *you*, Sergeant Trouser Snake?"

Heather turned his head to face her. "*Relax*, darling. I'm sure she's perfectly *safe* with Jack. Now would you mind not thinking about your sister and turn your attention back to *me*? It's kind of creepy if I kiss you while you're thinking about your sister."

"Ha!" Brooke busted out laughing. "Maybe *that's* why he's so protective!"

He pushed Brooke's shoulder. "*Cram* it, Brooke! That's not *even* funny! I'm just looking out for her is all!"

Once more Heather turned his head back towards her. "I'm over *here*, dear!"

As he finally returned his focus back to his girlfriend, Brooke sighed and took another drink. "*Great* job, Brooke." she said to herself as she looked up the stairs where Jack and Erica had gone and then to Heather and Richard starting to dance. "You've managed to help find love for everyone but *you*."

Chapter 10 - Revelations

I spent my next Liberty with Erica. She talked while I listened and messed with her hair. I learned a lot about Jack, things he never told me. I understand why he'd kept it to himself, though. He'd endured so much pain, it's amazing he was only as nuts as he *seemed* to be! *No one* want's that to show.

I learned a lot about Rich, too. She didn't talk as animatedly about him as she did Jack, but she knew all his secrets! I don't know what it is about being a beautician, but women will bear their souls to *us* the way guys do with a *bartender*. They tell us things they won't even tell their *shrink*!

For Jack's part, he was just so damnably, blissfully, innocently, *ignorant* of Erica's feelings toward him it was hard to watch! It wasn't that Jack didn't see her that way because she was *younger*, but because of something much more *basic*. She was his best friend's sister, and that made her almost like his *own*. It's a little creepy if you think too *hard* about it!

Jack wasn't one to look a gift horse in the mouth, though. Erica *loved* him, and had loved him through some of the worst times of his *life*. He wasn't about to let *that* get away, no matter *who* she was.

Following Erica up the stairs, Jack was in a bit of a daze. He had a hard time reconciling that the girl ahead of him was 'Buttons'; the girl who was always there. Heading into an empty bedroom, she turned on a light and pulled him in, closing and locking the door behind her. Jack gulped nervously as she did.

"Do you *know* how long I've waited for this, Jack?" she asked, moving to him slowly as he tried backing away anxiously.

Smiling weakly with a quiver in his voice, Jack tried to humor his way out of whatever it was he'd gotten himself into. "Few minutes? An *hour*? What

exactly are we *talking* about, here?" Downstairs he'd been happy to make Richard squirm by hitting on her, and honestly that's all he thought it was, Erica messing with her brother, but when he hadn't known who it was that Brooke had set him up with, he'd been mesmerized by her. Now that they were alone and he knew who she was, there was no one to impress but her, and he realized she knew him too well for false bravado. His knees hit the back of the bed as he continued to back away from her, causing him to fall back and sit.

Slowly, Erica walked to him, her hips swaying to draw his attention. Smiling that she could make him this nervous, she settled her mind and desires and stopped in front of him. "First, there's *one* thing I want more than *anything*, Jack. Something I've waited *years* to do!" Pulling him up to stand again, she wrapped her arms around him and tucked her chin over his shoulder. "I've *missed* you!" she almost cried.

Relief washed over him as he hugged his Buttons in return. "I... I missed you *too*, Buttons! *Erica! Sorry!*"

"It's OK, Jack!" she laughed. "You can call me *Buttons!* I don't mind much, anymore!" She pulled back from her hug and regarded him. "I've grown *up*, though!"

"So I *noticed!*" Jack complimented her. He still could hardly believe that the stunning woman in front of him was the same girl he'd nearly trampled more than a decade ago. Half laughing, he couldn't take his eyes off of her. "You look, *amazing!*"

Guiding the both of them to sit next to each other on the stranger's bed, Erica smiled and blushed. "Thanks! That means a *lot* coming from *you!*"

"*Me?*" he asked confusedly. "What's so important about *my* opinion?"

"You really *don't* know, *do* you?" she sighed lovingly.

Trying to figure out what she meant, the words she'd said sparked a memory of the day he'd woken up from the coma. His eyes wrinkled up in memory of the pain. He'd slowly begun to regain consciousness, following the sound of the voice, and after all this time the words finally started to make sense.

"So anyway, that's all I've been doing in school. Just trying to get through each day while Mom's at Aunt Edina's is hard enough without all the kids in my classes asking me how Richie got put in jail. I hate him for what he did to you, but even so, I don't like him being in so much trouble. I... I guess that's all. I love you so much, Jack. You really don't know, do you? I wish I could tell you, but I guess you'll never know."

"You were in the room with me, when I woke up." he commented. "I heard a voice, I mean, before I was really *awake*." He paused and his eyes went wide. "It said... No! No, *you* said, 'I love you!'" Even as he said the words, a thousand memories flooded his brain. Every time he'd seen Erica, from the first day they met all the way up until the day before he and Richard had left for North Carolina, and it all started to make sense.

"Erica, how long..." he began to ask.

"Since *forever!*" she interrupted with a happy note in her voice.

"I... I wish I'd..." He stopped as Erica put a finger on his lips.

"It wouldn't have *mattered*, Jack. Back then I was too *young* for you." She looked down as she spoke, then looked into his eyes. "But not *anymore!*" she smiled.

Swallowing hard, Jack looked into her happy eyes. "Erica, I... I *care* for you, a *lot!* Hell! I *love* you! You're my *Buttons!* My *miracle* girl! But... but you're Rich's *sister!*"

Scooting next to him until their hips touched, she lowered her voice to a sultry whisper. "But I'm not *your* sister, Jack. I *love* Rich, don't get me wrong, but..." She gathered her courage to say the words she'd spoken so many times, but never to his face. "I... I *love* you, Jack! I think I always *have*! From that first day you knocked me down! I think I always *will*!"

Stunned at hearing the words spoken out loud, Jack could feel his heart race. His ears rang with an overload of emotions. He felt lightheaded, dizzy, and just like he was thirteen all over again and lying in a pile of spilled papers. "*Erica...*" was all he managed before he could no longer formulate words.

Wrapping her arms around his shoulders and leaning forward around in front of him, she pulled him to her. Wanting this moment to last, she moved so slowly that at times she felt like she could hear her muscles contracting. Her lips quivered as she anticipated what she'd wanted for so long.

Slowly, tenderly, she touched her lips to his. A wave of feelings washed over her, threatening to drown her in them. Desire, happiness, longing, hope, fear, need, joy, and dread all jumbled into a tangle of emotions that made her cry both tears of joy and sadness at the same time.

Jack was so overcome with mixed emotions he didn't know what to do. He wanted to kiss her more deeply, but he also wanted her to stop. He wanted to push her back on the bed and ravage her, but he also wanted to run. He wanted to hold her and feel her body against his, but he also wanted to push her away. He wanted to see her in the throes of passion, but he also wanted to see her running from him. In the end he decided that all he could do was sit there and let her do what she needed, but before he realized it, he found himself kissing her in return, and liking it far more than he felt he should.

Slowly pulling away, ending their kiss, she sighed in a tearful whisper full of hope and dread. "So *long*! I've wanted to do that, for *so long*, Jack! I... I *love* you!"

Seeing the tears running down her face, he reached up, cupped her face in his hand, and wiped them away with his thumb. She turned her head slightly and kissed his hand gently, her eyes closed as tears fell. She sobbed; crying into his hand with all the pent up emotion in her heart until she felt it would never end. He in turn drew her to him, softly tucking her eyes against his neck and shoulder as she wrapped her arms around him so tight she felt she might crush the life out of him. Holding her gently, Jack just ran his hands along her back, trying to comfort her.

When at last her emotions were spent, she pulled back and wiped her face soaked with tears. "*S-Sorry, J-Jack. I...*"

"*Shhhhhh.*" he quieted her. "*It's alright!*" Pulling her back into his arms, he just held her. "*I've got you, and I'm never letting you go.*"

Erica slowly pulled away from him with shock in her eyes and her mouth hanging open speechlessly.

Finally, he half-smiled at her. "Well, until I gotta go to the *bathroom* that is!"

Her look of shock at his words melted into a grin of pure joy. "*Jack!*" she laughed. "*You...! You...!*"

He looked at her with a dumb expression. "Well what do you *expect!* You fell in love with *me*, didn't you?" he said smiling. "You think I was gonna let comedy gold like that slip by *unused?*"

She threw her head back in utter hilarious joy. "*Jack! God, I love you!*" She closed on him again, this time kissing him hard, needfully, and passionately. Her hands wound up through the short crop of hair at the base of his neck, pulling him into her with a ferocious desire. Her lips parting, she felt his do the same, their tongues touching and sending spikes of pleasure through her with such strength that she jumped in fright of their intensity.

Their kiss slowed until finally she felt the hunger ebb. She knew it would return, so she basked in the happiness of the moment. Smiling, she pressed her forehead against his. "*Thank you!*" was all she could say.

Chuckling giddily, Jack felt like he'd just inhaled a tank full of laughing gas. "My *God*, Buttons! That was *intense!*"

Nodding against his brow, she composed herself and slid away from him knowing she needed the space to have coherent thought.

Feeling her move away, it suddenly felt like someone was ripping him in half. He started to move towards her again until he felt her outstretched hand stop him. Looking at her with a look that was equal parts pain, desire, and confusion, he forced himself to back away until she lowered her hand.

"*Whew!*" she breathed out. "You have no idea how hard it was to *stop* you, Jack! Do you know how badly I *want* you right now? How long I've *ached* for this day?"

Composing himself, he drew a breath and exhaled slowly. "Right. *Thinking*. I can do that!" He looked up at her and grinned his half-smile, forcing her to wince as though she'd been pricked by a needle.

"*Jack!*" she begged. "Now *stop* it! Please? I... We need to *talk*, OK?"

Standing up, Jack walked the room slowly. "OK. I... I know we do. I can do that."

"Can you be *serious*? Just for a *little* while?" she asked hopefully.

"That's a pretty tall order, Buttons..." he joked. Forcing himself to push aside his humor, he grabbed the chair that sat in front of the stranger's desk and straddled it backwards. "OK. So let's *talk*. Seriously."

Erica took a breath again and looked at him. Seeing his funny face bent into seriousness almost hurt her physically, but she needed to know. "Jack, I... I've been in love with you a *long* time. I... I need to know if you... if you feel *anything* towards me. If you *ever* have."

"I *love* you, Erica." Jack sighed. "I have for *years*, but, I... I never thought..." He hated himself for not seeing it all sooner. Standing quickly, he threw the chair to the floor and screamed at the ceiling. "God, *why!* You had the chance to clue me in! Why'd you let us *suffer!*?"

Coming down from his rage, he remembered his eternal drifting and his self reflection; the millions upon millions of things that happened to him that had brought him to this point in his life where he could feel the utter elation of Erica's love for him. His fury spent, he chided himself for challenging God's wisdom, for presuming to think he could see all ends, and for thinking that he knew better than God that things would have been better if he'd known sooner.

We still would have been just as separated. The needs of our lives dictated that. he realized. I would have known, and she would have known that I knew. Who knows how that knowledge, too soon in our lives, would have twisted our love into something it was never supposed to be? Full of angst, longing, despair, anger, and hate towards one another for not throwing our futures away and running into one another's arms. Finally, he just laughed and fell to his knees.

Erica didn't know what to make of Jack's outburst. Seeing him fall made her run to his side in spite of her fear. "*Jack!* Are you..."

Unable to help himself, he laughed. He laughed until he cried, and then he just cried. Feeling Erica take him in her arms the way he had done for her, he cried like never in his life. The pain and anguish of a lifetime poured out through his eyes, and he held on to her for dear life.

After it was his turn to be emotionally spent, he wiped his eyes and laughed at the idiocy of the situation. "Sorry! I know you want me to be *serious*. It's just... I feel *ridiculous*! A grown man, a *Marine*, bawling like a *baby*!"

She smiled at him and caressed his cheek, taking her turn to wipe away his tears. "I don't think it's *silly*, Jack! I think it's *beautiful*!" She sat on the floor with him until he regained his composure. "You alright now, love?"

Nodding, Jack stood up, helping her to stand next to him. "Well, now that *that's* out of the way." He gestured toward the bed and picked up the chair, resuming his seat. "You asked me a question, if I ever felt the way *you* do. Not until *today*." he admitted. Seeing her disappointment, he held up his hand. "It had nothing to do with *you*, Buttons! Not your *age*, your *beauty*, not *anything* you could have done. I *swear*!"

Seeing he was being completely serious, she just nodded and accepted his answer at face value and waited for him to explain.

"It was *Rich*." he sighed. "*He's* why I couldn't see you. It's not *his* fault, but you were his sister and, to *guys* anyway, that means 'Hands off! This isn't a girl, this is a sister!' Do you understand? It's not even something we *think* about. It's just something we *do*, instinctually, I guess. There was nothing you could have done or *not* done to *make* me see it!"

"I could have *told* you I loved you to your face." Erica pointed out guiltily, looking at her lap. Looking up at him, she nearly started crying again. "Then you would have known, but I was too *scared*! Too afraid you'd reject me because I... I was just a little girl to you!"

"*Hey*!" Jack comforted. "It's alright!" He sighed and tried to explain. "Do you remember when I told you I *had* to get hurt? That I *needed* it? And you didn't understand why?"

Erica nodded, looking up at him.

"Do you understand *now*?"

She thought seriously for a moment, trying to justify the pain he'd endured and why it was needed. Her mind rebelled at the idea, wanting to spare him every pain of his life. "*No!*"

"You *love* me, right? Just as I am? Good *and* bad, strength *and* faults, right?" Seeing her nod enthusiastically, he continued. "I wouldn't be *me*, the person you love, if it weren't for those things! Would you still love someone who looked like me, but wasn't *me*?"

"*No!*" Erica cried. "I don't love you for the way you *look*! I love you for who you *are*! The man..." Her own reply finally brought understanding of what it was he'd been trying to tell her. She paused, unable to formulate the words she needed to say. Slowly she looked at him with new eyes, and smiled. "I'm a foolish little girl sometimes, Jack!" she admitted.

Standing up, Jack pulled her to her feet, the two embracing where they stood. "I wouldn't change a *thing* in my life, Buttons! Because of *this* moment, right here, right now! Being able to hold you, touch you, kiss you..." He pulled back to look her in her eyes. "...to *love* you? It's worth all the pain, sadness, loneliness, and heartache of a *hundred* lifetimes!" He pulled her close to him and kissed her. "I *love* you, Buttons!" he said with a smile. "Is that *enough*?"

Erica nodded through tears of joy. "Yes, Jack! It's enough!" Pulling him into another passionate kiss, they heard yelling and horns from below.

When their kiss ended, Jack smiled at her. "Happy New Year, Buttons!"

"Happy New Year, Jack!" she replied through her own smile.

Kissing slowly and tenderly once more, the two reveled in the moment of the New Year before parting. Hearing the crowd below quiet down, the two sat back down together to talk.

"So, you say you've always loved me?" Jack asked incredulously.

Erica nodded. "I have a confession to make. I've had a crush on you since I was *ten!*"

"Who *me?*" Jack laughed. "I don't think I'll *ever* get tired of hearing that!"

"Then I'll remind you of it *often!*" she laughed back at him. "Something to hold over your head when we're fighting about money or kids!"

"*Kids!*" Jack yelled. "When did we have *kids?*"

Slapping his arm playfully, Erica pursed her lips. "*When* we do! Someday, *maybe*. I don't know, maybe you've *changed* in six years! Maybe I won't *want* to spend the rest of my life with you now!" Her humor dying down, she looked at him. "*Seriously* though, I... I want to take it *slow*. I think we should get to know one another all over again, as we are *now*."

"I think that's prudent." Jack nodded. "After all, I need to stop thinking of you as just Buttons and start thinking of you as a *woman*." His eyes drifted over her body. "A really, *really*, gorgeous woman!"

Blushing, Erica looked away. "*Jeez*, Jack! You're too *much*, sometimes!"

"I'm *serious!*" he defended his opinion. "I think you're just about the most beautiful woman..." He sighed and paused for effect. "...on the second floor!"

Grabbing a pillow, Erica smacked him with it playfully. "You're gonna *pay* for that someday!" she threatened.

Jack took hold the pillow and pulled her over to him with it slowly. "I want another kiss!" he said matter-of-factly. "It'll help me get used to seeing you as a woman! *Honest!* It's strictly for my own self-improvement!"

"*Oh?*" she asked. "What'll you give me for it?"

"The same in return!" he replied.

Moving closer, Erica could feel his breath on her lips, making the hunger inside her rise once more. She pushed forward into him, wrapping her arms around him and relishing the feel of his lips and tongue against hers. She found her hands clinging to him, groping and grasping, trying desperately to pull him tighter into her. Her lithe legs wrapped around his waist as she moved to sit on his lap, their lips never separating for a moment. With her arms wrapped around his neck, she pulled their bodies tightly against each other, a moan of need escaping.

They stayed like that for a time unknown to either of them, lost in one long moment that never seemed to end. Finally, with the hunger abated once more, she stopped and could only pant in a further need that she knew she wasn't ready for. "Jack?" she gasped. "I... I need to *stop!* Please?"

Groaning with unfulfilled desire, his love for her outweighed his need for her, and he slowed his kisses just as they'd begun trailing down her neck to stop just below the collarbone. "OK." he relented, making his body just be satisfied with holding her.

After a few ragged breaths, Erica could think again. Lifting Jack's chin up, she looked him in the eyes with a wild desperation. "Make *no* mistake, Jack! I *want* you! *All* of you! Right *now!*" She smiled and kissed his cheek before turning shy. "But... um... there's something... something I need to tell you. I... I've loved you since before... I mean, I never could..." She tried to make the words come out, but she just couldn't find them.

Slowly, Jack realized what she was saying. "*Oh!* You mean, you mean you've never..." It dawned on him then just how deep and powerful Erica's love for him had burned. "*Never?*"

She shyly shook her head. "I've never even *kissed* a boy before tonight! I... I *couldn't*! I never gave up hoping that..." She looked into his eyes. "I only ever wanted *you*, Jack! No one else! *Ever!*"

Jack cleared his throat. "Well, alright then. We'll..."

"...take it slowly!" they said together, ending in laughter.

Pulling herself up off his lap, Erica flopped back on the bed even as her body screamed for more. "I'm sorry if I... well... If it's any consolation, you got me... um..."

Looking at her, Jack waggled his eyebrows. "Ready for *beddy*?"

Erica burst out laughing. "*God*, Jack! You are *perfect*! Don't *ever* change!"

"I'll *try*, but I remember my old man, Buttons. Don't get too attached to this *hair!*" he joked, making them both laugh uncontrollably.

Their mirth slowing, Erica moved off the bed and held out a hand to him. "Talk done! Now fun!" she giggled, pulling him to his feet. Passing a mirror on the way to the door, Erica stopped and gasped. "*My God*, Jack! I look like *shit!*" Quickly, she opened her purse and took out some cotton swabs and started removing mascara from under her eyes and off of her cheeks. "How can you even *look* at me like this?"

Coming up behind her, he put his hands on her waist and kissed her head while looking at her in the mirror. "You look beautiful to *me*."

Grimacing, Erica nudged an elbow into his ribs, causing him to fade back defensively. "That's for *lying*! It's a *beautiful* lie, but if I look *this* bad, I want you to *tell* me!"

"OK, Buttons!" Jack chuckled. "I'll tell you if you look fat in those jeans!"

She looked down at her hips in the mirror. "*Do I?*"

"*God, no!*" Jack yelled. "Good *Lord*, woman! Don't you *eat?*"

After Erica finished touching up, she turned to Jack and smiled. "There! *Now* how do I look?"

Looking at her earnestly, he surveyed her face for flaws. "You have a speck of something black in the corner of your left eye." he pointed out.

Turning and looking in the mirror, she retrieved another swab and cleaned it out. "Mascara." she noted. Turning back she asked, "Better?"

Kissing her quickly and gently, he smiled. "*Perfect!*"

Coming out of the bedroom door, they both saw Richard and Heather sitting glumly at the top of the stairs.

Waving a hand at them, Jack couldn't resist. "Look! *Chaperones!* I didn't think college parties *had* those anymore!" he said loud enough that the two could easily hear him. When Richard stood up and walked over to them, he smiled at his perturbed best friend. "Don't you know parties are for having *fun*, Rich? You're killing Heather's good time!"

"*Jack!*" Richard wanted to throttle him. "What the hell have you two been *doing* in there!? You were in there for over *two hours!*"

Erica tried to get between the two. "Richie! It's none of your *business* what we were doing! Get *away* from him!"

"Buttons?" Jack said softly. "Will you please let your brother and I handle this like *men?*"

She turned to him. "You are *not* going to fight over this!" she insisted.

"No one said anything about *fighting*, Buttons." Jack said calmly. Looking Richard directly in the eyes, he nodded. "We just need to *talk*."

"We'll see what needs doing, *Jack!*" Richard spat. "So let's *have* it then! Got anything to *say* for yourself, *funny man?*"

Closing his eyes, Jack exhaled. Opening them again, he once more stared Richard down from below. "Rich? Do you know me at *all*? Have you *ever* known me to be anything but *civil* to a lady, even *alone?*"

Feeling his outrage start to shrink like an ice cube in a microwave, Richard was at a loss. "Um... well, *no...*" Re-gathering the anger he felt was justified, he glared back at the smaller man. "...but there's always a *first time*, *Jack!*"

Unfazed, Jack took a breath. "We *talked*, Rich. And cried. *Both* of us."

The anger he felt was suddenly replaced with confusion. "*Huh?*" Turning around to face the two ladies, he pushed open the door to the bedroom Jack and Erica had just come from and shoved Jack back in. "We'll be a few!" he said to them, following Jack in and slamming the door behind him. Scanning the room for evidence of anything untoward, when he found none he turned at last to his best friend. "*Jack!?* What the *hell* goes on?" His face turning ashen, he asked, "Did something happen to Mom or Dad?"

"*No! No! Nothing* like that!" Jack said, waving his arms dismissively. "It's *Buttons!*"

"What's wrong with *Erica!?*" he demanded, closing with him, ready to wring the truth out of him, if needed.

"Nothing's *wrong* with her, Rich!" Jack sighed happily. "She's just in *love* with me!"

Richard felt numb as his heart skipped a beat. "She's *what?*"

Pacing the room away from Richard, Jack flung his hands up in confusion. "She's in *love* with me, Rich! And this isn't a new thing, *either!*" He turned and faced his oldest friend. "Rich, she's been in love with me for *years!* Since before we left *home!* Since before *Wendy!* Since... Hell, according to her, since the day we *met!*" He stopped, letting his arms fall to his sides. "Well, not since the day *we* met, I mean the day you and *I* met, that was a full day before Buttons and I even *knew...*"

"*Jack!*" Richard barked.

"What do you *want*, Rich? It's still *me!* Still *Jack!* Same guy!"

"I want you to be *serious* for a minute, damn it!" he shouted. He looked at Jack with murder in his eyes. "Jack, did you *ever...*" his voice trailed off menacingly.

Jack's eyes bulged at the unspoken accusation. "*Rich!* No! *God,* no! That's... What the hell's the *matter* with you! Jesus! She was a little *girl!*"

"Well, she got it in her head to like you *somehow,* Jack!"

"*Love,* Rich!" he forcefully corrected Richard. "Not like, *love!* She *loves* me! She loves *me!* *She* loves *me!* No matter how you say it, it keeps coming out the *same!*" He lowered his voice before finishing his thought. "*Wonderful.*"

Richard's anger broke under the strain of Jack's re-spoken words.

"Rich, she's *not* a little girl." Jack pointed out. "She's a grown *woman,* and she *loves* me." he laughed.

"How long have you known?" Richard asked seriously.

Jack checked his watch. "Uh... pfft! About two hours. *Why?* You wanna make an *anniversary* of it?"

"*Jack!*"

"*Sorry!*" he held his hands up defensively.

Richard forced himself to be calm. "So you had *no* idea about this before tonight?" Seeing Jack shake his head seriously, Richard almost collapsed as he sat on the bed. "*Shit!*"

"*Now* what!" Jack asked defensively. "I didn't do anything!"

"Not *you*, ya jarhead!" Richard spat back. "What are we gonna *do* about this? How can we make her snap out of it?"

"It's not a hypnotic *trance*, Rich!" Jack retorted. "She's in *love!*" He braced himself as he said the rest. "And I don't *want* her to stop."

Richard looked at Jack as though he'd gone mad. "*What? Are you nuts? We have to fix this! You're...*"

"I'm *what*, Rich!" Jack snapped at him, stepping forward. "What? *Unlovable? Unworthy?* Too low a *station* for your sister? What, is it because Mom and I were so poor we could never afford a nice house? Or a *car*? Or cable TV? Is *that* it?" He lowered his voice as he looked at the shocked expression on Richard's face. Sighing, he parted his hands and dropped them down to his sides again. "Rich, don't I deserve to be loved, *too?*"

He hung his head, ashamed of what Jack had stopped him from thoughtlessly saying. Shaking his head, he bit his lower lip and sighed. "Jack, this can't *work*. You and Mom *hate* each other!"

"Last I checked, Erica's an *adult* and this is almost the twenty-first century." Jack stated simply. "She doesn't *need* anyone's permission to love me." He paused briefly before letting the other shoe drop. "And I don't need anyone's permission for me to love her *back*."

Richard looked up at him perplexedly. "How can you *love* her, Jack?" he asked. "She..."

"How can I *not*, Rich!" Jack shouted. "I've known her most my *life*! She's too wonderful *not* to fall in love with! I'm surprised she doesn't have a *hundred* broken hearts pining for her!"

"But she's my *sister*, Jack!"

"And I *love* her!" he shot back.

Silence sat between them like a thick blanket. Finally, Jack turned away from his best friend. "Rich, we're not *asking* your permission. We don't *have* to. We don't need *anyone's*! Not your *mother's*, your *father's*, yours, Heather's, Brooke's... *anyone's*!" He turned and faced his greatest friend and protector. "But I would like your *understanding*. It's not like we're gonna go out and get married next *month*, Rich! She wants to take it *slow*, and so do *I*. We need to... to *find* each other. We've been apart six years!"

"How long have you been in love with her?" he asked quietly.

"I've loved her for *years*, Rich. She's my *miracle* girl! My *Buttons*! It's not the way she loved *me*, but the way I love *you*, ya' jarhead!"

"So, how long have you been *in* love with her?" he asked more directly.

"Since the moment I knew who Brooke's mystery guest *was*, Rich. That the beautiful woman who came as my 'not a blind date' was my *Buttons*!"

Richard chuckled at the memory of setting up his mother as his Prom 'not a blind date'. "Nice callback, *leatherneck*!"

"Dillweed!"

"Seabag!"

"*Woah!* Low blow! That's a *penalty!* One more and you're *disqualified!*"

Richard laughed low and slow. "Look, Jack. I... I'm sorry, alright? You're *right.* You *do* deserve to be loved. And if Erica... well... *loves* you, then... then that's just the way it *is.*"

"*Well!*" he scoffed. "Why don't you make sound like she's just been stricken with some *disease* or something, Rich!"

"*No!* I didn't..." he stopped as Jack started to laugh. "Oh, you son of a..."

Running from the room laughing, Jack pulled the door closed behind him, holding it shut. While Richard tried to pull it open, Jack looked over toward Heather, Brooke, and Erica who were standing nearby and looking stunned. "Don't worry! Everything's *fine!*" he assured them.

"What'd you say that set him off?" Brooke asked as Erica ran up to him.

Her eyes growing wide at the memory of just how intimate they'd almost gotten, Erica whispered, "Did you tell him what we almost *did* in there?"

"Nope!" Jack said, straining to hold the door. "Just made a smart ass remark is all!" Quickly letting go of the knob, Richard tumbled backwards into the room as the door flew open.

Heather took up a place in the doorway, blocking Richard's mad dash out to the hallway to clobber Jack. As he came running up, she cleared her throat.

"*What?*" he asked, breathing heavily and wanting desperately to get to Jack.

"I was wondering if it was as good for *you* as it apparently was for *Jack!*" she asked nonchalantly. "*He* certainly came out all smiles!"

Chapter 11 - The Impatience and Patience of Love

Erica once told me that the night she and Jack talked upstairs was one of the most romantic experiences of her life. Sounds *great* when you say it, but if you *think* about it you come to realize that the logical corollary to that is that it must have been all worse after that! Luckily for her, Jack was only getting started. Besides, Erica had a tendency to exaggerate!

Jack told me that they talked, cried, kissed a few times, and professed their love for one another. That and a bunch of stuff about living in contentment with pain and such. *Blah, blah, blah*. Richard was a *wreck*. He hid it well, but I knew him better than anyone except Jack, even better than *Heather*. He was torn between wanting to see Jack happy against his protectiveness of Erica. I guess that means protecting her from ever growing up, having fun, *sex*, a marriage, *children...* etc. Men are *idiots*!

The rest of New Years morning was uneventful, unless of course you count Jack's proposal to Erica, but then I'm pretty sure they both knew it was only Jack being Jack. I told you *that* story already, though. The next few weeks were hard on them. Jack had no Liberty and Erica was swamped with school. Richard and Heather had gotten to the 'comfortable' part of being a couple, so they were *used* to the separation. Plus, they were *sleeping* together, which took off a lot of the tension. Jack and Erica... well... Erica told me what they *weren't* doing.

It got difficult for them to go slowly after only six weeks. Their needs pushed them faster and faster than they'd planned to go, but sometimes you realize you gotta to take hold of life fast, and *live* it while you still have the *chance*.

Just as Jack closed the door to her apartment, Erica was on him. Wrapping her legs around his waist, she could feel the hunger inside smoldering like a fever as she showered him in kisses all over his face. "*Jack!*" she panted

between kisses, "I know... I said... I wanted... to go... go slow... but..." She covered his mouth with hers as he tried to move towards the couch. "Jack! *Please?*" she mumbled against his lips.

Aching with desire, Jack didn't know how much longer he could put off the inevitable. "*Erica!*" He had to stop her or else he was going to lose control, and he knew it would end badly if he did. Returning her kisses, he was able to lower her down to the couch, their lips still searching for more pleasurable contact even as he did. Stepping back, he struggled for breath as he forced them to stop their passionate assault. Even being in top physical condition, her sensuous attack had left him with difficulty breathing.

Yearning for him badly, Erica wanted to cry. "*Jack!*" she whined. Tucking her knees up to her chest, she wrapped her arms around her legs. Rocking back and forth while Jack gasped, she lost control as tears began to flow.

Not being able to stand seeing her so distraught, Jack knelt on the floor in front of her. "Buttons? I... I don't think our original plan is going to *work!*" he stated, referring to the six-month 'getting to know you' time they'd agreed on, to be followed by whatever they felt comfortable with after that. It was to be discussed beforehand all neat and tidy. Unfortunately for their plans, their bodies craved more, and love is neither neat nor tidy.

She nodded, trying to stop her tears. "*I know, Jack! It's just so hard! I never get to see you! It's been weeks! I can't stop thinking about you! I dream about you! I can't focus in class! I don't know what to do!*" She buried her eyes in her knees, letting her jeans soak up her tears as she vented her frustration.

Knowing they were fighting a hopeless battle, Jack hung his head in defeat. They either had to take the next step, or never see each other again. Their hearts and bodies gave them little other choice. "*Erica?*" He looked at her longingly. "I... I want you to know, I love you more than life itself! I can't *breathe* without you near me! I... I want to make you *happy, content...*" He paused, taking a breath. "*...pleasured.*"

His words nearly made her take him there in the living room. Controlling her need for him by only the smallest of margins, she let out a ragged breath. "*God*, do I want you, Jack! You have *no* idea!" She chuckled a little. "OK, so maybe you have *some* idea!"

Closing her eyes and taking a long slow breath, she forced herself to calm down. When she opened them, she looked at him kneeling in front of her smiling sweetly; almost shyly. She moved to him slowly, uncurling her legs until her feet were on the floor by his knees. Helping him to stand as she did, she took him by the hands and led him to her bedroom.

He followed Erica helplessly into her room and stood numbly as she closed the door. Walking up to him slowly and carefully, as though too quick of a movement would scare him off, at last she stood in front of him. Her hands reached up and started undoing the buttons on his uniform blouse.

Slowly, she worked her way down until she reached his belt, her eyes never looking away from his returning gaze. Pulling his top up to free the last two buttons, she undid them just as slowly until she could push the shirt off his shoulders without more than the slightest touch, which she provided with a smile and listened as it rustled to the floor behind him.

"*Erica...*" he started to say, but her finger moved over his lips, staying his words. Her hands drifting down to his belt, she pulled the strap to loosen the buckle, letting the strap glide freely through and out. Not done, she started undoing his uniform trousers, unzipping them and letting them fall to the floor with a satisfying sigh.

Guiding him to her bed silently, not a word spoken nor a sound made until her bedsprings creaked with his weight, she stepped back slightly and began to unbutton her own blouse while he watched, almost frozen with a hunger for more. She removed her light green blouse, exposing her naked abdomen and leaving her lacy bra the only thing between Jack's eyes and her breasts. Undoing the buttons on her jeans, her smile seemed contented and peaceful.

She knew exactly what she wanted, and this time nothing was going to stop her. When her jeans fell to the floor, she stepped out of them and her flats, leaving her almost completely bare to him.

Scanning the curve of her body, he tried to memorize every millimeter. When she lowered herself down to her knees, she at last pulled his shoes, socks, and trousers off, tossing each one over her shoulder with an almost wicked smile. Moving up, she sat on the bed beside him and reached for his T-shirt, letting her fingertips brush the flesh of his belly. Jack's eyes rolled back in his head, overcome with sensation. Slowly tugging it up his chest, she let her fingers drift gently along his sides, forcing a low moan from his lips.

Just as she started to push him backward to lie on her bed, Jack caught her hand; his breath ragged. "*Erica!*" he gasped. "I need you to stop for a just *minute!*" he begged. Trying to move his hand away, he wouldn't release it, moving around her wrist until their fingers were joined together. When his emotions slowly gave way to his thoughts, he looked at her desperately. "I... I don't want you to stop..." he began.

"Then don't *stop* me." she interrupted. Trying to untangle her hand from his, she found he wouldn't let go. "*Jack...*"

"Buttons, *please!*" he begged. "I... I need to tell you something, *first!* I... I've never... I mean, I don't really know what I'm *doing.*" Just as she couldn't say the words on New Years Eve regarding their passionate reunion, he too was having difficulty finding the same ones. He'd said enough, though.

Leaning back, she regarded him confusedly. "But... Didn't you and *Wendy...*"

He shook his head as a smile crept over his lips. "The only thing Ox ever got right in his entire *life!*"

Looking at him in astonishment, she couldn't help but join in his mirth after a moment. Soon the two were rolling on the bed, both in just their underwear,

holding their stomachs from laughing so hard. Eventually, as their giggles faded, they lay next to each other looking into each other's eyes.

Jack reached out a hand and watched as Erica intertwined her fingers with his. Their delicate touch seemed to satisfy more need than anything else they could have been doing at that moment. Gone was the hunger from both of them, their love for each other having taken its place.

"*Jack?*" she smiled. "Tonight. *Now*, if you'll let me. I *want* you." she looked at him expectantly. "Do you still want me?"

He sighed, lost in the green of her eyes. "Yeah. I *do*."

She moved gently, rolling over his body and letting her bare stomach press into his. Her lips found his and they kissed delicately, slowly, and lovingly as their hands roamed freely over each other.

Rising up, Erica's legs straddled his hips as she reached around behind her back with one hand, unclasping her bra. "I *love* you, Jack." she whispered. "I have a *confession* to make. I've had a crush on you since I was *ten!*"

"Who *me?*" he replied routinely with a smile.

She giggled as she slipped her arms free. "Just remember who loved who *first!*" she teased, the only thing holding her bra in place being her free hand. Shyly, she let it slip down until she finally dropped it to the floor. Leaning forward, she lowered her bare bosom to his nearly hairless chest, pressing her open mouth to his once more. She moaned with pleasure as he ran his fingertips along the side of her naked breasts.

Slowly, she slid her body upward until she was straddling his stomach, and gasped when the tip of his tongue flicked over her taut nipple. Now certain she was ready, Erica slipped a hand down and hooked a thumb into Jack's boxers, pushing them lower until she could grab them with the toes of her

right foot; stretching her leg out and dragging them down his legs until they slipped off his feet.

Feeling Erica remove his last bit of clothing, Jack felt a burning need in him to see her lost in pleasure. Rolling them both over so that she was below him, he supported his thin but athletic form on his arms as he kissed his way down her body. Reveling in her lusciously sensuous movements, every kiss seemed to make her squirm with pleasure. He kissed lower and lower until he at last came to her own final garment. Feeling her hips lift off the bed, Jack slowly slid the panties down her thighs, kissing the skin below them as if preparing it for their passage.

When at last the two were completely bare to one another, Jack slid up her legs, using his hands to caress the smoothness of them and causing her to part them on instinct. In no hurry toward his own fulfillment, and desperate to make her happy, he leaned down and began kissing the inside of her thighs, working his way slowly toward the place the two limbs joined.

Erica's breath became ragged and heavy, her head thrown backward against her pillow as she arched her back. When Jack stopped just before reaching the center of her desire, she looked down at him wantonly.

"It... it's not too late to stop." Jack pointed out, offering more than wanting.

Shaking her head, her breath came rapid and deep until a smile crept over her lips. "You do, so help me *God* Jack, I'll throw you down and *rape* you!"

They laughed together, both reveling in each other's passionate desire for one another.

Slowing his chuckles, Jack looked up Erica's body as it lay before him and into her eyes. "I *love* you." he said softly, his breath just barely reaching her highly sensitive skin and making her tremble.

"I... I *love* you, Jack!" she panted. "*Please?*" she moaned beggingly.

Certain of her desire, he lowered his open mouth until it covered the lips of her womanhood and made her gasp, her entire body tensing up in desperate need. His tongue pressing forward, she felt it enter her, making her eyes snap open widely as she stopped being able to even breathe. After nearly a decade of fantasy, the reality was so intense that her mind almost couldn't handle it. She'd utterly underestimated the effect actually having him touch and taste her would have on her body as she convulsed.

"*Jack!?*" she almost screamed as her first orgasm ripped through her body at so simple an intimacy, her pent-up need breaking through every part of her as her hands gripped the back of his head and her legs wrapped around his back. She forced her mouth closed, screaming through her nose in an effort to hide the enormity of the pleasure from her neighbors.

Sitting perfectly still, he looked up her naked body in awe of her pleasure. Even as she convulsed, he could feel the muscles of her entire body tense and contract, the flesh of her sensitive womanhood pulsing against his tongue and her moisture wetting it further as she continued to grip him in place. Her loss of control almost scared him, it was so powerful.

When at last her first wave of pleasure passed and her limbs started to relax, he pulled his mouth away from her. "Are... are you *OK?*" he asked, concern making his voice shake.

"I... I'm *fine*, Jack!" Erica managed after a moment as her body vibrated with the pleasure coursing through her. "Please... please don't *stop!*"

Returning to his ministrations, he explored her. Using his tongue and fingers, he learned every part of her, memorizing every inch of her as though it was the most important thing in his life to know. When his fingertip brushed the nub of her pleasure, her sudden gasp made him pull back. "Did... did I *hurt* you?" he asked concernedly.

She shook her head vigorously. "*N-no!* Th-that was... *Ungh!*" Her words left her as his tongue took the place of his fingertip, sending waves of ecstasy through her and threatening to push her rapidly to climax once more. Guttural sounds escaped her lips as his tongue slowly circled her pleasure, rocketing her skyward in an ever-expanding burst of bliss. She screamed once more, this time incapable of holding back her vocalizations as the most powerful orgasm of her young life tore her mind apart. No longer caring who heard, for several minutes she only cared about Jack and the ultimate pleasure he was giving her. Nothing else in the entire world mattered at that moment.

Her mind returning to her, after Jack slowly ended their first frenzied time as one, she covered her mouth with a hand as she started to laugh. A languid feeling washed over her while her body slowly shook from her giggle fit. Moving her hand up to cover her eyes, a smile shone across her entire face.

"What's so *funny?*" Jack asked confused.

Erica shook her head, her hand still over her eyes. "*Me!* That's what!" she answered in a hushed throaty voice between giggles. "*My God,* Jack! That was... that was the most intense experience of my *life!*" She tried to move, to pull him up to her, but her body was as weak as a newborn kitten and she could barely move her limbs. "*Come here,* Jack!" she purred.

Moving up alongside her naked form, one hand propped his head up while the other rested on her belly. Her giggles still shaking her, he couldn't help himself. "You know, I've made people *laugh* before, but this is *humiliating!*"

His humor only intensified her giggles into fits of full laughter as her love for him and who he was poured through her. She rolled over to push him flat on his back, snuggling up next to him and laying her head on his chest as she continued to laugh. "I... I'm *sorry,* love!" she giggled. "I just... I can't *help* it! You make me so *happy* it... it just comes bubbling *out* like this! I love you *so* much!"

Running his fingers through her soft red hair, he smiled. "A guy could get a *complex*, ya' know! I thought women were all hot and *wanton* afterwards, not chuckling like they just got done watching '*Your Show of Shows*'!"

Continuing to giggle, she enjoyed the feel of her skin against his. "I have no idea what that *is*, Jack! I *love* that about you!"

"Sid Caesar? Imogene Coca? *No*?" he inquired. "Oh, well. I guess I'll have to show you sometime. You have a lot of catching up to do!" He wrapped his arms around her, holding her until her laughter was spent.

At last, she was able to stop her guffaws and looked up at him libidiously. "What about *you*, love?"

"*Me*?" Jack shrugged. "I've seen '*Show of Shows*'!"

She lightly slapped him on the chest. "No, you *goofball*! You *know* what I mean!" She slowly slid her body against his sensually and started running her fingers down his side.

His breath caught as she touched him, raising gooseflesh everywhere her fingers roamed. "*Oh*." he moaned. "Y-you mean..." his voice trailed off as she moved on top of him, straddling his belly. "Y-you know, you don't *have* to...."

"I *know* I don't." Erica shook her head slowly. "I *want* to, Jack. No, I *need* to! I need to make you feel *just* as good as you just made *me* feel!" Lowering down until their lips met once more, kissing him slowly and seductively, she moved her hips toward his. When she felt his manhood press between her legs, it raised a need in her unlike any she'd ever felt before, the need to feel him inside her seeming to overwhelm her senses. She raised her hips slightly, feeling him press against the outside of her wetness. Ever so slowly, she pushed down, relishing the feeling as he slipped inside her, forcing a moan to escape her lips as she closed her eyes.

Gasping as he felt it, Jack's eyes went wide and his hands found her hips all on their own, a desire burning in him to push her more forcefully onto him. Not wanting to rush her or force it though, he fought the urge and just let his hands follow her hips slowly down, the warmth and wetness of her on him threatening to send him over the edge at any moment. "Oh *God*, Erica! You... You're *incredible!*"

When he felt their hips meet in conjoined ecstasy, his eyes fluttered and his grip on her hips strengthened, pulling them tightly together. They sat there like that, unmoving, for what seemed to be an eternity. Erica looked down at him with eyes wide and her lovely face contorted into an expression of almost pain.

"Does... does it *hurt?*" he asked concernedly.

"*N-No.*" she stammered. "Well... o-only a *little.*" She smiled at him, their faces only inches apart. "It mostly just feels *wonderful!*" Slowly, she began to rock. Small movements, both patient and deliberate, she loved how her slightest move would send him into absolute fits of pleasure. Soon, much sooner than she would have liked, she saw his eyes tighten.

"*E-Erica!* I... I'm..." he mumbled.

Slipping a hand under his head, she ran her fingers through his short-cropped hair. "*Good!* I *want* you to, love. Take your pleasure from me!" Hearing her words sent him flying, his body trembling as she gripped his hips with her legs; her feet wrapping around his knees to pin her in place on top of him. Pulling him into a kiss, she felt his pleasure explode in her, Erica gripping against him and holding him tightly to her as they finally consummated their love for one another.

His breath rapid and shallow, he pulled slightly away from her lips as his desire peaked. "I... I *love* you, Erica!"

She lay on him as his body slowly calmed from their lovemaking. Feeling his entire body grow languid against hers, his hands slipping off her hips to flop lifelessly against her bed, but his pleasure still buried inside her, she looked him in the eyes once more, smiled, and said, "Yes!"

Laughing, he knew at last what she must have felt earlier, the giddiness of love and passion commingled. Slowly comprehending that she'd spoken, his eyes tightened in confusion. "Huh? Yes, what?"

"Yes, I'll *marry* you!" she replied. "You've only asked me five times. Did you want to make it *six*?"

He looked at her in awe. "I thought you wanted to *wait*! We've only been dating a month and a half, I thought you wanted to go slow to be *sure*?"

"Oh, I'm *sure*!" she smiled. "I knew before I *saw* you again!" She leaned down and whispered seductively in his ear. "I just didn't want to scare you *away*! I was going slow for *your* benefit, love!" She pulled slightly back from him so she could look at his whole face. "I never doubted for a *second* that you're the one man in this entire world meant for me! Seeing you again just meant I didn't have to *wait* anymore! I *love* you, Jack! I've *always* loved you, and I want to spend the rest of my life loving you and making you happy!"

"You are... *amazing*, Buttons!" he looked up at her in awe. "I don't think I could *imagine* life without you now!" His hands reached up and pulled her face close to his. "I love you, too... and I'm going to spend the rest of *my* life doing whatever it takes to *deserve* the love you have for me." He pulled her into a loving kiss, their bodies still joined together.

An hour later, they sat across from one another eating the spaghetti dinner that Erica had prepared before Jack arrived for their Valentines Day meal. The holiday was actually two days earlier, but they'd had to wait until that Friday to celebrate it. She smiled and giggled at seemingly nothing as they ate wordlessly.

"What's so funny?" Jack asked before taking another bite. "Do I have sauce on my *nose* or something?"

"*No!*" she giggled as she looked away from him embarrassedly. She stared at the candles that lighted their meal. "I was just thinking about how different tonight went from the way I *planned* it. We were *supposed* to have dinner, a little wine afterwards, and *then* I was going to drag you into the bedroom and have my way with you, even if I had to club you over the head!"

Jack nodded as he finished a bite. "Ug! No, *me* club *you!* Drag *you!*" he grunted. "Don't you know how these things are *supposed* to work, Buttons?"

His reply only made her laugh harder. After settling herself back down, she looked across her small table at him lovingly. "So, we still have the rest of the weekend before you have to head back. What would *you* like to do with it?" she asked seductively.

"I have a feeling I know what *you* would like to do with it!" he commented knowingly. "Don't get me wrong, I'd *love* to see the second reel, but I think we should *talk*."

Nervous that she'd jumped the gun and scared him away, she took a large drink from her wineglass. "Alright. Anything in particular?"

Shrugging, Jack looked over at her. "Well, there's the fact that you accepted my *proposal*. Understand, I'm elated that you did, but don't you think we'll need a new plan, now? The old one was kinda ripped to shreds earlier when you were clawing at my back!"

She chuckled as relief washed over her. "Well yeah, I guess we *do* need to figure things out! I have a year and a half of school left, but you only have four more months of service, right?" Seeing him nod through a bite, she took another drink and sighed. "Can you move in here while you finish up?"

"Only after we're married." Jack informed her, leaning back from his empty plate. "It's a violation of the UCMJ to cohabit with a member of the opposite sex outside of marriage. I can't even leave a pair of *socks* here!"

"Well then, there's only one thing we *can* do." she sighed in a defeated tone. "We're just going to *have* to get married right away!"

He laughed a deep full laugh. "Oh, *God!* Rich is *so* going to kill me! I'm a dead man!"

Standing up, Erica walked around the table. Sitting on his lap, she wrapped her arms around him. "He *touches* you? He *dies!*"

"So how do you want to do this, then?" he asked, wrapping his arms around her waist. "Justice of the Peace? A church wedding will take time, but I want you to have your dream come true. I'm told it's something a girl imagines her whole life and I don't want to deny you *anything!*"

"Jack, darling. I have everything that I ever *dreamed* of right *here!*" she said before she kissed him slowly and lovingly. "Whatever *you* want to do is fine with me! I just want to be Mrs. Jack Dunning for the rest of my life!"

"OK. You want me to plan it then? I will, if that's what you *want*, Buttons."

Running her fingers through his close-cropped hair, she smiled contentedly. "*Yeah!* I think I'd *like* that!" Running her fingers down the side of his face and neck until her hand came to his chest, she pressed the palm of her hand against him. Pushing herself up, she captured his hand as it slipped off her waist and pulled him to his feet. Walking backward as she looked him lustily in his eyes, she led him once more toward her bedroom. "In the *mean* time love, I think I'm ready for a second course of the meal that *you* brought!"

"Well, if your reaction earlier was any measure, it certainly was a *happy* meal!" Their humorous journey to the bedroom was halted when the phone

rang. He looked at Erica longingly and sighed as he started to pull away from her towards it.

"*Jack!* Let the *machine* get it! Come with me!" she begged.

"*Can't*, Buttons." he groaned. "I'm just on Liberty and I left your number at the base for a contact. Someone *has* to answer!" He released her hand and jogged over to the phone, picking it up before the answering machine did. "Hargrave residence. Dunning."

"Jack? It's Rich. I... I have some bad news for you."

Gritting his teeth, Jack punched the wall lightly. "Let me guess... Liberty's canceled?" he presumed. He saw Erica's shoulders slump and a pout cross her disappointed face.

"No, it's not that, Jack. We... we got a call from the home where your Mom lives." Richard had a hard time finishing the message.

"Rich? What's *wrong*? Is she *OK*?" Jack's mind raced with the possibilities; that she'd gotten lost, she'd run away, she fell and broke a bone...

"She... uh... she's in a *coma*, Jack. She won't wake up."

Seeing Jack drop the phone, Erica ran to him, grabbing him as he collapsed to the floor. "What *is* it, Jack? What's *wrong*?" Hearing her brother shouting from the dropped receiver, picking it up, she answered for him. "*Richie*?"

"*Erica!* It's Jack's mom. She's in a coma. She's... she's not expected to wake up. You need to get him back here right away so he can put in for Emergency Leave. The hospital told me she's not expected to survive the weekend."

"I'll get him there, Richie! Love you!" she said, hanging up the phone and hugging Jack as tight as she could. "Oh, *Jack!* I'm so sorry! I... I need to get

you to the base right away! You can get Emergency Leave, and then we'll get a plane back to Pittsburgh. We need to *hurry*, Jack!"

Only numbly aware of his surroundings, he responded idly. "Emergency Leave. Right." His thoughts suddenly rushing back to him as the shock wore off, he looked at Erica. "*We'll* get a plane?"

"Of *course!*" she stated, heading to her room to pack. "I'm going *with* you! You don't think for one minute I'd let you do this *alone* do you?"

"Thanks." he smiled at her. "I... I think I may *need* you there, Buttons."

Four hours later, the two were taking off on a non-stop flight to Pittsburgh International. By seven the next morning, they were in a rental car driving towards Mary's nursing home. Jogging into the lobby half an hour later, they were greeted by one of the nurses.

"I'm sorry, visiting hours don't begin until..."

"I... I'm Jack Dunning!" he interrupted her. "Mary... Mary Dunning's *son!* This is my fiancée, Erica. We came as soon as we *could!*"

She nodded in understanding. "I *see*. Well, her condition is unchanged. She's not expected to wake up. You... you can go see her if you like. I'm *sorry.*"

Jack and Erica walked somberly to her room. Entering slowly, he saw her lying in a hospital bed, monitors next to her showing that she was still alive. Creeping quietly into the room, Erica holding his hand, he carefully moved up to her bedside. "*Mom?* It's *Jack*. I came to see you. You've got the place *buzzing!* They all think... well... *I* know what you're going through!" He knelt down next to her bed, taking her frail fingers in his free hand.

"I... I have some *news*, Mom! You remember Erica? Rich's sister? We're getting *married*, Mom!" He squeezed her fingers gently, trying to coax a

response from her, but none came. "She *loves* me, Mom! Always *has*, it seems!" He looked back at Erica only to see tears streaking down her face. He stood and held Erica as she cried into his shoulder, her heart breaking for Jack's sake once again.

When at last Erica stopped crying, regaining her composure, Jack returned to his mother. "Mom! I *know* you can hear me!" he almost shouted, not quite loud enough to be a disturbance. "Look, just... just follow my *voice*, Mom! You have to *want* to come back! You can't *will* it, you have to *want* it! Come *on*, Mom!" He was near to tears and heard Erica begin sobbing behind him again while he watched his mother for any sign, any indication of her return. When none came, he pulled up a chair. "*Alright*, then. I'll *talk*."

He talked for hours. He talked to her about his work, about Erica, about their plans, about Richard, about Brooke, about Heather; he talked until he ran out of things to talk about. Then he just started remembering things, telling her stories about when he and Richard were young and the things they'd gotten away with without her ever knowing. He talked the entire day. When Erica left to get lunch, he talked. He even talked while they ate, never stopping. He kept at it until the sun was going down and still he talked. He knew if he kept it up long enough she could find his voice and return to the land of the living. He just wanted one more moment.

When the nurse came to tell them they'd have to leave in five minutes at the end of visiting hours, he told the nurse he wasn't leaving, that he was staying with her until the end or she woke up, whichever came first. When the nurse called security, he demanded to speak to the facility administrator, insisting on staying with his mother and not even leaving to go talk to him until Erica finally spoke up.

"Jack? *Go!* Talk to him and get it straightened out. *I'll* stay and talk to her. I *promise*. I won't ever stop! Not for a *second!* Not until she wakes up or you tell me to stop!"

He looked at her with exhausted eyes, having been up for two days with only the short nap on the plane. "Alright. You *promise*?" Seeing her nod, he left with the security officer while the nurse stood by at the door as Erica turned to face his mother.

"She's *not* going to wake." the nurse explained. "He's just making it *harder* on himself."

"Jack knows what he's doing!" Erica defended him. "I'm *staying* and I'll talk all *night* if I have to!" She mumbled under her breath, "Why *not*? It worked *before*!" Walking over to Mary's bed, she started talking. She talked about Jack almost exclusively, how much she loved him, every memory she had of him, watching his successes and heartbreaks, and her own heartbreak at his leaving. She had just gotten to their wedding plans when she saw Mary's eyes move.

"*Mary*?" she asked hopefully. "Mary, it's *Erica*. Erica *Hargrave*! *Richie's* sister! *Mary*?"

"*Jack*?" Mary mumbled. "Where's *Jack*?" Her eyes were still closed, almost as if she were talking in her sleep.

Erica ran for the nurse. "She's waking up! Go get Jack! *Now*!" she shouted. Seeing the nurse nod in astonishment and head towards the administrator's office, Erica ran back to Mary's bed. "*Mary*? *Mary*, wake up! *Jack's* here! He's here to see *you*!"

She lolled her head over and opened her old and worn eyes, trying to focus on who was talking to her. "Who're *you*?" she asked groggily.

"I'm *Erica*!" she laughed. "Erica *Hargrave*, Mrs. *Dunning*! *Richie's* sister! *Jack's* here with me! He just stepped out for a few minutes! He'll be right back, OK? He's been with you *all day*!"

"*Hargrave?* Richard's sister? *No!* You *can't* be her! She's a little *girl!*"

Laughing through tears of joy and heartache, she nodded. "I'm all grown *up* now, Mrs. Dunning!"

"Grown up? Where... where *am* I? Where's *Jack*? I'm... I'm supposed to be getting *ready*. I... I'm taking him to the *dance*."

"He'll be here any *minute*, Mrs. Dunning! You... you look *beautiful!* He's going to have *such* a good time with you!"

Mary smiled. "I hope so! He... he's been hurt *so* bad! Poor Jack!" she laughed slightly. "Poor funny Jack! I hope he's not embarrassed by his... his old mom going with him!"

"He *won't* be, Mrs. Dunning! He's going to have *so* much fun! I... I have to admit, though. I'm pretty *jealous* of you! You see, *I* wanted Jack to take *me* to the dance!"

His mother looked at her hard. "*You?*" she asked incredulously. "*That's* right! You *like* my Jack."

She wiped the tears from her eyes. "*No*, Mrs. Dunning! I *love* your Jack! I always *have!* Ever since I was *ten!* I want to *marry* him!"

Mary's eyes cleared and Erica could see she'd subtly changed. "You're Erica Hargrave, all grown up." Becoming lucid and seeing Erica nod, she squinted. "You're *still* in love with my Jack? You want to *marry* him?"

"Yes, Ma'am!" she answered as she wiped another tear away. "I'd do *anything* to be Mrs. Jack Dunning! I've *always* loved him!"

"I *know*." Mary nodded. Waving Erica closer, she took the girl's hands in both of hers. "I've known you liked Jack a long time, dear. A woman can

see it. I'm *old* dear. I think I might be going to see my Danny soon. Does... does Jack *know* you love him? He's never *mentioned* that he knew."

"I was *afraid* to tell him, Mrs. Dunning." Erica explained sadly. "I... because I was so much younger than he was, just a little girl, but now..."

"Now you're a *woman*, and you *still* love my Jack." she looked at her sternly. "You promise you'll take care of him? Stay with him always? Never *hurt* him? Never *leave* him?"

"I'd sooner die *myself* than live without him, Mrs. Dunning!" Erica sobbed.

"Good girl!" she cackled and patted her hand. "I *knew* you'd be good to him. He'll need all the love you can give! Dunning men can *be* that way! *You'll* see!" she laughed.

"I *will*, Mrs. Dunning!" she laughed along with her.

"And call me Mary or Mom! If you want to be my Jack's *wife*, we can be on a first name *basis*!"

"OK... *Mom*!" Erica laughed as Jack came running into the room.

"*Mom*! You're *awake*! Thank *God*!"

"*Jack*!" Mary growled. "Good! Get over here! *Siddown*, boy!" she barked.

Gulping, he slowed to a walk, crossed the room, sat next to his mother, and looked over at Erica. "*Thank* you! I don't know how you *do* it!"

"Do *what*?" Erica asked.

"My *miracle* girl! Something about your voice just *helps*!" he said with a half smile before they both started laughing together.

Seeing them laugh made Mary smile before her face turned serious. "*Jack? I want to talk to you. Alone.*" She looked at Erica and the nurse. "If you two wouldn't *mind?*"

Erica practically had to drag the nurse from the room. "We'll be right outside if you need us." she promised.

Once the door was closed, Mary looked at Jack sternly. "That Hargrave girl. She *loves* you, Jack. Has for a very long *time*, you know. Do you love *her?*"

"*Yeah, Mom! I do!*" he nodded. "I asked her to marry me and she said *yes!*"

His mother smiled and clasped his hand in both of hers as her entire body seemed to relax with the release of decades of worry. "That's *good!* I *told* you that you just needed to look where you weren't *expecting*. I was thinking I'd never *live* to see you two get together. She promised me she'd take care of you, and I know she *will*. Love that lasts *that* long isn't going *anywhere!*" She looked sternly at him. "I didn't see a *ring!*"

Swallowing hard, Jack looked at the floor. "I... I couldn't *afford* one, Mom. I'll have one before we get married, though. I *promise!*"

Pulling at the ring surrounding the third finger of her left hand, when at last it came loose, she held it out to him in her wrinkled and barely functional fingers. "*Here*. Take this. Your father's ring is in the shoebox in my closet there. Take that, too. Sell 'em and get her a real *pretty* one!"

"*Mom!* I... I can't sell your and Dad's rings!" he almost cried.

Sighing, she sat back exhausted. "Then if she likes it, you can *give* it to her! Girl's *got* to have a ring or she won't feel properly engaged!" Beginning to feel drowsy, her mind started slipping back into the light that she'd drifted away from to come back here. "*Jack?* You know you're my *gift*, right? My precious gift from *God?* He *blessed* us, me and Danny, with *you!*"

Tears rolled down his cheeks. "Yes, Mom! I *know*! And I... I *love* you! When you see Dad, tell him... tell him I'm *alive*! I'm *alive* again! And I'll see to it Erica and I spend the rest of our *days* together alive, *too*!" Pausing a moment, something she'd said finally clicked. "Wait... Erica... you *knew*?"

"*Course* I did!" Mary furrowed her brow. "I've got *eyes*, don't I? Every time I *saw* that girl I could see it, the way she watched you, hung on your every word. You'd have to be *blind* to have missed it!" Looking at him carefully, she grinned. "Didn't have a clue, *did* you baby?"

"Not *one*." he admitted bashfully.

Cackling, Mary looked at the ceiling. "Same as your *father*."

"Is it alright if she comes in again?"

"That's fine, dear." she said wearily. "I said what I needed."

Calling her back in, Erica came and stood next to Jack. "*Mom*?" she asked delicately.

Mary Dunning reached out a hand to her. When she felt the young, fresh fingers against hers, she guided Erica's hand to Jack's. "*There*!" she sighed contentedly, her words beginning to slur. "*That's* where it belongs! Where it's *always* belonged and always *will*! Don't you two ever *forget* it!"

"We *won't*, Mom!" Jack cried happily and sorrowfully, "*Ever*!" but she was already unconscious again, this time never to awake.

Chapter 12 - Big Things Come in Small Buildings

They buried Mary in the plot next to his father Danny there in Pittsburgh the following Saturday. It was just the two of them and Erica's father Frank there to say goodbye. They flew back the next day and Jack went to work on his big plan.

Jack told me about his plan for the weekend of March twenty-third, ninety-six. He'd thought of everything, but needed Heather and me to help pull it off. So we spent four weeks between Jack burying his mom and the weekend of the twenty-third plotting, scheming, and basically having a blast planning the surprise of a lifetime for both Erica and Richard. Rich almost caught us once. He walked into the shop while I had stuff out he shouldn't see, but he could be a bit oblivious at times. He never had a *clue*!

Rich once told me that he thought Jack didn't know *how* to plan ahead... that he seemed *incapable* of thinking more than five minutes into the future. He thought Jack was wasting his time and opportunities by not going to college on the government dime. We'd *earned* it, so why not take advantage? The truth is Jack *did* have a plan for what he wanted to do, he just had different priorities than Rich. He thought love and happiness, even in total poverty, were better than living in the lap of luxury...

...but Jack *did* know how to plan.

When Richard walked into Jack's room the Friday before he was scheduled for a week's leave, he looked at his friend with a puzzled expression. "You're *up* to something, Jack." he said accusingly as he leaned on Jack's locker.

He looked up at Richard as he changed into his Civies with his usual half-smile. "Yep. I *am*."

Surprised at his candor, Richard pushed off the locker. "You *admit* it? Come on, Jack! Tell me what's up! You've been acting weird for *weeks*! Weird for *you*, I mean, I know you lost Mary, and you seem to be alright with that, but you're definitely up to *something*! Usually you can't *help* but brag to me over and over about whatever it is you have scheming, but this last month you've been button-lips!"

Jack chuckled at Richard's choice of words, nearly having to actually bite his tongue trying to keep from turning it into a crude joke. "I ain't gonna tell ya', Rich! Might as well drop it!" He laced his shoes as he talked. "Hey, change of subject, I was thinking. What do you think about a road trip with the girls this weekend? Say run up to Reno and drop some cash?"

"I *guess* that could be fun." Richard shrugged, secretly glad of the suggestion as it meant he could keep an eye on Jack and Erica.

"Thanks, Rich! We still meeting the girls at Erica's place for dinner?"

"That's the plan." he replied, seeming to forget all about Jack's odd behavior. "I'll see you two out front at eighteen hundred, alright?"

Smiling, Jack nodded. "See you then!"

Just as Jack, Richard, and Brooke walked in the front door of Erica's apartment, they saw Heather and Erica sitting at her dining room table talking. Moving away from each other as the trio entered, Heather ran up to Richard and threw her arms around him, planting a quick kiss with a smile.

"Richard? Have I told you lately what a wonderful man you are?" she asked.

Suspicious, he nodded. "Whadda you want? Don't get me *wrong*, whatever it is, the answer's yes, but I'd kinda like to *know*!"

Heather wrapped her arms around his chest. "Jack called earlier and said we were headed up to Reno this weekend. Would you mind if we spent some time alone while we're there? Just the *two* of us? I was thinking maybe a romantic evening at one of the casinos? Dinner, dancing..." She looked in his eyes. "...a room for just the *two* of us?"

"Sounds great for *us*," he commented happily, "but what about Brooke, Jack, and Erica? What'll *they* do while we're off on our own?"

Brooke laughed as she walked by him, patting him on the shoulder. "Don't worry about us! You two have a good time! We'll figure *something* out!"

Shrugging, Richard smiled back at her. "Alright! If everyone's agreeable!" He planned to take a moment alone with Brooke to ask her to keep an eye on Jack and his sister and make sure they didn't get too carried away with each other. He took comfort in the idea that Reno was the *divorce* capital of the U.S. and that *Las Vegas* was where people got quickie marriages.

Jack spoke up as he wrapped an arm around Erica. "That's OK, I was kinda thinking we could spend some time up at Tahoe. They have this cruise and dinner around the lake that's supposed to be really great!"

"I think I should drive up in my own car." Brooke added. "That way when we split up, no one's left without a car. Sound good?"

The five sat in the living room, talking about their weekend plans and other things, Richard noticing that Heather and Erica occasionally would give each other knowing glances, as if the two of them knew something the rest didn't.

They headed off the next morning, Richard driving Jack, Heather, and Erica up in his station wagon, and Brooke in her car, packed to overflowing, full of all the things that they needed in order to carry out Jack's greatest gag of all time.

Richard followed the four of them through the casino. They'd checked into their hotel at a little after two in the afternoon taking two rooms; one for Jack and himself, the other for the girls. That surprised him. Not that they'd split rooms that way, but that he didn't have to suggest it... *Jack* had. He knew that Jack was conscious of Richard's feelings when it came to him and his sister being alone together, so he chalked it up to Jack trying to make him more at ease. It was fine, so long as Richard didn't know what they were doing. If Jack hadn't suggested the arrangement though, he would have *insisted* on it.

Still, he couldn't shake the funny feeling that there was something amiss. The way Heather had been behaving had bordered on schizophrenic; secretive and quick to anger one moment, sweet and romantic the next. Erica was even *more* perplexing. She seemed to know something he didn't about their plans, but at the same time kept asking Jack what they were doing as though she were lost.

"Hey, Rich?" Jack asked as they stopped at the top of an escalator leading down to the gaming floor. "Erica wanted to take a walk down by the river, but Brooke wants to play the tables. You wanna come with, or stay?"

"I *did*?" Erica asked with a puzzled look. "Oh! *That's* right! I *did*!"

Her brother had little interest in walking more than they already had. It had seemed they'd done little else for two hours. "I think I'd like to stick around and sit for a while." He turned to Heather. "You wanna join them, honey?"

Clutching his arm, Heather smiled up at him. "Not a *chance*! Where *thou* goest! I don't trust some of the ladies here not to see you looking fine and sharp and try to pick you *up*!" Heather had asked Richard to wear his dress blues as they walked the casino floor, saying it made her proud to be seen with him. That prompted Erica to insist the same of Jack, which the younger Marine griped endlessly about the entire time that they were getting ready for the evening.

While Erica and Jack walked off on their own, Erica's arm in his, Richard took comfort in knowing that they couldn't do much in public, kissing at the worst. Following Brooke down the escalator, they walked past the fake mine shaft in the middle of the gaming floor and sat at a Blackjack table, enjoying the 'free' drinks as they slowly lost money. He didn't mind as it was fun, and Brooke seemed to be having a good time and won almost as much as he lost.

After a while, he noticed Heather checking her watch repeatedly. Eventually, she sighed and tugged on his arm. "Richard! Can't we go do something *else* now? I feel like we got dressed up for *nothing*!" A smile slowly crept across her face. "Let's go dancing at that place Jack talked about!"

"Fine by me." Richard shrugged. "Brooke's the only one winning. Well, her and the *casino*!" He dropped a twenty-five dollar chip in front of the dealer as he got off the stool. "Thanks!" he told the casino worker.

Walking away from the tables, he felt Brooke tap him on the shoulder. "We should go down to the river and find Jack and Erica. If we go without them, Jack'll get pretty *steamed*! After all, he's the one that *suggested* the place!"

He nodded, starting to get uncomfortable with how long they'd been gone, anyway. "Good idea. They shouldn't be *too* hard to spot, a Marine in dress blues with a girl in a white dress? They looked like salt and pepper shakers!"

Walking out onto the city's main street, they saw people coming and going. Richard kept his eyes open looking for Jack and wasn't really watching where they were going, just following Brooke while Heather held his arm.

Passing over the tiny river that cut the town down the middle, he looked up the sidewalk that ran alongside it, but still couldn't see Jack or his sister. They turned down the river walk, crossed the street, then turned down a side street, finally turning again to start coming back the way they'd come. By the time Richard noticed to look, he'd become completely lost.

"Hey, where *are* we, anyway?"

Brooke turned her head and pointed forward. "The main street is ahead, right by that little white house on the corner. *See?*"

Coming alongside the building, he heard Jack before he'd seen him. "*Rich!*" Looking around, he saw Jack peering from around the corner of the house.

"*Jack!* We've been looking all *over* for you! Where's Erica?" he asked as the three got closer to him.

"She's inside! I think she hurt her ankle or something! The people here let her sit down for a minute!"

Rushing ahead, Richard was worried about his sister. "*Damn* it, Jack! You were supposed to take *care* of her!" He turned the corner, ran up the short walkway, and up the few steps, not even looking at his surroundings as he stopped to knock on the door; Jack, Brooke, and Heather coming up behind.

An older man opened the door, smiling. "Come in!" he offered, stepping aside as he did.

Rushing into the house, Richard looked around. Instead of a living room, it seemed to be the front reception area of an office of some kind. Suddenly, he felt Jack behind him, pushing him forward and around the counter.

"*This way!*" he directed Richard. "Right down the hall and to the right!"

Confused, Richard walked into the room and saw Erica holding a bouquet and standing next to their father, Frank. Stunned, he stopped a moment until Jack pushed him the rest of the way into the room.

"Time's wasting, Rich! We're on the *clock!*" Jack said as he pushed Richard up to stand next to a podium.

"What's going on?" he asked. "*Dad?* What..." Suddenly it became clear to him, washing over him like a storm.

"Here. Hold these." Jack said, stuffing something in his hand. Richard looked down and opened his fingers numbly and saw two gold rings.

"*Jack?*"

Taking his place next to Richard as Brooke and Heather walked slowly to them, turning to the opposite side of the podium, Jack let a out a sigh and smiled toward Erica and her father. "You'll do *fine*, Rich! Just stand there and hand me those when the guy says to. Easy as pie!"

Richard looked around in a daze as the old man who'd let them in walked up to the podium carrying a bible. Setting it down, he opened it and nodded to Erica; Richard only just then noticing that she had added a beautiful floral ring veil to her dress, completing the look of a bride to perfection.

As Frank walked Erica up the aisle, the Wedding March playing softly in the background, he turned to his daughter and whispered, "You know, when I said I'd pay to send you to a school near him, I didn't think we'd be jumping to *this* so quickly! Are you *sure*, sweet pea?"

Nodding, Erica looked up the aisle at Jack, standing and waiting for her. "I always *have* been, Daddy! When it comes to Jack, I'm sure of *everything!*"

Coming up to stand next to Jack, Erica turned to her father and blushed as he partially lifted her veil and kissed her on the cheek before stepping back.

Richard was so dazed, he hardly noticed when Jack started nudging him a few minutes later when the man asked for the rings. "*Huh?* Oh." Wanting to refuse to give them over, drag Jack out of the building, and beat the tar out of him, Richard just sighed and accepted fate, handing them over.

"The couple have decided to write their own vows, so as you exchange rings, exchange vows." the officiant instructed.

Turning to Erica, Jack gave her his half grin. "I don't think I'll ever *deserve* the love you've given me over the years, Buttons. I intend to spend however many I've got left trying to be *worthy* of it, though!" Holding up the ring, he nearly cried. "Mom... Mom gave me *this*. It's been on her hand since the day she and Dad were married back in forty-five after the war. She wanted *you* to have it, and so do *I*." He slipped his mother's ring over her finger, fitting perfectly. "I *love* you, Erica. Now and forever!"

Trying to hold back her tears while she held Jack's father's ring, Erica took a ragged breath. "I have a *confession* to make, Jack! I've had a crush on you since I was *ten*!" she repeated to him, the words signifying their happiness together. "You make me *laugh*! You're the reason I *smile*! You've been my friend, and now I want you to always and forever be my *love*." She slipped the ring on his finger. "I *love* you, Jack! I always *have*!"

Nodding with a smile, the officiant stated, "If anyone can show cause why these two should not be wed, let them speak now or forever hold their peace."

Watching as everyone turned to him, almost daring him to say something, Richard shrugged. "What? *Now*? I'd lose a *head* I'm fond of! I'm good!"

Shaking his head, the minister took a breath. "Then by the power vested in me by God and the State of Nevada, I now pronounce you Man and Wife." He leaned forward slightly to finish with a smile. "You may kiss the bride!"

Jack turned and lifted her veil, laying it gently over the back of her head. Leaning down slightly, they tilted and kissed, simply and quickly.

When they all started exchanging hugs and congratulations, Richard found a moment and dragged his father aside. "Dad, I *have* to know. You're *OK* with this? I mean, I *assume* you are! You're *here*, you gave her *away*, but..."

Nodding, Frank clapped Richard on the shoulder. "Yes, son. I've known about your sister being in love with Jack for a long time. I figure if after *this* long she's *still* in love with him, then there's nothing more to say. You can't fight a woman's *heart*, boy. *Remember* that!"

Sighing, Richard nodded and turned to his best friend. "Jack, you son of a..." His words were interrupted as Jack hugged him tightly.

"Thanks, Rich! I know you could have said something, stopped the whole thing, but you *didn't*! I'll love you *forever* for that!"

Stepping back, he looked down at his new brother-in-law. "I meant what I said before, Jack. You know perfectly well that if I'd said *one bloody word*, Heather, Brooke, *and* Erica would have all thrown me into that creek they call a *river* here!"

Jack looked at him seriously. "For what it's worth Rich, I really *do* love her, and I'll be *good* to her. I *meant* what I said in my vows. I'm gonna spend the rest of my life trying to *deserve* how much she's always loved me."

Grabbing him in a hug, Richard sighed, "You damn well *better*, Jack!"

The two separating, Frank came over and took Jack's hand. "Congratulations, boy. Welcome to the *club*. Just remember the most important words in any marriage."

"I love you?" Jack guessed.

"*Nope!* It's '*Yes, dear.*'" his father-in-law advised. "*You'll* see!"

When the six walked out of the building after paying the fees and signing the license, Richard and Heather signing as witnesses, Richard took a look at the outside of the building, wondering how he'd been fooled. "I could of *sworn* this was a *house* when we walked up!" he said as he looked at it.

"It used to be one!" Jack pointed out. "That's what made it so *easy*! Well, *that* and you're an all day sucker, Rich!" he added. "*Gotcha!*"

Richard tried to grab him, but Jack slipped loose and backed away; his cover falling to the pavement. Quickly grabbing it again, Jack ran in a large circle, keeping Richard at a good distance and laughing the entire time.

"Will you two children act your *age*!" Heather barked at them.

Leaning back, Jack howled like a coyote as Richard caught up to him, nearly tackling him.

Starting to walk back toward the casinos, Frank pulled his daughter aside. "I can't stay, sweetie. I've got a nine o'clock flight back to Pittsburgh, but I wanted to tell you something first."

"I'm sorry you have to go home so *soon*, Daddy. What is it?"

"Well, your mother and I are moving to Newport Beach, California in May. I retire in a month, and I'm sick of shoveling snow, dealing with rain half of the year, and never seeing the *sun*. We've sold the house and bought a place there, so we'll be closer when you want to visit."

"I notice *Mother* didn't come." she stated disappointedly. "Why not?"

Exhaling heavily, Frank started to walk with her behind the other four. "Jack *invited* her, that's one of the main reasons *I'm* here. He swallowed his pride and showed me what kind of a man he was. He offered to pay for both our tickets, round trip, too." Pulling out his pipe, he struck a match, puffing on it until it lit. "Your mother wouldn't accept it, sweet pea. Keeps insisting that if we cut off your tuition and threaten to disown you, you'll forget all about Jack. She even threatened to *leave* me just for coming to give you away, but I called her bluff."

"I think she's been trying to push Jack and I apart for a while, Daddy." she stated sadly as they started to cross the bridge over the tiny river. "When I first told her how I felt about Jack, the first thing she *did* was to try and push me toward someone else, *anyone* else! I got so sick of her trying to set me up on dates with boys that go to our church!"

Looking at the pavement as they walked up the street and toward the casinos, Frank grimaced while the other four ahead of them talked and laughed. "I... I need to tell you something *else*, sweetie. I don't know if it's a good idea to let *Jack* know this. I'll leave that to your judgement."

Swallowing hard, Erica knew that whatever he had to say was going to be bad. "OK, Daddy."

He let out a sigh. "See, your mother knew you had a crush on Jack longer than you *think*." he explained. "She told me after Jack invited us here to your wedding that she *knew* how you felt about him almost a year before she set him up with that Wendy girl."

She stopped on the sidewalk on the side of the bridge over the river. "Mom was *always* trying to get Jack away from me?" Suddenly her mother's erratic behavior regarding Jack all made sense. "But *why*, Daddy?"

"Your mother thinks Jack is a '*bad influence*'." Frank huffed as he puffed on his pipe. "She wanted you to marry a rich boy who could take care of *you*, the way I took care of *her*. Jack grew up poor, so she thinks he'll *always* be poor. She just won't ever admit that love beats money. I'm sorry, sweet pea."

"Daddy? I know this sounds *terrible*, but..." Erica sighed and looked out onto the small river flowing under their feet. "Why don't you just leave Mother in *Pittsburgh* and marry some busty actress!"

"Can't." he replied. "Despite it all, *I* still love *her*. Besides, I didn't promise your *mother* I'd stay with her the rest of our lives, I promised *God*."

They started walking again, Erica seeing that the other four had stopped at the north side of the bridge. "I can understand *that*, Daddy."

His arm hugging her shoulder while he puffed his pipe, he nodded toward the group that waited for them. "You gonna tell him?"

"I don't think I *can* keep it from him." Erica sighed. "I love him so much I just *can't*! I spent so long hiding how I felt from him, I don't think I could hide *anything* from him ever again. I don't *want* to." She looked at him as they slowly walked together. "Do you understand?"

Frank nodded as his pipe went out again. "Yeah. I get it, sweetie."

"What's with the long faces?" Jack asked. "Second thoughts, Buttons?"

She laughed at the suggestion. "*No*, Jack! No second thoughts! No regrets, no going back!" She separated from her father and flowed into his arms. "Daddy can't stay. He's flying home in just over an hour."

"Yeah, I know." Jack nodded. "I bought him his ticket, even after he tried to insist on paying for it *himself*! You sure you can't stay, Frank? You're more than welcome! You can still get your ticket traded for a later flight."

He clapped his hand on Jack's shoulder. "I'd love to son, but I gotta get home. Lots to do! Your *wife* can fill you in on the details!"

"My *wife*!" his expression brightened. "*God*, I love the sound of that!" He kissed Erica on the forehead quickly and sweetly before extending his hand to her father. "Have a good flight then, Frank!"

Taking it, he gave a firm grip back. "Oh, and you can call me *Dad*, now! It's official! You're *family*!"

"Jack's been family for a long *time*, Daddy." Erica cooed.

"No. Good thing too, or else you two would be in serious trouble!" he replied jokingly. "So long, sweet pea!" He bent and kissed her cheek before hailing a cab to take him back to the airport.

After the five watched him depart, they turned toward the casinos once more, Richard suddenly remembering something. "*Oh!* We were supposed to be *looking* for you! Heather wanted to go dance!" he looked at the conspirators. "Or was all that just a part of the *ambush*?"

Smiling, Heather wrapped an arm through his. "A little of *both*, dear!"

Jack grinned as the three walked into the club, music playing loudly while video screens all over showed re-runs of 'American Bandstand'. Leading the way to the bar, he ordered drinks for all of them. "You're looking at a married man!" he told the bartender.

"*Congratulations!*" the man said as he poured, eyeing Richard and Heather. "Them *too*?"

Turning to look up at Richard, his girlfriend smiled. "We could if you *want* to, dear! Nothing stopping us!"

Sweating, Richard shook his head. "Oh, *no!* You're not getting off *that* easy, lady! You're getting a wedding in a proper *church* with a proper reception and the whole nine yards!"

"So *what*?" Jack interrupted angrily. "You think my wedding wasn't *good* enough?" He scowled at his oldest friend; all humor gone from his face.

Pushing between them, Brooke put a hand on the both of their chests. "Don't either of you even *think* about starting anything, or else I'll kick the *shit* out of *both* your asses! *Stand down!*" she ordered them. Turning to Richard, she poked him in the chest. "And don't you *ever* belittle Jack and Erica's wedding ever again!"

Seeing he was completely outnumbered, including Heather, he dropped his head. "Look, I didn't *mean*... I..." He looked up at his sister who was staring daggers at him. "Erica, I'm *sorry*. I didn't mean to make fun of your wedding! It was *beautiful*, really! It's just... it's not *us* is all. *OK?*"

Heather softened her ire some. "I'd be happy with *any* wedding, Richard!"

Moving closely to her so he could talk more privately, Richard lowered his voice. "I thought you wanted to wait until you graduated and I got out?"

"I still *do*, dear." she said softly and pulling herself close to him. "But I don't care *how* we do it!"

"I want to give you the wedding you always *dreamed* of!" He felt someone bump against him as they pushed past, trying to make their way into the club. Pulling her aside and out of the way of the entrance, he took her hands in his. "I *love* you. You *know* that, don't you?" he asked.

"Of *course* I do, Richard dear, and I love *you*. I think it's *adorable* of you that you want me to have a big wedding with all the ceremony! So if that's what you want, then that's what we'll do!" She wrapped her arms around him and kissed him deeply, not caring who was watching or if it was proper.

When their kiss ended, they were greeted with a round of cheers and catcalls. Richard could only blush and nod his head in a slight bow.

"Here!" Jack said, almost shoving a drink in his hand. "Drink it, *jarhead!*" His face was still serious until a moment after he raised his own glass against Richard's, then slipped into his half-grin. "You are *such* an easy mark, Rich!" he gloated.

After Jack downed his drink in one gulp and started to laugh, it dawned on Richard that his best friend had gotten him yet again. "You are *so* gonna pay for that later, Jack!" he chuckled as he downed his own drink.

"*Rich!* How many times are you gonna *fall* for it!?" Jack laughed. "You are *such* an all-day sucker! See? This is yet *another* reason why you *need* me!" He took Richard's glass and slapped it back down on the bar for a refill.

"He's not the *only* one that needs you, *Jack*." Erica said, slipping her arms around his waist. Pulling him down into an even more passionate kiss than the one her brother and Heather had just shared, she didn't end it until both of them were gasping for breath.

They didn't notice the whoops and cheers for their kiss until it was over and Jack found himself taking his turn at bows, in his case more flamboyantly and in grandiose style, bowing deeply at the waist. "*Thank* you! *Thank* you! No! *Please!* You're too much! It was *nothing!* *Thank* you!"

Grabbing his arm to halt his bows, Richard pointed at Brooke, who'd snagged a table for them while they'd gotten drinks and applause. Making their way over to her, they all sat and enjoyed the music, slowing their drinking to a reasonable pace. In the middle of a funny story that Jack was telling, Richard stopped him. "*Wait* a minute! What about our rooms? We only have two and... well... I guess you two will want... um... your *own* now." He looked at Brooke sadly, noticing she was still the odd girl out.

Brooke shrugged. "Don't sweat it, Rich. Jack and Erica aren't staying in either *one* tonight. He already reserved a suite for them before we even *got* here! As for me, well now I get a room to *myself!* You two can have *our* room..." She indicated Heather and Richard. "...and I'll get *yours!*" Hearing a song come on that she liked, her eyes got wide. "Oh! *Jack!* Come on! You're with *me!*" She grabbed his hand and almost jerked him to the dance floor.

While Heather laughed at Jack and Brooke hamming up the place to '*Heart of Glass*', Richard scooted over to his sister. "Erica, I just wanted... well... I wanted to say I'm *happy* for you, for *both* of you!" he shouted over the music. "I can tell you make each other happy, and I guess that matters a lot to me."

"*Thanks, Richie!*" she shouted back. "Same for you and Heather! She's a *great* girl!"

"She *is*. Sometimes I worry that she's *too* good for me, ya' know? Like I don't *deserve* her and one day she's gonna wake up and realize that she's dating down?"

"*I'll* be the judge of that!" Heather interrupted with a shout, leaning against him happily.

When Jack and Brooke returned to the table, he sat next to his new wife and exhaled heavily. "*Woo!* Brooke, I don't know where you get the energy! That about wore me out!"

Erica leaned against him happily and took his hand. "None of *that!* I need you healthy and rested for *later!*"

Finally leaving the club for their rooms after one in the morning, the five stumbled, staggered, and laughed the whole way there. When the elevator stopped at their floor, Jack and Erica didn't get out.

"Aren't you coming?" Richard mumbled.

"Not our floor!" Erica answered, while Jack pushed another button. Seeing her brother disappear between the closing doors, she waved. "*Goodnight!*"

Slowly Richard sobered to the thought that Jack and his sister were about to celebrate their wedding night. He sighed as Heather led him to their room with Brooke already ahead of them and grabbing her things to take them to the room he and Jack had shared that afternoon.

Walking in, Brooke tapped him on the shoulder. "Key, please?" Seeing him fumble for it, she grabbed his wallet and removed his room key, dropping the wallet in his hand once she had it. "Goodnight, you two!" she shouted.

Heather undressed him, Richard being too sauced to know how. Shaking her head, she tsked. "This will be the *last* time I do this, Richard! *Promise?*"

He nodded his head, the room spinning as he did. "Promise. I jus' wanted ta' celeb... celeb... ah, *shit!* I just didn't wanna think about Jack an' my sis doin'... *stuff!*"

"She's his *wife* now, Richard. You're just going to have to put it out of your head!" When she heard a snore emanate from her fiancé, she shook her head, finished undressing him, and tucked him into bed; staying up half the night to make sure he didn't vomit and choke in his sleep.

Walking slowly along the sidewalk next to the tiny river that ran through the middle of the city, giving it life, Brooke tried to settle her emotions. She'd gotten restless after moving her things to Jack and Richard's room, so she decided to take a walk. Leaning against the railing along the riverside, she sighed wistfully as the water ran by her; its soothing natural sounds helping to distract from the loneliness that threatened to overwhelm her.

Even as she tried to escape the feeling, she would see couples roaming along the walkway, each one a hot knife to her aching heart. "*Shit!*" she exclaimed to nobody. *I know I should be happy for them, but...* Her thoughts filled with self-loathing, she was angry with herself for her jealousy of the happiness that both Jack and Richard had found that continued to elude her.

"*Damn* it!" she swore. Stalking back to her hotel room, she passed a laughing group of teens going the opposite way, sure that they were far too young to be out so late, even for a Saturday. "Patience has its *limits!*" she grumbled absently. "I know I'll find her *someday*, but someday better get here pretty damn *soon!*"

Chapter 13 - The New Normal

When Rich, Heather, and I drove back to the bay area in his car, mine stayed with Jack and Erica after we three had properly 'decorated' it. By then I was feeling a *little* better about things, but not *much*. I think I did a pretty good job of keeping the boys blissfully unaware, but not Heather. She knew I was upset, and why, without me saying a *word*.

That week was hell for me. Once word got around that Jack and Erica had gotten married, I had every single serviceman at that base 'dropping by' the shop to give their condolences on the breakup of our relationship, and not too casually expressing their interest at taking his fictional place in my bed. I managed to duck out of them all that week by saying how I was still kind of heartbroken over the whole thing and just wanted to take time away from dating anyone, but I knew they'd be back.

I never realized before that week just how much Jack had helped my time in the Corps be as *enjoyable* as it was. After he got married, it was a *chore*. Just *work...* and I had eighteen months left in my cruise.

When Jack finally returned the next weekend, I got to hear all the details of their Honeymoon. Romantic evenings, dinners at the lake, feeding ducks at some park, I wanted to *puke* it was so sweet! I'll admit it. I was *bitter*. Bitter, jealous, and angry with Jack for taking away my protective cloak. I think that's why he did what he did.

Signing his release papers, Jack then handed them back to his commanding officer. Sighing, he dropped the pen on the desk. Without another word, he saluted and left, knowing that today would be his last day of active duty. He had enough Leave saved up that he would be taking the rest of his cruise on Leave starting the next day and ending on the anniversary of his joining up. Smiling as he returned to start packing up his things, most of them already

at the apartment he and Erica shared, he knew that his entire life was about to change.

"*Jack!*" Richard called out to him, running down the hall to catch up. "All out?"

He nodded silently. After walking a bit, he looked at his friend. "*You?*"

"Signed off, but I have three weeks left before I can take Terminal Leave." he replied. "So what're your plans now?"

Jack stopped in the hall and leaned against the cold bricks shrugging. "Well, Erica still has a year left on her degree. I'm thinking of getting a job around locally so I can keep things moving toward us buying that place when she's done. Dad's still paying her tuition and housing for her, so we don't need to worry about *that*. Makes me feel guilty, though."

"Don't sweat Dad's help, Jack." Richard advised. "Soon you'll be missing it! *Badly!*"

Starting down the hall once more, this time Jack was slow and methodical. "Well, I had a thought about what to do after she's done with school. With Mom gone and your folks living in SoCal, there really isn't any *reason* to go back to P-A. No one there to want to go back *to*. So I was thinking, maybe Erica and I'll move down south so she can be close to your folks."

Stopping in his tracks, Richard grabbed Jack's arm. "Jack, you're willing to live that close to *Mother*? Not afraid she's gonna *poison* you or anything?"

"*Nah!*" Jack shook his head. "I just won't ever eat her *cooking*! She's got to get used to me being her son-in-law *eventually*, right? Right? *Rich!?*"

Laughing, Richard shook his head. "I *dunno*, Jack! I wouldn't be surprised if you bring your wife over for dinner at their house one night and find that

Mom *happened* to invite some single guy friend over, someone she thinks Erica might like better than *you!*"

"I got no worries about *that*, Rich! Buttons would sooner gnaw off her own *arm* than leave me! Poor girl! She's a *hopeless* case, Rich!"

He patted Jack's shoulder. "I don't *get* it. I don't think I ever *will*, but you're right! She's totally *gone* for you!" After a moment, he gently grabbed Jack's shoulder to pull him to a stop again. "Um... you talked to Brooke?"

"*Brooke!*" Jack sighed. "See, I don't *get* it! She was all happy to help me with the wedding and almost *giddy* at tricking you into being my Best Man, but then as soon as I got back... *Bam!* It's like a *freezer* got left open anytime she sees me! I can feel the temperature drop twenty degrees!"

"You know she's getting hit on like thirty times a day?" Richard pointed out.

"*No!* How *could* I know! She hardly *speaks* to me!" Jack lightly punched the wall. "What does she expect? She want me to get a *divorce* just to keep the guys off her back?"

"Just cut her some slack, Jack! She's having a hard time adjusting to things! She got *used* to you keeping the field clear and now it's like every guy here is trying to make up for lost time! Swabbies *included!*"

"*Ouch!*" Jack winced. "Oh, *that's* gotta hurt! Well what can I do? Put out the word that she's *frigid* or something? Bad in bed?"

"Have Erica invite her over for dinner more often! At least if you keep her social calendar full, she'll have handy excuses for turning them down!"

"*Great!* Just what I want! Brooke crashing my romantic dinners at home just when I get time to be there myself? No, Brooke's just gonna have to man-up and turn them away on her *own*. If she's pissed off at me for marrying Erica,

then... well... then she's on her *own*! See ya, Rich!" At that, Jack took off down the hall, intending to make the rest of his final day at The Barracks less uncomfortable.

Watching his friend leave, Richard sighed. "Damn it, *Jack*!"

Erica lit the second candle at the dining room table, shaking the match out before turning the lights down low. Any minute Jack would be home to stay, and she intended to make the most of their first of many evenings to come. Checking her makeup once more, she smoothed her hair away from her face, smiling at her reflection. With a gratified sigh, she waited.

Hauling the seabag out of the cab, Jack pulled it over his shoulder, vaulting up the steps by twos towards their apartment. Opening the door, he noticed the dark lighting immediately, despite the late afternoon sun. The smell of pasta and bread wafted out the door as he entered; his seabag dropping off his shoulder as he saw her standing next to the couch.

"Welcome *home*, Jack!" she purred.

Not even bothering to close the door, he rushed up to her and lifted her in the air, making her shriek with laughter. "I'm *free*!" he shouted, spinning her around. Putting her down gently, he kept his arms around her. "How was *school*, little girl?"

Laughing, Erica relaxed into his embrace. "*Boring*! This makes up for it!"

Returning to and closing the door after picking up his bag, he carried it off to their room, dropping it unceremoniously in their cluttered closet. "Dinner smells *wonderful*!" he complimented her. "How do you find the time?"

"I *made* the time!" she replied from the kitchen. "Go wash up!"

"Yes, dear." he surrendered. "Want me to change to a suit and tie?"

"No, just wash your hands!" Erica laughed. "And *shave*, you *Neanderthal*!"

"*Ug!* Me scrape face! Then club head!" he grunted, drawing another fit of laughter from his wife.

Coming out freshly shaven and clean, he leaned against the wall next to the kitchen, his smile at watching Erica stir spaghetti almost made her laugh for that alone. Coming up behind her, he wrapped his arms around her and kissed her neck. "Anything I can *help* with?"

"Just go sit and I'll bring it out. You can help later with the *dishes!* I cooked, *you're* cleaning up!"

"*Deal!*" he agreed, poking her sides with his fingers and making her jump.

"*Ah!* Jack! *No!*" she laughed.

While they sat and ate silently, the two kept looking at each other smiling, sometimes breaking out into giddy laughter at nothing but the other's smile. Once Jack finished his plate, he sat back and held his stomach. "Now that I'm Outside, I'm gonna need to watch that. You keep stuffing me like this, and I'm gonna bloat up like Principal Ford!"

"I'll make sure you get plenty of *physical activity* to keep you in top fighting shape!" she joked seductively. "You can start with the *dishes!*"

"*Ah!* The bliss of married life! You're bossing me around already! I *love* it!" Getting up, he made his way to the kitchen, kissing her cheek on the way.

"So did you see Richie before you left today?" Erica asked as she gathered their dishes and brought them into the kitchen.

"Yep. Just a quick word in the hallway, though. Got too busy after that." Jack started running hot water over the pans.

"How about *Brooke*? I haven't heard from her in *weeks*! How's she doing?" She leaned against the refrigerator to listen.

"Um... well, Brooke's been a little... distant... lately. Downright *frosty*, to be honest." He talked as he washed. "Apparently, since I'm not available to run interference for her anymore, she has like half the base beating a path to her rack. Poor kid! Still, she acts like it's *my* fault."

Twisting her fingers in knots, Erica looked down. "I... I feel for her. It's sort of *my* fault that you're not around to keep the guys away. If I didn't..."

Jack stopped washing and hugged her. "*No*, Buttons! This is *not* your fault! It's just... just the way it is." Stroking her hair and comforting her, he decided that it would be a good time to tell her about his idea. "I was thinking, after you graduate next spring, what would you think about moving south to be close to your folks? I mean, I just want you to be happy, and I know being able to be near Dad would help."

"Oh, *Jack*!" she cried, wrapping her arms around his neck and pulling him into a deep and loving kiss. "That sounds *wonderful*!" She stopped and her smile vanished. "But we have another *year* until then. What'll you do in the mean time?"

"Well, I... I saved a lot of money from the sale of my mom's house. Between my pay and that, Mom's care and funeral only used about *half* of it, so I have a bit left. If I get a temp job around here I can add to it, so by the time we're ready to move south we can afford a pretty decent house. So long as Dad keeps paying your apartment rent now that we're married, that is. Otherwise, I'll have to make enough to cover expenses and the money we have saved will have to do for a down payment. Either way, I should get *some* kind of job around here."

"What were you thinking of doing?" she asked.

He returned to washing dishes as he answered. "Well, I know a lot about the dry-cleaning business from my old man. I figure I could get my foot in the door to start, then work up to management pretty quick. Good enough for *temp* work anyway. Once we get to SoCal, I'm thinking about opening my own place. '*Jack's Jiffy Dry-Clean*'! How's *that* sound?"

"*Corny!*" she laughed. "Still, I think you could do *anything* sometimes! If that's what makes you happy, then I'm right there *with* you!"

He finished scrubbing dishes and loaded them in the dishwasher. "Sometimes I feel like that, too! Usually after you *tell* me!" He added the soap and started the appliance. Turning to dry his hands on a dishtowel, he wrapped his arms around his wife. "So any *other* plans for the evening?"

She looked up at him coyly. "I just might have one or two!"

Three weeks later, Richard joined Jack in leaving the service, using the last of his Leave time to get out early. Carrying a box of Richard's clothes out the door to the old station wagon, Jack met Brooke coming in. The two looked at each other, almost daring the other to say something. When Brooke slowly looked away and cleared the doorway, Jack sighed and carried his load out without a word.

"You two *ever* gonna work this out?" Richard asked idly as he taped another box shut.

She shrugged as she looked for the next thing to take out. "Nothing to say, really."

"*Oh?* How come you keep staring *daggers* at him every time he so much as *breathes* in your presence, then?"

Brooke paced the room, her task forgotten. "You just don't *get* it, Rich! OK, so he fell in love and got married! Where does that leave *me*? I can't even

use the *head* without three grunts and a squid asking me out!" She moved over close to him so she could lower her voice. "I can't even *think* about going on a date! If I got caught, I don't have Jack around to cover for me!"

"That's not *Jack's* fault, Brooke. You *know* that." Richard pointed out. "I don't see why you're pissed at *him* for it."

"It's because... *Rrrg!* You just don't *get* it, do you!" she growled. "I know, I've had it easy the last five years. No one bugging me for a date because I was Jack's girl. Now it's ten times worse than the other W-Ms get though, 'cause all the guys know I'm 'straight', available, *supposedly* willing to date grunts, and some of them have *years* of pent up desire to act on it! I'm scared one of these thugs is gonna drag my ass in a closet and *rape* me 'cause I dated *Jack* and won't date *them*, Rich! What am I supposed to do!? I... I don't think I can finish my *cruise* like this! It would have been better if *Genius Jack* had never helped me in the *first* place!"

"Sorry to have been so much trouble." Jack snidely remarked as he came in for another box. "*OK*, Brooke. What *do* you want me to do? Divorce Erica so I can go back to 'dating' you for the next sixteen months? Huh? Tell me how to *fix* it! What do you *want* from me?"

Brooke stared at Jack as though she could burn him with her eyes. "*Nothing*, Jack! You've done *enough!* Why don't you run back home to your little girl and play *House* some more!"

"*Hey!*" Richard barked. "So you're pissed at my sister, too?"

She nearly cried in frustration. "*Rrrg!* You two are *impossible!*" She started for the doorway that Jack still stood in. "Make a hole, *maggot!*"

"*Gladly!*" Jack snapped as he stepped back out into the hallway. As Brooke stormed away, he saw Corporal Rogers intercept her in the hall.

"*Brooke!* Hey look, I was thinking, since you're *available* and all, if you'd like to..."

She turned on him with fire in her eyes, her voice a low growl so it wouldn't carry. "Let me break this down Bert and Ernie-style, *shit-brick!* Finish *that* sentence and they'll be collecting shards of your *nuts* from the floor for the next *month!* I'm no fucking *Barracks Bunny!* And even if I *was*, I'd sooner stand naked in the middle of *Mess Hall* at noon than go out with a broke-dick *maggot* like *you!* Do I make myself *clear!?*"

He escaped down the hall away from her and towards Jack as she went the other way. "I can see why you *dumped* her, Dunning! What a *bit...*"

Lunging, Jack pinned him to the opposite wall with his forearm against his throat, interrupting his insult. "Don't even say it Rogers, or I'll do to you what she *threatened!*" He leaned in and lowered his voice to a low growl. "Spread the word! *Leave! Her! Alone!*" Pausing he added, "She's *still* not available, *get* me?" As Corporal Rogers tried to struggle away, Jack leaned harder, threatening to break the other Marine's neck.

Richard pulled Jack off the hapless Marine. "Back off! You're on Terminal Leave, so don't screw it up!" Turning to Jack's victim, he hooked a thumb over his shoulder. "*Beat* it, Rogers!" Looking back to Jack, he ran his fingers through his hair and exhaled heavily. "And *you*, ya' double-digit midget! Help me get this stuff out of here, will ya'?"

Calming himself from his rage, Jack nodded. "Alright, Rich. I'll *behave.*"

Between the two of them, they managed to pack out Richard's things by the end of the day. Getting ready to leave for the last time, Richard saw Brooke approaching. Nodding to her, he got Jack's attention. "We have company."

Brooke walked up to her two best friends almost shyly. "Listen, I wanted to say..." She paused and stopped next to the rear hatch of the old car, looking

at the two men who had been her best friends, but were about to get in and never return. "*Shit!*"

"*Really?*" Jack said with surprise. "*That's* your parting words for us?"

"*Jack!* You..." Brooke fumed before she couldn't help herself and began to laugh along with the two others. "I *hate* you!" she said jokingly.

Straightening up, having doubled over laughing at Brooke's reaction, Jack shook his head. "*Brooke!* You *know* you love me! Come here!" She walked over and they hugged, their laughter fading. "Just so you know, I straightened out Rogers and told him to spread the word that you're *still* off limits."

Brooke pulled back and looked at him with an astonished expression. "*Jack!* Won't that make people think..."

"Who gives a shit what these jarheads think!" he interrupted. "They wanna think we're having an affair? *Let 'em!* It's harmless and will keep you outta their scopes. *What?* You afraid you'll get hit with Article one-thirty-four? I'm *out*, and *Erica* isn't going to lodge a complaint!"

"*Jack,* if that gets back to Dad," Richard pointed out, "he'll kill you where you stand, on rumor *alone!*"

"It's a risk I'm willing to take, and I know Buttons will back me up on this!"

Erica stared at him. "You did *what?*"

"Look, I didn't actually *say* anything, honey!" Jack defended his actions. "I just *implied* it! It'll keep the guys off her back until she's out!"

She paced the living room floor almost yelling at him. "*Jack!* I don't want anyone thinking things like *that* about you! Why didn't you talk to me about it first?"

"Is that *it*?" he accused. "Or is it you'll be embarrassed if people think that your husband..."

"*Jack!*" she screamed at him. "I don't care what people think of *me*! I... I just couldn't stand it if someone like Daddy were to think... think so *badly* of you! It would make Mother look like she was right and break my *heart!*"

Looking at his wife, he saw the tears streaming down her face, melting his defenses. "Oh *God*, Erica! I... I'm sorry!" He closed to her and wrapped her in his arms. "Honestly, I didn't *plan* it. It... it just popped out of my mouth! I couldn't let that idiot badmouth her, and when I saw that my defending her could be taken to mean... well... I added just enough to put the idea in his head. I... I'm sorry, but I wouldn't take it back, even if I *could*. Brooke is one of my best friends. I just... I couldn't sit by and do *nothing* while she went through hell!"

Erica held him tightly, terrified. "I guess there's nothing to be done about it *now*. I'm just scared that your solution to Brooke's problem will backfire on us, somehow! I... I really hope it turns out for the best!"

The following Saturday Jack was out job hunting when Erica heard a knock at the door. Looking through the peephole, she opened up with a worried expression. "*Brooke?* Is everything alright?"

Her husband's best friend couldn't look at her. "Um... can I talk to Jack?"

She opened the door for her. "Come on in." The Marine walked into their living room as Erica explained. "Jack's not here, but you can stay until he gets back." She closed the door and watched Brooke start toward it again.

"No, I... I think I should go and try to talk to him later. I..."

"*Brooke!* It's alright! *Please?* How about a nice cup of coffee?" Erica smiled, trying to ease her discomfort.

Forcing a smile, she still couldn't look at Erica. "I... I suppose that would be alright." While Erica warmed up their drinks in the microwave, Brooke took a seat at their table. "Maybe I should just go until Jack gets back."

"*Really*, Brooke! It's *fine*! Whatever it is, I..." she said as she sat down at the table with her. "I don't want you to feel *uncomfortable* around us."

Brooke sighed. "It's just... well... Jack's been really easy to talk to about some things over the years, and I... I was hoping he could help me with... well... with a *problem*."

Hearing the microwave, Erica got back up to retrieve their drinks. "Well, you could talk to *me*. I know I'm not Jack, you and he have a *lot* more in common, but I'd like to think I know Jack pretty well. Maybe I can help!" She sat a warm cup of coffee in front of her guest and returned to the seat next to her. "*Try me!*"

Staring at the cup in front of her, Brooke shook her head and laughed lightly. "It's stupid, really! I... I'm just used to Jack being around to help me. Guess I'm gonna have to find a new normal." She looked at Erica and smiled. "I really *am* happy for you two, but also just a *tiny* bit jealous!"

"A *tiny* bit?" Erica retorted. "You look like I've *felt* for the last six years!"

"How's that?"

"*Pining!*" Erica replied empathetically. "Is there... um... someone *special*?"

Brooke pushed her cup around in a circle with the handle. "No, and... well... that's the *jealous* part! I see you and Jack, Rich and Heather, and... *ugh!* It just makes me think I'm never..."

"*Hold it!*" Erica interrupted. "Just stop right *there!* I *know* there's someone out there for you, Brooke! You just haven't *found* her yet!" She took another

drink before asking, "I mean, how long has it been since you even went on a date?"

Rolling her eyes, Brooke chuckled uneasily. "*Too* long! Not since last year! Um... November. God! What a disaster *that* turned out to be! But, it's... it's harder now that I can't fake-double with Jack."

"Can't Richie help?"

Brooke stuck her tongue out. "*Blech!* Sorry, I *love* your brother, but doubling with he and Heather is like swimming in a syrup vat! They're so damn cute and into each other it's like they aren't even *there* with you sometimes! Even when they are, it makes any date I have uncomfortable. It's so obvious they're gonna spend the rest of their lives together, it makes them start thinking the same thing about *me!* That's dangerous territory!"

"Don't you *want* a long term relationship?"

"Of *course!*" Brooke said defensively. "But it's kind of a turn-off for a first date! Besides, you start talking long-term commitments with a *lesbian* and you might get them showing up the next day at your house with a *U-Haul!*"

The two laughed together for a bit before Erica asked, "So, what was it you wanted to talk to Jack about?"

Smiling embarrassedly, Brooke looked into her cup. "Um... well, I was kinda hoping he would... um... take me out? Running as my wingman? That way if I bump into anyone from the base I can just say I was out with him and not raise any ticklish questions."

Pondering Brooke's situation, and wanting to get closer to the woman that helped her get Jack, Erica shrugged. "Well, I suppose it would be alright with me, but what would you think about going out with the *both* of us? I swear, I wouldn't be *too* much of a drag!"

"I don't think that would work." Brooke said shaking her head. "I mean, if I was out with the *both* of you..." She stopped and reconsidered her objections. "Actually, come to think of it, I don't see why it couldn't work!" She looked up at Erica, concerned that she didn't trust her with Jack alone. "I hope you know that there's never been *anything* between Jack and me, and there never *could* be! I *love* Jack, but like a brother! You have *nothing* to worry about!" She was surprised when Erica began to laugh. "What's so funny?"

Unable to help herself, she tried to calm down and explain. "Oh, *Brooke!* It's just... I tried to see you and Jack being romantic in any way and... Oh *God*, no! It was almost *comical!* Honestly, I have *no* idea how you've pulled off being a couple for so long!"

They were still laughing together when Jack came in the front door. "Well *this* doesn't bode well! *You* two? Laughing and conspiring while I'm out there slaving to get a job?" He looked at Brooke. "You're not trying to take my Buttons to the *dark* side are you?"

Erica rose and hugged him, still laughing. "*No*, love! Just you and I taking her out tonight for some fun and looking for a date! Nothing to worry about!"

"So what? You need *two* wingmen again?" Jack half smiled as he sat down at the table. "Now that Rich is living up the whole 'unwed couple' bit, you need to horn in on *my* Saturday nights?"

"*Hey!* I was just gonna ask you to fly CAS for me like you used to, but she insisted!" Brooke said defensively.

Coming up behind him, Erica wrapped her arms around his chest. "Don't worry, love! It'll be *fun!*"

Ordering three more drinks at the bar, Jack stood and waited uncomfortably. The bartender gave him a dirty look as he took the drinks and dropped a ten on the counter. "Keep the rest for the wonderful service." he quipped.

Taking their drinks back to their table, he rejoined Brooke and his wife. "Ya' know, I get the distinct impression that the bartender might have spit in my drink."

Shaking her head, Erica took a sip. "She's just jealous that you're with *us!*"

Sitting back in her chair, Brooke stirred her drink absently. "I'm starting to think going out with you is part of my *problem*, Jack! Heck, *Erica's* gotten hit on more times than I have tonight! Maybe I'd do better if she and I left you at home!"

Blushing, his wife shook her head again. "I think that last girl really wanted to ask *you* to dance, but she chickened out at the last second and asked 'the ugly friend' instead!"

"You take that back!" Jack almost barked. "No bad-mouthing my Buttons!" He took another drink before leaning over to Brooke. "Hey. End of the bar. The tall blonde with the cropped hair? I think she was just eyeing you."

Glancing over at where Jack had indicated, she shook her head subtly. "No, and if she *was* it was to shoot me a dirty look. I'm not her type. She's the type that thinks that you're not a *real* lesbian unless you look like a *man*."

"How can you possibly know that from *here?*" Jack asked in disbelief.

"The same way you can tell when..." She paused and looked at the couple sitting with her. "Oh, wait. I forgot who I was *talking* to. Mister Oblivious who couldn't figure out that his wife was in love with him for over a *decade!* Never mind. You wouldn't understand. Suffice it to say I can just *tell!*"

Chapter 14 - Everything Changes

That established the pattern. Jack and Erica would go out with me when I had Liberty and I'd trawl for Ms. Right. Never really got anywhere, but the three of us sure had fun *trying*! We got together with Rich and Heather a few times for dinner, but it was becoming clear that the guys started getting too busy with their own things to spend any real time together.

Jack got a job managing a dry-cleaners in Palo Alto, meanwhile Rich was busy finishing his degree. With Heather and Rich graduating shortly after he and Jack were officially shifted to the Reserves, a full year ahead of Erica's graduation and sixteen months before the end of my cruise, we all knew it meant big changes were coming in our lives. Rich had talked about taking an office job somewhere in LA so he could be close to Jack, Erica, and his parents, but he never got into any details. I guess he was just stalling.

I remember the last dinner we had all together that summer. It was at Heather and Rich's apartment because it was bigger. I'm pretty sure Jack knew what was coming, but it didn't make it any easier to take.

Richard was hiding in the kitchen cooking when Heather came in to check on him. "Everything alright, Richard dear?" she asked.

"*Sure!* The roast is almost done!" he answered with a false smile. "We can sit down soon."

"*Richard.*" Heather intoned knowingly. "You have been in here for over an *hour*. Are you avoiding Jack?"

He sighed, letting his head hang. "Yeah, *kinda*. I... I just didn't want to ruin dinner is all. I know Jack's going to take it *hard*."

"You're going to *have* to tell him sooner or later, and we're running out of *time*, Richard!" she told him. Taking his hands in hers, she smiled at him. "It's what we *both* want and Jack *loves* you! You'll see! He'll be *fine*!"

"I've been watching Jack's back so long it's hard to *stop*." Richard laughed. "I guess he was always right. I *do* need him!"

She wrapped her arms around him and hugged him gently. "I *know*, dear. I *know* you do."

They came out into the living room several minutes later, Richard carrying the roast. "Chow time!" he called to the three.

Jack intercepted him before he even made it to the table. "Good! I was about to start gnawing on your *table* leg, Rich!"

"Hands off!" Richard shouted as he tried to hold the tray out of Jack's reach. "What? You can't wait until we sit *down*?"

"I might *faint*!" Jack rolled his eyes and staggered back. "*Food*!" he dragged out the word like a starving man.

While the girls laughed at his antics, Richard shook his head and put down the roast. Once they'd all started eating, the conversation trailed off.

Jack couldn't help but notice that Richard was continually looking at Heather expectantly, as though waiting for her to say something. "OK. Rich, you're about as subtle as a brick to the side of the *head*. What's going on?"

Putting his fork down, Richard sighed and looked at his oldest friend. "Well, we were going to wait until after dinner to tell you three, but I guess there's no use putting it off." He looked over at Heather who nodded and smiled at him encouragingly. Looking to the others, he let it out in one breath. "I've been offered a job, but it's not in LA. It's in Concord... *New Hampshire*."

Silence cut through the room as Erica lightly gasped. Finally, Jack smiled at him. "Congratulations, Rich. I uh... I assume you *accepted* it. Otherwise we're all in shock for *nothing* and this was a pretty terrible joke!"

"I *did*." he replied seriously. "It... uh... I start next week. Heather and I'll be moving to a place in Concord by the end of this week. We'll be looking to *buy* a place pretty soon, though." He resumed eating as he finished talking.

"What about *LA*?" Erica almost cried. "I... I thought you were going to..." Her voice faltered as she worked on keeping her tears from spilling out.

"I have some news, too!" Heather offered cheerily. "I got a position interning as a psychotherapist with a medical group not far from Richard's new job!" She looked across the table at Richard's stricken sister. "It... it really is a good opportunity, for us *both*. We were worried that we might end up with jobs that split us up."

"Well, we can't let *that* happen!" Jack broke the somber mood. "After all the work I put in getting you two together? So when's the *wedding*?"

"*Jack!*" Erica laughed as she wiped a tear away, the other three chuckling and giggling as well. "You *goofball!* It is a good question, though. I can *assume* you're going to have one *eventually*, right Richie?"

"Well, we were planning on getting settled in first and then plan a big thing for the fall, say around Thanksgiving? That way Brooke can build up a long enough Leave." He looked over at the only person yet to comment.

Brooke set her glass of wine down, trying to steady her nerves. "That's *nice* of you two, but you shouldn't have to wait on account of *me*."

"But we *have* to, Brooke!" Heather explained. "I *can't* get married without my Maid of Honor!"

"Who? *Me?*" Brooke looked at her in shock.

"Well, it's your *turn!*" Erica commented. "Then it'll be *my* turn when *you* get married!"

"Yeah, *right!*" Brooke laughed. "Figure some way to pull *that* off!"

Taking a drink before answering, Erica looked at her seriously. "Well, even if you can't make it *legal*, you can still have a wedding *ceremony*, right? We'll do it, even if I have to get Jack *ordained!*"

"*Woah!*" Jack nearly choked as he heard his wife. "You want me to do *what* now? Try it and I don't think anyone would be able to stop *laughing* long enough to say '*I do!*'"

Finishing dinner as they talked, Richard could see that Jack was putting up a front. It was painful to see his best and oldest friend hurting as bad as he was, but in the end it was inevitable. They had both known for some time that life would push them in different directions, but now that it was here, Richard couldn't help but feel like he was abandoning Jack, *and* Erica.

"So, we'll keep in touch and set up the plans for the wedding while you two get settled in." Jack went over everything. "Then in November when Brooke arranges her Leave, we'll be all set for the wedding on November thirtieth. That's the date, right?"

"Yup." Richard responded with a nod. "If it works for *you*, honey." he asked, turning to Heather.

"I don't care when or how, Richard! So long as we *get* there!" she said gaily, a smile covering her face that shone through the undertone of sadness that permeated their occasion.

Erica and Jack rose together. "We should be getting back to our place."

"And I have a long drive ahead." Brooke pointed out, grabbing her jacket and looking over at Jack. "See you guys on Saturday like usual?"

He nodded absently. "Yeah, sure." Turning to Richard he asked, "So, when do you two fly out?"

"Friday morning." he answered, one arm around Heather.

"So *soon*?" Erica asked disappointedly.

Her brother nodded glumly. "Our flight leaves at nine. The movers will have everything out by end of day Thursday though, only day they were available, so we're planning on staying in a hotel near the airport Thursday night." He laughed a little. "We'll have to call a cab to *get* there! The guy who bought my old wagon will be picking *that* up Thursday, too!"

"You sold *The Beast*?" Jack said in shock. "I wish I'd have known! I would have taken it off your hands!"

"Yeah, but the guy buying it paid me *money* for it!" Richard needled him.

"*What?* You think *I* don't have anything?" he replied with mock hurt. "I'll have you know I've got forty *grand* saved for the house Erica and I are buying in Newport Beach!"

"You'll need every *penny* of it!" Richard replied.

Erica shook her head. "No *way* you two are going to take a cab and sleep in a *hotel* on your last night in town! Don't think you're getting out of it, either! You two are staying at *our* place Thursday night and *we're* driving you to the airport on Friday!"

"Oh, *Erica!*" Heather intoned as she shook her head. "We can't put you out like that! Besides, don't you two have work and classes Friday?"

"I can get the first few hours off." Jack answered as he looked at Erica.

"And I haven't missed *any* classes this semester. I think I deserve *one* day of hooky! I just couldn't *imagine* not being there to see you two off!"

"Well, *I* can't be there!" Brooke shook her head. "Unless I come up with the most fabulous excuse in the history of excuses, I'll be in the shop all day!" Pushing past Jack and Erica, she gave Heather a hug. "I'm gonna *miss* you two! You take care of Rich for us, girl!"

Returning the hug, Heather nodded and choked back a tear. "I will, Brooke dear!" With a mirthful tone, she added, "I'm looking forward to seeing you this fall!"

The Marine slowly stood back and looked at Heather in shock. "Oh, *God!* You're gonna make me wear... a *dress!* *Aren't* you!?"

Nodding, Heather smiled wickedly. "Why of *course!* It goes with the *job* description, dear!"

Seeing Brooke turn to her pleadingly, Erica shook her head slowly. "Not a *chance!* You're up!"

Jack half-smiled when Brooke looked toward him, desperate for an escape. "Don't look at *me*, Brooke! I'd look *terrible* in a dress!"

"How do *you* know? *Weirdo!*" she retorted. "I bet you have nicer legs than I do!"

Getting a laugh and trying to change the subject, hoping to talk Heather out of it sometime before November, she turned and hugged Richard in a tight bear hug. "You take care too, jarhead! Stay clean!" As she pulled back, she flung her jacket over her shoulder and waved at the four as she headed for the stairs. "Catch you all later!"

"We *do* really need to get going." Erica apologized. Wrapping her brother in a warm embrace, she leaned her head on his shoulder. "We'll see you on Thursday, alright?"

Giving Heather a friendly one-arm hug, Jack smiled at her wryly. "See if I ever trust *you* again! First you toss me over for *this* chump, then you drag him two thousand miles away! I guess I can see why. Guess you *need* that distance to not run back to *me*! What *is* this power I have over the ladies?"

"It's called BO!" Richard replied to his rhetorical question. "New Hampshire *might* be far enough that we won't smell you!" Grabbing his best friend in a firm hug, he slapped Jack's back. "We'll see you Thursday."

Pulling back and surreptitiously wiping his eyes, Jack nodded and looked away. "If you're lucky!" As he and Erica made their way to the stairwell, he managed to maintain his half-grin until their door closed.

Thursday evening, Jack opened the front door to his and Erica's apartment after picking up Richard and Heather at their vacated apartment. "*Entrez-vous!*" he shouted, carrying in Richard's suitcase. "We just cleaned up the place, so the whips and leather harnesses are tucked away! Make yourselves at home! Well, for tonight anyway, you *traitors!*"

"*Traitors!?*" Richard declared as he put his carry-on bag down by the door. "Why? Just because we worked hard and found *jobs*? You make it sound like we're skipping the country!"

"You might as *well* be!" Jack shot back as he turned on the living room light. "*New Hampshire!* What's in New Hampshire, anyway? *Snow?* Didn't you get enough of that stuff back in *Pittsburgh*, Rich?"

"Well, for starters there's my family home!" Heather noted as she came in following Erica. "It really is a fine place. You'll see it when you come out for the wedding!"

"Wait a minute!" Jack said stopping to turn back. "You have a *house* there? Why in the heck are you getting an *apartment* then? What, do you need a summer home and winter home? What're you, *birds*?"

"No!" Heather laughed. "The house is in central New Hampshire! We'll be working in Concord, twenty miles away. I was thinking of just *selling* it, but until Richard and I have a place of our own, I don't have anywhere to put the family heirlooms, so we'll just hang on to it until we do."

"*Oh!*" Jack sniffed as he raised his voice an octave. "The family *heirlooms*? My, what *was* I thinking!" Dropping his tone back to normal, he scoffed and waved her off dismissively. "*Bah!* Twenty miles! You think twenty miles is too far to drive to work to save on renting an apartment? Just how good do these jobs pay? Might think of charging you a night's *rent!*"

"Don't even joke about it!" Erica chided him. "My brother is welcome in my home, free of charge, anytime!"

"*Great!*" Jack sighed. "He's got brother-in-law Roger privileges!" he joked, referencing a running gag from the *Burns and Allen* TV show. "Just don't be coming over all the time to raid the fridge and gank my stuff, Rich!"

"I'll try not to make it a habit, Jack! The airfare puts a damper on the profit margin, anyway!" He carried his and Heather's suitcases into the spare room. "I've been meaning to ask, sis. Why'd you rent a two bed apartment when you moved out here?"

"I used to have a roommate." she answered. "A girl that went to school with me. She flaked on me after two months. Never even came back for her share of the deposit! I guess it's fair. I never got her last month's share of *rent!*"

Coming back out, he leaned on the wall by the bedroom door. "So Dad has been footing the whole bill ever since? *Our* father?"

Erica smiled as she headed to the kitchen. "Well, at least he loves *one* of us!"

"Ooh! *Ouch!*" he laughed as he and Heather moved to the sofa. "So Jack, you're living off my old man now?"

"He wouldn't take '*I suppose we shouldn't*' for an answer!" Jack answered as he followed Erica into the kitchen. "Make yourselves at home. Dinner'll be in about half an hour. Feel free to use the Head to get clean!"

Enjoying their final meal together before going their separate ways, Jack kept the mood up by telling embarrassing stories that he hadn't gotten around to telling Heather yet about their lives back in Pittsburgh.

"So *anyway*," Jack said between laughs, "I'm banging on the door, saying we need to get moving, and he flings the door open, wearing nothing but a sheet, tells me to come back in ten minutes, and slams the door in my face! So *I* yell at him..."

"If you're done *that* quick, you really should see a doctor about it!" Richard said along with him as he shook his head in shame. "*God*, Jack! You're *never* gonna let me live that down, are you? It's your fault anyway! Dragging me to Doug's Dad's place! At *nineteen!* You *are* a bad influence on me!"

Fisting him in the ribs gently, Heather looked at him in mock anger. "Makes me wonder about poor Erica! What stories *she* doesn't know about Jack!"

"*Ah!* I got no stories like that!" Jack almost blushed. "Never could get a girl to take me serious! Not that I didn't *look!*"

"*Ugh!*" Erica groaned. "I do *not* want to know!"

Finishing the casserole as Jack kept them entertained, the two couples split into their separate rooms that evening, finally getting to bed by eleven. The next morning was a flurry of activity. Re-packing after laundering Richard

and Heather's clothes from the previous day, Jack saw to it they were ready and at the airport by eight-fifteen.

After the four went through the lax security, Jack and Erica walked the two to their gate, still laughing and trying to keep their feelings at bay until the last minute. When the call came announcing the boarding of their flight, their moods shifted; the fun and laughter finally giving way to the seriousness of their parting. They got up and started heading toward the gate slowly, none wanting their years together to finally come to an end.

Richard wrapped his arms around his sister as she started to sob. "I'll miss you, kiddo! Seems like just yesterday we were doing this out in front of the house in Pittsburgh!"

"I... I *know*!" she cried. Wiping her eyes as she stepped back, she shook her head. "Seems like we're *always* saying goodbye!"

"It won't be long until November!" he pointed out. "I can't *wait* to see you!"

Nodding, Erica wiped her eyes again before hugging him once more, this time more fiercely. "*November*! You take care, Richie!"

Meanwhile, Jack and Heather hugged almost as tightly.

"Jack, I... I don't ever think I'll *ever* be able to tell you just how wonderful a man you are!" Heather intoned, keeping her emotions in check. "I owe you for the love of my life! If you ever need *anything*, you need only ask! You and your family will *always* have a place in our home!"

Sighing at what might have been, but glad of how things had turned out, Jack shook his head with a smile. "I *still* don't know what you see in that muscle-headed brother-in-law of mine, but I'm glad you make each other happy! I'm sure gonna miss you two! Who *else* can I bum rides off of?"

Heather laughed as they separated. "I *love* you, Jack! I really *do*!"

"So dump this creep and run off with me!" he joked, only to have Erica slap him in the arm. "*Ouch!* I was only kidding, love!"

"Not *even* funny!" she growled at him as they switched places. Hugging her future sister-in-law, Erica almost started crying all over again. "You have a good flight!" she sniffed as she tried not to cry. "Call us when you get in?"

"We will!" Heather promised. "And you take good care of *Jack!* He's going to need you more now than he'll ever admit."

"I know." Erica nodded as they separated. "I'll take care of him, and *you* keep Richie out of trouble!"

"I think that will be easier without *Jack* around!" she stated with a feigned serious tone and a faint smile on her face, making Erica laugh.

While his wife and Heather hugged and talked, Jack stuck his hand out to Richard. "Well, figures! After all this time you're finally getting *rid* of me! I *knew* you were just a fair-weather friend!"

Grabbing Jack's hand, Richard yanked him into a hug. "*Jerk!*" he said as they slapped each other on the back. Feeling the tears edge into the corners of his eyes, he shook off the feeling and laughed. "You always told me I needed *you!* Now look at who needs who!"

Hugging him back, Jack suddenly felt the same as the day Wendy broke his heart. "You *still* need me, muscle-head!" He paused a moment before adding in almost a whisper, "And I *always* needed you, Rich!" Pulling apart before he started to actually cry, he stepped back and wiped his eyes. "Aww! Now look what you've gone and done, Rich! You've made me get all *misty!*"

"*Softy!*" he needled his friend as he pushed on Jack's shoulder.

"*Jock!*" Jack shot back with a shove.

"*Dork!*" Richard fisted him in the ribs.

"*Jarhead!*" he countered with a jab toward Richard's gut.

"*Leatherneck!*" he joked as he grabbed Jack's fist and pulled him into another quick hug. "Love you, man!"

"You *too*, Rich!" Jack said before stepping back again and putting an arm around Erica, her arms wrapping around his waist.

Mimicking the other two, one arm around Heather and backing toward the gate, Richard looked sadly at his best friend and his sister. "Take good care of Brooke, Jack. Tell her we'll see her in November!" Right before turning to the boarding ramp, he tossed a sloppy salute to Jack. "Catch you 'round Jack! Try to keep out of trouble! I might not be *around* to get you *out* of it next time!"

After Jack and Erica watched them board their flight, they stayed until the plane pulled away from the terminal, holding each other as Jack kept his tears at bay through strict discipline while Erica freely cried for them both.

"It's alright." Jack consoled her as they turned to leave the concourse. "The wedding in November will be here sooner than you think!"

"I *know!*" Erica said, trying to dry her tears. "I just miss them *already!*" She looked at Jack's stoic countenance. "And you don't fool *me*, mister! I know *you* miss them already, *too!*"

"Yeah, I do." he sighed as they walked through the airport and back to their car. Letting the silence speak for him, the two walked out together feeling the sorrow of the end of one part of their lives wrap all around them like a blanket, threatening to smother them. After Jack started the car and pulled

out of the parking lot, he looked over at his wife and half-smiled. "Of course, you know what *this* means, don't you?"

Looking over at him, Erica shook her head after wiping away her tears again. "What, *what* means?" she asked innocently.

"Well, with Rich and Heather getting married soon, we have a job to do!" he explained. "We need to get Brooke hooked up by November so she doesn't have to go stag to the wedding!"

She furrowed her brow at him. "Why is it so important *now*?"

"You know what they say about the Maid of Honor and Best Man! We need to get her hooked-up so she doesn't get any ideas about me!"

Erica burst out laughing at the ridiculous thought of Jack and Brooke. "I... I think I can only see it if *you're* the Maid of Honor!" she laughed.

"Oh, Ha! *Ha!* Very funny! Sometimes I may *feel* like Jack Lemon, but I am *not* pulling a '*Some Like it Hot!*' Just *forget* it!"

By the time they pulled up to Jack's work, Erica was feeling a little better about things. Jack had continued to clown around until he pulled to a stop. "OK, your man needs to go and win some bread." he said before he leaned over and kissed her quickly. "And *you* need to get to class! I'll see you after work. Pick me up about five?"

She nodded and smiled. "You *always* know how to make me happy, Jack! I *love* you!" She leaned over and kissed him much more deeply before he got out and closed his door. Sliding over to get behind the wheel, she waved at Jack as he walked around the car and into work almost two hours late. As she pulled away from the curb, she sighed; her vaguely sad smile not wanting to leave her lips.

Weeks passed while the trio were getting used to Richard and Heather not being around. They settled into a comfortable pattern. Brooke would spend Liberty at their place, more often than not sleeping in the guest bedroom if they had a little too much fun. She also wasn't getting hit on at the base as often; Jack's warning having spread. It was nearly forgotten by August, so Brooke was taken by complete surprise when she was asked to go see her commanding officer one Friday afternoon.

Jack half-heard the pounding on their door through his sleepiness. Looking over at the clock, he stumbled out of bed. "Who in God's name could *that* be at nearly midnight?" he asked nobody.

"As if you didn't *know*." Erica yawned. "I bet you anything it's *Brooke*." She looked at the clock and tried to think. "She's not supposed to be here until tomorrow afternoon, though."

Opening the door in nothing but boxers, Jack strained his eyes at his intruder. "Brooke? It's *late*! Did they kick everyone out of The Bricks already?"

Ignoring his near nakedness and bad joke about the pending closure of the naval base, she pushed into his apartment and quickly sat on his couch. "I... I needed to talk to you right away!" she said, her voice obviously shaken.

"Well they have these things called *phones* you know!" Jack quipped as he closed the door and walked up to her. "You want anything? Coffee? Tea? *Hard liquor*? You look like you've seen a *ghost*!"

"I couldn't use a base phone, Jack!" She looked up at him. "I'm in *trouble*!"

Sitting next to her, he shook his head to clear the cobwebs. "Well, whoever she is, we'll get a shotgun and make an honest woman of you!"

"*Jack!*" she yelled. "Be *serious*! I got called in for *Office Hours* today!"

Suddenly wide-awake and serious, he leaned forward. "What's the beef?"

"Someone anonymously filed a *complaint*, Jack! Article *one-thirty-four*!"

Jack furrowed his brow. "Adultery? *Seriously*? Brooke! They can't make it stick! They'd have to have photos or a confession that say we did something that I'm damn sure we've never done or confessed to! Besides, they'd never even *bother* unle..." He looked at her seriously. "What're the *other* charges?"

"Cohabitation." she replied. "He... or whoever it is, *knows* I've stayed here a bunch of times! The CO said that the person filing the complaint threatened that unless something is done about it, they'll take the story to the *papers*! That sets the second and third points of evidence, Jack!"

"They can't prove the *first* though, Brooke!" he said, standing and pacing the room. "Without that, they can't make *anything* stick! They can search this apartment top to bottom and they're not going to find *anything* of yours!"

Shaking her head, she closed her eyes. "Sit down, Jack! You're making me more nervous!" When he'd done so, she let out a worried breath. "The CO told me he *knows* they can't prove anything, but the rumor mill is so full of talk about us two seeing each other behind Erica's back that he ordered me to stop seeing you and accept counseling because it was hurting moral! If I violate *that*, or refuse, they can Court Martial me for defying orders!"

"What can we do to help?" Erica asked as she came into the room.

Jack waved her away. "It's *fine*, honey. I just need to think for a minute."

Refusing to accept his dismissal, Erica persisted. "I don't know much about the military, but... I mean, can't I like, sign an affidavit or something saying that every time you stayed here that I was here and you two were nowhere *near* each other? I mean, they can't stop you two from being friends based on a *rumor*, can they?"

"That might work, Brooke." he pointed out, suddenly hopeful. "If we go to the Old Man and tell him how it is, that we never actually dated and I was just helping you keep the guys away, he'll have to drop it. He *knows* he can't ask you *why* you didn't want to date any guys!"

Sighing, Brooke nodded. "Yeah, but it also means that the ruse is finished. I'll have to do my last thirteen months without you keeping the flies off me! Everyone who's been laying low will be right back on me again!"

"Can't do anything about that now, Brooke." he pointed out. "I'll call Monday morning. It *has* to be done." Jack stood and headed for the door before he stopped. "Well, there's one alternative."

"*What?*" Brooke looked at him hopefully.

"You can follow orders." he stated simply. "Take the counseling and stop coming over."

"*Jack!*" Erica cried. "She can't *do* that! You're her best friend!"

Shaking her head, Brooke looked at Jack resignedly. "Besides, it wouldn't make any difference. If I give in, it'll go on my record and the guys will be on me *anyway*. No, she's right, Jack. My only hope now is you two."

He nodded in acceptance and resumed his walk to the door. "In the mean time, you need to get *out* of here. Go back to The Bricks and tough it out 'till Monday."

Brooke walked over to the open door and hugged him as Erica looked on. "*Thank* you, Jack! You're the best friend *anyone* could ever have!"

Chapter 15 - Homecoming

True to his word, Jack called the CO first thing Monday and laid it out for him, that he and I had never had a relationship, that it was always a ruse so I wouldn't be pressured for dates, and Erica backed him up the whole way! He was skeptical, but when Erica nearly bit his head off at the accusation that Jack was cheating on her, that sold him. He dropped the whole deal, with no ticklish questions about *why*. Within hours, I heard that it had gotten around that Jack and I had been a big lie the whole time.

The funny thing is, it didn't get worse. In fact, I hardly ever got hit on again after that! Seems once they learned Jack and I had never been a couple, that I hadn't dated *anyone* for over five years, the trouser hounds lost interest. Oh sure, I got a few asks right afterwards, but all I had to say was 'no' and they wouldn't ask again. My rep went from '*she must be great in bed*' to '*she's frigid*' in two days. I was never so thankful for being unpopular!

So my Leave started the last week of November and, since I hadn't used any that year, I was able to take three full weeks. I decided I wanted to take a trip back home on the way out to Heather and Richard's place and spend a day to introduce my best friends to my folks.

Stepping out of the rental car they had driven from the airport, Jack looked around. "So this is your old man's place?" he asked. "*Nice.*"

Brooke looked at him suspiciously as she climbed out of the back seat. "OK, so what's the gag, then?"

"*What?* I mean it! It's *nice!*" Jack held his hands up defensively.

"Jack, you have *never* given a serious compliment in your *life!* So, what's *wrong* with it?" she barked.

Erica smiled as she got out. "*Nothing's* wrong, Brooke! I just told Jack that if he embarrassed you while we're here he'd be sleeping alone for the rest of our trip!" She closed her car door and arched her eyebrows at Brooke.

"Huh!" Brooke leaned on the door, closing it. "Well, I'll be damned! He *can* be serious!"

"Only when absolutely necessary." he corrected her. "Well, you're a better man than *I* am, Gunga Din! Lead the way!"

The trio coming up the walk, the door opened before they were even halfway up. "*Brooke*, darling!" her mother exclaimed as she ran down the walkway. Reaching her daughter, the older woman threw her arms around her. "We've missed you so much, baby!" Rocking her back and forth, she finally released her. "I'm sorry, dear! I didn't mean to *embarrass* you!" She wiped her damp eyes and looked at Jack and Erica. "I'm Carolyn Hathaway!" she said gaily, extending her hand to Erica.

"Erica Dunning! This is my husband, Jack!" she said with a smile. "It's a pleasure, Mrs. Hathaway!"

Looking at Jack, she smiled politely. "How do you do, Jack. Won't you all come in?" She led them into the house. "Mark! *Brooke's* home!" she shouted. "Please, make yourself at home! Brooke, dear? Why don't you sit and rest? I know it's a long way from San Francisco. *Mark!*"

"I'm coming! *Jeez*, woman! The girl's not *going* anywhere!" Brooke's father stepped into the living room from his den, a cane in his left hand.

Looking him over, Jack could instantly see the veteran inside the man. His pride was only tempered by the white hair that topped his head. While his clothes were common jeans and a polo shirt that wouldn't look out of place anywhere, Jack noticed that his shoes were polished black boots with not a scuff or smudge and his clothes were neatly pressed. He fought the almost

instinctual desire to salute; the man's baring screaming '*officer on deck*'. It wasn't until his eyes met his daughter and his face cracked a smile that Jack could finally see the father inside the veteran.

"*Brooke, sweetie!*" he exclaimed. Recovering quickly, his face once again became an emotionless mask. "*Ehem!* I see you're looking well. Would you *mind?*" He nodded toward Jack and Erica.

"*Oh! Sorry!*" Brooke apologized. "Dad? This is my best friend Jack and his wife Erica. *Jack?* This is my dad, Colonel Mark Hathaway!"

Extending his hand to Jack, he grimaced. "USMC, *Retired*, she should have added!" Noting Jack's sharp handshake, he smiled slightly. "You've got the look, but it's gone *slack*. How long you been Outside?"

"Five months, sir." Jack snapped out of habit. "It's an honor to meet you, sir. Your daughter is a *fine* Marine!"

"She would have made a finer *officer!*" he barked as he made his way into the room. "Damn waste, her piddle-farting with handheld radios, generators, and crap like that!"

Jack's habit of taking the heat off his friends was hard to break. "Oh, but she's the *best* at it! She once fixed a radio that *no one* could figure out what was wrong! Saved my bacon from our CO that thought I was skating!"

He only grunted in reply. "Still, she had the makings of a finer *officer!* Like myself and my father *before* me!"

"*Dad!*" Brooke almost whined. "We've been through this *countless* times! I wanted to serve *my* way! Not yours or grandpa's!"

"*Bah!*" he exclaimed, dismissively waving his free hand in her direction as he lowered himself into his easy chair. "I *get* it, girl! Still, don't *amount* to

much!" Relaxing back, he looked at Erica who looked pensive. "Don't worry yourself over me, girl. I'm just a grouchy ol' fart who's all bark! No teeth left to bite with!" he smiled at her as he finished.

Relaxing, Erica sighed in relief. "It is a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Hathaway! Brooke..."

"Call me Mark!" he barked. "I'm no '*Mister*' anymore!" He looked at Jack. "Same to you! And don't call me sir again, *neither*! I'm retired and I don't want you makin' me feel like I need to be ready to return a damn *salute*!"

Jack fought the comical urge to shout, '*Sir! Yes, sir!*' and snap a salute with every fiber of his being. Biting his tongue, he just smiled and nodded. "OK, Mark. You can call me Jack!"

The old man grunted and nodded. "You were stationed at The Barracks in Alameda too, I take it? How long were you in?"

"Since eighty-nine, s... so I did seven years in." he just managed to bite off calling him sir again.

Mark grinned, knowing he had almost caught Jack out. "Mmmm. So were you in the Gulf then, or were you some damn *box-kicker*?"

"No, I was deployed with the First MEF out of San Diego then. Six months in The Sandbox with my buddy Rich. He's who we're off to see get married to the girl he's been dating." Jack explained.

"*Mark!*" his wife shouted. "That's quite enough, grilling our guests! They're here with Brooke and she's home to *relax*, not talk *war* stories!" Turning to the three, she shifted to a kinder tone. "Would you all like lunch? I made egg salad sandwiches!"

"That sounds great, Mrs. Hathaway!" Jack smiled.

The five sat around Brooke's parents' dinner table eating lunch and talking, Jack noticing her father eyeing him and then his daughter as if looking for any sign that they had been more than just friends. Clearing his throat, Jack excused himself.

"I'm gonna go rest my eyelids on the couch a few. If that would be alright, Mrs. Hathaway?" he said as he started to stand.

"Oh, *please!* Call me Carol! And you go right ahead, young man! We girls have a lot of getting to know one another to do!"

Mark grunted as he got up as well. "Well, if this is turning into a hen party, I'll be dealing myself out!" He stopped as he passed Brooke and leaned in to kiss her cheek. "Enjoy your talk with your mother. We'll talk more later." He hobbled out of the dining room and into the living room just as Jack was stretching out on the couch. "*Shoes!*" he barked.

"*Oh!* Sorry, s... so sorry!" he caught himself. Kicking his shoes to the floor, he stretched out and closed his eyes.

Sitting in his easy chair next to the couch, the retired Marine groaned as he lowered himself down. "I don't know how you kids do it now-a-days, but I feel every year of my thirty in the Corps right now!"

Jack nodded, his eyes still closed. "I feel all seven of mine every time you try to trick me into calling you *sir*, Mark!"

Chuckling, Mark relaxed. "I uh... I wanted to ask you, boy. About *Brooke*. She *seeing* anybody?"

Jack half-smiled. "At the moment I would guess your wife and mine!"

"Don't be a such smartass, boy!" he growled. "You *know* what I mean! Is she *dating* anyone? Hell, even a *civilian* would be good news!"

Sighing, Jack shook his head. "Sorry to disappoint, but she hasn't dated any guys the entire time I've known her, but she told me the first day we met that she wasn't going to date so long as she was serving, so..."

Mark grunted again. "*Figures!* I taught her too good to love the Corps! Now she's so gung-ho I ain't gonna be a grandpa before I'm dead and gone!"

"Well, you never know!" Jack shrugged. "Maybe she'll meet someone at the wedding! Awfully romantic time, weddings! Make people want to jump the broom *themselves!*"

"*Jump the broom!*" Mark exclaimed. "Jay-zus, boy! You talk like *my* father!"

"Blame my parents!" he chuckled lightly. "They probably *were* your dad's age! I was a late surprise! Dad served in the Pacific Theater in forty-two."

"Marine?"

Jack nodded. "Got blinded by a naval gun and when his sight came back he couldn't see straight ahead; peripheral only. Oh, he could *work* alright, but you can't fire a rifle at a target you can't look directly at. He spent the rest of the war doing laundry for Marines that *could* shoot. So he did his part."

"Damn shame!" Mark lamented. Despite his initial impression, he'd begun to like his daughter's friend, deciding to have a little fun at his expense. "So what's wrong with my Brooke, huh? Why'd you go and marry that other girl instead of *her?*"

Looking over at the man sitting behind his head, Jack chuckled. "Because she didn't *want* me, Mark! I'll admit, I was interested, but once she made it clear I wasn't her type, I let it go. Besides, I *love* 'that other girl', *sir!*"

Grumbling that Jack wasn't more unsettled by his rude question, he shut up and Jack closed his eyes again.

Caroline Hathaway sipped her tea while her daughter talked about how she had set up Erica and Jack on their first 'date'. "So, you've been in love with Jack since you were a little girl? Oh, that's *such* a beautiful story! There's just something about an older man that makes a woman feel *loved*!"

Brooke looked at her mother and then at Erica to explain. "Dad is ten years older than Mom. They met when she was only twenty and he was just shy of *thirty*."

"*Oh!*" Erica exclaimed. "Well, Jack's less than four years older than me, but when you're ten, *every* boy above twelve is old!"

The three laughed before Brooke's mother turned to her daughter. "Dearest, haven't you met *anybody* that you like while you were serving? Oh, I don't mean you should marry a fellow serviceman like your *father*, but..." She let her words hang in the air like a dangling sword.

"*Mom!* I told you when I left for Boot! I'm *not* going to date while I'm in the service! I don't need the distraction!"

"*Nonsense!*" she chided. "It didn't distract *Erica's* young man!"

"You have no idea how much it *did* distract him, Mom!" she retorted. "Jack never made Corporal because he was too busy going after this Latino girl that wouldn't give him the time of day and missed his cutting score!"

"*Oh.*" she said, disappointed that Brooke had a legitimate comeback. "Well, you only have one year left and then... well... we'll see!"

Brooke sighed. "*Yes, Mom. We'll see!*"

Erica sat through the exchange uncomfortably. Trying to change the subject, she cleared her throat. "Brooke? Did you tell your mom when we get to New Hampshire you're going to be Heather's Maid of Honor at the wedding?"

"Really?" Caroline practically sang. "Oh, *Brooke!* Why didn't you *tell* me! Oh, sweetie! That's such an honor! You should be *proud* of it! This Heather must think *very* highly of you!"

While Brooke knew Erica was only trying to help by changing the subject, she groaned at what Erica had changed it to. "Oh, *Mom!*" She dropped her head onto the table with a loud thump. "This is why I didn't *say* anything! It's just a ceremony! All I do is stand there and get my picture taken after! It's not that big a *deal!*" She raised her head up and looked at her mother. "Don't *even* say it!"

"Mayb..." Caroline stopped herself. "Alright, Brooke. I won't." She grinned mischievously. "Who's the Best Man? Is he *single?*"

"Fortunately no, Mrs. Hathaway!" Erica giggled. "It's my husband, *Jack!*"

"*Oh.*" she replied disappointed. "Will there be many Groomsmen or Ushers?"

"You want me to hit up the *ring-bearer* for his phone number while I'm at it, Mom?" Brooke asked snidely. "God, you have a one-track mind!"

"None of *that*, Brooke!" her mother snapped. "You don't need to be *flippant* with me! I just *worry* is all! I want to see you happy!"

Brooke nearly lost her temper, but checked it at the last second. "I *am* happy, Mom! *Really!* Do I want to find someone to be happy *with?* Damn straight, I do! Who *doesn't!* But I'm not going to *force* it!"

Sighing, Caroline shook her head. "Alright! I'll let it *go!*" Looking at Erica, she lowered her tone. "I apologize if we embarrassed you. I didn't *mean* to."

"It's *fine*, Carol. Really!" Erica put the older woman at ease.

"So, tell me about the happy couple!" she said, changing the subject slightly.

"It's my brother Richard and his fiancée Heather." Erica explained. "They've been dating for just over two years and they finally set a date!"

"Your *brother* asked your husband to be his Best Man, but you're not her Matron of Honor?" she asked. "Isn't that a little *unusual*?"

"Heather's known Brooke longer than she's known me, Mrs. Hathaway." she explained further. "I didn't meet Heather and Brooke until late last year."

"*Oh!* I understand, now!" She shot a glance at her daughter. "You might have at least *written* to me and told me about friends so close to you, dear!"

Brooke just laid her head back down on the table with a satisfying thump.

After lunch, Brooke took Jack and Erica on a tour around where she spent the latter part of her youth, including her last high school and the first place she'd taken a girl on a secret date. She didn't actually have that much to show them, having only spent two years living there after her father retired, but it was gratifying to get out of the house and away from her parents for a while.

"I swear to God that woman can drive me to *drink!*" Brooke fumed.

"Why not just *tell* them?" Jack asked. "It'd save you a lot of headache!"

She looked at Jack as though he'd suggested she set her hair on fire. "Are you *nuts*, Jack! Tell my old man, mister original *Clean Marine*, that his daughter digs chicks? He'd turn me in *himself!* And Mom? God, she'd have a *stroke!* She's been harping on me to get married since I was *five!*"

"Now, now!" Jack admonished. "Let's not exaggerate! I'm willing to bet she didn't start *really* harping on you until you were at least *twelve!*"

"I'll take that action!" Brooke shot back. "For my fifth birthday, she got me a little girl's wedding dress and play wedding set!"

"It's normal for a five year old girl to want stuff like that for her birthday!" Jack countered. "Maybe she thought you'd *like* it!"

"I asked for a *football*!"

Erica couldn't hold it back anymore and started giggling hysterically.

"What do *you* think is so damn funny?" Brooke asked, still fuming.

"*S-sorry!* I... I can't *help* it, Brooke! Now I've got this image in my head of five-year-old you in a cute little girl's wedding dress playing *football*!" Her giggles grew into full belly laughs.

She tried to stay mad, but soon Brooke was smiling and then laughing along with her.

Shaking his head, Jack drove around aimlessly. "If you two hyenas are *quite* through, I think we should start heading back."

Walking back into her parents' living room once more, Brooke yelled out to them. "*Mom! Dad!* We're back! We brought ice cream!"

Caroline came out from the kitchen, smiling politely. "That's very thoughtful, dear. Here, I'll put it in the freezer until after supper."

Holding on to it to delay her from taking it for a moment, Brooke looked down. "Just a little peace offering, Mom. I'm sorry for earlier."

Smiling genuinely, she looked away embarrassedly. "It's *fine*, sweetie. I... I just... I worry! *That's* all!"

"I *know* Mom, and it's sweet really, but honestly, I'm *fine*! I'm happy! And *when...* not if... *when* I find someone that I can share that with, it'll be when it is *ready* to happen. Not a moment sooner. *OK?*"

Nodding in acceptance, her mother looked at her. "I know, baby. I'll... I'll try not to make an issue of it anymore, alright?" Looking at the three, she took a cleansing breath. "*Well!* We're having the best meatloaf in Oklahoma tonight! I assume you *can* stay for supper?"

Brooke nodded weakly. "Yeah, Mom. For dinner, then we're gonna have to go. Stopping off was supposed to be a just layover, but I managed to swing a later connecting flight so I could see you two. We got a ten o'clock flight to Detroit." Seeing the disappointment on her mother's face, Brooke smiled to try and turn it around. "We have the rest of today, though! Maybe after the wedding I can stop on the way back and stay a while. I have Leave time."

Looking up, her mother squared her shoulders. "Yes! We *do* have the rest of the day! Let's make the *most* of it!"

While the three were driving back to the airport, Jack looked over at Erica sitting in the passenger seat beside him, Brooke reading in the back seat with a book light. "Something on your mind, love?" he asked his wife.

"Just wondering what they'll say when Brooke *does* find someone." Erica mused. "I mean, it's obvious they love her very much, but... I... I just..."

"But?" Jack asked. Nodding knowingly, he grimaced. "But you know *your* mother loves you, and yet she barely *speaks* to you for who *you* married. I guess it's not just people like Brooke that have their families torn up because of who they love." He sighed and let just a moment pass before asking his question. "Any regrets?"

"*None!*" Erica said without hesitation as she looked over at him. "Not *one!* Not *ever!* Not for *anything!* I wouldn't care if the whole *world* hated me for loving you! I'd never regret a single moment of it! I *love* you!"

He smiled at her a moment before turning back to watch the road. "Ya' know, sometimes I feel bad that I came between you and your mom. Oh, I know she

can be a *pain* sometimes, but I know you still love her and she loves *you*." Pausing he sighed. "Unfortunately, she loves you *so* much she'd rather you be in a gilded, loveless cage where you'd want for nothing, except the one thing you always wanted."

Erica nodded. "My *Jack!*"

"My *Buttons!*" he returned.

"You two mind clapping a lid on that gunk?" Brooke sighed. "I don't want to get *car sick!*"

Waking in the dark to the phone ringing, Richard reached over and grabbed it mumbling, "Hargrave."

"*Rich!?* It's me! *Jack!*"

"*Jack?*" Richard pried his eyes open. "What *time* is it? Are you just leaving Detroit *now?*"

"No, we just landed at Boston-Manchester! We're *here*, buddy-boy!"

Richard sat straight up as Heather rolled over next to him and tried to cuddle. "*Jack!* I thought your flight was *delayed!* You weren't supposed to be here for another... um... What time *is* it?"

"Four in the morning!" Jack laughed. "Turned out the layover in Detroit was only delayed a few minutes, but we didn't have a chance to call and let you know! Don't sweat it, Rich! We'll snag a place to flop for what laughingly passes for the rest of the night!"

"*No!* I'll... I'll come get you, Jack!" He yawned in the middle of speaking. "Let me just... um... just let me..."

"Go back to sleep, Rich!" Jack ordered. "I just wanted to let you know so you weren't down at the airport at seven in the morning looking for us! We'll call when we're up and about and have you pick us up when you won't fall asleep behind the wheel!"

"Alright." he yawned. "See you tomorrow, Jack." he said groggily as he hung up and rolled over, already asleep before he finished settling in.

Later that afternoon, Richard pulled up in front of a motel near the airport. When he saw Jack turn around and flash his half-grin, Richard chuckled and almost leapt from his BMW before coming to a stop. "*Jack!*" Wrapping his best friend in a tight hug after months apart, the longest time since the day they'd met, he slowly released him and embraced Erica. "Missed you, kiddo!"

"Missed you, too!" she replied. "How's Heather?"

"Doing good!" he replied. "Busy, but happy!" Turning to Brooke, he clasped her hand and pulled her into a quick hug. "How've ya' been ya' Devil Dog ya'! Jack still keeping the hounds at bay for you?"

"Actually, he doesn't *need* to anymore!" Brooke half explained.

Richard turned to Jack. "*What?* You figure some angle to keep guys from seeing her as gorgeous?"

"Not *exactly*." Jack quickly explained what had happened after Richard left while they put their luggage in Richard's car. "So now they just ignore her! Since the word is out that she hasn't dated any guys in over six years, they don't *want* her anymore!" Closing the trunk, he leaned on it. "*Huh!* I guess women are right! Guys *are* stupid!"

Driving back home, he decided to hold off on catching up with them more until they were settled in so they wouldn't have to tell it all twice, once to him, and again to Heather. Instead, he talked about his and Heather's lives.

"She filed her Candidate for Licensure Agreement before we left Cali, and took the Clinical Mental Health Counselor Exam shortly after we got here. Since then it's been '*hurry up and wait*' while she interns with this Therapist's office she's working for. For now she's a glorified secretary, but as soon as her license is approved she can start work! Should be any day now!"

"Is she going to get any time off after the wedding?" Erica asked. "I would hope she won't be spending her Honeymoon at *work*!"

"Not *much*." Richard laughed. "She has two weeks off after the ceremony, but then she's going to have to work through our first Christmas."

"That's too bad!" his sister pouted. "I suppose it's for the best, though. At least she gets time off to Honeymoon with you first!"

Jack tapped him on the shoulder. "What about *you*, buddy-boy? How's your new box-kicker job working out?"

"It's not *box-kicking*!" Richard barked. "It's actually an interesting job. I'm a Senior Business Analyst with the company. The lowest one, but my VP's a Leatherneck too, so he likes me. I think I'll be moving up pretty quick! The money's nothing to sneeze at! Low six figures!"

"*Nice*!" Jack complimented. "So what's the downside?"

"I have to wear a suit. That and everyone there thinks that because I was in the Corps that I must have the IQ and temperament of a rabid wolverine, so they either talk to me like I'm stupid or about to snap their *neck*!"

"I dunno, Rich. You sometimes struck me as the kinda guy who might end up in a news story with the words, '*...finally turning the gun on himself*'!"

The four chatted for a while until Richard pulled up into Heather's driveway. "This is it!" Richard stated proudly after a half-hour drive.

Jack looked out the window and had to do a double take. "Wait a minute! I thought you guys said you were moving to an apartment?" Jack looked out the window again, his brain not accepting what his eyes were seeing.

"Well..." Richard scratched his neck. "After we got here, I found out that the company I came to work for is actually headquartered in Keene, not Concord where Heather works. Only the final interview was in Concord. There was a miscommunication. Since Heather's home is in Hillsboro, about halfway between the two, we decided for now to just set up in her old home. It's a twenty mile commute for us, in opposite directions, but it could be worse!"

"Oh, *yeah!*" Jack quipped as he got out and looked at the place his best friend was living. "Twenty miles! I would *definitely* say it could have been worse! What a *hardship* for two of the upper crust!"

"At least it's twenty miles of relatively uncrowded highway." he pointed out as he walked around the car. "Nothing like the Bay Area or Pittsburgh! Even on a *bad* day I can get to work in under forty minutes, and it's forty minutes of gorgeous driving! Come on in!"

The traveling trio surveyed the 'old home' Heather had talked about. It was less a home and more a sprawling mansion. Three stories tall, the house was magnificent. Painted in stately white, the house looked to be of eighteenth century design with an expansive semicircular driveway in front that led to a six-car garage. The house proper looked like six buildings connected to one another with an old-fashioned barn further off to the north.

As Richard walked to the stone pathway that led up to the main entryway, he turned around to see the three guests standing there stunned. "What's the matter?" he asked concernedly. "Come on in!" Reaching the front door, his guests finally following, it opened and an elderly man greeted him.

"Welcome home, Master Richard!" he rasped happily. "Shall I see to your guests' luggage?"

Nodding, Richard greeted him. "That would be great! *Thanks, Gregory!*" Waving the three in, he almost glowed with pride. "Well? What do you think? Pretty *nice*, eh?"

Jack looked around the room he'd entered; the high vaulted ceilings making it feel open and homey, and yet still opulent. "*No, Rich. Your parents' place back in Pittsburgh was 'pretty nice'. This is un-frigging-believable! You live here? This isn't, like, a museum exhibit or National Historic Treasure meant to preserve eighteenth century architecture? It's a house?*"

"*Yes!*" Heather said politely but cheerfully as she entered from an adjacent room. "*It's a house, Jack! It's my house! Welcome to Moore Estates!*"

Chapter 16 - Wedding Bell Blues

Heather wasn't kidding or bragging, either. Five huge bedrooms, *seven* full baths, a great room, a formal dining room, and an adjacent kitchen, all with flawless pinewood floors that shined with *two centuries* of care and attention. In the wings off the main building was the library, den, music room, and what Heather called the 'Meeting Room'. It had marble floors and it's own huge fireplace, in addition to the one in the great room.

The bedrooms were all on the second and third floors, each with their own private bath, with two bathrooms on the main floor. The attached garage had chauffeur's quarters, as well as a machine shop... and that was just the *house*!

The property itself was almost beyond description. Forty-five acres with a private pond, apple orchard, woods, walkways, green space, equestrian trails, and, oh yes, lets not forget the 'barn'! The *three-story* barn with heated stalls and tack room and its own laundry! The second floor was a home for stable workers. Kitchen, living area, bathroom, with the three bedrooms on the third floor, and all of it surrounded by forestlands and fields that were donated to the state as a preserve. It was truly magnificent!

When we first arrived, I thought Heather was trying to show off, but she was just as warm and friendly as she'd always been. She was just very proud of her family home.

Brooke was speechless when Heather showed her to her room. It wasn't as large as the one she'd seen following Jack and Erica to the room Heather had given them, but it was more opulent than any she'd ever seen, let alone been allowed to sleep in. Centuries-old furniture decorated the room perfectly; an oak four poster bed with matching nightstands, a dresser, two wardrobes, and a vanity graced the room with functional style. On the far wall, French doors opened onto a balcony that connected all the bedrooms on the second floor.

"Heather! I... I can't stay *here!*" Brooke stammered.

Concerned, she walked up to her Maid of Honor. "Why *not?* I thought you'd like it!" She looked around the room wistfully. "This used to be my room, ever since I was a little girl. I... When Richard and I came home, I finally moved into my parents' bedroom." A note of sadness tainted her otherwise loving description of her home.

"I *do* like it!" Brooke exclaimed apologetically. "It's just I like it *too* much! I... I'd be afraid I'd ruin the floors with my sweaty feet!"

Laughing, Heather placed a hand on her shoulder. "It's *fine*, Brooke! Like I said, I grew up in this room! There's nothing *you* can do to it that I haven't done a hundred times over or even *worse*, dear! I used to draw on the walls! I think I drove my poor mother crazy, sometimes!"

Facing her, Brooke smiled. "Thank you, Heather! It's a *lovely* room! I... I really appreciate that you're letting me stay here!"

"Nonsense!" she dismissed Brooke's seriousness. "You're my Maid of Honor! I *wanted* to put you in the best room! The floor here is warm in the morning because the Great Room is right below us, so heat from the fireplace comes up through the floor!" Lowering her voice to a conspiratorial whisper, she smiled wryly. "Just don't tell Jack and Erica!"

While the two talked, across the hallway the two in question were putting away their things in their own opulent surroundings.

"Did you notice the look Gregory gave us when we said we'd unpack our own suitcases?" she asked.

"I noticed that she has a cook, butler, *two* maids, two groundskeepers, and a *chauffeur*." Jack intoned as he unpacked. "That's what *I* noticed!"

"*Jack!*" Erica stood and put her hands on her hips. "You aren't being *snobbish* about Heather's family background, are you?"

"*Me*, snobbish?" Jack pointed at himself. "I'm not the one with *servants!*"

"*Jack Dunning!*" she almost yelled at him before lowering her voice again. "Heather does *not* have servants! She has people that *work* for her! It's not like they're *slaves* or something! You *know* Heather! She likely pays them very well! Would they *stay* if she didn't?"

Something about Erica's logic seemed slippery and no matter how he tried, Jack couldn't make it gel. "OK, sure. She probably pays well, but don't you think people ought to take care of their *own* homes and not someone *else's*?"

Walking over to him, she stood in front of Jack with a look on her face that reminded him of the first day they met. "Do you *see* this place, Jack? Do you think Heather *alone* could keep it up? What was she supposed to do? Let it fall to ruin while she was in school? That would almost be *criminal!*" She glared at him. "And don't you even *think* about making a stink over the place she calls home, Jack! So help me *God* if you do, you'll be spending the next year sleeping on the sofa! Is that clear?"

Seeing he wasn't going to win this argument, Jack sighed in defeat, holding up his hands. "Alright! You win! But I'm *telling* you, I for one cannot *wait* to get out of this place and go back to a *normal* home!"

Erica shook her head in disbelief. "Of all people, I never thought I'd see the day when I'd lose any respect for *you*, Jack. You're a *snob!* You think you're *better* than Heather because you grew up poor, don't you? Like she's less of a person! She can't help who her family is, any more than *I* can, Jack! You think you're better than me, too? Because I grew up in Squirrel Hill and not North Oakland? Is *that* it? *Oooo!*" Erica stormed away from him and began throwing her clothes in the dresser one at a time as she boiled with anger.

Slowly, Jack walked to stand behind her as she knelt in front of the dresser. "Erica, can you stop for a second so we can talk?" He kept his voice low and soft, almost apologetic. "*Please, Buttons?*"

She stopped and almost began to sob, she was so angry. Composing herself, Erica stood back up and turned to him; her voice low and growling. "Alright. *Fine!* We'll talk." She stormed over to the bed and sat on it, curling one leg under her and waited.

Taking a breath, Jack moved and sat on the edge of the bed with his elbows resting on his spread knees and his fingertips together; his head hanging in shame. "You're right. I'm a *snob*. A slum snob. All my life I've seen people who had everything... handed to them on a silver platter... while Mom and I barely scraped by. All of Rich's friends who lived in nice houses and got cars on their sixteenth birthday? I *hated* them for it! Hated them for having it easy while Mom couldn't afford *shoes*." He looked up at Erica. "And I was just as wrong as Ox ever was. I'm sorry I'm such a disappointment to you."

"Oh, *Jack!*" she groaned. "You're not a disappointment! It's just..." Sighing in exasperation, Erica took a breath. "You can't blame people for what they have or don't, Jack! You *know* that! I would've done *anything* when we were kids to make your life easier! I *hated* seeing your heart get broken, or going through all the terrible things that happened to you, but you once told me you *had* to go through it, right? That there was a *reason* for it? Well, can't there be a purpose behind Heather's life, too? Why it *had* to be easy? Isn't that just as much a part of it as suffering?"

"You're right!" he smiled at her. "But then, you've *always* been right!" He reached out a hand to her and pulled her to him when she took it. "You were right for loving me, you were right when you showed it to me, and you're right now. What did I ever do to deserve you, Buttons?"

"Nothing." she replied as she wrapped him in her arms. "Just like I never deserved *this!*" She leaned forward and pressed her lips to his, feeling the

spark of electrical shivers that coursed through her entire body. Deepening their kiss, she found herself hungering for his touch with more ferocity than their first time. Just as she was about to suggest they do something about it, she heard a knock on the door.

"Erica? Jack?" Heather spoke through the door. "Lunch is almost ready!"

She groaned as she slid down his body. "Alright! We'll be down in a minute!" she shouted. Gripping the front of his shirt, Erica looked up at him. "Lunch, then dinner..." Sliding up against him once more, she planted a passionate kiss on his lips. "...then *you!*"

Swallowing hard, Jack was almost in fear of her. "Yes, dear!" Half-smiling as they stood up, he added, "Remind me to do something stupid once in a while so I can come to my senses again! I like the aftermath! *Ouch!*"

Erica slapped his belly with the back of her hand. "Not even funny, Jack!" she said as she tried to keep the smile off her face. "Come on. Lets get this stuff tucked away and get downstairs!"

Holding Heather's seat out for her as she sat at the table, she looked up at Richard with adoration. "Thank you, dear!"

"My pleasure!" he replied, leaning down to kiss her quickly before seating himself with Gregory's assistance.

Watching the loving exchange between two of her best friends, Brooke had a feeling of deep longing mixed with bitterness. The three sat for a moment chatting before Erica and Jack came in, Richard rising as his sister entered the room.

"Sorry we took so long, Heather!" Erica apologized as they entered. "Your family home takes a little getting used to! It's *huge!*"

When Erica was about to seat herself at the table and Jack seat himself next to her, Richard cleared his throat. "*Ehem!* Jack?"

Stopping and about to sit, he looked over at his best friend. "*What?* Barn door open?"

Shaking his head, he waved dismissively as Erica finished seating herself. "Never mind, you *cretin!* Siddown!"

Looking confusedly across the table at Brooke, he asked in a hushed voice, "What'd I do?"

Shaking her head, Brooke sipped on her glass of water. "*Manners,* Jack. A gentleman always seats a lady. Don't you know nuthin'?"

"*Oh!*" he looked over at Erica. "I... I'm sorry, Buttons! I just thought..." He looked at the others seated at the table with him. "Don't women *hate* that kind of stuff now-a-days? When did this become a thing again? Last time I held a door for a woman, she bit my *head* off!"

Chuckling, Richard's laugh carried through the room and echoed off the old walls. "Not *here,* Jack! This isn't California! That part of Women's Lib never really reached this part of New England!"

Jack sat up straight. "*Oh!* Well, I'll just have to get back in the habit again, then! Hate to think Mom taught me all that stuff for nothin'! I guess today's the day I get to use some of it! So what's the plan?"

While Gregory brought out their soup and finger sandwiches, Heather looked toward Richard. "Well, we were thinking of just spending the day relaxing and catching up. I'm sure a lot has happened in the last six months, for *all* of us! Thank you, Gregory!" she added when he smilingly set her soup down in front of her.

Watching the old butler serve everyone while Heather and Richard talked as though it were an everyday occurrence was a little unsettling for Jack. Try as he might to push aside the feelings, he couldn't get past the fact that he was sitting and doing nothing while an old man brought them their food and then stood by to wait on them while they ate.

His discomfort didn't go unnoticed. "Jack?" Heather asked in the middle of telling them about her medical office. "Is everything alright? Did you need Gregory to get you something?"

Lowering his head, Jack chuckled at the irony. He was uncomfortable with being waited on by Gregory and she wanted to fix it by having him wait on Jack even *more*. "No. I'm fine, Heather. A little tired is all." he lied badly.

Reading his best friend like a book, Richard cleared his throat. "Gregory? Would you mind excusing us for just a moment?" Once the butler had left the room and it was only the five of them, Richard looked at him. "Alright, you can relax now, Jack! *Spill* it!"

Looking at Erica with a helpless expression, Jack looked at the floor. "OK! I admit it! I... I can't get used to being waited on! It's... *weird*! I keep finding myself wanting to get up and *help* the old guy!"

Heather looked away almost ashamedly. "So... so *that's* what you think of me, Jack?"

"*No!*" he protested, looking up at her seriously. "I don't think any less of you, Rich, or *anyone*! This is *my* problem, not yours! You haven't done anything wrong! *Honest!* I... I'm just a guy who grew up having to do everything for himself is all. It's... it's an adjustment that's harder than I'd hoped it would be. I never wanted to make you feel uncomfortable with my issues! I *swear!*"

Brooke hadn't said much of anything since the butler had seated her. Finally she spoke. "Well, I'm with Jack on this. I don't think any less of people that

have..." She paused a moment while she carefully selected her words so as to not offend. "...*staff*, but it is weird for someone like Jack and me that are used to doing things for ourselves. I'm just better at hiding it than him, but then, I've *always* been better at pretty much *everything* than Jack!"

Her humor managed to defuse what could have been an ugly scene into a round of giggles from everyone at the table except Jack. "Oh, very funny, Brooke! You should take that on the *stage*! The first one out of *town*!"

After a moment more of light laughter, Jack looked over at Heather who was still trying to wipe the smile off her face. "Look, I'm sorry if I offended *you*, Heather." he said seriously. "I didn't mean to and I was trying to *not* to. I'm still just a screwed up kid from North Oakland!"

"It's *fine*, Jack." she accepted with a sigh. "I should have known better. You can't take people like you and Brooke that aren't used to being waited on and just drop them in it and expect it not to rub them the wrong way. *I'm* the one who should apologize! If it makes you feel any better, Gregory and the others are *very* well paid for what they do around here and I couldn't hope to run this house without them!"

Erica poked Jack in the ribs. "See? I *told* you!"

"I sometimes feel like Gregory is almost like a second father to me," Heather admitted, "and Theresa's been the cook for my family since I was a child! They're all like family."

"I have no complaints!" Jack offered. "The soup is great! Heck, *everything* here is! But yes, it *does* make me feel better knowing all that. I should have known! You can't be anything less than *you* Heather, but do you have to be so generous that you're willing to live with this *box-kicker* the rest of your life?" he asked, pointing a spoon at Richard.

"*Hey!*" he barked. "Watch your language, *Snuffy!* I can still kick your butt!"

Relaxing into the lunch, Gregory came in again, served coffee, and collected their bowls. As he did, Jack decided to truly make himself at home, so when the butler was heading for the kitchen, he quickly got up and held the door for him.

"Thank you, Master Jack!" Gregory smiled at him. "But there's no need! I can manage!" he said happily as he entered the kitchen.

His tone was friendly, but Jack could detect the faintest hint of irritation as he tried to help. Returning to his seat, the rest of them looking at him, Jack shrugged. "*What?* You said to make myself at home! I wanted to help is all!"

"Jack," Richard explained, "I *know* you're used to doing your part, but help like that would be like when Corporal Rogers thought he was helping you when he squared away your rack for you."

"That's not the same thing!" Jack defended his actions. "Rogers was being a smartass! Kept telling me my rack wasn't regulation!"

"It's the same to *Gregory*, Jack!" Richard retorted. "If you help him, he'll think that you don't think he can do his job!"

Thinking about it from that perspective, Jack mulled it over as he sugared his coffee. "Well, when you put it *that* way, you make me feel like an absolute heel for wanting to help! Should I apologize? You know, sort of explain it to him? I just don't want to make it *worse* is all!"

"Just let them do their *jobs*, Jack." Heather said softly. "Enjoy being able to take it *easy* for a while!" Relaxing after lunch, Heather continued with her glowing description of her new job. Finishing up, she noticed Gregory refill Jack's cup, Jack just smiling and thanking him. "So Jack, what have you been doing these months? Getting up to no good, I assume!"

"You know me too well, Heather!" he replied as he re-sweetened his drink.

"Nonsense!" Erica chided him. "Jack is doing fine!"

"Seriously, I've been doing alright." he admitted. "I started managing this dry cleaner in Palo Alto. Pay is pretty good, so Buttons and I should be able to put a substantial down on a place when Erica graduates in the spring."

Richard turned to Brooke. "How's things at The Bricks? I told Heather that things have been easier lately, but anything new?"

Nodding as she drank her coffee, Brooke put the cup down. "They closed the NADEP at the end of September. All the Airdales are gone."

"They really are gonna close Alameda, *aren't* they? Like the end of an era. Any idea when?" he asked.

Shrugging, Brooke sighed. "Nothing *official*, but scuttlebutt is that it could close by next spring, probably early May, I'd guess."

"So, you'll be moved to another base before I graduate?" Erica asked sadly.

Brooke looked away. "It's almost a guarantee. I doubt the base will still be open next June, and I don't qualify for Early Release. The Corps is already done with their drawdowns. Either way, my enlistment won't end until next September thirtieth, and I'm not shipping over again."

"What *are* your plans when you get out?" Jack asked. "I don't think you've ever said."

"I'm not sure." Brooke answered honestly. "I'd thought about college, but then I don't know what *for*. I guess right now I don't have a plan. I always thought I'd be a lifer."

"You could always do like your old man suggested, go to college and become an officer!" Jack snorted.

"Oh, Ha! *Ha!*" Brooke sneered at him. "No, I'm done with the service. At least as an enlisted I'm safe from Airdales and other officers. No *way* would I ever want to open *that* can of worms!"

"So? You've got ten more months to figure something out then." Jack pointed out. "*Plenty* of time!"

"In the mean time Brooke," Heather changed the subject, "I was hoping you would go with me into town tomorrow? You'll need a fitting if you want your dress to be altered before Saturday. You too, Erica!"

Brooke's mood quickly went from apathetic to irritated. "*Jeez*, Heather! Are you really gonna make me wear a stupid Bridesmaid's dress? *Honestly?*"

"What would *you* suggest, Brooke?" Jack asked with a grin. "Suit and tie?"

"That might be preferable!" she quipped. Looking at Heather with the same look she used to give her mom when she didn't want to eat her lima beans, Brooke knew that she was going to give in, but that didn't make her like it. "OK! *Fine!* Dress me up like a friggin' Barbie doll, Heather! At least I know it's only for an hour or two, and then I can *burn* the damn thing!"

"I'd be surprised if satin doesn't spontaneously combust when it touches your *skin*, Brooke!" Jack let slip. "Like a cross on a vampire?" He then hissed like Bela Lugosi. If nothing more, it made Brooke laugh and forget her troubles for a moment.

Richard chuckled before he cleared his throat. "Erm... I... uh... I hate to rub salt in it Brooke, but it'll be more like six to *eight* hours."

"*What?*" she yelled. "Eight hours? Dressed up like a cake topper?"

"You're forgetting about the reception, pictures, and the bridal party will be getting their hair and makeup done that morning." Heather pointed out. "We

will have to be wearing our dresses when we do, otherwise when we go to put them on it will ruin it all!"

Shaking her head, Brooke refused. "Uh-uh! I ain't letting some amateur do anything to *my* hair! I can do my own, and *better!*" Sitting up straight, she got a look of giddiness across her face. "That's *it!*" she slammed her hand down on the table, making Gregory jump slightly. "I've been knocking my brains out over what to get you two for your wedding, and that's *it!*"

"*Brooke!*" Heather interjected. "You don't have to *give* us anything!"

"Yeah!" Jack added. "You never got *us* nothin'!"

"You two got my car for an entire *week*, buddy-boy! Remember?" Turning to Heather, she grinned. "I want to do everyone's hair and makeup! I can do that, and it'll make me feel like I gave you two something! *Please?*"

Erica stepped in for Brooke. "Oh, Heather! You really *should* let her do it! She did mine for New Years!"

"She *did*, did she?" Jack asked with a pointed look at Brooke.

Suddenly shy, Erica demurred. "Well, I... I wanted to look perfect for you!"

"Why you old softie!" Jack stared at Brooke in astonishment. "I wasn't just set up, I was *submarined!* I never stood a chance, *did I?*"

"Nope!" Brooke answered as she smiled into her cup. "Not a *chance!*"

"Alright!" Heather admitted defeat. "Only because you *want* to, Brooke! I don't want you to feel you *have* to!"

Suddenly feeling a lot better about the impending nuptials, the 'dress issue' temporarily forgotten, Brooke hardly listened to a word after that. Instead the

Marine spent the rest of their lunch going over in her head what she planned to do to make Heather shine brilliantly that day.

The next morning, Jack walked into the dress shop behind Erica so she too could get her fitting done. Turning a corner, the sight that greeted him was something the likes of which he had figured would signal the apocalypse.

"Oh... my... *God!*"

Brooke glared at him as she stood on the pedestal in a beautiful pink satin strapless A-line gown. "Don't you say one *fucking* word, Jack! *Not. One. Word!*" A round of gasps followed from the seamstress, her assistant, and several ladies looking over dresses for their own weddings the next spring.

"Nope!" he replied. "I have no words, Brooke. Just waiting for the ground to open up and *swallow us all!*"

"Jack?" Erica warned. "*Behave!*"

"Yes, dear!" he replied dejectedly. "You ruin *all* my fun!"

Brooke closed her eyes and took a deep breath. While she stood waiting for the seamstress to finish pinning the gown, she rolled her eyes impatiently.

"Aren't you *done* yet? I feel like I've been in this thing for *hours!*"

"It's been less than twenty minutes!" Jack pointed out. "*Couldn't* be longer! You only left half an hour ahead of us!"

The seamstress shook her head, talking through pins stuck between her teeth. "It'll only be another few minutes, ma'am."

"Don't ma'am, me!" Brooke snapped. "I'm no officer! I *work* for a living!"

"Sorry." she replied, trying to finish as quickly as she could. Standing after pinning the hemline, she worked on pinning the back as she asked Heather,

"So, Miss Moore. Do you know when the other Bridesmaids are supposed to arrive?"

"Erica here is next, then I have two ladies from my medical group coming down. They should be here in the next ten minutes or so."

Just as she was finishing with Brooke, the door chimed once more as Jack turned to see two ladies enter. "I think that might be the others." he offered.

Heather rose and greeted them. "Maya! Jennifer! So glad you could make it! Mr. Frakes didn't give you a hard time about leaving, did he?"

Maya, the taller of the two shook her head. "He knew better! You may not be *practicing* yet, but he knows you will be next month!"

"Good!" She turned to Erica as Brooke stepped down off the platform. "Well, since they're here, would you mind if they went ahead of you Erica so they can get back to work?"

"Not at *all*, Heather!" she replied smiling. "I'm sure *Jack* won't mind waiting, *will* you, dear?"

"Yes, dear." he replied absently. "*Oh!* Uh... *no*, dear, I wouldn't mind!"

"Maya, why don't you go first." Heather suggested.

The tall blonde went back into the changing area just ahead of the fleeing Brooke, cutting the Marine off and closing the curtain in Brooke's face.

"Make a hole, lady!" Brooke barked, charging into the changing room. "I need to get out of this monkey suit! You can wait!" she barked as she pushed the blonde bodily back out through the curtains.

"*Heather!*" Maya whined. "Who does she think she is? *Rude* much?"

"Sorry!" Heather apologized for Brooke. "Brooke's my Maid of Honor, but she's... well... not entirely comfortable with the dress. Here, why don't you sit for a minute and I'll get you something to drink, alright?" She looked at the shop girl assisting the seamstress, who rushed off unasked, returning a short time later with a bottle of mineral water.

Waiting, Heather made introductions to Jack and Erica. When Brooke came back out carrying the dress, Heather sighed and shook her head as she saw her Maid of Honor toss the dress at the seamstress like a football.

"Here's your dress, lady." she barked. Sighing in frustration, she practically stalked back to Heather as Maya headed into the changing room. "I still don't know how you talked me into this, Heather! I think that damn thing's gonna fall down and my *boobs* are gonna pop out every time I *move*!"

"It'll be worth going to the wedding just for *that*!" Jack arched an eyebrow.

Erica smacked him in the back of the head. "Shut up, Jack!"

"Yes, dear." Jack muttered, rubbing the back of his head.

Turning to Brooke, Heather smiled sweetly. "It will fit better once it's fitted for your measurements, dear. I *swear* to you, it won't slip!" Seeing that her words still offered no comfort, Heather shook her head and sat back down, waiting for Maya to come out wearing her dress.

"Well, if you don't need me for a while," Brooke said, grabbing her purse, "I think I'll just pop down to that pizza place just down the strip. I'm *starved*! Wanna come, Jack? Split a meat lovers with ya'!"

The seamstress looked at Brooke as though the Marine had just slapped her. Turning to Heather as the two ran out the door, she was speechless with her eyes like saucers. "Wh... bu... Isn't she on a *diet* for the wedding? She's the Maid of Honor! If she puts on more than a pound, the dress won't *fit*!"

"I'm sure it's *fine!*" Heather consoled the stricken woman. "Brooke isn't like most women!"

"I should say *not!*" Maya growled as she came out wearing her dress. "She acts like a *man!* You would think it was some sort of punishment to wear that gorgeous dress! It's even nicer than ours, and this is *beautiful*, Heather!"

"Well, to her it almost *is!*" Erica stood up for Brooke. "She's a United States Marine, and *proud* of it!"

Maya looked at her. "Well, it shows! She has the manners of a *bulldozer!*" Taking a breath and smiling, she stepped up on the platform. "Well? How does it look?"

Sitting next to Heather, Erica lowered her voice and asked, "Can I ask you a question? Maya... she seems kind of... stuck up. Why did you ask her to be a bridesmaid?"

Leaning over, Heather whispered, "She's usually very nice. I guess Brooke just rubbed her the wrong way. *You'll* see! She can be very sweet!"

"I'll have to take your word for it, Heather." Erica shook her head in disbelief.

All the while, Jennifer, the other newcomer who hadn't said more than hello since coming into the shop, sat and watched the exchange silently as she struggled with her own inner turmoil.

Chapter 17 - Giving Thanks

Jack and I had a blast at the pizza parlor that day while Heather and Erica saw to the fittings. We talked for what seemed like hours, laughed, and had a *great* time. At one point, the waitress that brought us our drinks said we made a cute couple. I wanted to rip her head off at the time, but Jack just laughed. Looking back, it *was* kind of funny, and I suppose we *did* make a cute couple, as weird as *that* sounds! I guess that's why people believed it so easily for so long.

The next several days were a blur. Not only were we getting ready for the wedding on Saturday, but Thanksgiving was that Thursday and Heather had planned a large get together at her family home for both the wedding party and guests and friends of hers and Rich's from their jobs. Sort of a hybrid Rehearsal Dinner, Office Party, and Thanksgiving all rolled into one. I had doubts if even her huge home could fit everyone.

The *biggest* worry was Rich and Erica's parents. They were invited of course, but none of us knew if Judith would show or not, what with Jack being the Best Man, and even if she *did* show, if she would make a scene. Erica told me that she was feeling nervous, like a cat on an unplugged electric fence, scared that at any moment it'd go live. Meanwhile, I was struggling with my own issues. I just didn't know if I could be what Heather *needed* me to be, and I wanted her to have what she deserved.

So Thanksgiving began with a lot of question marks and ended with more.

Jack awoke just as the sun started to break through the window of the room Heather had given Erica and him for their stay. Still two hours earlier than his usual six o'clock rising time, but already almost an hour later according to the clock, he rolled over so the sun wouldn't be in his eyes and he could go back to sleep.

Rolling into Erica roused her from sleep, stretching and wrapping her arms and legs around him and relishing the feel of every morning that she could wake with her Jack just where she had always wanted him; wrapped in her arms. She almost purred with contentment as she ran her fingers through his lengthening hair. "Good morning, Jack! Happy Thanksgiving!"

"*Uh-uh.*" he mumbled. "Not *yet* it isn't! Come back in a few hours!"

Kissing his forehead as she giggled, Erica wouldn't let it be. "Not a *chance*, Marine! *Reveille!* We have a big day today, and Heather's going to need all the help she can get!" Lifting his chin, she kissed him passionately, knowing it would stir him. When she knew she had his full attention, she slid out of bed and walked nonchalantly towards the bathroom. "Come on! Up, up, *up!*"

"Dirty pool!" he shouted after her as she closed the bathroom door, throwing the blanket back and climbing out of bed. "*Jeez!* This floor is *freezing!*" he commented, stepping tiptoe into the bathroom behind her. "I'm gonna run through a shower real quick. Wanna join?" he asked with his half-smile.

"I'd love to, sweetie. I'm afraid we'd take too long, though!" she said with a seductive grin. "You go ahead. I'm gonna throw some things on and I'll come back up and shower and change before the guests start arriving."

"Suit yourself!" he said shrugging as he stripped and turned the water on. The glass walls of the alcove shower steamed up quickly when he stepped into it, sighing with relief from the cold of the autumn morning.

Dressing in jeans and a T-shirt quickly, Erica came down the stairs and went into the kitchen to a flurry of early morning activity. "Anything I can do to help?" she asked Theresa, the cook.

"No! Nothing, dearie! You just leave everything to me!" Theresa dismissed her with a smile. "I already have most the work done, so I just need room to get the eggs done! You just relax and enjoy the day, dearie!"

Shooed from the kitchen, Erica made her way into the den where Richard sat behind a desk. "Morning, big brother! Happy Thanksgiving!"

"Oh! Morning, Erica. Happy Thanksgiving!" He barely looked up from the papers he was looking at. "Did you need something?"

"No." she replied absently. "Just wondering what you needed *me* to do is all. I know there's a ton of things that need to be done before this afternoon! How can I help?"

He looked up at her and smiled. "I think we have everything under control. You can just relax and enjoy it! Cook's got the food taken care of, Gregory's making sure everyone else is getting things ready. Maybe you should check with Heather if there's anything *she* needs help with, if you're so anxious for something to do!"

Erica smiled weakly as she headed out of the den. "Oh. All right. I'll see you later then." The spring in her step faltering, she almost trudged up the stairs before she turned to the master bedroom. Seeing the door open, she peaked in to see Heather at her vanity, wearing a beautiful pale-blue A-line dress. "Good morning, Heather. Happy Thanksgiving?"

"Good *morning*, Erica!" she smiled. "And Happy Thanksgiving to you, too! Did you need some help getting ready? I can have Franchesca..."

"*No!* I just wanted to see if there was anything you needed me to do to help is all." She wandered into the room absently, stepping up to the tall posts of the bed and wrapping a hand around it. "I seem to be at loose ends a little! I feel like I should be doing something, *anything* to help! I know this is a big day!"

Heather stopped getting ready and looked at her soon to be sister-in-law in the mirror and smiled. "Well, I can't think of anything at the moment. Did you ask Richard if he..."

"Yes." she mumbled her interruption, plopping down to sit on the bed. "He sent me to see if *you* needed anything! And your cook kicked me out of the kitchen! I make really good deviled eggs, too!"

"I have an idea!" Heather brightened. "Why don't you get ready, and then we'll take a walk down by the pond! Just the *two* of us!"

Sighing, Erica nodded. "Alright. I'd *like* that, but... and *please* don't take this the wrong way, Heather... I... I'm beginning to understand how Jack feels. I mean, I *get* it. There's no way you could run this house yourself, and today would be *impossible* without help, but... I don't think I could ever get used to living like this all the time! I'd go *crazy* with nothing to do!"

"I understand!" Heather replied softly. "Imagine how difficult an adjustment it was for me going to Stanford, and then adjusting back after we returned! I just try and focus on *my* job and making overall decisions for the staff and let *them* worry about getting it done." She looked off into the distance with a sigh. "Mamma used to say that running a household like this was like being a General in the Army. '*You don't stick your nose in the help's business!*' she would say! '*They know better how to get things done than you or I ever will!*' I... I wish she were here now."

"That reminds me." Erica changed the subject. "Who *is* going to walk you down the aisle? Or are you doing it solo?"

"No, your father offered to do the honors." Heather answered. "He and Judith will be here this afternoon and are staying through Monday. I put them up in town, though. I didn't think it would be a good idea to have Jack and Judith around each other any more than necessary!"

"That's probably a good idea!" Erica laughed. "Well, if nobody needs any of my help, I guess I'll go get ready. See you in a bit!" She hugged Heather's shoulders and slowly made her way to their bedroom, bumping into Brooke as she did. "*Oh!* Good morning, Brooke! Happy Thanksgiving!"

"Yeah. Um... Happy Thanksgiving." Brooke grumbled. "You seen Jack or Rich?"

"Jack's getting dressed, and Richie's down in the den working on something. Heather's in her room getting ready." Erica offered.

"Oh. I'll go see Rich, then." Brooke said before she headed down the stairs. Erica just shrugged and went to go change.

Entering the den, Brooke knocked on the doorway. "You busy?" she asked.

"Yes, but you're going to interrupt me anyway!" Richard joked. "Do *you* need something to do, too?"

She closed the door behind her and paced the room nervously. "I... um... I think Erica should be Heather's Maid of Honor. After all, Jack's your Best Man, and I'm really not cut out for this sort of thing! I mean, I'm honored that she *wants* me to, *believe* me! It's just..."

Richard sat back and nodded. "It's the dress, *isn't* it? And Erica would be a *Matron* of Honor. She's married."

"Maid, Matron, *whatever!* It's not *just* the dress!" she countered. "I mean, as dresses go, especially bridesmaid's dresses, it's really nice! Not like some of the monstrosities you hear talked about! But... I mean... *Rich!* I'm just not *suited* for this! I'm not a *girly-girl!* I'm supposed to throw Heather a party Friday night, and my idea of a party is *not* your bridal shower type party! I don't even know what women *do* at those things!"

"What? You think *I* do?" he asked incredulously. "Why don't you ask Erica to help? I'm sure she'd..."

"*Alright!*" Brooke admitted. "It's the dress! The last time I wore a formal was to my Senior Prom and I *hated* it, Rich! I don't think I can make myself do

it! I... I'm just going to have to tell Heather she needs to find another girl! I'll be happy to just sit and watch."

Pursing his lips, Richard stood and set his papers aside. "Come on. Why don't we go talk to her? I'm sure there's *something* we can do to satisfy you both!"

Erica turned her back to Jack. "Would you zip me up, dear?" she asked.

Showing his half-smile, he pulled the zipper up his wife's back, closing the beautiful green dress in place. Putting his hands on her bare shoulders, the neckline wide and open allowing her shoulder-length curly red hair to just cover her neck, Jack leaned over her shoulder and kissed her cheek. "You look *gorgeous*, Buttons!"

His wife turned and smiled at him, draping her arms over his shoulders and around his neck. "Thank you, Jack!" She kissed him delicately, making sure not to smudge lipstick on him. "*You* look very nice, too!" She smoothed his black jacket and straightened his tie slightly. "Shall we?"

The two leaving their room, they made their way downstairs where they saw Richard and Heather, both dressed formally, sitting and talking to Brooke who was lounging in jeans and a T-shirt.

"If I knew casual was an option, I would've gone for *that!*" Jack muttered.

"Don't worry, Jack." Brooke retorted. "I'll be changing to Class Bs in a bit."

"*Speaking* of which, Jack." Heather said lightly. "Richard and I would like it if you wore your Dress Blues at the wedding. You did *bring* them?"

Thinking a moment, he shook his head. "No, I don't think I *did*, Heather. I'm sorry! You shoulda told me before we left!"

"Good thing I know better." Erica commented. "*I* packed them, dear!"

Jack wrapped an arm around her shoulder. "What would I ever do without you?" he asked.

"Die alone!" Brooke quipped as she stood and stretched. "Well, I should go get cleaned up. Heather? You said guests will start arriving at noon?" Seeing her nod, she started toward the stairs. "Alright. Be down by then."

Turning to Erica, Heather smiled. "Ready for our walk? I have some things I need to talk to you about." While the two ladies headed for the back door, she started explaining what they'd been talking about when she and Jack had come down. "Brooke was just telling me that she's uncomfortable being my Maid of Honor." Their voices faded as they went outside.

Jack looked at Richard. "So Brooke's out? What? Heather gonna get Buttons to step in for her?"

Shaking his head, Richard clapped his hand on Jack's shoulder and started leading him to the Meeting Room. "Best not to get involved, Jack. I'm sorry I did as much as I *did*! Come on, let me give you the full tour."

Frank Hargrave drove their rental car in silence, his wife Judith sitting next to him, staring out the window in equal quietude. When he saw a convenient turnoff, still ten miles from Heather's family home, he pulled off the road and slowed to a halt.

"Why did you stop?" she asked. "We're nearly there! I want to see Richard!"

"Before we go one inch further, I wanna make something *clear*, Judy." he said seriously. "From now on, under *no* circumstances are you to belittle Jack or their marriage to *anyone*, especially them! Jack's a fine man! He's a hard worker who's doing right by Erica! Treat him with the respect he's earned!"

"*Respect!*" she spat. "Some respect! He drags our daughter to some seedy place, in *Reno* of all places, taking advantage of her childish affections for

him, all for a cheap laugh! My baby deserved an honest *church* wedding, and a man that could afford to *give* her one!"

"First of all, it was not a seedy place! It was a *lovely* chapel. You would have *known* that if you would have deigned to be at your own daughter's wedding! Secondly, if *anyone* took advantage, it was Erica! She's been wanting that boy for over *ten years*, and she finally got her hooks in him! She loved her wedding, just the way it was! She would have loved it more with you there!"

"Oh, for heaven's sake, Frank!" Judith shouted at him. "Erica's *never* been practical when it comes to that boy! You mark my words! *She'll* be the one supporting that bum!"

"He's not a boy, or a bum, Judy!" her husband retorted with a growl. "He's a *man*, an honorably discharged Marine, and she *loves* him!"

"If you had just done what I said and cut off her tuition, she would've come to her senses!" Judith snapped.

"No, she would have quit school and married him anyway!" Frank countered. "Without even her father there to give her away!"

"That's another thing!" she barked. "You *blessing* this marriage! I just don't understand how you could *stand* there and watch as she threw her life away! Did you know she could have married *Jason Summers*? *Jason Summers*! The boy whose father ran our bank back in Pittsburgh! He *begged* her to go out with him, but no! *You* had to encourage Erica to chase down that boy from *North Oakland*, who couldn't even be bothered taking care of his own dying mother! Just shipped her off to a home! That's *our* future, Frank!"

Closing his eyes, Frank tried to control his temper. "Look here, Judy. I've put up with your nonsense. You almost *celebrated* the day Jack nearly died! I almost filed for *divorce* when you ran off to your sister's because I insisted on paying for his hospital care! You've done nothing since you *met* him but

show contempt for his background! You've tried everything *imaginable* to throw up walls between he and Erica! Well, *get over it!* They're married now and nothing you say or do is gonna change that! What happens when they start having *kids*, Judy? Are you going to forsake your own grandchildren because of their father?"

Judith fumed at the idea of her daughter having Jack's children. "Well, they haven't *yet*, and if *I* have anything to say about it..."

"You don't!" he barked at her. "I'm warning you, Judy! If you try and push them apart, it will never work and Erica will never forgive you for it! And if you ruin *my* chances at seeing my grandchildren, you'll be changing your name back to Rheinhardt faster than you can say '*Reno divorce!*'"

"It would be worth it!" she quipped. "Besides, once she's married to a *nice* young man who can actually take proper care of her, she would forget all about her little dalliance and *thank* me for saving her from her own childish mistakes! It would be a lot easier though if you were at *least* less supportive! Now, let's get going. Richard's waiting and I don't want to be late!"

"Until you *swear* to me that you'll keep your lip buttoned about your opinions of Jack, we're going to sit here until *Hell* freezes over!"

"*Never!*" she cried. "I won't do it! I'll fight Erica's sham of a marriage with my last breath and you can't *stop* me!"

"Then we sit here. *I'm* in no hurry." Frank sat back and closed his eyes.

After several minutes of silence, Judith broke it. "So, are you quite through being *ridiculous*, Frank?"

"I'm not being ridiculous." he replied calmly, not even opening his eyes. "We don't budge until I hear the words, Judy. You have to swear on your honor to the Lord! *That* I know you'll keep!"

Ten more minutes passed in silence. Judith considered getting out to walk the rest of the way, but not knowing the address or directions, she could search for days before finding it. Biting her knuckle, she began to realize he would actually sit there and never give in. Jack had been their only serious argument through twenty-seven years of marriage and she couldn't understand why he wouldn't see things her way. *That boy's going to ruin her life! Either she'll have to support them both, or he'll drag her down with him into squalor! I have to make her see that!*

Formulating a plan, she sighed. "Alright, Frank. Are you done *brooding*?"

"I'm not brooding." he answered. "I'm *waiting*."

"*Frank!*" she whined. "We're already late! *Please*, dear? For *me*?"

"I'm not the one *keeping* us here. *You* are."

"Oh, you can be so stubborn! *Fine!* I swear on my honor to the Lord I will not talk down about Jack to anyone at the party!"

"Or at the wedding or *reception!*" Frank added.

Wincing at him catching on to her loophole, she sighed. "Very well, or at the wedding or reception! *Happy* now?"

"Or anytime before, *after*, or *between!*"

"*Frank Hargrave!*" she snapped. "You know *very well* I can't make a promise for things that haven't happened yet! What if he *abandons* her? Or cheats on her? I'd be bound by that silly promise even if he *murdered* her! I won't!"

Thinking a moment, he came up with a compromise. "OK, then. For so long as Erica *wants* him!"

"Alright, fine!" she screamed. "I swear on my honor to the Lord I will keep my peace regarding Jack to anyone so long as Erica *wants* him!"

Frank looked at her, searching her face for signs of deception or loopholes. Seeing that he'd frustrated her into giving in and certain there were no other loopholes, he started the car and pulled back out onto the highway. "Very well, Judy. On your *honor*."

Standing in the Meeting Room next to Richard and several of his co-workers, Jack found it eerily similar to how things would be at one of the many parties he and Richard had been invited to when they were in school. He could see the vague look of disdain whenever he spoke or commented on whatever the subject happened to be. The only exception seemed to be Richard's senior boss, the VP of Business Research, Henry Chase. Jack felt at ease talking to the fellow Marine, and found that Henry shared his sense of humor. Seeing him returning with a drink, Jack smiled.

"Welcome back, Hank! Find the *good* stuff or is that just what Rich put out?"

Laughing, he raised his glass. "Bit of *both*, Jack! Say, I wanted to ask you. You're still in the reserves, right? *Active* or *inactive*?"

"Active." Jack answered honestly. "One more year."

"Good man!" he congratulated him. "So, what do you do outside of that? Your *main* line, I mean."

"I'm managing a dry-cleaner until my wife finishes college. Then we move to Southern California to be near her and Richard's parents where I plan on opening my own! Maybe grow it into a chain!"

"Speaking of Mom and Dad," Richard interjected. "I wonder what's keeping them? Their plane was supposed to get in over two *hours* ago."

"Your Mom probably had to wait for Frank to paint the car windows so she wouldn't burst into flames from the *sun!*" Jack quipped.

Hank laughed as Richard restrained himself from joining in. "Now, Jack. She may be your *mother-in-law*, but she's still my *mother*."

"And you have my sincerest condolences on that account, Rich. *Speaking* of which, I need to find Heather and give her the heads up. Judith will be *her* mother-in-law Saturday, and she needs a final warning before committing! If you'll excuse me, Rich? *Hank?*"

Heading to the Great Room where the ladies had gathered, Jack scanned the crowd, seeing Heather talking to the only other person in the room wearing pants besides himself. Making his way through, he smiled. "Heather, if I didn't say it before, I want to say it *now*. You look *beautiful!*" He kissed her cheek and turned to Brooke. "Ya' look good, Hathaway! By the way, being serious for just a moment, I really do think you look good in that dress for Saturday. You may hate it, but it *loves* you!"

Looking down, Brooke tapped her glass. "Thanks, Jack. I... uh... guess you meant that as a compliment, so I'll *take* it that way. But... um... I... won't be wearing it." She glanced at Heather with an embarrassed smile as she took a gulp of her drink.

He held up his hands. "Didn't mean to get into anything! Just forget I even mentioned it." Looking around the room he asked, "Have either of you seen Buttons recently?"

Brooke shook her head. "Not recently, no. Heather?"

"I *think* I saw her talking a bit ago with the other ladies in the bridal party." Scanning around the room, she spotted her sitting behind Maya. "*There* she is Jack! Over in the corner with Maya and Jennifer!"

"Thanks!" Remembering why he came over to her, Jack half-smiled. "*Oh!* Say, Heather. I... uh... I wanted to give you a heads-up about Richard's mom, Judith."

"I know all about her, Jack." Heather explained. "I think I can handle her!"

"*No!* You don't understand!" Jack corrected her. "See, she's gonna *love* you! *Nothing* like me!"

Heather blinked at Jack in surprise. "Why do you think that? I thought she was difficult to get along with?"

"Oh, to *me*, she's a monster." he clarified. "But *you*? You're rich! She's gonna *adore* you! Not that you don't *deserve* to be adored, you *do*, but she wouldn't care if you had three eyes and rode a broom, so long as you have it where it *counts*, if you know what I mean! Just a friendly warning is all! I'm gonna spend time with my wife! See ya' 'round Heather! *Brooke!*"

Making his way to Erica, Jack smiled at her. "Hey, beautiful! Just wanted to stop by and see if you'd like to..." He paused when they heard a car pull up the driveway. Glancing out a window, Jack grimaced. "Guess who? Hide your Ruby Slippers, Dorothy! The wicked Witch of the West is here! The upside is Dad drove her. Guess you have to take the bitter with the sweet! Shall we go greet them?" Seeing Erica nod stoically, he started toward the Meeting Room. "I'll run and get Rich."

"*Thanks*, Jack." she said as she rose and excused herself. Making her way over to Heather, she interrupted the bride and Maid of Honor's conversation. "My folks are here! *God*, I hope Mom doesn't make a scene today! I'd rather Jack and I *leave* than embarrass you, Heather!"

"*No!*" Heather insisted. "This is *my* home. If she tries to make you or Jack uncomfortable, I'll make it clear it won't be tolerated! *OK?*" With a breath, she saw the men going to the door, she and Erica moving to meet them there.

After getting out of the car, Judith looked around at the house and grounds. "Frank? Is this the right *address*?" Seeing Richard and Erica come out the front door to greet them put a smile on her face. "My babies!" she called out, almost running to them.

Richard kept an even expression, but Erica freely let her anger show.

When she and Frank got closer, she noticed the sour expression and slowed; her smile melting. Walking up to them ahead of her husband, she reached out and hugged her son. "*Richard!* I've missed you!"

"It's good to see you again too, Mom." he said earnestly, if hollowly. While he resented his mother's dislike of Jack, he truly had missed her.

Turning to her daughter, she cleared her throat and held out her arms. "Erica? Won't you hug me hello?"

Looking over at Jack and seeing him nod, she hugged her mother's shoulders quickly and backed away. "Hello, *Mother.*" she stated scathingly.

Heather stepped forward and greeted her with a warm smile. "Welcome to Moore Estates, Mr. and Mrs. Hargrave! I'm Heather and I'm *very* pleased to finally meet you both!"

While she briefly hugged Judith hello, Frank came up and shook Richard's hand. "Good to see you again, son! How's life on the Outside treating you?"

"Can't complain!" he smiled. "Dad? I want you to *officially* meet Heather! I know you met her briefly at Erica's *wedding.*" He glanced at his mother, who just turned her head away. "You had to go so soon though, I never really got the chance to properly introduce her to you!"

Heather hugged him hello warmly. "It's good to see you again, Mr. Hargrave! I'm sorry we never got the chance to be *formally* introduced in March!"

"Better late than never, I say!" he said returning the affection. Stepping back, he looked at Jack who stood behind his son, his face an expressionless mask. "Jack? Good to see you, too!" He reached out as Richard moved out of the way and they shook hands and hugged genuinely. Turning to his wife, Frank growled. "*Judy?*"

She walked up to Jack and held her hand out. "Jack. You look *well.*"

Tentatively, he took her hand and shook it once before letting it go. "*Judith.*" was all his anger would let him say. He wasn't so much angry with her for how she treated him, but for snubbing Erica's wedding and hurting her.

Heather broke the awkward moment. "Well, shall we go in? It's a little *cool* out to be standing around outside!"

While everyone else went in, Jack and Erica going in last, Jack lowered his voice so only Erica could hear. "It *did* feel a bit *frosty* out, but then The Ice Queen went inside! I wonder who'll win? *Her* or the giant fireplace?"

Chapter 18 - Turkey Surprise

While Jack and them were greeting Rich's parents, I was inside with a bunch of strangers, the only person in uniform, in a place where I didn't even know people's opinions regarding the military. To say I was a bit jumpy is to put it lightly! Even when someone *did* talk to me, I always felt like a curiosity more than a Marine, or even the supposed Maid of Honor.

Later on, when Jack and I were talking, everyone else being busy, he told me about Judith and what all happened between them that day. I wanted Jack to know that no matter what, I would be there for him and Erica both. There's not a lot of things you can count on in this world, but I think my friendship with Jack and Rich could be counted as one of them.

Most of the time, you think you know what's going to happen in life. Things like Thanksgiving come around and you... you *expect* certain things. Turkey, stuffing, football, napping on the couch, talking and laughing with family and friends... You know, the predictable things that are why we *have* things like Thanksgiving in the *first* place. To take time together with the people we love and make a memory.

Sometimes things happen that you *don't* expect though, and would and could, never see coming.

While her four friends were outside to greet their parents and in-laws, Brooke wandered the Great Room aimlessly. She accepted a few compliments and thanks for her service, but didn't know anyone, and none of them seemed to be interested in starting up a conversation, even when opportunity struck.

She was about to head into the Meeting Room to see if any of the men would care to talk, when she felt a tap on her shoulder. Turning her head, she looked down to see a young woman standing shyly behind her.

When the woman in the uniform turned to face her, Jennifer couldn't look her in the face. She shyly looked at the floor between them and cleared her throat before looking up at the statuesque Marine. "Um... *Hi!* I'm Jennifer Hooks! One of the bridesmaids? We met at the dress shop. Brooke Hathaway, *right?* You're a Sergeant in the Marines? I wanted to *thank* you for your service!"

Brooke smiled, almost instantly at ease with the shy young woman. "Yes, yes, and it's an honor." She put out a gloved hand. "Nice to see you again! Sorry I didn't stick around to actually meet you! Mind if I ask *you* a question?"

"*S-sure!*" the bubbly brunette answered nervously.

"How is it that you know Heather? I mean, I *know* you know her from work, but what do you *do* there?"

"I... uh... I'm the receptionist!" she responded with a smile. "Heather's *such* a great lady! When her license comes through, I can tell she's going to be a *really* great therapist!" Glancing away again shyly, she looked at the floor and then back at the Marine. "How do *you* know Heather?"

Laughing lightly, Brooke shook her head. "The groom Richard and I served together, along with a buddy of ours, Jack Dunning, the Best Man. You met him at the dress shop. They didn't re-enlist, but I have another year before my cruise is up. Thus, why I'm in uniform today and they *aren't!*"

A confused look came over her face. "But aren't they going to be in uniform for the wedding on Saturday?"

Looking around, Brooke found an open love seat. "Would you like to sit with me for a bit, Jennifer? I can explain!"

"*Sure!* I'd *love* to!" she said with an overly dreamy lilt in her voice, before getting self-conscious and wiping the smile from her face. "I mean... that'd

be *nice* of you... to *explain* it, I mean." Once Brooke took her seat, Jennifer smoothed her peach satin skirt and sat next to her nervously. "And you can call me Jenny! Only my co-workers and my *mother* call me Jennifer!"

"Alright, *Jenny*." Brooke said with a smile, which seemed to hit Jenny like a slug of whisky. "See, there are regs about when and where military uniforms can be worn. Marine Corps regs are the strictest. Only someone in active service, or a retiree with twenty years service, can wear the uniform at *any* social occasion. Wartime vets with less than twenty years service, like Rich and Jack because they served in the Gulf War, can only wear it on *certain* occasions... weddings, military funerals or memorials, inaugurations, or parades and other activities involving other vets. Other Corps retirees can *never* wear the uniform again." As she talked, she could see Jenny was listening closely, and sitting even closer. Even still, she had a strange sense about the woman.

"And you know all that by *heart*?" Jenny asked in amazement.

Laughing, Brooke nodded and blushed. "That's *small* stuff! Uniform regs. I didn't even get into the four kinds of dress blues!"

Blushing even more obviously, Jenny looked away again. "Thanks for taking the time to explain it to me, Sergeant Hathaway!"

"Please, call me *Brooke*!" Looking around and seeing nobody paying much attention to them, and wanting to be able to speak more freely to the young woman, she nodded her head toward the back door. "Would you care to take a walk?"

"*M-Me*?" Jenny stammered as she felt faint. Confused and exhilarated at the same time, she swallowed her fear and nodded slowly. "I... I'd *like* that!"

Brooke stood and held out a hand. Helping the breathless young woman to stand, she smiled at her. "And here I thought today was going to be *dull*!"

The two walked out toward the pond in silence. Once there, they started to slowly walk the path around it before Brooke turned to her. "I... uh... got the feeling you wanted to ask me something, Jenny. You don't need to be shy or afraid. It's one of the reasons why I suggested the walk... some *privacy*."

"Well, since you *asked*... um... I kinda got a *vibe* from you? That you... um... *aren't* into guys?" She twirled her hair with a finger as she talked nervously.

"That's funny, I get a vibe from *you* that you *are*! If I'm wrong, just say the words!" Brooke smiled slyly and looked away at the pond.

"Oh, I've been out with a few guys. Nothing *serious*, just a date or two, but I never found anyone that I really liked though, ya know?"

"Not really!" Brooke laughed. "I've *never* gone out with a guy. Oh, I've been out with Jack and Rich, but that's just palling around. Not a *date*!"

"So you... um... *always* knew?" Jenny asked tentatively.

Brooke stopped and looked at her. "If you want to ask me something, why don't you come right out and ask?"

"Alright." Jenny said, gathering her courage to be uncharacteristically bold. "Did you *always* know you liked other girls?"

"What if I said yes?"

"Then... um... I think I might ask... *Oh!* I guess it's stupid! Never mind!"

"Are you wanting to go *out* with me, Jenny?"

Her eyes grew wide in shock. "Y-you... are you asking *me* out?"

"What if I were?" Brooke asked cautiously.

"Then... um... I guess I would say, *yes*?"

"Don't sound *too* eager!" Brooke joked. "I mean, if you wouldn't *want* to..."

"I *do*! I mean... I think I would *like* that, Brooke!" Pausing as they resumed walking together, Jenny looked over at her. "Can I ask why you won't just come out and say it? That... that you *like* me?"

Brooke sighed. "You have to understand my position, Jenny. I'm an active duty Marine... *in uniform*. If I were to be seen doing *anything* with you, even as simple as stating as fact that I like you or wanted to go out with you, I could be dishonorably discharged. As it is, if... *hypothetically*... we *were* to go out, I'd have to dress inconspicuously and not go anywhere I could be recognized or photographed, at least until October when my cruise is up."

The smaller woman furrowed her brow in confusion. "But no one is around to hear you, so why can't you say it?"

"Because *you're* here." Brooke pointed out, her tone becoming mildly harsh before softening once again. "Jenny, try to understand. You're being *vague*. You never actually *said* if you think it's OK for someone like me to like other women. You *could* just be trying to trick me into admitting it, so you could turn me in! This is a *very* dangerous subject to even be *discussing*. You will note that at no point have I admitted to *anything*, other than the fact that I've never dated a man. *Many* straight women my age haven't either."

"*Oh*." she replied. "Brooke?"

"Hmmm?" She looked over at the young woman.

"I think you're *beautiful*!" she practically sang the words before turning shy again. "I... I've never been interested in another woman before, so I... I'm not sure what I'm supposed to *do*! All I know is, when I *look* at you... I get that feeling that everyone says you're supposed to get when... um..."

"When you're *attracted* to someone?" Brooke finished for her.

Nodding, Jenny sighed. "You... you might think this is *terribly* forward of me, but... um... do you know what I want to do right now?"

"I can *guess*!" Brooke laughed. "Why don't you tell me?"

"*Kiss* you." she said shyly and barely above a whisper.

Brooke laughed as they turned the far corner of the pond. Seeing her walking companion look away embarrassedly, Brooke slowed her pace and stopped laughing. "*Oh!* I'm sorry, Jenny! I'm *not* laughing at you or what you want! Honestly! I'm laughing at me trying to tell somebody seeing us that it wasn't *me* kissing you, when I'm the only person in uniform *here!*"

Ahead, she saw a small outcropping of bushes that were growing next to the pond. Brooke bit her lower lip and stopped when they reached them.

Jenny only noticed Brooke had stopped after she'd walked on a little further. Stopping and turning back, she tilted her head. "What is it?"

"Come here." Brooke said softly. When Jenny turned back, she pointed a gloved thumb toward the house. "Can you see any part of the house?"

Turning, she looked and then back at Brooke, confusedly. "No."

"Then *they* can't see *us!*" she pointed out. Slowly, she pulled on the fingers of her gloves until they were free of her hands. Tucking them into her service belt, she stepped forward and took Jenny's hands in hers, taking a daring risk. "Do you still have the same feeling as earlier? Wanting to kiss me?"

Jenny nodded slowly, her eyes growing wide and her breath growing rapid.

Brooke let her fingers slide gently up Jenny's bare arms until they were at the girl's exposed shoulders. Slipping her fingers down along the peach satin of her gown until they came to rest on her slender waist, Brooke slowly pulled Jenny to her until their bodies touched. Bending down to the woman who stood six inches shorter, she tilted her head as Jenny did the same. Gently, she brushed her lips against the woman's cheek, feeling the quivering of Jenny's desire. Throwing caution to the wind, she moved her lips over the trembling girl's and tenderly let them touch for the first time.

Even as she did so Brooke could feel the instant heat of attraction boiling into desire, then need, within her. She'd never felt such an instantaneous hunger for anyone in her life, the burning passion that enflames the hearts of every woman who's ever been in love. It coursed through her so fast it terrified her that this woman, who she barely knew, could cause such powerful feelings in her that Brooke was ready to throw away her career just to kiss her one more time.

When Jenny felt the woman's lips touch her cheek she went through a wide gauntlet of emotions. First afraid for herself that someone would see them, then fear for Brooke being caught and punished. Then came the excitement at the newness of it, passion for more, dreading that a kiss on the cheek was all Brooke would do, anguish at knowing the woman would soon be over two thousand miles away, and lastly longing for Brooke to do so much more.

When Brooke moved her head and their lips touched, it was unlike any kiss Jennifer had ever known; soft and gentle, patient and yielding, tender and sensual. She could smell Brooke's perfume and it intoxicated her even more. She felt dizzy with so much shock that her eyes snapped open and she would have fallen, were not for the Marine's strong but gentle grip on her waist.

Pulling back slowly, Brooke ended the kiss reluctantly. Opening her eyes once more, she saw that Jenny had never closed hers. Stepping back, she cleared her throat. "I... uh... I guess that wasn't what you expected. I'm..."

She never got to finish apologizing before Jenny moved quickly up to her and pulled her down into a kiss as passionate as though they were long lost lovers reunited. This time it was Brooke who was taken so much by surprise at the depth of feeling this stranger brought out in her that she couldn't close her eyes. She had to look at the beautiful face a fraction of an inch away from hers that stirred her to the point of aching longing, just to know it was real.

Jenny slowly came back to her senses and realized just how forward she'd been. Shocking herself, she jumped back from Brooke as if bitten. "I'm sorry! Oh, *God!* I didn't... I mean, it's just that... oh, *wow!* Can I just say something? I've *never* looked at another woman and wanted to kiss her! I mean, I don't think I'm actually really *gay!* It's not you being a woman that made me need to kiss you, it was... it was *you* that made me need to! Oh, I am *so* confused!"

Brooke tried to repress a grin, but couldn't. "You and me *both*, sister! I... I think I understand though. When you kiss me, it's not like when any woman has ever kissed me before. When *you* kiss me, I feel... *whole!* Like a missing part of me just clicked back into place!"

"*Oh!* And I think I needed to kiss you to stop you from apologizing for when you kissed me! I mean, that first kiss on my cheek was... *wow!*"

"Jenny..." Brooke tried to jump in.

"And then that *second* kiss? I... I was like, in *shock*, it felt so good! I couldn't even close my eyes!"

"*Jenny?*"

"Is that why you thought that... *Oh!* It *is*, isn't it! You thought I didn't *like* it because my eyes were open! *Oh!* Wait, *huh?*"

Brooke laughed at the sudden wall of words. "Jenny! *Calm down!*" Walking up to her, she reached out to hold her. When the smaller woman didn't move

away, Brooke slid her arms around her and brought her closer. "OK, let's take this a piece at a time. *Yes*, I was about to apologize. I thought once I kissed you, you found it wasn't what you thought it'd be. I'm glad I was wrong!" Jenny calmed down and smiled up at her, fairly melting in the larger woman's arms. "I... uh... I'd *really* like to do that again!"

Her sense of duty reasserting itself, Brooke released her and stepped back. "Why don't we *talk* for a bit first, *hmm?*" Quickly pulling a compact out of her purse, Brooke cleaned Jenny's lipstick from around her mouth with a tissue. Reapplying her own lipstick, she smiled at Jenny and offered her the compact to do the same. Blotting and putting her gloves back on while Jenny touched up, she took back her compact and the two started walking the path once more. "May I ask you what made you approach me in the first place?"

Jenny took a breath. "OK, you'll probably think it pretty silly of me, though! I... I was *bored*, OK? Everyone at the party is like a Ph.D., Doctor, Nurse, Business Executive, or stuff like that! You looked... well... like the only other person there that knows what it's like to *work* for a living! Like a *normal* girl with *normal* problems like paying the rent or the gas bill!"

Breaking into a laugh, Brooke nodded in understanding. "I was thinking the same thing!"

"I... um... I also had *really* confused feelings about you at the fitting the other day." Jenny explained. "You were all mad at having to wear your dress, but it looked *so* good on you! Then when you turned and looked at me today? I felt like, '*Woah! She just made my knees weak with a look!*' When you asked me to sit with you, my hands got all sweaty like I was thirteen and Jimmy Francis just asked me to the dance! Then when you asked me to *walk* with you? *Uh!* I nearly kissed you right *then!*"

Brooke laughed. "Alright. Next question. How *old* are you?"

"I turn twenty-one next April eighteenth. *You?*"

"Oh, *God!*" Brooke laughed. "I'm robbing the cradle! I'll be twenty-*six* the end of next June!"

"Well, that's within the acceptable margin." Jenny mused. "I could be almost a year younger and it would *still* be OK!"

"Half plus seven?" Brooke asked, getting a nod in answer. "I suppose. OK, next. You've never dated a woman." Brooke stopped and waited until Jenny stopped to face her. "Would you *like* to?" she smiled.

Jenny moved toward her eagerly, wanting to answer with a kiss, but stopped with a blush, turned, and started walking again. "I... um... I... I think... *Yes!* Are you busy tomorrow night?"

"We *both* are! Remember? *Bridal* shower? Heather's *wedding*?"

"Oh yeah." she said disappointedly. "And at the wedding we'll *both* be busy! How about Sunday?"

"I'm free then. What did you have in mind?"

"Well, you said you couldn't go anywhere that you might be recognized or photographed." She looked over at Brooke nervously. "I... um... I could make you dinner at... uh... *my* place? You could relax and be yourself there, right?"

"Yes. I could also be very *tempted* there!" the Marine admitted. "You're too beautiful and irresistible for my own good!"

"Me? *Beautiful*? Oh, now I *know* that you're just flattering me! Maybe *pretty*, but not *beautiful*! I mean, Heather and Maya are beautiful!" Nervously, she looked at the ground. "And you're *gorgeous*!"

"Well, I think you're beautiful!" Brooke blushed. "And *way* too sweet!"

"Brooke? I... um... Do you think that it's weird that... um... Oh, never mind! What's your next question?"

"No! I want to hear what you wanted to ask!"

"OK. Um... I think... I think... I think you look *really* sexy in your uniform! I mean, like *really* sexy! Like super *hot* sexy! Oh, God! I said it!"

Brooke was so stunned she stopped walking. "*Really?* I mean, don't get me wrong, I think I look *good* in it, I know what it means to wear it, but *sexy?*"

"*See?* That's why I wasn't going to say anything! It's just... You wear it with such pride, and I really respect that! I mean, you put your *life* on the line, for *me!* I think that's just..." Jenny sighed wistfully. "*Sexy!*" Composing herself, she added, "I'm really thankful, too. Thankful to have met you, that you're you, that you stand up for *all* of us, and... and for taking a chance on me!"

Brooke sighed. "Well then, you're welcome! And I want to thank *you!*"

"What for?"

"For taking a chance on *me.*" Brooke sighed. "I was beginning to think that I'd never meet *anyone* like you, Jenny. You make me feel so good, it's *scary* really! I'd... If you wouldn't mind, I would *really* like to spend the rest of my Leave with you! If you wouldn't mind me hanging around that is!"

"When do you have to go back?" she asked almost sadly.

"I have to be back at ANAS by the sixteenth. I took three weeks Leave. I *was* going to spend it at home, but I'd rather spend it here! Then I have nine and a half months until the end of my cruise, but I'll probably be PCS to the butt-end of God knows where by April." Looking at Jenny, she saw the confusion. "*Sorry!* PCS, Permanent Change of Station. My long-term posting, Alameda Naval Air Station, is part of the base closures they're doing. So I'm getting

sent off somewhere new for my last six months or so before I get Outside. Just enough time to get hit on by every grunt and rust picker there!"

"Is it *that* bad for women in the military?"

"Depends on the woman. Jack made it easy for *me* for a long time, though." Brooke explained how Jack covered for her and kept the Sailors and other Marines from asking her out.

"So, did you date a *lot* then?"

Brooke laughed. "*No!* Not really! Maybe a half-dozen times over five years. I had to be *really* careful. Well, that and I'm *picky!*"

"So, you have over two weeks left. I could... *No!* Well, um... *Yea!* I could take my vacation time! I have it coming and I was just going to take the cash equivalent at the end of the year anyway!"

Brook stopped and turned to Jenny with a stunned expression. "You... you want to take your vacation time to spend with *me?*" Resuming their walk, she whistled low. "*Wow! That's* a first!"

Coming around the house side of the pond again, they kept up talking about themselves; where they'd grown up, their beliefs, and what they wanted out of life and relationships. The more they talked, the more they realized just why they were so quickly drawn to one another. It was beyond mere physical attraction. They were very compatible and somehow, on some level, they'd felt it before they knew it. Sitting in the lounge chairs next to the pond as they kept talking, Brooke heard someone approaching from the direction of the house.

Taking a drink from his glass, Jack was thankful that beer was a part of the menu. He watched Heather show Frank and Judith the house and introduce them to their other guests and just shook his head. "I don't *get* it, Buttons. I

mean, it's *obvious* she still hates me, but she's being... *polite*. Not friendly, but still polite. I don't *like* it!"

Stealing his glass for a sip as he talked, Erica handed it back to him. "What? You *want* her to make a scene?"

"*No*, but it makes me suspicious is all, like she's getting ready to drop a *bomb* on my head, like she somehow got our marriage *annulled* or something! I dunno!"

"Just be grateful for the reprieve, Jack. Maybe she's coming around! We *are* married, and moving to SoCal next summer! Maybe she realized that if she ever wants to see her *grandkids*, she needs to straighten up her act!"

He looked over at her expectantly. "Anything I should know about?"

Laughing, Erica shook her head. "*No*, Jack! I'm still on the pill! I still want to finish college first! *Believe* me, you'll be the second person to know!"

"Who gets first dibs? Brooke? *Heather*?"

"*Me*, you dork! I think *I* might have to know before *you* do!"

"*Oh*! I suppose you can tell *you* first. You're a lot closer! Known you your entire life!"

While Richard and Heather made the rounds with their parents, Jack looked idly around, finally noticing that Brooke was nowhere to be seen. "Buttons? You see Brooke? She appears to be MIA."

"Maybe she went in the Meeting Room. She's *almost* a guy!"

"Uh-uh. Guys aren't shaped like that. I'll have a look-see, though." Starting toward the Meeting Room, movement outside caught his eye. Doing a subtle

double take, he spotted Brooke walking along the path around the pond with a woman in a peach dress. Smiling, he headed back to Erica. "Ready for the A.A.R.?"

"*Jack!* You don't need to build it up! Where *is* she?"

"Come here!" he said quietly, taking her hand and casually making their way to the big bay window. "Without drawing any attention, take a look outside by the pond. See anything *interesting*?"

"That's Brooke..."

"So who's her dancing partner? I don't recognize her from the back and I never danced with her." he joked in reference to an old movie.

Erica drew in a breath. Lowering her voice to a whisper, she leaned over to his ear. "That's *Jennifer!* One of the other bridesmaids! Oh my God! I never would have *guessed* it! She seemed so sweet and shy!"

"*What?* She doesn't wear enough flannel?" Jack quipped, remembering his own reaction when he found out about Brooke. "Come on! *Look* at them!" Just as he turned, he saw them slowly walk behind the bushes at the far end of the pond, and then not come out the other side. Looking at Erica just as she looked at him, Jack cleared his throat. "Well! *OK* then!"

"Good for her!" Erica whispered. "She *deserves* someone!"

As a group went by towards the buffet, they stopped looking. "We, uh... we better stop or we're gonna attract unwanted attention their way!" Leading her back to where they'd been standing earlier, they settled back as though they'd never moved. Leaning over, Jack kissed her on the cheek.

"What was that for?" she asked, almost laughing.

"Because! I just *felt* like it is all! Don't I have a right?"

"You're feeling all *squishy* inside for Brooke, *aren't* you! Ya' big softie! A romantic at heart!" Walking around in front of him, Erica wrapped her arms around his waist. "And *this* is because *I* want to!" She leaned in and kissed him tenderly, sighing as she leaned back and looked at him.

"Erica, *please!* You'll make a *scene* and I'll *blush!*"

"Let 'em watch!" she growled. "We're *supposed* to be all mushy still! It won't be weird until we're still doing this ten or twenty years from now!"

Just as she was about to lean in and kiss him again, he tapped her shoulder. "Heart of Darkness at six o'clock!" Jack steeled himself for the assault as Erica's mother started making her way towards them; Richard, Heather, and Frank nowhere to be seen.

"Well! *There* you are, Erica!" she intoned sweetly. "Your father is talking to Richard, Heather needed to see to her guests, I thought we could catch up!"

"We've been right here, Mother. *Both* of us." Erica noted in a strained tone.

"Yes. I can *see* that dear. Jack? I understand you left the service. Keeping busy, I presume?"

"Yeah, I keep busy." he answered jovially. "Between running my drug trade and all the pimping and whoring I do, I hardly have time to *sleep!*"

"No need to be *crude!*" Judith replied haughtily. "I'm making an *effort!*"

Sighing, Jack closed his eyes and re-centered himself. "Alright, *Judith*. I'm running a dry-cleaners in Palo Alto. We're saving to buy a place near yours and Dad's, so Buttons can see you two more. By the time she graduates, we should have enough for me to open my *own* business."

"*Well!*" she said in surprise. "Maybe I misjudged you, Jack. I *still* think..."

"*What*, Mom? That I could have done *better* than Jack?" Erica snapped.

"*No* dear, that's *not* what I was going to say." she refuted. "What I was *going* to say is that I still thought it was a mistake for you two to get involved. He's almost like a *brother* to you, dear!"

"*Mom!*" Erica dragged her name out. "You can't keep doing this! Even when you're not being derisive, you're still managing to put him down!"

"You're right! You're right! I'm *sorry*, dear!"

"You should be apologizing to *Jack*, Mother!" she growled.

"Very well!" Judith looked at Jack. "*Jack?* I... I'm sorry. I'll try to do *better*."

Arching a brow and cocking his jaw slightly, Jack nodded. "Alright, Judith. Accepted. And... and I will as *well*. Now let's just forget it."

Just as he spoke, Frank came walking up, pipe in his teeth. "Judy? Richard wants to talk to you about Saturday."

"Alright, thank you dear. Erica? *Jack?* If you'll excuse me?" She made her way back towards the den where Frank had come from.

Turning to his daughter and son-in-law, he smiled and hugged her. "How you holding up, sweet pea? Your mother *behaving?*"

"Oddly, yes." she replied, watching skeptically as her mother departed.

"I'm shocked!" Jack added. "She *on* somthin'? Valium? Prozac? *Thorazine?*"

Chuckling, Frank shook his head. "*No!* No, I extracted a promise from her. She promised, on her honor, that for so long as you two love and *want* each other, she won't say anything negative about it, or *you*, Jack."

"*Huh?*" Jack stammered. "Um... wh... *how*..."

"*Frustrated* her into it!" he explained. "It doesn't matter how, though. She'd sooner gouge out her own *eyes* than break a promise to God!"

Spending a few minutes talking, Richard came out with Judith to join them.

"Hey, Jack?" he asked. "You seen Brooke anywhere? Heather needs her."

"*Oh!* Uh..." He looked at Frank and Judith and lied. "No, but I'll go find her for ya', Rich! You stay here with your guests!" He turned and gave Erica a quick kiss. "Back in a few, Buttons!"

While Jack took off through the house, Judith shook her head. "I thought you didn't like that nickname, dear?"

"No." she sighed. "I just only like it when *he* says it!"

Brooke turned around to see who was coming. "Oh, Jack! We were just..."

"Yeah, yeah! *Talking*. I know. *Stow* it, Brooke! The children aren't around!" Glancing at the woman sitting next to her, he smirked. "OK, maybe I was wrong! She looks a little *undercooked*, Brooke! Maybe throw her back on the fire a few more years?"

"Don't make me get up and kick your ass, Jack! I'm *comfortable!*"

"Well, you need to get up anyway! *Heather's* looking for you."

Brooke stood and helped Jenny out of her chair. "Sorry to cut it short!"

"I... I wanted to *thank* you, Jack!" Jenny blushed. "You... you've been a *really* great friend to Brooke and helped her! That means a *lot* to me!"

"*Well!* You two certainly hit it off! When's moving day? Oh, Brooke? Jenny? You uh... might want to touch up a little!"

"We already *did!*" Brooke shot back at him. Even as the words were coming out of her mouth, she knew he had gotten her again. "*Jack!*" she growled through gritted teeth.

"*Hey!* I was just confirming what I *suspected* you two were doing behind that bush! Yeah, Erica and I *both* saw! Rookie move!"

Brooke hung her head while Jenny blushed heavily.

"*Oh!* It's fine! I think it's *adorable!*" he comforted them comedically. "Erica agrees! If you like, I can... uh... see to it you two get some time *alone* later? Run *CAS* for you? One last time, Brooke?"

Shaking her head, Brooke was once more taken aback by how much he was still doing for her. "Have I ever told you I *love* you, Jack?"

"No, I don't believe you ever *have*, Brooke." Jack answered, turning serious. "I'm touched. *Honest.* And... well.. the same to you, Brooke."

"Well, let's get back inside then." she suggested, holding out her hand to Jenny. "Walk in front, Jack?"

"Rookie move!" he said through a smile. "You must have it *bad!*"

Chapter 19 - Love and Marriage

Jack not only saw to it Jenny and I had time alone that night, he saw to it we had time the next day before the bridal shower *and* that night *after* it! I think Jack was a little in love with the idea of Jenny and I being in love! More than anything though, I think Jack wanted to make sure *someone* would be there to take care of me, because he knew that very soon, he wouldn't be.

The day of the wedding came and everyone was frantic... except Heather. I worked overtime doing everyone's hair, then getting myself put together, but Heather never faltered or got nervous. That woman's a *rock!* Unshakable! We girls piled in Heather's limo afterwards, and Gregory drove us to the church in good time.

Later, Jack told me that Rich begged off his own Bachelor Party. Jack still threw it, but Rich didn't go, so neither did Jack! It ended up they spent the evening at a bar around the corner, nursing at beers and reminiscing, while Rich's guests partied hard a block away. It must have been a *beauty* of a party though, because Jack wouldn't say a *word* to me about what happened!

So November thirtieth nineteen ninety-six, Rich *finally* got Heather to say 'I Do'. The wedding was nice. The reception was... well... *memorable!*

Heather was the last to climb out of the car. Brooke escorted her through the front of the church and into a small room off to the side.

"All ready?" Brooke asked in a heavy exhale.

Nodding quickly, Heather squared her shoulders and lifted her chin. "*Ready!*"

"Alright! Just wait here and I'll be right back with Frank." Casting a quick glance and smile to Jenny, she headed out into the church where their guests

were still taking their seats. It was only a few dozen for each side, the church barely a tenth full, so finding him turned out to be easier than Brooke thought it would be.

"*Frank!*" she yelled at a whisper. Seeing him turn and smile, he tossed her a sloppy salute before he walked over to Richard.

"She's here, son! You're *on!*" He regarded his boy and nodded in approval. "You look good! Now get up in your place! You too, Jack!"

Checking each other's uniforms one more time, Jack and Richard stepped up in front of the altar.

"You have the rings, *right* Jack?" Richard whispered.

With a reassuring half-smile, Jack patted his pocket before his face dropped. "Um... uh... um!" Frantically, he started searching his uniform pockets in a desperate attempt to locate them.

"Cut the clowning, Jack!" he whispered again. "I'm not *buying* it this time!"

Tapping Richard on the shoulder, he looked at his best friend with a pained expression. "I... I think I left them in the pants pocket of my civvies in the changing room! I'm *serious*, Rich!"

Richard blanched. "You better get them fast, Jack! *Move* it, Marine!"

Seeing Jack running into the rear area of the church, Brooke stopped Frank on the way to the waiting room. "Take a knee, Frank. Jack just went U-A. You wait here. I'll go tell Heather we're on hold."

A minute later, Jack returned with a smile on his face. "Not to worry, Rich! I got your back! *Remember!* You *need* me!"

"Like a hole in the head!" Richard finished for him. "You *done* now? Can we get *on* with this, please?"

Jack shot the OK sign to Frank, who waved back and headed for the waiting area. "Alright, whatever it was, it's OK *now*." he said, rounding the corner. Stunned into stopping, he smiled. "*Oh!* Rich don't *deserve* you, little lady!"

Heather shook her head, her veil waving as she did. "*No!* I don't deserve *him*, Frank!"

"You can knock off that *Frank* business, sweetie! If I'm about to walk you down the aisle, I'm Dad to you!"

"Alright... *Dad!* I'm ready!"

After the music began, Maya started up first. Jenny followed, smiling and blushing at Brooke as she passed her. Lastly, Erica moved in behind them, winking knowingly at Brooke. The three bridesmaids making their way up the aisle, Brooke snapped to attention and began her precession, her Dress Blues a stark contrast to the pale pink of the bridesmaids' dresses.

Lastly, Frank took Heather's arm and escorted her to his waiting son, glowing with pride at seeing him prepared for whatever challenges awaited the two.

The on-looking guests smiled as Brooke passed them with perfect precision in her cadence, her eyes cast in the thousand-yard-stare of long-engrained drill. When at last the guests turned to see Heather, her ballgown dress was trailed by a chapel-length train attached at the bustle with thousands of pearls decorating the dress in an elaborate floral pattern across the bodice.

Reaching the altar just as the music ended, the service went on in traditional fashion, flowing through the ceremony just as billions of others before it. Jack occasionally stole a smiling glance at Erica, who seemed to know when he was doing it, as she would always be looking back at him and smiling.

Brooke was a statue. Her eyes never wavered, her bearing unmovable, as though you could push her over and she would crack like a marble statue. Her perfection didn't stop Jenny from stealing glances around Erica, though. Jack caught her checking Brooke out from behind at least twice, with the faintest glimmer of desire in her eyes each time.

When the ceremony at last came to a close, the minister giving permission to kiss the bride, Richard raised her veil and placed it over and behind her.

Heather looked up at him. "*Hello, Mr. Hargrave!*" she said low and soft.

Bending down to kiss her, he smiled. "Hello... *Mrs. Hargrave!*"

When the minister introduced the couple to their guests, Jack and Brooke both gave out a shout. "*Ooo Raa!*" raising cheers from everyone.

After getting photos of the wedding party, they quickly made their way to the reception hall a few blocks away. Climbing into Heather's limo, Gregory congratulating them as he closed the door, Richard removed his cover and kissed Heather passionately. Making out in the back of the car almost the whole way, Heather finally made him stop to touch herself up.

Meanwhile, Jack worked furiously to get everyone in their cars. "*Come on people! Hustle! Hustle! Hustle! We have ten minutes to get to the hall!*" He'd made sure that Gregory was taking the scenic route to get there, but it still only gave them a few minutes margin so that their guests could both see them off at the church and greet them at the reception.

Catching sight of Brooke, he half-smiled at her. "*Perfect drill, Hathaway! No gigs!*"

"The day this *Sergeant* takes gigs from a *Lance Corporal* is the day I *quit!*" she retorted.

Leaning in close, Jack lowered his voice. "What did you *do* to that poor girl, Brooke! She was practically undressing you with her eyes all through the ceremony!"

"Why not?" she said nonchalantly. "She's done it *before*!"

"Oh! *Details*, Girl! You owe me details!" Jack insisted as he got in the car behind her.

The happy couple reached their reception and stepped out, surprised by the cheers and whistles from the same people they'd just left. Jack stood front and center of the crowd and pointed his finger at Richard. "*Gotcha!*"

Shaking his head, Richard escorted Heather up to Jack. "Someday, Jack. I don't know *when*, I don't know *how*, but someday, I'm gonna see you coming, and then..." He started to move toward him.

Jack held up his hands defensively. "*Hey!* You still *need* me, Rich! I still got a Best Man speech to give and I still have stuff even *worse* than 'Cindi with an i' up my sleeve!"

Stopping mid-move, Richard only tipped his cover. "Lead on, Jack! The *hero* of this story wants to celebrate!"

The party went through the usual motions; cake cutting, face smearing, and first dance to '*Love of a Lifetime*'. When all the formalities were over with but one, Jack picked up the microphone.

"*Hello?* This thing on? *OK!* Good evening, ladies... gentlemen... *Rich!*" He paused a moment while people snickered. "Best Man speeches are supposed to be memorable, and I'm sure ol' buddy boy Rich over there is just *waiting* for me to embarrass the living *heck* out of him! He knows I can do it, too! I know all his secrets! I *could* tell you about the day we met! Funny story! Rich sees this jerk about to *pummel* me... and he *stops* him. I make a total

fool of myself in front of the entire lunchroom... and *he* helps clean up the mess. I get my *heart* broken... *he's* there to help me pick up the pieces. I get *humiliated* in front of the *entire school*... *he* gets even for me. I get *hurt*... well... *Frank* helped me there. Sorry, Rich!"

A small laugh went around the room before he continued. "I don't get a date to Senior Prom, can't afford tickets, or a tux, or *anything*... *he* gets me the best date I could *imagine*." Looking at Richard, Jack subtly nodded. "I need physical therapy to pass the Marine Corp physical... *he* coaches me through it. I find this woman who's absolutely *amazing*... " he paused to glance at Brooke, "... *he* shows me what a great *friend* she can be. I get slapped by my *date*..." he looked at Heather with a grin, "... and *he* goes and tries to talk her into giving me a second chance. My mother goes into a *coma*... *he* calls to give me the news *himself*. I get passed up for promotion... *he* takes me out to celebrate not having to become an *NCO*!"

After a pause to take a drink, he continued his speech to his rapt audience. "I never get invited to *parties*... *he* refuses to go unless I can come. I fall in love with his *sister*... *he* gives me his blessing. *Yep!* I know a *whole lot* about my buddy Rich! I could tell you stories that would leave you all in stitches for *hours*... but I wanted only *one thing* to come out of this speech. I wanted *everyone* here to know what a *privilege* it is to know, and be the *friend* of, Richard Hargrave."

Putting down the mic, Jack walked in front of Richard's seat at the head table. Pulling his heels together crisply, he snapped to attention. Slowly raising his arm, he saluted his best friend and held it. Getting up, Richard returned the salute, and the two looked at each other, both sharing a lifetime of comradery in a single breath. Returning to attention, Jack turned sharply and marched from the room before anyone noticed the wetness in his eyes.

Washing his hands in the restroom after composing himself, he saw Richard stroll in slowly. "You did it *again*, Jack. Caught me *completely* by surprise! How do you *do* it! Here I figure, 'OK, Jack's my Best Man, Best Man speech,

Jack the always on comedian...' I knew what I was asking for! So I'm ready for either a ten minute vaudeville routine, or every funny story about me you can think of to embarrass me! And what *do* you do?"

"*Look Rich,*" Jack interrupted. "I... I just wanted you to *know*..." Looking up at him, he chuckled once before looking at the floor again and started to dry his hands. "I just wanted you to know that I *knew* all those times you stood up for me, that... that I... uh... I *knew*, Rich... and I *loved* you for it every *time*. Because you didn't *have* to! You would have had it easier if you'd have just let Ox beat the tar out of me and just minded your own business! You didn't *have* to, but you did *anyway*, and you *keep* doing it! And I *know*, OK?"

"*Jack?*"

"Yeah? What is it, Rich?"

"Your fly's open."

"*Shit!*" he looked down, but saw nothing wrong and looked up deadpan.

"*Gotcha!*" Richard shouted as he ran from the restroom.

A second later Jack took off after him. "Rich! You son of a..." Tearing out of the room, he was intercepted by Erica as she threw her arms around him, tears streaming down her cheeks.

"Oh, *Jack!*" she cried. "That was... it was *beautiful!*"

Holding her while she cried, he saw Brooke leaning against the opposite wall next to the ladies room door. "Wow, Jack. That was..." Brooke sighed. "It was *wonderful*, Jack. Nothing could have been better!"

Smiling back at her, he nodded. "*Thanks*, Brooke!"

Kicking herself off the wall, she slowly walked toward him. "Of course, you *know* you just caused every woman in that room to rush off to the Head to fix their *make-up*, right?"

"Everyone but *you*, Brooke!"

"*Bah!*" she waved a hand at him dismissively. "I'm no *woman*, Jack! You know that! Corps through and through! *Ooo Raa!*"

"You fixed your make-up out here in the hall, didn't you?" Jack guessed.

"Head was too busy!" she smirked at him.

After everyone returned to the reception hall, Richard picked up the mic.

"Um... I know this isn't *traditional*, but I... uh... I wanted to say a few words about Jack's speech." He paused as he took a drink. "I... uh... I just want to let you all know... he's *absolutely right!*" Laughter filled the room as Richard smiled. "I *have* been looking out for Jack since he was thirteen! And I'm *such* a wonderful guy for doing it!" Laughter rolled through the room once more. "*Everyone!* Give me a round of applause!" Cheers and applause mixed with laughter as Jack was left agape. "*Alright*, everyone! Time to have *fun!*"

Music filled the room as he returned to his seat between Jack and Heather while '*Everybody Have Fun Tonight*' played and people started to dance.

"*Rich!*" Jack looked at him with a shocked expression. "You stole my act!"

"Yeah, yeah! Well, you let us all down, Jack! The King of Comedy gives a *serious* Best Man speech? It had to be done, Jack!"

"You're a *straight* man, Rich! You can't do comedy on your own!"

"Lucky for me I followed *you!*" Richard shot back as he downed his drink.

Heather took his glass from his hand and turned it upside down. "Alright funny-man! You're cut off! I already told you at Jack and Erica's wedding that I am *not* pouring you into bed again!"

"Yes, dear!" he replied.

"Same goes for *you*, Jack!" Erica warned him. "I want you *sober* tonight!"

With the dance floor crowded as the first sounds of '*Girls Just Wanna Have Fun*' filled the room, Heather stood up and grabbed Brooke's hand, nearly jerking her off balance. "Come on, girl! You're coming with me!" Reaching the dance floor, they were joined by Erica, Jenny, and Maya as the five of them danced together, while Jack and Richard laughed at Brooke trying to dance to eighties pop in her Dress Blues. More than once the Marine found Jenny dancing very close to her, almost as if they were dancing just with each other, while the others were off on their own.

Just as Brooke and Jenny were smiling and dancing close again, the song faded to '*True*' and what had a moment earlier been innocent fun became a dangerous desire to slow dance together in public.

"*Jenny...*" Brooke began, when suddenly her face became serious. "You'll have to excuse me." Brooke's cheeks flushed red with embarrassment as she quickly left the dance floor and returned to the head table, taking Erica's seat next to Jack for a moment.

Jack leaned over. "*Sorry*, Brooke. That was rough! That DJ's a *bitch!*"

Drinking a glass of water quickly, she nodded. "Almost makes me wish I'd just worn the stupid dress! No one would have *cared!*"

"So what *did* you two do last night?" Jack asked. "Seriously! No jokes, no crude comments, just a friendly ear."

Looking down at her lap, she shrugged. "We... uh... things got pretty *involved* and... um... I might have used the word '*love*'."

"You *might* have?" Jack asked incredulously. "*Brooke*, did you tell Jenny you *loved* her? After only knowing her for two days?" Seeing her silently nod, he whistled low. "What are you gonna do when your Leave is up?"

"Go back to The Bricks! What else *can* I do?" she answered, looking across the room at Jenny. "Jack? Tell me *not* to do what I'm thinking!"

"That depends on what you're *thinking*." he replied cautiously. Slowly his eyes widened. Keeping his voice low he broke into a whisper. "*Brooke!* Don't even *think* it! You get caught and you'll be dishonorably discharged! You think the Old Man won't see pictures of Rich's wedding day online?"

"*Jack!*" she growled through gritted teeth. Lowering her voice once more, she whined, "Jack, I just want to go out on that floor and dance with the woman I *love!*" Catching herself saying it out loud again made her eyes bulge.

Shaking his head, he looked at her sternly. "I know, and I'm *happy* for you that you found someone to love! I wish you could too, but that dance would *probably* cost you your job and make getting another one almost *impossible!* How many people that *you* know will hire a DD Marine?"

Sighing, she nodded in defeat. "I *know*, Jack. It's just..." She almost felt like crying.

Hugging her shoulders with one arm, he tried to console her. "I *know*, I *know*. It's hard, it's not fair, and this time I can't cover for you, but you *knew* that going in." He looked at her with a hopeful smile. "*Hey!* You have less than a year left! How long have you been looking for someone like Jenny? What, since you were eight?"

"*Seven.*" she answered with a slight smile of her own.

"So? You've waited eighteen years? What's one more?" Shaking her slightly with his arm, his voice turned mirthful. "Huh? Right? You *know* I'm right!"

Brooke couldn't help but laugh at his clowning as she surreptitiously dabbed a tissue at the corner of her eyes. "You're right, Jack. Ten months! I can do that!" She paused and looked at her lap again. "But will Jenny?"

He sighed and looked across the room at Jenny talking with Heather and his wife. "Well, what happened when you told her? How did she react?"

She smiled and chuckled once. "She... um... she was stunned, I guess. I mean, we... we haven't *done* anything yet besides kiss and make out a little. She's... she's never been with a woman before. I think she's never even *considered* it before!" She shook her head and looked off into the distance. "Lucky me, right? Find the right girl and she's straighter than *you*!"

"I seriously doubt that, Brooke. I've never made out with *Rich* before!" His humor worked, lifting her spirits and making her laugh. Looking at her and then across the room at Jenny, he turned serious. "Listen, why don't you go talk to her? Tell her what you feel and what you want and what you need to do to *get* it. I'll bet you anything, if she's *half* the woman you think she is, she'll wait for you."

Seeing Jenny across the room glancing at her made her blush again. "You think so? *Honestly*?"

"Brooke, I *love* you. You're like the sister I never had. I... I just want you to be happy, and I know if you threw it all away for her, you'd *hate* yourself for it, and sooner or later you'd hate her for it, too. So, go! *Talk!*"

Standing up, she looked at him. "You're *right*. When did you get so wise?"

"Life's a *bitch* of a teacher, but I *learned*. Good luck!" he said as she started around the table.

Jenny was beyond frustrated as she talked with Heather and Erica. "I... I just don't *get* it! She's hot and cold! Fine one second, then gone the next! I... I've never *done* this before! Am I doing something *wrong*?"

Shaking her head, Heather smiled. "Jenny, I don't know exactly what's going on between you two, but I know one thing. If you were doing something Brooke didn't like, you'd *know* it! She can be extremely... *blunt*!"

"Like a *brick*!" Erica added. Shyly biting her lip, she looked at Jenny. "Um... so what *is* going on with you two? I mean, I know you like each other, and that's *great*, but... um... how far have things gotten?"

Blushing heavily, Jenny wanted to just run and hide. "I... I *kissed* her."

Heather looked at her incredulously. "That's all? I sincerely doubt that's all that's going on, here!"

Rolling her eyes, Jenny put her hand on her hip. "*What!* You want *details*? *Fine!* We made out, *OK!*?" Her anger at Heather pressing the point ebbed as she retreated back into herself once more. "I mean... that is we... Oh *God*, Heather! I'm just messed up! I'm a confused broken mess and she knows it! No *wonder* she keeps backing off! She ought to just *run!*"

Erica stole a glance across the room at her husband talking with Brooke, who seemed to be on the edge of tears. "Jenny? Can I ask you something?" Seeing the young woman nod, she tried to be delicate. "How do you feel about her?"

Looking across the room at Brooke just as she was looking back sent a shiver up her spine, making her look away. "I... uh... I *really* like her! More than anyone I've ever known! I like her so much it *scares* me sometimes! I wasn't ever ready for something like this! I've never even *looked* at another woman the way I look at her! She makes me feel... special... wanted..." She sighed and closed her eyes, finishing softly. "...*loved!*"

The silence between the three was palpable as Erica and Heather looked at one another in surprise. Finally Jenny shook her head as if to clear it. "*No!* It just... it wouldn't work! I mean, I'm pretty sure I'm not gay! I *like* looking at guys! I don't think I could *ever*..." She looked at the floor embarrassedly before looking over at Brooke once more. "Oh, God! But when I *look* at her, I just want to..."

"Jenny?" Heather asked sweetly. "Are you in *love* with her? Because I have to be honest, everything you're saying and doing is telling me that you are!"

Looking at her with eyes wide, Jenny blurted out, "She... um... she told me! I mean, last night we had dinner after the shower... the *wedding* shower I mean!" Flustered that she'd implied Brooke and she had showered together last night, she took a breath and tried again. "Last night, we had dinner after the wedding shower. We were talking, and laughing, and... well... she just... *blurted it out!*"

Erica shook her head in confusion. "Blurted *what* out!"

"She said, 'I *love* you!' At first it was just like one of those things you say? Like 'I love pasta' or 'I love laughing', but then, after she said it, she *looked* at me funny and... and said it seriously! Like she really *meant* it!"

Heather blinked. "Well? What did *you* say?"

"Not *much*. We were kind of... *busy*... after that." Jenny admitted shyly.

"So after that did you tell her you loved her, too?" Heather asked impatiently.

"*No!*" Jenny shot back defensively. "I... I mean... I don't know if I do! How do you know if you're in love with another woman?"

"It's no different than if you were in love with a man, Jenny." Heather stated as fact. "You just *know*."

Erica smiled subtly as she got an idea. "Jenny? Close your eyes and picture yourself with Brooke." Seeing Jenny's eyes close, she pressed forward. "Now she's *gone*! How do you feel?"

Her eyes shooting open, Jenny almost started to cry. "Oh, God! I *am* in love with her! I'm in love with a woman! I'm in love with Brooke! A woman I've only known for *two days*!" She looked at Heather and Erica as if searching for help. "What do I do?"

Seeing Brooke stand and start walking their way, Heather smiled. "*Do*? You *enjoy* it, Jenny!" Quickly, she got out the compact from Jenny's purse and dabbed a tissue under the younger girl's damp eyes. Looking her over, she nodded. "Touch up a little."

Confused, she looked in the tiny mirror and hid the redness under her eyes. Looking up, she saw Brooke approaching. "*Oh my God*! Do I look alright? What should I do?"

Heather laughed lightly. "You look *fine*, Jenny! You should just talk to her."

Brooke stepped up to the three women and looked at her friends. "Heather? Erica? Would you two excuse us for a bit?"

The bride and bridesmaid nodded and, as soon as Heather was in back of Brooke, turned and mouthed to Jenny, "*Tell her!*"

Seeing an empty table, Brooke smiled. "Why don't we sit and talk a bit?"

Melting at her smile, Jenny returned it and nodded. "*OK!*"

Sitting together, she leaned on the table, looked at Jenny, and smiled again dreamily before clearing her throat and sitting up once more. "I... um... I... I wanted to apologize for earlier. I feel I should explain."

"*Oh!* You don't have to explain!" Jenny offered enthusiastically. Suddenly looking embarrassed, she looked away. "I... I must have done something that made you... *uncomfortable.*"

"Actually, no." Brooke corrected her. "You did something that made me feel like doing something I shouldn't. Not *yet* anyway." She sighed as she tried to explain. "I... I have obligations. Part of that is respecting this uniform and all it represents. I wanted to hold you in my arms and dance with you *so much*, I very nearly *did*. Doing it would have been a violation of my standing orders though, something I just *can't* overlook. I'm... I'm sorry."

Jenny looked up at her with eyes full of compassion. "*No!* You don't need to be sorry. *I'm* the one that needs to apologize. I... I'm *immensely* proud of you and how committed you are! I just got caught up in the fun of dancing with you, I shouldn't have put *you* into the position of having to choose between me and... and what makes me *love* you."

Brooke suddenly looked at Jenny with eyes wide. "You... you *love* me?"

"Yeah. I think I *do!*" Jenny smiled shyly.

Right then, Brooke wanted nothing more than to pull Jenny to her and kiss her passionately. Instead, she just smiled. "You know I love you too, right?"

Nodding, Jenny smiled wide. "*Yes!* I love *hearing* it, though!"

"OK, so here's the deal. I have ten months left. As soon as I'm Outside and my commitments are fulfilled, I... I want to move here, to *live* with you."

The import of what she was saying struck Jenny like a lead weight. "You... you want to *live* with me? But... don't you have family in New Mexico?"

"*Oklahoma!*" Brooke laughed. "But I don't *care!* My father will probably *disown* me and my mother will try to 'fix' me by guilting me, saying that it's

all her fault, but I don't *care* about any of that! All I want is to do my duty as I swore to do, then spend the rest of my life loving you!"

Jenny was overwhelmed. "You... you'd *do* that? Give up your family and everything you've ever known, for... for *me*?"

Shrugging absently, Brooke smiled. "I *have* to! My heart won't let me do anything less!" Looking at her seriously, she continued. "It means being away from you for most of the next year, though. *I'm* willing to wait. I've waited eighteen years to find someone as wonderful as you. One more won't kill me, but... but I guess I need to know. Will *you*?"

"I... I don't know." Jenny said honestly. "I mean, I *want* to! I think I would do almost *anything* for you, Brooke! But... a year without you?" She looked away ashamedly. "I... I don't know if I could *stand* it!"

Brooke felt her heart sink. "Well, I could try and come see you. I... I don't know where I'll be stationed soon though, so I don't know how easy that will be. But I can *try*! If... if you're willing."

Looking in Brooke's eyes, Jenny saw the longing and saw how easily she could hurt this strong woman. Suddenly overwhelmed with pride for her serving Marine, she nodded and smiled. "I'll wait. I... I *love* you, Brooke!" Laughing, she looked away. "I guess now I know how military wives feel!"

"*Woah!*" Brooke shouted quietly. "Are you asking..."

"*Huh?*" Suddenly her eyes shot open. "*Oh!* I... um... I didn't mean... that is, what I *meant* was..."

Brooke laughed and took Jenny's hand discretely. "I know what you meant! I just thought I'd have a little fun with you!" She smiled and looked deeply into Jenny's eyes. "The scary part is, I think if you *were* asking, I... I'd say yes!"

Enjoying the feel of Brooke's gloved hand in hers, she blushed and shied away. "I don't think I could ever see *me* asking, but I know how you feel. Sometimes I feel so strongly about you it scares me, too! If *you* asked me, I... I don't think I could say no!"

It was Brooke's turn to blush as she looked away. "I... I'll keep that in mind!"

Jenny smiled at her and looked at the carefully pressed jacket Brooke wore. Reaching out, she discreetly ran a finger along one of the seams. "I *love* what this means to you." she commented idly. "And I *love* that you respect it so much, I... I can't help loving it, too. It's a part of what makes you the person I love, and I know it always will be."

She looked up at Brooke. "*Thank* you for not putting what we want ahead of the things that make me love you!" She stood up and backed away. "I think we should go back to the head table. I... I don't want anyone to think you're doing something you shouldn't."

"Will I still see you tomorrow?" Brooke asked, half fearing the answer.

"You better believe it!" she smiled. "But, tomorrow? Leave the uniform at *home*!"

Chapter 20 - New Life

Jenny and I spent the next two weeks together almost constantly. She got her time off of work, though I'm pretty sure Heather had something to do with that! Those weeks we spent together were all that we'd have for the next year. After I went back, I got my PCS notice effective the first of January ninety-seven. They were already drawing down ANAS and shipping us out to other duty stations.

So two weeks after I said goodbye to Jenny, Heather, and Rich, I was saying goodbye to Jack and Erica, too. I was being shipped off to Okinawa, which left me so far from everyone else it wasn't worth trying to get home to see anyone. I poured myself into my job and counted the days. All I had to get me though it was the memory of those blissful two weeks and the occasional phone call that I made off base.

In the interim, Erica graduated with a degree in Psychology, and she and Jack were getting ready to start *their* new life.

Looking around the apartment one more time, the only thing Jack could find were the last few boxes left to put in Erica's car. Searching each room for items they might have missed, he remembered the fun and love he and Erica had shared in the place they had called home the first eighteen months of their lives together. The heat of the August morning was already making the apartment stuffy since the power had been turned off. Certain that nothing had been overlooked, he grabbed the boxes and carried them out and down to the car where Erica was trying to fit everything in.

"Jack, I don't know if we're gonna be able to fit what we've got in here!" she complained. "We should have put some of these things in the moving van before it left!"

"Everything here we needed for the last two days, Buttons." he pointed out. "I mean, we couldn't pack up the last of our clothes, or the kitchen, or the *bathroom*! Could you see us going two days in the same clothes, or without a shower or being able to cook?"

Erica sighed. "I *know* Jack, but what are we gonna do?"

He half-smiled at her. "I *got* it! Put 'em in the passenger seat, and you ride on my lap!"

Laughing, Erica shook her head. "I think CHP would object, love!" Looking around at the boxes, she threw up her hands. "I give up! You're on, funny-man. Figure out a way to get all of this to fit!"

After re-packing and shuffling the contents into different boxes, half an hour later Jack pushed the hatchback closed, having to lean on it. "*There!* Got it! Everything's in!"

"You've got things packed so tight in there I'm afraid that when we get to the house and open it, it'll be like opening a joke can of peanut brittle!"

"Don't sweat it, sweetheart!" he said in a terrible impression of Humphrey Bogart. "I'll take the first leg."

Erica shook her head. "No way, *José!* I'll take the first leg! You get that lovely Southern California traffic!"

"It's not *that* much worse than up here!" he argued. "Besides, I'll want to take a nap later after repacking all this stuff four times!"

"You can nap first and then drive us over the finish line!" she insisted. "I'm a better navigator than you, and we're gonna need that when we get down there, not up here where I know all the roads!"

"Yes, dear." Jack gave in, opening the passenger door. Pausing, he looked up at their old apartment window. "I think I'm gonna miss this place." He turned and looked at her about to get in the driver's side. "Special memories!"

"For *both* of us!" she pointed out as she got in. Buckling, she looked over at Jack doing the same. "Ready?"

"As I'll ever be!" he answered. "Let's go *home*!"

Their drive down was fairly uneventful. They switched places just outside Bakersfield when they stopped for gas. Jack fell asleep less than an hour into the trip and felt rested for the four-hour drive ahead. Erica napped until they reached the four-oh-five interchange, then agonized over the stop-and-go traffic. Finally, an hour after sunset, they reached the house they'd bought in Newport Beach, located less than a five-minute walk from her parents' home.

Turning off the motor, Jack finally relaxed. "We're *here*! Movers should have put most of the big things where they belong, so all we should have to do is unpack the car, take everything in, and then unpack everything else!" He glanced at his watch. "Shouldn't take past... oh... *February*!"

They laughed together as they got out. Jack started moving boxes to the front door while Erica got out her keys and unlocked it. She was about to step in when she felt herself suddenly lifted into Jack's arms.

"Put me *down* you goof!" she laughed.

"Sorry! Old traditions are still important!" He swung her easily in through the doorway and Erica reached over with one hand to turn on the light.

Nothing happened.

She looked at him in the dark. "You remembered to call and have the power turned on today, *right*?"

"*Yeah!*" he said as he placed her on the floor just inside the door. Running back to the car, he fished a flashlight out of the glove box and turned it on. Running back to the front door, they saw a maze of boxes filling the living room, creating an imposing wall of packed things. "Let me see if I can make my way through this and check the fuse box."

Erica watched him disappear around a corner stack of boxes. She followed his progress through the living room by watching where the flashlight lit up the ceiling above and in front of him. Finally she saw the light vanish down the back hallway that led to the bedrooms; the breaker box located inside the master bedroom closet. She heard several thumping sounds and Jack cursed twice. Suddenly, she heard him yell as the living room light she'd switched on came to life. "*Jack!* Are you OK?" The hallway light came on as she made her way into the cluttered house.

Jack saw her as they met near the entry to the kitchen while he sucked on the side of his right index finger. Taking it out of his mouth and shaking it, he nodded back towards the bedroom. "Breaker was tripped, probably when the power was turned on. Damn thing cut me when I reset it!"

"Are you alright?" she asked concernedly, grabbing his hand to examine it. "*Jack!* You're *bleeding!*"

"*Ah!* Just a flesh wound!" he said dismissively. "I'll put some disinfectant on it after we unpack the bathroom. Lets get those boxes in so we can get it."

Two hours later, they sat at the only two kitchen chairs that weren't stacked with boxes. "At this rate we'll need a *week* to settle in! Where did we *get* all this stuff?"

"It's things I brought from Pittsburgh, plus things *you* brought, plus what I'd gotten in college." she answered. "It's all the things you need to run a *house*, Jack."

"Forget it!" Jack suggested "Let's chuck 'em all outside and live the *simple* life! It'd be easier than unpacking!"

"Come on, you!" she laughed as she stood back up and dragged him to his feet. "Break time's over! We need to at *least* find the sheets so we can sleep on our bed!"

They didn't get to bed until well past one in the morning and had only been asleep three hours when the phone rang. Jack turned on the light, reaching down to the floor next to the bed where they'd put the telephone for the time being. "Gary's Dry Clean, Jack speaking." he mumbled.

Heather would have laughed if she hadn't been so excited. "*Jack?* Jack you're at home, not at work. I need to talk to Erica! Is she *there?*"

Slowly realizing where he was, he looked at the watch he'd forgotten to take off when they'd gone to bed. "*Heather?* It's four in the morning! I don't know what time *you* get up there on the farm, but out here we have *hours* left 'till we milk the cows!"

"*Oh!* I'm sorry, Jack! I completely forgot about the time difference!" Heather apologized. "Um... did I *wake* you?"

"*No!* We get up at four *every* morning! Good for catching worms!"

Erica rolled over. "Who *is* it, Jack? Tell them to call back in the morning!"

"It's Heather, Buttons... and it *is* morning there. She wants to talk to you. Want me to give her the brush off?"

Sitting up, she shook her head. "No, I'll take it." Grabbing the receiver, she sighed. "Heather? It's Erica. *Look* honey, can this wait until tomorrow? It's *late!*"

"So am I!" she replied.

"For what?" Erica asked sleepily. "Whatever it is, I'm s..." Suddenly Erica was wide-awake. "*Heather?* Do you mean..."

"Uh-*huh!*" she answered, her smile audible even over the phone.

"Oh my God! *Heather!* When did you find out?" she yelled.

Jack rolled over, having started falling back asleep until Erica yelled. "Is everything OK? Something wrong with Rich?"

She covered the mouthpiece with her palm. "Heather's having a *baby!*"

"What, *now?*" he asked. "When did all *this* happen?!"

She shushed him. "Heather?"

"I just found out and I *had* to tell you right away!" she said excitedly. "I'm sorry for calling at such an early hour! I just couldn't wait!"

"*No!* It's *fine*, Heather! I'm glad you called!" Lowering the mouthpiece she told Jack, "She *just* found out!" Going back to the phone she asked, "How far along are you?"

"Five or six weeks." she answered excitedly. "My due date should be in April! Oh, *Erica!* I'm so excited!"

"How's Rich taking it?" she asked.

"I haven't told him yet." she explained. "He left for work an hour ago and won't be back until late tonight. He's working out of the office today, so I can't even call him. I just *had* to tell somebody and Brooke isn't reachable!"

"Well congratulations, Heather! I'm sure Rich will be *thrilled!*"

"*Wait a minute!*" Jack sat up suddenly. "*I know before Rich does!?* Oh, ho, ho! This is gonna be *so good!*"

"Don't you *dare* ruin this for Heather!" Erica barked. Hearing her sister-in-law over the phone, she went back to it. "What's that, Heather? Oh, Jack was just planning something nefarious for Rich because *he* knows before *Rich* does! Don't worry, Heather! *I'll* keep him in line!"

"You tell Jack that if he ruins this surprise for me, I'll... I'll... I'll never speak to him again!"

She turned to her husband. "*Jack?* I'm *serious*. If you ruin this for her, I don't think I could ever forgive you for it! This is not something to turn into a *joke!* Do you understand me?"

Jack lay back and sighed. "Alright. *Fine!* Ruin the best thing I've ever had on Mr. Perfect! I'll let it go!" He grumbled as he rolled over and pulled the sheet tight up to his neck.

"OK, Heather. You don't need to worry. Jack won't do anything. You just plan however you want to tell him! Congratulations again! All right! Call me later! *Bye!*" Hanging up the phone and handing it to Jack to put back on the floor, Erica lay back and sighed. After a time, she rolled over and wrapped her arms around him. "*Jack?* You still awake?"

"*Unfortunately.*" he grumbled.

"Jack?" She paused, trying to think how to broach the subject. "Jack, I want to go off the pill."

He slowly rolled over and looked at her. "*Seriously?* I thought you wanted to wait until we were more settled..."

"I *know* what I said!" she interrupted him. "I changed my mind. Oh, *Jack*! Don't you want to start our family? Rich and Heather got married *after* us and here we are, in our own *house*, and we haven't even started *trying* yet!"

"We've been in our own house for a total of *seven hours*, Buttons! What? You wanna start *now*?" He looked up into her eyes, seeing the mischievous grin creep across her face. His face lit up with a half-grin before they both started giggling and working to get undressed as quickly as possible.

Heather struck a match and lit the two candles that she'd placed on the dining room table. Shaking the match out once they caught, she moved over to the light switch and dimmed it just bright enough to allow them to see while still emphasizing the candlelight. Smiling, she walked back to the mirror by the front door and checked herself one more time. Just then she heard a car pull up the driveway and one of the garage doors opening. Moving through the house gracefully, she went down the few steps at the head of the hallway that led to the garage. Taking a deep breath, she smiled and waited.

Richard slowly dragged himself out of the driver's seat, stretching his worn body. He'd spent all day on the road and was just glad to be home. Slamming the car door as the garage closed, he threw his dark gray suit jacket over his shoulder as he made his way to the door leading into the house. Stepping into the hallway, he smiled at the sight that greeted him. "*Hey*, beautiful!" he said exhaustedly. "Are *you* a sight for sore eyes!"

"Rough day?" she asked, hoping that it hadn't been too hard.

"Boy and *howdy*!" he exclaimed, walking up to her and wrapping his arms around her. "Sorry! You got all dressed up for me and here *I* am, dragging my butt in here, smelling like a sock!" He started to pull away from her so he wouldn't get his sweat all over her.

Heather tightened her grip on him, not letting him pull away. "I missed you today!" she sighed.

"Just *today*?" he asked with a chuckle.

"I just really missed you, is all." she said as she looked up at him. "I *knew* it would be a hard day for you, so I wanted it to be nice when you got home! Have you eaten?" She slowly released him as they started into the house.

"Grabbed a late lunch about three. I'm *starved*!" He sniffed the air. "What's Cook making?" he asked.

"Her name's *Theresa*, dear! Calling her Cook just seems... *inappropriate*!"

"Tough habit to break, love." He shrugged. "You're lucky I don't call you *Hargrave*! Besides, it's convenient! Her last name's Cook, and that's what she *does*! What'd she make, anyway?" He looked into the dining room and saw the candles and low lights.

"Theresa's off for the night, dear." she explained. "So are Gregory and the others. I wanted time alone! I hope you don't mind. I made dinner myself!"

He stopped and looked at her. "You *cook*?"

"If the need or desire arises, *yes* I can cook, Richard!" She fisted him in the ribs lightly. "Sit down love, and I'll bring you your dinner!"

Walking up to the table, Richard smiled when he saw she'd set places at the head of the table and one next to it. Sliding into the seat at the head as she liked him to, he relaxed for a moment. When he saw her carrying out a large tray, he quickly rose to go to her. "Here, honey! Let me help you..."

"*No*! You sit right back down, Richard! I *want* to do this for you tonight!" she ordered, nodding toward his seat.

Holding up his hand in mock surrender, he sat down and waited while she served his favorite dinner of roast lamb. He wanted to start eating right away,

but waited until she was done serving herself. Just as he was about to dig in, she put a hand on his arm, staying it. "Something wrong, Heather?"

She smiled at him as she softly answered. "*No*, Richard! Everything's *perfect*! I was just remembering dinners with my parents at this table! I really wish you'd gotten a chance to know them. They would have *loved* you!"

Smiling, he put down his fork. "I'm sure I would've loved them! After all, they raised *you* and I love you!" he complimented her before leaning over to kiss her gently. Wanting to tear right into his food, he could see Heather had some kind of plan for the evening, so he relaxed into it. "So then, how was dinnertime in the Moore household?"

Sitting up straight, Heather looked off in the distance. "Well, for starters we always dressed for dinner. Father would sit where *you* are, Mamma at the other end, and I would sit *here*." She gestured to the seat on her left in the middle of the table that seated eight. "Theresa would serve, with Gregory's assistance, then once served, Father would say Grace and we would wait for him to begin eating. If there was anything that needed discussing that day of major importance, he would talk about it after Grace and before he would start. Anything of minor import would wait until after dinner when we would retire to the Great Room."

She sighed wistfully. "It was like that *every* night. It was a pleasant comfort to know what to expect, *especially* after a hectic day at school or after Church and the weekly social that was always so chaotic."

"Sounds nice!" he said smiling. "Dinner at our house was chaos incarnate! Half the time we didn't even *eat* at the table, we ate in the living room around the TV. Sundays and Wednesdays Mom would have us at the table, though. Saturdays were hit and miss. Once Jack was around, he ate at our place twice a week until..." his voice trailed off. "Well *anyway*, dinner was a casual thing for us. Mom would say Grace if Dad hadn't started eating by the time she sat down. It wasn't very often into high school though, more often when Erica

and I were kids." He looked at her questioningly. "Did you want to make our dinners more formal, like you used to do when you were growing up?"

Heather considered his offer honestly. "Well, it would be nice if we would *occasionally*." She glanced at him and smiled. "Maybe on Wednesdays and weekends?"

"Mix of both?" he nodded and chuckled. "OK. I can go along with that. Since it's Tuesday, you wanna start tomorrow or start tonight and then pick it up this weekend?"

"If you wouldn't *mind* starting tonight?" she asked hopefully.

"Anything you like, beautiful!" he leaned over and kissed her again. "Well, 'the cook' has already served, so..." They both bowed their heads in prayer as Richard spoke. "Dear Lord, thank you for the blessings you have seen fit to bestow upon us, and make us truly thankful for them. In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, Amen."

"*Amen!*" Heather said smiling in contentment. When she opened her eyes and saw Richard about to begin eating, she cleared her throat. "*Richard?* I have news of importance to bring up."

Setting his fork down once more, he looked over at her. "*Oh?*"

"*Yes, dear.*" She took a breath and smiled. "I talked to Erica this morning. I called to deliver some news to her."

Curious how this would be important, he furrowed his brow. "What news?"

"An expected delivery?" she smiled at him shyly.

He was about to ask what was going to be delivered when his eyes widened. "*Delivery?* As in..." He watched in awe as Heather bit her lower lip with a

wide grin and nodded enthusiastically. "A... a *baby*? You mean... you're... *you're*..."

"*We're* pregnant!" she corrected him. "You're going to be a daddy!"

Getting out of his chair, Richard helped her to stand. "*When? How?*" he asked dumbly.

She looked at him with mock seriousness. "You mean you don't know where *babies* come from, dear?"

He laughed at his own idiocy for even asking. "*No... I mean yes! Of course I know! No, I meant... I knew we talked* about it and you said you were going off the pill, but that was only last month!"

"Apparently that's all it *took*, dear!" she giggled.

Wrapping her in his arms, he kissed her strongly, lifting her up and swinging her in a circle afterwards as he howled, "*Oooooooo Raaaaaaah!*"

Putting her down again as she laughed, Richard almost stumbled back to his chair, his dinner and hunger completely forgotten. "Oh, *wow!*" he said in a daze.

"So I take it then you're happy about it?" she asked jokingly.

"Happy? *No*, dear! I'm not happy! I'm over the *moon* about it!" As his brain starting to work again, he looked at her with a concerned expression. "What about your practice?"

Considering it for a moment after she sat down, she picked up her water glass and sipped it. "Well, I can take six weeks Maternity Leave, and then we can hire a nanny to take care of..."

"No." Richard shook his head. "I don't want my kids raised by a *stranger!*"

Upset that he expected her to give up her career, she looked at him. "*Richard!* It wouldn't be a *stranger!* Besides, I have obligations to keep! Patients that *need me!*"

Pursing his lips and considering her position, he nodded. "You're right! *I'll quit!*"

Heather was shocked at his suggestion. "*Richard!* I can't ask you to do that! You worked so hard to get that position! I'm *proud* of you for it! *Lots* of children are raised by nannies!"

"But they aren't *my* kids, Heather!" he still shook his head. "I don't care about my job! I do it because it's necessary! If we have to cut back to make it on just your salary, it's worth it to have our kids raised by one of us! That's a *lot* more important than a career to me!"

"Richard, are you *sure* this is what you want?"

"*Absolutely!*" he answered without even waiting for Heather to finish asking her question. "Besides, I hate the way the upper managers look down their nose and give me all the crap work they don't feel like doing, just because I didn't go to an Ivy League school! I know Hank will be disappointed, but... No, *he'll* understand! I'll see him tomorrow and give him the news that..." He thought for a moment, trying to figure out on his own when the baby would be due. "When's the due date?"

Shaking her head, Heather laughed. "April! I'm not exactly *certain* though. I haven't seen a doctor yet. I just missed my period five days ago and used a home testing kit! Well, actually I used three! I wanted to be sure!"

"*Perfect!* I'll tell him that after I do the quarterly reports due the first week of April I won't be coming back!"

Lowering her tone to be serious, Heather looked him squarely in the eyes. "Richard? *Look* at me. Are you *sure* you could be happy as a 'Mister Mom'?"

Looking back in her eyes, he smiled. "I can't think of anything I'd like *more*, love!" He frowned suddenly as a thought occurred to him. "Heather? You wouldn't be *embarrassed* having a stay-at-home husband, would you?"

"*No!*" she shouted.

"Is it the money then?" he asked, hoping he hadn't misjudged her essential character.

"*Richard!*" she scowled at him. "I have more money than we could ever need! It's not about money, or what other people think! I just want you to be happy! Are you *sure*? Is it *that* important to you that you would give up your whole career for it?"

Nodding, he smiled at her reassuringly. "*Positive.*"

"Alright!" she gave in.

"So it's settled!" he stated. "*I'll* stay at home and raise the kids and *you* keep people from going nuts!"

Chapter 21 - Surprise, Surprise

I stayed in touch with Jack and Rich while I was overseas. They would call and tell me what was going on in their lives and I in turn lied to them about how great my new posting was. The only benefit of being so bloody far away was that I was still accumulating Leave that I never took, so in the end I got out almost a month early, taking my last twenty-one days as Terminal Leave.

By September second, I was on my way back to CONUS... the Continental US... but things had changed. Jack and Erica were living in Newport Beach and Rich was in New Hampshire, which was where I was headed as fast as I could. I didn't even take the time to call anyone and let them know I got out early. I felt like I was abandoning Jack, *especially* after all that he'd done for me over the years, but I just *had* to follow my heart.

Brooke slammed the door of the cab and pulled the seabag over her shoulder, most of the weight resting on her back. To her, the late summer weather in Concord felt more like the fall that wasn't due to start for another two weeks. Biting her lip nervously, she gathered her nerve and walked up to the door of the tiny house. Setting the bag down once more, she knocked and waited.

Jenny heard someone knocking on her door as she put a load of laundry in the washer. "*Coming!*" she yelled loud enough for them to hear her. She'd spent most of that Saturday cleaning her one bedroom rental and hadn't been expecting anyone, her parents being out of the country. Jogging through the living room, she slowed as she reached the door. Sighing, she pulled it open quickly, mildly annoyed at the interruption. "Yes?" When her eyes caught sight of who was at her door, she nearly fainted. "*Brooke!?*"

"Jenny?" she smiled hopefully. "I know I didn't call ahead, but I thought I might surprise you!"

Surprised was an understatement. Jenny was stunned into speechlessness. "Wha... how... uh..."

"*Well?* Can I come in or do I need to go live in *New Mexico*?" she said with a smile.

Jenny still couldn't formulate words, so she just stood back and let Brooke enter. Clearing her throat, she finally was able to speak again. "Um... sorry about the mess!" she apologized, looking around the room. "I... I... I wasn't expecting you until..." She shook her head, trying to clear it. "I thought you wouldn't even be out until the end of the month! I wasn't expecting you until sometime in October! What *happened*?"

"I haven't taken any Leave for almost a year, so I took it all at the end of my cruise so I could get here sooner!" she explained. "*Surprised*?"

"No, I'm not surprised... I'm *floored*!" She looked at her grungy sweats and touched the bandana holding the hair out of her eyes. "I... I wasn't ready for you yet! I... I wanted everything to be *perfect* for you to..." She looked down as her voice shook and cracked, her eyes starting to water.

Brooke moved in close to her and grasped her shoulders. "It's OK, Jenny! I don't care how clean your house is! I just couldn't wait to *see* you!"

She looked up at Brooke upset. "But I look *terrible*! Me standing here like an idiot in sweats... and I haven't showered since *yesterday morning*!"

Laughing at how seriously Jenny was taking it, Brooke shook her head. "You still look beautiful to me!"

Furrowing her brow, Jenny walked away frustratedly. "You're just saying that to make me feel better!"

No longer laughing, she cleared her throat. "Do... do you want me to *go*?"

Spinning to face her, Jenny pleaded, "No! *God*, no! It's just... *Oooo*, you can be so damn frustrating!"

Sighing and shaking her head, Brooke smiled. "Yes, yes I can, and *you* can be *adorable* when you're angry!" Pausing for a moment, she looked around the room. "Tell you what. We'll get this place cleaned, *together*, get *us* clean and dressed nice, and I'll take you out to dinner. How does *that* sound?"

Shyly looking to the floor, she blushed. "You mean, out? Like a *date*?"

"I mean out, like what loving *couples* do!" Brooke clarified, slowly walking up to her. "But first, I want to say hello properly!"

Gulping at the predatory look in Brooke's eyes, Jenny's pulse quickened as she hurriedly pulled the scarf off her hair, still hardly able to believe that after so much waiting, her love was finally in her home again. Feeling her pulse pounding in her neck, the smaller woman stood there as Brooke walked up to her and slipped her arms around Jenny's waist. Still not used to being so drawn to another woman, fear gripped her heart for a moment before desire overcame it and she found her arms slipping around to draw Brooke tightly to her.

Leaning down, Brooke brought her face only inches from Jenny's. Seeing the fear, but feeling the younger woman pull their bodies close, she changed her approach and instead of ravishing the woman she loved as she desired to, Brooke instead whispered, "I love you!" before gently kissing her, just letting their lips brush together tenderly.

Hearing the words and feeling Brooke's lips lovingly kissing hers, drove the fear out of Jenny's heart as wanton desire took its place and overwhelmed her. Just as Brooke was pulling back to end their loving reunion, Jenny ran her right hand up to rest on the nape of Brooke's neck and pressed their lips back together. Opening her mouth hungrily, she jumped up and wrapped her legs around Brooke's hips to make their bodies press together in a lover's

embrace. Throwing caution to the wind, Jenny only knew one thing at that moment; Brooke was in her arms once more and she wanted the Marine more than she'd ever wanted anyone in her life.

Reveling in the love and desire Jenny was showering on her, Brooke returned her desperate clinging as her heart burst with joy. When Jenny's passion was at last sated and she slowly slid back down to her own feet, their lips parting, Brooke sighed in contentment. "I missed you, too!" she whispered, delicately toying with the curly brown hair around Jenny's face. Smirking, she grabbed the smaller woman behind the shoulders with one arm and swept her legs up with the other, Jenny instinctively wrapping her arms around Brooke's neck.

"*Brooke!*" Jenny yelled. "What are you doing!"

"Something I've been dreaming about my entire *life*." she answered as she headed for Jenny's bedroom. When she saw Jenny smile and giggle, Brooke knew that the love of her life wanted her just as desperately as she did her, and that this was where she'd always belonged. *Home*. she smiled to herself as she kicked the bedroom door shut behind them.

Six weeks later, and twenty-five hundred miles away, Erica walked through the door to *Jack's Jiffy Dry Clean* with a smile on her lips that she couldn't shake. They'd leased the building using some of the money they'd saved for their house and had opened for business in early September. Within weeks, Jack found himself busy enough to start hiring employees and begin paying back the small business loan he'd taken out. Erica smiled at the young lady behind the cash register. "Hi, Gwen! Is my husband available?"

The teenage girl looked up from the order slip she was filling out. "*Oh!* Hi, Mrs. D! Um... I think Mr. D's in the back. Do you need me to get him?"

"If you wouldn't mind?" she asked politely. She watched the bubbly blonde eighteen-year-old jog off to the back while she waited, going over things in her mind. Gwen returned and headed back to her work as Jack followed her.

"Hey, Buttons! What brings you by?" he said wiping his sweaty hands on a cloth. "I'm a little busy. We got a rush of costumes needing cleaned before Halloween next Friday." He half-smiled as he walked up to her. "Oh, yeah! Today was your physical with... um... what's-her-name, that... that doctor you picked. How'd it go?"

Erica shook her head. "Her name's Dr. Blumenthal, dear... and it went fine! *Wonderful*, in fact!"

Hugging her, Jack smiled. "That's great, Buttons! So did you just stop by on the way home? Just couldn't *stand* being away from me on a Saturday?"

Laughing, Erica shook her head. "You know me so well, Jack! I have some news though that I thought you might want to know right away."

His smile dropped. "Nothing *bad*, is it? I mean, nothing wrong with you? Or your folks or Rich or Heather? Or *Brooke*?"

She shook her head slowly. "No, nothing bad, and everyone's *fine*, last time I checked! I needed to make sure your schedule was free next July around the fourth."

Confused, he thought hard. "Next July Fourth? Buttons, I don't even know what I'll be doing next *week*! We got plans already for next July?"

"Just the birth of our baby!" she said smiling as wide as she could.

He looked at her with a stunned expression. "The wha...? Birth? Baby? *You*?"

Erica arched her eyebrows. "Well, I *do* seem to be the only one of the two of us *able* to do that, sweetie! Unless one of your *other* girls is expecting, too!"

He stumbled backward slightly, not even hearing her joke. "Me? A *daddy*? You're *sure*?"

"Couldn't be anyone else, love!" she quipped.

"Did the doctor tell you what it is?" he asked in a daze.

"It's too soon to *tell*, Jack! We won't know for fifteen weeks or so!"

Gwen was giddily waiting for an opportunity. Seeing a lull, she rushed up to Erica. "*Congratulations*, Mrs. D! I couldn't help but overhear!"

"*Thanks*, Gwen!" Re-shouldering the strap of her purse, she hugged Jack. "I have to get home and call everyone! See you tonight?"

Slowly, Jack started coming out of the fog that had wrapped around his brain. "Huh? *Oh!* Yeah, yeah! Sure! I... I'll be off at six." Pausing, he looked at her concernedly. "Hey, should you be *driving* in your condition?"

Erica laughed. "I'm *pregnant*, Jack! Not *drunk!*" continuing to laugh as she walked to the door. "I'll see you tonight, sweetie! Don't work *too* hard!"

Fifteen weeks later, they were in the doctor's office as the OBGYN pushed the sonogram wand around Erica's belly. Jack squeezed her hand while the two waited pensively. When he'd called Richard the day she'd told him about the baby to crow about their expected joy, Richard had told him that *their* recent sonogram had revealed that Heather would be having a girl. Now it was his turn to find out.

"*There!*" Dr. Blumenthal said happily. Pressing a button on the machine, a grainy monochrome photo started to print out. "Well, from what I can see, the baby looks healthy, is at the proper growth stage, and..." She paused and looked at the two. "...is a *girl!*"

Jack looked at Erica with a smile. "A *girl!*" he exclaimed softly. "A beautiful baby *you!*" He kissed her gently on the forehead. "I know what I wanna call her!"

Surprised, Erica looked at him. "Don't *I* get a say?" she laughed.

"*What?* Of course, Buttons!" he said defensively. "I just mean... I just have a suggestion I'd like you to consider, if that's alright!"

Laughing, she nodded. "OK, so what *is* it?"

He took her hand in both of his. "Erica *Bella!* Erica the *Beautiful!*"

A tear formed in her eye. "Oh, *Jack!* You're *wonderful!*" she kissed him on the lips, making him blush in front of the doctor.

"Well... um..." He half-smiled at her. "See, since she's due on the fourth of July, *that* way, when she introduces herself, she can say, '*Hi!* Ah'm Erica... *the Beautiful!*'"

Erica groaned along with their doctor. "*Jack!* You clown!"

Proud of himself for catching her out, Jack smiled. "Yeah, *seriously* though, what do you think? Erica *Bella?* I don't think I'll call her Buttons, that's just for *you!* Plus it'll make it easier to know who I'm *talking* to!"

"*Aww!* You're *sweet!*" she said, her heart melting at his love for her. "Alright! If that's what you *really* want!" She smiled and looked at the grainy photo again. "Hello! *Erica Bella!*"

Richard drove to the hospital in a near panic. Cursing himself for taking a few more days of work to close out the quarterly figures before resigning, he increased his speed to just under sixty. He wanted to go faster, but didn't want to risk getting stopped and delay him even more. Almost an hour after he'd gotten the call at work, he squealed the tires of his car, turning into the parking lot of Concord Hospital. Finding a parking space, he ran to the front doors where he saw Jenny waiting for him.

"Where is she?" he asked desperately.

Trying to calm him, Jenny answered in an even tone, "They've taken her to surgery. Follow me!"

Making him walk through the hospital, she could almost feel him pushing her with his eyes to go faster. Finally, they came to a waiting room where Brooke was sitting.

"*Rich!*" she sighed in relief. "They just came out and told me! She's *fine!* You have a beautiful and healthy baby girl, too! They're *both* fine!"

He very nearly fainted as the rush of adrenaline ebbed and he dropped to one knee. "*Thank* you, God!" he sighed, eventually letting them guide him to a chair. "What... what *happened?*" he asked, not having gotten the full story before racing off.

Jenny took a breath. "She started going into a perfectly normal labor while we were at work. She figured there would be plenty of time since the office is right across the street. She also thought it might be false labor and didn't want to worry you until she was *sure.*"

Seeing Jenny pause, Brooke took over the explanation. "Jenny called me just after she called *you.* When they got her in and prepped, the doctor saw that the baby had her umbilical wrapped around her neck. Heather opted to do a Cesarean to avoid any risks."

"And they're *both* OK?" he asked, needing to hear it once more.

Brooke smiled at him reassuringly. "They both *fine,* Rich! This happens all the time! *Right* Jenny?" Her girlfriend just smiled and nodded.

After a few minutes, the doctor came back into the waiting room. "*Oh!* Mr. Hargrave? You can follow me!"

He looked back at Brooke and Jenny. "Can they come, too?"

The obstetrician put his hands on his hips and blew out a breath through his pursed lips. "Are there any *others* coming?" he asked.

Richard shook his head. "No. My parents and the rest of my family are out in California. They won't be here for another few days at least."

Nodding, the doctor turned toward the door. "OK. We normally only allow two at a time, but I'll allow it since three is all there is. Follow me."

The trio followed him into the recovery area where Heather was holding their baby girl and smiling. "*Hi*, love! Come meet our *beautiful* daughter!"

He slowly stepped ahead of the others, approaching as though his wife and child might break if his feet hit the floor too hard. "I told Hank on the way out I'd be back for my stuff later on. *Oh!* He said to say '*Congratulations!*'" Pausing, his voice fell. "I... I'm sorry I was at work!"

Heather shook her head, her smile unbreakable. "*No*, love! It's *fine!* All you need is to have a little *faith!* I *knew* it would all work out alright!"

Laughing, he reached her side and stroked her blonde hair. Looking down at their tiny daughter, it came to him. "Honey? I *know* we settled on Beatrice René, but... I just had a thought."

"Oh, *Richard!*" she almost whined. "I thought we settled all this!?"

"Just hear me out!" he said softly. "What about 'Faith Beatrice'?" He looked down at the little girl. "Your mother's name is still there, and you *did* just say we needed to have a little *Faith!*"

Heather laughed lightly. "You're channeling your inner *Jack!*" She looked down at their girl. "*Faith!* It's *perfect*, Richard! Faith Beatrice Hargrave!"

While Brooke and Jenny came to meet their tiny honorary niece, Richard had only one thought. *I sure wish Jack was here!*

Four days later, as Heather was being discharged from the hospital, Frank and Judy arrived. While Heather was being wheeled into the lobby, Richard smiled to see his parents waiting next to Brooke and Jenny.

"*Mom! Dad!*" he called out to them quietly. After he and Heather had moved up to the four waiting for them, he smiled and looked down at his daughter. "Mom? Dad? I'd like you to meet your granddaughter, Faith! *Faith?* These are your *grandparents!*"

Judy wept happily as Frank kneeled down in front of the wheelchair. "*Hi, gorgeous!*" he said softly as he smiled. "Can you say 'hi' to grandpa?"

Heather laughed lightly. "Oh, *Dad!* You two just get in?"

He nodded as he stood back up. "Just. Drove straight here from the airport! That Jenny girl was kind enough to give us directions!"

"*Sorry, Frank!*" Brooke apologized. "I'm new to this wilderness!"

Looking up and nodding at the honorably discharged Marine, he smiled. "*It's fine, Brooke. We got here! That's all that matters!*"

Judith knelt down next to Heather. "May... may I hold her?" she asked.

The nurse standing behind the wheelchair shook his head. "Sorry. Against hospital policy." Smiling, he added, "Why don't we get these two outside? Then you can get them *home* where you can make your *own* policies!"

Standing and looking at the man as though he were denying her the ability to breathe, Judith was about to object when her son spoke up.

"That's a *great* idea! Let's get you two *home*!"

Half an hour later, Heather walked slowly and carefully through her front door, carrying her bundle of joy while Gregory smiled and held the door.

"*Congratulations*, Madame Hargrave!" he wheezed.

"*Thank* you, Gregory!" she said absently as she stared down at the sleeping child in her arms. Not able to handle the stairs up to the baby's new room while carrying her, she passed the child to Richard. "*Here* you go, Daddy!"

"*There's* my baby girl!" he sighed as he took Faith in his arms. "Gregory? Would you get her bags up to the room, please?" he asked.

"Of *course*, Master Hargrave!" Gregory said happily.

Looking up the stairs to the bedrooms she'd climbed all too easily all her life, it seemed to Heather as though she'd be climbing Mount Everest. As Frank came in, he walked up next to her and took her hand. "*Here*, sweetie! Let *Dad* help you!"

Judith jogged in behind him and made straight for Faith. "Oh, Richard! *Now* may I hold her?"

Looking over at Heather and seeing her nod as Frank helped her up the first step, Richard sighed and handed Faith to his mother. "*Careful*, Mom!"

"Oh, Richard!" she scoffed. "I raised two babies! I *think* I know how to hold one!" Turning to her granddaughter, she smiled at the tiny child. "You are just *so* precious!" she cooed.

Brooke and Jenny came in behind Gregory, who was carting two suitcases toward the stairs. Brooke moved in close to Judith and Richard while Jenny moved to help Heather.

"Here!" Jenny offered. "That's supposed to be *my* job, Mr. Hargrave!"

"*Oh?*" he asked.

Heather nodded with a grimace. "Yes. Jenny works at my office, Dad. She took a few days vacation to help me get settled in."

"So, she's a nurse then? Well I'm glad..."

"Jenny's not a nurse, Dad." Richard explained. "She just wanted to help!"

"See, I owe Heather and Richard a *lot*, Mr. Hargrave!" Jenny grinned as she glanced over at Brooke before slipping under Heather's free arm. "*OK!* Just put your weight on me, Heather! No exerting yourself for a few weeks!"

Brooke smiled down at baby Faith as Judith cradled her. "*Hi* there, Faith! You got a smile in there for your Aunt Brooke?" Seeing the babe grin in her sleep, Brooke laughed. "She *did!* She *smiled* for me!"

"That was *gas.*" Judith said coldly.

"*May* I?" Brooke asked. "They wouldn't *let* us at the hospital!"

Judith turned her body to interpose it between Brooke and Faith. "That's alright, *Miss Hathaway.*" she growled. "*Grandma's* got her!"

"*Mom.*" Richard dragged out the word. "Let *Brooke* hold her a minute!"

"No!" she said defensively. "I just *got* her!"

"She's not *going* anywhere, Mom!" Richard argued with a laugh. "You guys will be here all week! Let Brooke hold her! She hasn't be *allowed* to for *four days!*"

"No!" she barked, pressing Faith into her bosom until the baby girl woke and started to cry.

"Give her here, Mom!" Richard ordered, reaching out for Faith.

Giving Brooke a dirty look, she grudgingly handed Faith back to her father. "Mind her head, dear!" she instructed him.

"I took the baby care classes, Mom!" he said as he took the crying babe who settled down. "*There!* Daddy's got his princess and everything's all better!" Turning to Brooke, he smiled. "Want a turn, Auntie?" he grinned.

"Do you think that's *wise*, Richard?" Judith scoffed.

Turning around halfway up the stairs, Heather furrowed her brow. "*Judith*, Brooke is Faith's *godmother* and one of Richard's *dearest friends!* What's *wrong* with you?"

Sniffing defiantly, Judith stared daggers at Brooke. "I just don't think it's a good idea to let someone like *her* handle a baby! I think a better godparent would be one who actually *follows* the word of God! Don't *you*, Richard?"

"*Judy!*" Frank barked, moving down the stairs to confront his wife. "Just what's gotten into you!"

"I have *eyes*, Frank!" she spat. "That woman shouldn't be *allowed* to hold our grandchild!" Looking at Jenny who stood next to Heather nervously, Judith narrowed her eyes. "That one, *either!*" Dropping to a conspiratorial whisper, she leaned in close to Frank. "They're ungodly *lesbians*, Frank! I can tell by the way they *look* at each other!"

Looking at Brooke with a shocked expression, then to Jenny, he turned to Richard. "Is that *true*, Rich? Are Brooke and Jenny..."

The two women in question looked at one another. This being her first time being 'outed', Brooke waited for the subtle nod from Jenny before speaking. "Frank? *Yes*. Jenny and I are a couple. We're in *love*."

"She *admits* it! Brazen Harlot!" Judith hissed. "*Richard?* Throw them out!"

"The *hell* I will!" Richard barked, stepping away from her with Faith.

"*What!*" Judith screeched. "Didn't you just *hear* her!"

"*Mom!* I've known Brooke was gay since the first day I *met* her! So what?"

"Mother Hargrave," Heather spoke with dignity as she undid all her progress and came back down the stairs. "This is *my* family home. Brooke and Jenny are *my* friends, as well as Richard's! They're a *lovely* couple and are *lucky* to have found one another! They will *always* be welcome in this house!"

"You *condone* this... this..." Near to apoplexy, Judith looked at Frank, who still stood in shock. "*Frank!* We're leaving! You call that lawyer of yours and get our *grandchild* away from them! They're..."

"*Shut up!*" Frank shouted, rousing Faith once more until Heather took her back and settled her down. "I... I'm sorry I woke her, Richard."

"It's OK, Dad." he excused his father cautiously.

Turning to Brooke, Frank puffed out his chest, but spoke in hushed tones. "You're a *Marine*, Miss Hathaway! How could *you* serve!?"

"Because I love the Corp more than *women*, Mr. Hargrave." she answered just as formally as he had asked. "Jenny and I didn't start dating until *after* my cruise had ended and I was Outside, no matter *how* much I loved her. She wouldn't *let* me."

"That's true, Mr. Hargrave." Jenny spoke up at last. "I... I just couldn't let her ruin everything I love about her! I *love* that she was a Marine! I waited a whole *year* for her to come home to me! A year alone! Do you know what that was *like*, sir? Never *seeing* her? Hardly even able to *talk* to her? For a *year*?"

Disarmed, Frank Hargrave looked at Jenny sternly, but compassionately.

"*Frank!*" Judith shouted in a whisper. "Are you just going to stand there and listen to this... this... *blasphemy*? This..."

"Enough, Judy!" he growled low and quiet. "You wanna leave? There's the door!" He turned to his son and shook his head. "I don't like it! Not one *bit*, son! But..." He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "...but I'm not going to throw away any chance of seeing my grandchildren by being a stubborn *leatherneck!*"

"Dad..." Richard began before Frank stopped him.

"Rich, you're a *man* and this is your home!" he pointed out. "I... I may not agree with how you run it, but I won't disrespect you in your own house!" He turned to Heather and nodded. "Nor you in *yours*, Heather." Turning to Brooke, he stepped up to her. "I'd like to apologize for my wife's conduct, Miss Hathaway. It was *inexcusable*."

"*Frank!*" Judith gasped before he shot her a look that shut her up instantly.

Shaking her head, Brooke sighed as the man turned back to face her. "The sentiment is appreciated, Mr. Hargrave, but you can't apologize *for* her. Only *she* can apologize for *herself*. It holds no meaning unless *she* does it."

Nodding, he looked down embarrassedly. "I know." Turning to his wife, he growled, "*Judy?*"

"I will not!" she huffed.

"Then get out and never come back!" Richard ordered.

"But I'm Faith's *grandmother!*" she argued. "You can't..."

"I *can!*" Richard interrupted. "And I *will*, unless you apologize and promise never to do it again! Brooke is a good woman and a fine Marine! She's also Heather's and my *best friend*. Jack and Erica's, too! I know *they* won't put up with your nonsense about Brooke, either! So *go!* Get out and never lay eyes on any of your children, or grandchildren, again! All you'll be doing is proving that Jack was right all along! I can't *believe* I stood up for you!"

Standing next to Richard, Heather raised her chin. "I agree. *Unless...*"

Frank turned to his wife once more. "Judy? *Please*. Just... just let it drop. You can't win this. Apologize and let's get back to why we're here, to see *Faith*, not to argue religion and politics!"

Outnumbered and with no options short of calling a cab and returning home never to return, Judith swallowed her pride and tried to get back a little of her dignity. "Miss Hathaway? I... I apologize for... for losing my temper and saying hurtful things. I... I still disagree with your... *lifestyle...* but this is not *my* home. I... I was wrong to try and force my will on Richard and Heather. Please forgive me."

Turning back to Brooke, Frank regarded her sternly. "Is that satisfactory?"

Meeting his gaze with the same grim determination, Brooke nodded curtly. "It'll *do*, Mr. Hargrave."

"*Brooke?*" Heather said softly as she took Faith over to her, handing her over gently. "I think it's time you got acquainted with your *goddaughter!*"

"*Alright!* Just one more!" Erica's doctor ordered calmly. "*Push!*"

Erica thought she was going to faint from exhaustion, but she gathered her strength and made herself bear down once more. She could only barely feel Jack's hand in hers and thought she might crush it to dust. "*Errrrrrrg!*" she screamed as the pressure built and then was suddenly released.

"*There!* I have her!" the doctor said smiling. Clearing the baby's mouth and nose with a squeeze bulb, she smiled... and then frowned.

Jack was trying to split his focus between his wife and the obstetrician. The pregnancy had gone normally, but Erica'd been ordered to bed rest for the last three months. That meant when Heather had Faith, they'd had to stay home while Judith and Frank flew out to see her. Now it was *their* turn to add to the family. When Jack saw her frown, he felt his heart drop. "What's wrong?"

Gathering her wits, she cleared her throat. "N-Nothing's *wrong*, Mr. Dunning. The baby's *fine!* I... I think someone made a mistake, though!"

Erica could hardly breath and was terrified. "W-What... m-mistake...?"

Steeling herself for their shock, she looked at them hesitantly. "*Mine.* It's... it's a *boy!*"

The two looked at her as though she had just suggested that Erica had given birth to a rabbit. Erica shook her head confusedly. "But... but you..."

"*I know!*" the doctor admitted her error. "All the sonograms didn't show what I was looking for! It must be a fluke, or I need newer equipment! I'm sorry for the mix up! He seems to be a perfectly *healthy* boy!"

The two looked at one another a moment before the laughter began. Finally, Erica was able to say, "Jack! If this is one of your jokes, I'm going to ask you how you managed it and *kill* you, and I don't know in which order!"

Jack was still wiping tears of laughter and joy from his eyes. "I... I swear to *God*, Erica! This joke isn't mine! It's *His*!" He looked up at the ceiling and shouted, "*Very funny!*" before looking back at his wife and laughing more.

The doctor cleaned their baby and wrapped it in blankets, finally returning the infant to its mother. "I really *am* sorry for the error. It happens, but at any rate, *someone* would like to meet you two!" Erica took her dear child into her arms and cradled the babe as she wept with joy.

While Erica cooed, Jack used a finger to delicately stroke the soft skin of his child. A tiny hand reached out and grasped it, bringing Jack to tears.

His wife looked up at Jack and sighed. "So what do you want to call him? Jack Junior? I *know* you said that's what you wanted to call our first boy!"

"I... I don't know!" he stammered "Um... *Maybe?* I... uh... huh." He thought hard a moment. "What would you think about calling him Eric, Buttons?"

"Eric *Buttons* Dunning?" she asked incredulously.

"*No!*" he scoffed. "Eric..." he smiled. "Eric *Franklin?*"

Smiling at the idea of using her father's name for their child's middle name, thinking a moment, she suggested, "What about Eric *Richard?*"

"*What?* And give that brother-in-law of mine more of a swelled head? He *already* thinks he's all that!" He shook his head and thought hard. "I want *Eric*, that's for certain. Since I picked the first name, *you* pick the middle!"

"*Alright!*" She looked down at their baby and immediately knew what to say. "Say hello to your daddy, Eric Bell Dunning!"

Looking down on his child, the only thing Jack could think was *I sure wish Rich was here!*

Chapter 22 - Moving On

At very least the confrontation between Judith and Rich ended with, if not acceptance, at least tolerance, which is more than I can say about my *own* parents when I came out to them.

It went about as I'd predicted. Eventually they just stopped communicating with me, even when I reached out to them. I learned later that Dad died in oh-four of a heart attack, and Mom went last year from the same thing. They never returned any of my letters. I wrote twice a year. I just kept busy at a local salon, while Jenny worked her desk at the medical group.

Jenny's parents were out of the country when I came home, and I never met them the two weeks we were together before that, so we didn't meet 'til July of ninety-eight. They were surprised, but not half as much as *Jenny* was!

In the mean time, Rich and Heather were getting into the swing of being new parents. Rich *loved* being 'Mister Mom' to Faith and ran the house like his own personal fire team! Shortly after she was born, they started looking into moving. There were too many sad memories lurking around the home she grew up in, and Rich wanted a place that would be all their own.

Brooke checked herself in the mirror one more time as Jenny came out of their bedroom. "Are you *sure* I look alright?" Brooke asked nervously.

"Um... yeah!" Jenny said even more anxiously. "You... you look *beautiful*! They're gonna *love* you, almost as much as *I* do!" Her assurances did little to boost her own lack of confidence. "Um... *Brooke*? Can... can I ask you something?"

Stopping her primping, Brooke looked away from the large hall mirror to look at her love. "You don't need to ask. You look *hot*!"

Fidgeting with her purse, she blushed and smiled before fear took her once more. "Um... your *parents*. Have... have you heard back from them yet?"

Her smile melting in an instant, Brooke looked at the floor. "Not since that last letter they sent me."

"You... you've sent them like *four more* since then!" Jenny pointed out.

"Yeah." Brooke admitted. "Given what Dad said in that last letter though, I don't expect they'll write back any more. At least I know my Old Man isn't gonna rat me out to his old Corp buddies that are still in, so there's *that*. He's too embarrassed to tell them!"

Turning quickly, Jenny let it finally come out. "I'm *scared*, Brooke! What... what if Mom and Dad *hate* me? I mean, it's not like they had any warning signs or anything! I dated in High School! *Boys* even! I never even *looked* at a girl before you... or *since*! I *still* don't think I'm gay! I just love *you*!"

Trying to calm her, Brooke gently put her hands on her shoulders. "You're adorable! I *promise* I'll be with you the whole time, *OK*? No matter *what* they say, you'll *always* have me there for you! If your parents are *half* as wonderful as *you* are though, everything will be *fine*!"

Wrapping her in a warm embrace, Brooke held Jenny until her fears subsided and Brooke felt the woman's arms snake up her back. Responding, Brooke leaned her head over as Jenny tilted her face up and let the woman five years her senior kiss her gently. Her worries forgotten for the moment, Jenny relaxed into the kiss. Finally separating, she looked up at Brooke happily.

"*Wow*! If they could bottle that, it would beat *Prozac*!" Jenny giggled.

Wiping Jenny's lipstick off with a tissue, Brooke smiled seductively. "Come on! Go fix yourself and let's find out what *else* you can do with those lips!" Seeing Jenny's mouth drop open at the innuendo, Brooke laughed.

"*Brooke!*" Jenny gasped. "What, *now?*"

"I mean talking to your *parents!*" Brooke answered coyly. "*Jeez!* Where did *your* mind go? Gutter, much? Or is it you'd rather do that than go see them?" Unable to control herself, Brooke started to laugh at her own joke.

About to explode in frustration, Jenny couldn't help but smile as Brooke's infectious laugh spread to her as well. "*Damn* it, Brooke! Why can't I stay mad at you?" she started to giggle.

"Because you love me!" she came back. "That and I learned from the best!" Thinking of Jack so far away and not having had a chance to see their baby with Richard and Heather since Jenny couldn't get more time off work ended Brooke's laughter quickly. "Anyway, we *really* should get going, babe. You go finish getting ready, and I'll go warm up the car."

Half an hour later, Jenny pulled up in front of her parents' house. "This is it." she said ominously. "*Ready?*"

"As I'll ever be!" sighed Brooke, climbing out of the passenger side before slamming the door shut.

Heading up the short walk, Jenny stopped herself from just walking in and rang the bell, unsure of her welcome. As the door swung open, she cleared her throat and pasted a fake smile on to hide her insecurity.

Betty Hooks smiled as she saw her daughter standing at her door. "*Jennifer!*" she cried as she stepped back to allow her entrance. "Since when do you need to ring to come in to your own home!"

"*Hi, Mom!*" Jenny squeaked as her voice almost faltered. "I... I just didn't know if... if..."

"...if you were welcome?" Betty fake-frowned. "Why wouldn't you be, dear?"

Gathering her courage, Jenny raised her chin. "*Mom?* I... I'd like you to meet Brooke... Brooke *Hathaway!*" indicating the tall ex-Marine standing to her side and slightly behind her.

Confused, Betty turned to her daughter's guest at her home. "How do you do, Miss Hathaway." she said politely.

"Mrs. Hooks." Brooke nodded at the woman with fading curly brown hair and good looks that told her where Jenny had gotten both.

Turning back to her daughter, Betty furrowed her brow curiously. "Won't you two come in?"

Stepping into her childhood home, Jenny embraced her mother while nearly shaking in fear. "*Thanks, Mom!* I... I just knew that you and Dad have been away a while and... and I didn't know if it was OK to... to... just come in with a... a *friend!* After all, I don't *live* here anymore!"

"*Honey!*" Betty held her child warmly. "You know perfectly well that you'll *always* be welcome in this house... *and* any of your friends!" Holding her a moment, she broke off the hug and gestured toward the living room. "Come in!" she beamed. Turning her head, she shouted, "*Charles! Jennifer's* here!" Turning back to her guests, she shook her head exasperatedly. "So why did you really think you had to be invited in?"

"Maybe she thought you and Mr. Hooks were '*enjoying a moment!*'" Brooke offered slyly. Jenny blushed three shades of red as she sat on her mother's couch and looked at the floor, while her mother raised a hand to her mouth and gasped at the suggestion. Thinking she'd pushed too far with people she didn't really know, Brooke looked away embarrassedly and was about to apologize before she heard the snort of laughter.

Growing from an embarrassed giggle to full belly laughing interspersed with snorts, Betty tried to control herself. "I... I suppose I can see your point!"

While the two women giggled together, Jenny could only stare at the floor, trying not to imagine her parents being romantic. She finally looked up at the sound of a throat being cleared. "*Daddy!*" she smiled as she leapt up and ran into his arms.

Charles Hooks wrapped his arms around his grown daughter who stood most of a foot shorter than his own six-foot two athletic frame. Though he was in his late forties, he'd managed to stay in shape and looked younger than he was. "Baby girl!" he sighed as he welcomed her affection. Rocking her back and forth a moment, he stepped back and looked at her. "I sure missed you, baby girl!"

Clearing her throat, she turned toward Brooke with one arm wrapped around his waist. "*Daddy?* I... I'd like you to meet Brooke Hathaway! *Brooke?* This is my father, Charles!"

Taking the man's hand, she gripped it firmly. "Mr. Hooks!" she nodded.

Surprised at the firmness of her shake, Charles adapted and returned it. "Miss Hathaway! *Please!* Call me Chuck!"

"*Alright!*" Brooke smiled as she released him. "Then it's *Brooke*, Chuck!"

Sitting a respectful distance from one another on the sofa, Jenny and Brooke waited while Chuck took his favorite seat in his armchair and Betty pulled another seat in close to her husband's, finally settling in with a smile.

"*So...*" Chuck began. "Brooke? It's nice to meet any friend of our daughter! What brings you here?"

Unsure how to answer, Brooke hedged. "Well, my best friend Rich, Richard Hargrave, got married November before last after moving out here with his fiancée. I was her Maid of Honor."

"*Oh!*" Betty perked up. "Jennifer, I remember you telling me that you were a bridesmaid at a wedding! Was that the same one, dear?"

Jenny nodded shyly. "That's where I *met* Brooke! Well, I *first* met her at the fitting that was before the wedding!" she noted, smiling at the memory of the humorous turn of events.

"*Ugh!*" Brooke sighed. "Don't remind me!"

"Let me guess!" Betty smiled. "Horrid dress?"

"*Yes!*" agreed Brooke.

"*No!*" Jenny insisted emphatically at the same time.

Looking from one to the other, Betty smiled. "Well which *is* it?"

"She looked *gorgeous* in that dress, Mom!" Jenny over-emphasized.

"*Eh!*" Brooke scoffed. "I looked like a Barbie Doll in it! I was *so* glad when Heather relented and let me wear my dress blues!"

"Dress blue?" Beth asked curiously. "You mean a blue *dress*?"

"No, I mean my dress blues, Mrs. Hooks." Brooke started to explain.

"*Please!* Call me Betty!" she smiled sweetly.

Nodding, Brooke continued. "OK, Betty! And *please*, just call me Brooke. See, I'm a Marine. So's Rich, my best friend who was the groom. When he married Heather, his fiancée, I was still in active service, so I wore my dress blues, my formal uniform, to the wedding and reception."

"*Oh!*" Betty looked at her with surprise. "You... you were in the service?"

Having sat back and listened, Chuck nodded. "That explains the shake!"

"What, dear?" Betty turned to him.

"*Oh!* When Brooke and I shook hands, she had a firm grip is all. I was just saying..."

"She's not a *man*, Charles!" Betty scowled at him. "Just because she was in the service doesn't mean she wanted to be a *man!*"

"Oh, *Betty!*" he retorted. "I was *complimenting* her!"

"*How?* By suggesting that she has a manly handshake? *Really*, Charles!"

Turning to his guests, Chuck laughed once. "Sorry, girls! Brooke? I hope you weren't offended at my remark. You certainly *aren't* mannish! In fact you're quite attractive! I bet you were *very* popular with the servicemen!"

"*Too* popular!" Brooke grumbled.

Wanting to change the subject, Betty smiled. "So, you came to Concord for your friend's wedding, and his *fiancée* asked you to be her Maid of Honor?"

"I met Heather the same time Rich did." she explained. "So she and I were good friends, too."

"I see!" Betty grinned. "So, afterward you decided to stay in Concord?"

Listening to the exchange, Jenny could see the direction it was headed and decided to cut to the chase and take the plunge. Standing up quickly, she looked at her parents. "*Mom? Dad?* Brooke and I are in *love!*"

Stunned silence filled the room like thick soup. Brooke sighed and slowly rose to stand beside Jenny, taking the younger girl's hand in her own.

"You... you're *what*?" Betty finally gasped after the momentary shock wore off. Looking at her daughter she asked, "But... *Jennifer*! Are you..."

Suddenly very unsure of herself, Jenny shrank back and looked down. "I... I suppose... *maybe*?"

"*But...*" her mother stammered. "But you *dated*! You dated *boys*! Did she..."

Pursing his lips, Chuck's face was an unreadable mask as he looked at them carefully. "Did you *seduce* my daughter, Miss Hathaway?"

Looking up suddenly at the accusation, Jenny suddenly felt very protective of her. "*No*, Daddy! Brooke didn't do *anything* wrong! She... she waited for me to say I liked her *first*! She *had* to! She could've been... um..."

"Dishonorably discharged." Brooke filled in the blank. "Mr. and Mrs. Hooks? *I love* Jenny! I think I fell in love with her the first moment we *spoke*. She's a wonderful woman! The kind I've been looking for all my *life*! She... she *completes* me. In ways I never knew I needed! You should be *very* proud of her."

"Miss Hathaway, I *am* proud of my daughter!" Betty snapped. "I... I just... I can't believe that she'd... she..."

"*Betty*?" Chuck interrupted her. Looking at the two, he sighed and smiled weakly as he turned his eyes to Brooke. "I... uh... I just want my baby girl to be *happy*, Brooke." Looking at his daughter, he sighed. "Does she make you happy, baby girl?"

Nodding emphatically, Jenny smiled as tears began to run down her cheeks. "*Yes*, Daddy! She does! Happier than I ever thought I *could* be! I... I *love* her!" She turned to Brooke and took both of her hands before looking up into the brunette's eyes. "I'm so *proud* of her! What serving means to her. She denied being with me for a *year* to fulfill her oath! She's *wonderful*!"

Standing back up, Chuck walked over to them and stood in front of Brooke as the two turned to face him. "*Brooke?* Do you intend on *staying* with my baby girl? Making sure she's happy and take care of her? Never *hurt* her?"

Facing him, Brooke looked up to lock eyes with him. "Chuck? I'd kill or *die* for her. I'll never hurt or abandon her. You have my word of *honor*, sir!"

"I can see that word actually *means* something to you." he noted. Stepping over to regard his daughter, he smiled down at her. "You *sure*, baby girl?"

Looking back up at him, Jenny smiled. "*Yes*, Daddy! I've never been more sure of anything in my *life*!"

Walking up next to her husband, Beth took his arm. "But *Jennifer* dear, you aren't a... a..." she stammered, unable to say the word.

"Lesbian." Chuck said for her.

"*Thank* you, dear." Beth blushed. "I mean, I *know* you aren't! You used to tell me all the time how cute you thought Jimmy Francis, the *boy* you dated, was! I mean, you... you had a crush on *Kirk Cameron* for *years*, for God's sake!"

"*Mom!*" Jenny whined. "I was a teenager! *All* the girls back then were in love with Kirk Cameron!"

"Actually, I kind of had a thing for his sister Candice." Brooke pointed out. "At least in the later seasons."

"You see?" Beth pressed the point. "You... you're not... um..."

"Gay." Chuck said for her again. "I don't think that's what Jenny's trying to tell us, Betty. Just that she loves *Brooke*." Putting a hand on his daughter's shoulder, he smiled at her. "Baby girl, it's *OK*. We still love you. Brooke seems like a... a *fine* woman! I... I'm happy for you, sweetie!"

"*Charles!*" Betty whined. "Aren't you even a *little* upset by all this? I mean, our daughter is in love with another *woman!* I mean, doesn't that *make* her gay?" Realizing how she sounded, the woman backtracked as she turned to Jenny. "Oh, sweetie! I'm *not* angry! I *love* you, dear! It's just... this is all so *sudden!* I mean, we were only gone for a *year!* When did this happen?"

Walking toward the dining room, Chuck gestured to the table. "Why don't we sit down together and talk about it." he suggested. "We *were* about to eat. Would you two like to join us?"

Sitting around the table, the two couples looked at one another in silence for a moment. Taking Brooke's hand for comfort, Jenny took a breath and told them about the day they'd met.

"So by the time we got back from our walk, I was..." she sighed happily. "I was in love!"

"We *both* were!" Brooke added.

"I see." Beth sighed. "But Jennifer dear, are you *sure* about all this? I mean, what about *children?* Don't you want to be a *mother* someday?"

"They can still do that, Beth." Chuck pointed out with a grin. "I understand it involves a donor, and something similar to a turkey baster..."

"Charles, *please!*" Beth gasped. "Don't be *flippant!* How can you be so calm about all this!" Turning back to their two guests, she added, "Don't get me wrong, I'm *not* passing judgement or saying it's wrong. I just..." She again regarded her husband. "I just don't see how you can sit there and take it all in! Aren't you upset at *all?*"

"Are you *kidding,* Beth?" Chuck grinned. "I'm *happy* for my baby girl! *Heck!* I'm happy for *me!*"

"What in heaven's name are you *babbling* about, Charles!" she asked.

"My baby girl found true love! On top of that, I don't ever have to think about a man 'giving it' to my little baby girl! What daughter's father wouldn't give his left arm for that privilege?"

Sighing in exasperation while Jenny blushed and looked away, Brooke just chuckled. Betty got up exasperatedly and headed for the kitchen. "You can be so *crude* sometimes, Charles!"

Seeing Brooke's laugh diminish, Chuck looked at her seriously and waited until she finished. "*Seriously* though, I *am* happy for you two! I won't pretend to not be surprised by it all, but I think I understand. I meant what I said, baby girl. Brooke seems like a *fine* woman! And Brooke? I hope you know what a special girl you're getting!"

Coming back from the kitchen with a crock-pot full of stew, Betty set it down as she looked at her daughter. "Are you *sure* she can make you happy, dear? I mean, don't get me *wrong* Brooke, you're a *lovely* woman, but that's sort of my *point*. If you're... well... *gay*, Jennifer dear, shouldn't you want someone more... um..."

"Butch?" Chuck continued acting as her vocabulary.

"*Mom!*" Jenny nearly shouted.

Returning to the kitchen for rolls, Beth shook her head. "I guess I just don't understand, dear. You're obviously attracted to *men*, yet you fall in love with a woman who, if you'll excuse me for saying, isn't *handsome*, but *beautiful!* Very attractive, actually! I mean, how does that even work?"

"I don't care how she *looks*, Mom!" Jenny argued.

"*Hey!*" Brooke exclaimed.

"*Oh!* I'm sorry, honey! I didn't mean it *that* way! I mean..."

Laughing at the exchange, Chuck spooned up some of the stew and handed the bowl to his daughter. "*Here*, baby girl. Just stuff a roll in your mouth once you get your *foot* out!"

Jenny blushed and took the bowl while Brooke offered an explanation to her mother as the woman sat back down at the table. "*Beth?* Jenny isn't gay the way I am. I've known I liked other girls since I was seven, and I *never* liked boys, except as friends." Taking the bowl of stew that Beth handed her, she placed it in front of her. "*Thank* you. Anyway, the way I see it, Jenny isn't so much attracted to me *physically* as she is *emotionally*."

Shaking her head, trying to puzzle it all out, Beth served herself last. "I... I *suppose* so." Turning to Jenny, she still looked concerned. "But how can you be happy with her if you aren't... well... *attracted* to her? I mean, there's an aspect of relationships that *needs* that sort of... um..." Her hand shook with nervousness as she tried to phrase herself delicately.

"Sexual fulfillment." Chuck answered as he broke up a roll and dropped the pieces in his stew.

"*Yes!*" Beth agreed. "*Thank* you, Charles." Turning back to Jenny who was only slowly stirring the hot stew, she sighed. "I... I just want you to be *happy*, dear, and... well... attraction and sex are part of a fulfilling life!"

Looking at Brooke, Chuck smiled. "I think they're *both* fulfilled, Beth!"

Smiling as she looked across the table at her love's father while she stirred her stew, Brooke chose to neither confirm nor deny his assertion and instead tried to change the subject. "So, Chuck. Jenny never got around to telling me. Why were you two away for so long?"

"Just work." he stated plainly as he finished stirring in his roll.

"Work?" she asked, realizing that Jenny had never talked to her about what her father did for a living.

Seeing the confused look on Brooke's face, he smiled wryly and turned his hazel eyes to Jenny. "You mean, she doesn't *know*? You didn't *tell* her?"

"I... I didn't know *how* to tell her!" Jenny admitted.

"Know *what*? Tell me *what*?" Brooke asked nervously.

Chuck smiled and laughed lightly. "That her old man's a pastor?" Seeing the look of shock on Brooke's face as he happily reached out and took Beth's hand and then Jenny's, Chuck nodded to her. "That's right! You're marrying a *pastor's* daughter, Brooke! Shall we pray?"

Stepping out of the car, Richard looked hopefully at the abandoned house. Smiling inwardly, he made sure not to let his first impression show to the real estate agent that was standing on the marble steps and waiting for them. Helping Heather out as she moved Faith onto her shoulder, the chill of the late November air stung their noses as she bundled Faith against the cold.

"*Thanks*, Fredrick." Richard nodded to the newly hired chauffeur who had opened the door for them. "Wait for us here, please?"

"As you wish, Master Hargrave." he intoned flatly.

Rolling his eyes at the man's formality, despite his repeated requests to the contrary, Richard took Heather's free hand and led his wife and daughter toward the building.

"Richard Hargrave?" the agent asked rhetorically as she extended her hand. "I'm Wendy! Wendy *Baker* from Baker Realty!"

Wincing at her first name, he nevertheless took her hand and shook it.

"Let's go in, shall we?" she bubbled. Unlocking the massive front door, it opened with a groan. Stepping inside, their footfalls against the cold marble floors echoed throughout the hollow building. "This is the entry hall!" she chirped, her voice echoing everywhere. "Over here on the left is a *spacious* walk-in closet and mud room for coats, winter gear, and anything *else* you might need to store! You can see the stairs leading up to the second floor, with *two* landings and *all* marble construction!"

Only half-listening to the woman's sales pitch, Richard instead looked at the dilapidated structure with an eye to what it would look like after he'd gotten it restored and couldn't help but smile.

"You can see on the walls that the building's original gaslight system is still in place! This building is truly unique in that it was originally *built* with both gas *and* electric lighting, rather than *most* houses of this one's vintage that were retrofitted with electric and the gas systems removed." she droned on.

Leading them through the house, showing them the upstairs bedrooms, the woman opened the first door on the right of the hallway that ran through the middle of the second floor. "This is one of the three larger bedrooms, each with its own private bath! The one across the hall is a mirror image of it!"

Looking at the room, Richard saw a nursery and felt the sting of loss. It had been only five months earlier, just after Heather had fully recovered from her emergency C-section, when they'd learned that she couldn't have any more children. They'd planned on several, three at least. Looking around the room that would have been big enough for five, Richard saw in his mind how it could become their only daughter's private playroom and bedroom.

"Down the hall on the left is the upstairs bath and three smaller bedrooms. On the right is the *Master* bed and bath with hot tub and separate shower..."

Returning to the ground floor, Richard followed the agent, not hearing much of what she was saying. His mind raced with possibilities as they explored

each run-down room that looked as though it hadn't been lived in for thirty years or more.

"The laundry room is off the kitchen with a separate entry from the outside. There are no modern facilities such as a washer or dryer, just an old hand-crank wringing machine, but easily enough room to have modern appliances put in! Just outside the door is the firewood bin, with a door on the outside for loading and a door *inside* the living room next to the fireplace, so you don't have to haul firewood through the house!"

Following along on the tour, Heather held Faith close to her, trying to keep her warm against the freezing cold in every room. She had to admit, it was a large home, though not as large as the one she grew up in, and less than fifteen minutes from where her new private practice would be. The state of it though left her skeptical. Every room had peeling paint that was probably lead-based, the marble floors were in desperate need of a good cleaning and polishing, and the whole house stank of blood and dead animals.

"The current owner's father only used this building during hunting season, so it hasn't seen much actual use for well over a quarter century! It's *very* well preserved!" the agent spun. "Additionally, there is the smaller house on the property. It's what is sometimes referred to as a 'mother-in-law' cottage! That one is a complete two-bedroom, one-and-a-half bath home with *oodles* of storage space, but not of *this* building's vintage. It was built in the seventies and has all the modern conveniences, including an emergency generator! The last owner used it as a rental, but it's well kept! Would you care to go take a look at it, Mr. and Mrs. Hargrave?"

Looking around the living room, Richard sighed and watched as his breath floated up to the high ceiling. "We'd like a moment alone to discuss it first, *Wendy*, if that's alright?"

"*Sure!*" she sung. "I'll just step outside and wait for you!"

Once she closed the door behind her, Richard turned to Heather. "Well?"

"It's... it's *big!*" she smiled with a strain. "It's also *cold!*"

"See that fireplace?" Richard asked, pointing to it. "Imagine a *roaring* fire in there! It'd easily heat the whole house!"

"You *love* it, *don't* you Richard?" Heather smiled.

"*Yes!*" he exclaimed. "The library's a *little* on the small side, but I think that den she showed us used to be part of it. I could restore it, add a bunch more shelves, and it would *easily* fit all your books... and *more!*"

"*More?*" she asked curiously.

"*Yeah!* We'll need books for Faith! A whole wall just for children's books and encyclopedias!"

Laughing at his exuberance, Heather shook her head. "*OK!* I can see *you're* hooked! Just don't let *her* know that!" she smiled, nodding toward where the agent had gone. Her mood suddenly shifting, she added, "The asking price is much less than what we can get for... for my *old* home." Heather hung her head sadly. Shaking it off, she raised her chin. "So let's not give her the idea that they could raise the price simply because you *want* it so badly!"

Moving to her and taking her and Faith into his arms, Richard patted her back. "*I know,* love. It's hard letting go."

"It's harder to *stay!*" she nearly cried. "I... I miss Gregory! And *Mom* and *Dad*, Jack and Erica, and Frank and even *Judith!* Oh, *Richard!* I feel like I'm *keeping* you, here in the wilderness, while your family is enjoying..."

"*Heather!*" he admonished her. "My family is all right *here!* You and Faith! Besides, who's going to keep people from going crazy while I run the house?"

Hmm? You! Right? If you don't take the position for that retiring therapist, the closest one will be in *Berlin*, over an hour south!"

Unsure as she stepped back to look around the living room, she shook her head. "But *Richard...*"

"And what about Brooke and Jenny? If we leave, who'll be there for them when *they* need help? Besides, I *like* the idea of living out in the wilderness! No *crime*, no hustle and bustle, lots of trees and actual *snow* for Faith to play in! I bet little Eric won't even know what snow *is* when Jack and Erica come to visit us!"

Sighing, she exhaled and watched her own breath rise. "Let's go look at the little house. Maybe we can live *there* while we get this place fixed up, which will take a small *fortune* if I'm right!"

"*That's* more like it!" Richard beamed.

"What will we do with it after?" she asked as they walked toward the door.

"Dunno." he shrugged with his arm wrapped around her shoulders. "Rent it out, I suppose. Maybe Brooke and Jenny might want it! Wouldn't *that* be nice? Having them living so close?"

"It *would*, Richard. Family *should* be close!" she sighed as they closed the door behind them.

Chapter 23 - No Greater Love

We mourned with Heather and Rich when they got the news about her not being able to have any more kids. She and Rich *wanted* more, but things are the way they *have* to be, right? That's what Jack always used to say. They moved north that fall while Rich worked at fixing up the big house.

They surprised Jenny and I when they told us they were going to *give* the little house to us. No rent meant Jenny could quit and I could open my own salon with her as my office manager. So in spring of ninety-nine, just after Faith's first birthday, we moved to be with Heather and Rich in Pittsberg.

Meanwhile, Jack and Erica had their *own* share of troubles. She caught an ectopic pregnancy three months after Jenny and I moved, *days* after Heather's twenty-fifth birthday, that nearly killed her. She had a radical hysterectomy that saved her life, but meant they too would only have one child. Rich and Heather flew all four of us down there, staying nearly a month, but we had to come home eventually, leaving Jack and Erica alone again. Judith broke her promise and tried tearing them apart, and Frank separated from her over it, though they reconciled after... well...

Things were never the same after that. They never came back to visit us in New Hampshire. Jack couldn't leave his business and Jenny and I couldn't leave *ours*, and Heather had her practice, so that trip in summer of ninety-nine was the last I ever saw Jack *or* Erica. We kept in touch, but not enough.

Then *everything* changed... for *everyone*.

Rolling over, Jack fumbled around for the light beside his bed. Turning it on, he finally was able to see the phone that was waking him with the sun not even up yet. Grabbing it, he grumbled, "Whoever this is, this had better be *good*..."

"*Jack?* It's Rich. You need to get up and turn on a TV."

"*What?*" Jack grumbled. "Rich, it's six in the morning here! I have *work* in two hours and I need *sleep!*"

"*Jack!* Just shut up and *do* it!" Richard barked. "*Please!*"

Shaking his head, Jack got up. "*Fine!* What channel?"

"Doesn't *matter*, Jack." he said in a fog.

Erica sat up and looked at him. "*Jack?* What's going on? Who *is* it?"

"A dead brother-in-law if he dragged me out of bed for anything less than an alien *invasion!*"

"*Richie?*" she said getting up and wrapping a robe around herself. "What does *he* want?"

"Dunno." Jack turned on the TV and it came on to the news channel it had been on the night before. "What the *hell*, Rich? A fire in New York? *This* is what you woke us up an hour early for?"

Erica walked into the living room just as the commentator said, "*Another... uh... vehicle, some kind of an aircraft, crashed into the World Trade Center. This is uh, no accident. This is no bomb from inside... uh... this is, as you put it, a terrorist attack. There's no two ways about it.*"

Hardly able to breathe, Jack just stood there silently, watching the towers burn while he began to burn inside.

"*Jack!*" Erica clung to him as if her life depended on it; tears starting to rain down her cheeks.

"*Rich?*" Jack said after a few minutes listening to commentary while sirens blared in the background. "You still there?"

"*Yeah*, Jack. I'm here."

When the network ran the footage of the second attack, Jack's face hardened into a fury while Erica turned away, unable to watch, and leaving to go hug their child still sleeping in their room.

"*Rich?* Remember way back when I said if we joined up we might get sent off to war? You told me we weren't *at* war anymore. Well, we are *now!*"

Sighing as he turned and looked at Heather, little three-year-old Faith holding her as her mother cried, he nodded. "You gonna *do* it, Jack? Go back in?"

"Damn *straight* I am, Rich! Aren't *you?*"

Looking at his family, Richard answered. "*Yeah*. Yeah, I think I *am*, Jack."

Brooke pulled her uniform out of the box she'd packed it away in, at the time utterly convinced she'd never see it again.

"Brooke! You *can't!* They won't *take* you now!" Jenny yelled.

"What they don't know won't hurt 'em!" Brooke snapped as she unfolded her uniform jacket and lay it across the ironing board. "As far as the Marines are concerned, you're just my Office Manager."

Jenny stormed up to her. "So that's *it?* After almost four years together you're just going to sign up again and *leave* me?" she yelled through tears.

"I *have* to, Jenny!" she yelled back. "For *you!* For Heather and Faith! For Erica and Eric and Frank and even *Judith!* This is *war*, Jenny! You think they'll stop at killing a few *thousand* of us? *Damn it*, Jenny! You once said

you were *proud* of me and what *this* represents!" she held up her uniform jacket. "I'm a *Marine*, damn it! Not a hairdresser! I'll *always* be a Marine! If you can't accept that then you never loved me at all!"

"Why does it have to be *you*, Brooke?" Jenny asked as tears began to fall.

Brooke calmed herself and lowered her voice. "Because it's the responsibility of everyone who's able, to defend the lives and liberty of those who *aren't*. Most Americans *can't* defend this country, Jenny! They lack the training and the drive. You, Heather, Erica, you're *fine* people, but you're not Marines. *Jack* is. *Richard* is. So am *I*. I... I'd hoped you would understand."

Jenny wrapped her arms around Brooke, laying her head on her shoulder. "I'm just so scared! I... I don't want to *lose* you!"

"I'm not a *Grunt*, Jenny! I'm an electronics tech!" Brooke tried to ease her fears. "I'll probably end up being stationed somewhere stateside, but I'll do my part! Even if I'm not fighting, I can take the place of a Marine who *can*. How many Marines might not come home because *one man* was here doing *my* job instead of over there, just so *I* could stay here with you? If I sat here and did nothing while other Marines *died*, it'd haunt me the rest of my *life*!"

Pulling away, Jenny forced herself to stop crying. "I... I understand. I don't *like* it, but I... I can't keep you from being the woman I fell in *love* with."

Brooke resumed her task. "Will you be here when I get back? *When...* not *if*."

"I don't know." she answered. "I don't know what I'll *do* while you're gone."

Closing her eyes to keep her emotions in check, Brooke nodded. "I see. I suppose I should be grateful you stayed with me *this* long."

Confused, Jenny pieced together what Brooke was really asking and shook her head. "*No!* That's... that's not what I meant, Brooke! I mean, I don't know

what I'll *do* with myself! If I can't be your receptionist, I can't just hang out here doing nothing but *pinning* for you! I'll go *mad*!"

Looking at the woman who's own father promised to perform their marriage ceremony when they were ready, Brooke sighed. "You could get an office job, maybe a place in Pittsberg or Clarksville? You're a good manager! Or you could move back down with Mom and Dad for a while." She stopped ironing and went to her, wrapping Jenny in her arms. "I'll be *fine*! You'll see! I'll call as often as I can and I'll be home before you know it!"

Jenny held her as tightly as she could manage. "I... I remember! No surprise homecomings though! I want a *warning* this time!" she laughed.

Holding the love of her life tightly, Brooke nodded. "I promise, Jenny! No surprises! I *love* you!"

While Jack packed his old seabag, Erica stood by, helping as she was able.

"Do you know how long you'll be gone?" she asked, handing him one of the uniform blouses he'd pulled out.

"It's a two year cruise Buttons, but I'll get Leave. You remember the drill! Don't know when I'll be stateside, though." Jack answered honestly as he continued to pack.

"What about the business?" she asked, standing back and just letting him pack on his own, the action seeming to help calm his anger.

"You'll have to sell it while I'm deployed." Jack sighed resignedly. "Damn shame, too. We were just taking off, but the lease alone would eat up all the assets over two years with no one to run it. Can't afford to pay a cleaner and manager and continue to pay off the business loan. No one would work as cheap as me, so running it *without* me won't save it."

"Part of me doesn't want you to go," Erica admitted, "but the rest is *so proud* of you for it!"

"I think I *like* that!" Jack smiled. "Makes me feel all *noble* and stuff!"

Looking out the window of their bedroom, Erica saw their three-year-old playing in the sandbox in the back yard with April, the little girl from down the street. "Eric will be in Kindergarten before you come home." she mused absently, not even aware she was speaking. "He might not even *remember* you, except from pictures. I'll have to make sure to talk about you, a lot!"

Stopping a moment to look out the window with her, Jack nodded with grim determination. "He's one of the *biggest* reasons I'm going. I have to make sure *nothing* like this ever happens again! I don't want *him* growing up in a world that's too scared to *live!*" Anger filled his heart all over again.

"I know, Jack." Erica paused and looked at the floor. "I... I'll *miss* you! Every minute of every day until you come *home* to me!"

"And I'll miss *you*, Buttons!" he half-smiled at her. "No matter *where* they send me, a part of you will be there, too! And I *have* to come home to you! You'd *kill* me if I didn't!"

Laughing even as fear threatened to swallow her, Erica tried not to let it turn to tears. "You'll be careful?"

"*No!* I *won't* be careful." he stated defiantly. "The only careful Marine is a *dead* one." Turning back to her after he closed up his bag, Jack looked her in the eyes with the most serious look she'd ever seen in him. "I'll be a *killer*. I'll make sure I come home by killing *every enemy* that threatens me. Until there *is* no enemy, but *peace*. That's the Rifleman's creed."

Taking him in her arms, Erica held him desperately. "You do what you need to do to come *home* to me, Jack!" she cried. "I love you *so much!*"

"I love you, too!" he said softly, holding her just as fiercely as she held him.
"My *Buttons!*"

"My *Jack!*" she replied. "I have a *confession* to make! I've had a crush on you since I was *ten!*"

"Who, *me?*" he answered back. "Come on! Grab Eric and you two can drive me to intake! That way I'm not away from you two a second more than I *have* to be!"

Jack walked into the Marine Recruitment Center in Costa Mesa days after the attacks and the day before his thirtieth birthday. He was quickly re-enlisted as a Lance Corporal once more, signing up for a two-year cruise and assigned to the Twenty-sixth Marine Expeditionary Unit. A week later, he was sailing for the Suez Canal and war.

Richard drove his car up the driveway to the little house on a mid-October morning. Honking as he pulled to a stop, he watched as Brooke came out, hugged and kissed Jenny goodbye, and finally tore herself away and jogged to the car before the snow started again.

Slamming the passenger door and buckling in, Brooke sighed. "Let's roll!"

Pulling away, Richard nodded. "Good choice of words." he noted.

Hours went by in total silence as Richard drove them to Concord where they would be re-enlisted into Active Service for two years. Neither one spoke more than absolutely necessary until they got close. Finally, Brooke broke the silence.

"Heather OK? Did she fight it?"

Richard shook his head. "Nope. She hated putting her practice on hold, but she promised that, for me, she'd take care of Faith while I'm gone." He smiled

weakly. "She told me that if I could put *my* career on hold because raising our daughter ourselves was *that* important to me, she would honor my service by doing it *for* me until I get back."

Brooke shook her head. "Did she make you *cry*, little man?"

"*Can* it, POG!" he ribbed her. "Grunts don't cry! Our tears and other bodily fluids are saved for watering the graves of the enemy with *piss!*" He drove a little further before he asked, "Jenny put up a fight?"

"She did at first." Brooke admitted. "In the end, she knew this was something *I had* to do." She smiled briefly. "That woman *loves* being the girlfriend of a Marine! And she sure can show it!"

Richard smiled at that before it got quiet again. "Heard from your old man or mom since nine-eleven?" he asked, glancing over at her.

"No." Brooke answered sadly. "I wrote them, and called twice after, but they just hang up and won't write back so..."

"Sorry." he expressed his sympathies. "Your old man sounded like a good Marine from what Jack told me."

"He's a stubborn, mule-headed, dirty-rotten son-of-a-bitch! Of *course* he's a good Marine!" she joked. "Where do you think *I* get it?"

Just as Brooke had expected, after she signed up for active duty once more, she was assigned to Marine Wing Support Squadron three-seventy-three for the Eleventh Marine Aircraft Group in Miramar; a stateside assignment.

Since he now had a college degree, Richard was offered the chance to be an Officer, but he refused as it would be more time away from home and wasn't why he re-enlisted. He refused to be away from Faith and Heather for one day longer than necessary to get the job done, so instead, just a few days

short of his thirty-first birthday, he was assigned to the newly formed Forth Marine Expeditionary Brigade Antiterrorism unit. He would be deployed to Afghanistan a month later as part of Task Force India.

Richard sat in the back of the HUMVEE as it made its way quickly through the crowded streets of Kabul. He wiped sweat from his brow as the desert sun and close confines of the vehicle threatened to cook him alive. The driver sped down the streets just ahead of the armored Jeep Cherokee they were escorting, clearing a path toward the US Embassy that had been abandoned since nineteen eighty-eight. Over the radio he heard someone shout, "*Slow down!*", but the driver of the vehicle shook his head.

"No way I'm slowing down and letting these ragheads get close enough to toss a frag in here!" he quipped.

Richard tapped him on the shoulder. "We have to keep the charge in sight, Private! *Slow up!*" He quickly turned and leaned to look through a window at the following vehicle as it entered the traffic circle they'd just traversed, suddenly cut off by a wagon being pulled by a donkey and coming to a halt. "*Stop!*" he shouted. "The Charge is *cut off!*" As the driver squealed tires on the pitted pavement, his squad immediately went to ready position, rifles shouldered with muzzles pointed downward; each one ready to race out and rescue the person they were ordered to protect.

Richard could feel his heart in his throat as he pulled his sidearm, judging the fighting distance too close for his rifle. People moved past the military vehicle like a sea of humanity, none smiling. He was about to order the driver to double back when the cart finally started moving out of the road and he could see the Jeep Cherokee start to move once more. "*Clear!*" he shouted, causing the driver to floor it and race off ahead once more.

Moving to the back of the vehicle, he saw the following vehicle closing with theirs just as a tiny yellow taxi ran up to within feet of the rear bumper of their HUMVEE. Richard pulled his weapon once more in preparation for an

attack while the Cherokee raced up to them and cut sharply in front of the cab, sparking flashing lights and a horn honking in irritation. While it was just an impatient driver, the terror he'd felt when the cab ran up behind them made Richard see the HUMVEE driver's point. "No stopping through the next Roundabout, Private! *Anyone* gets in your way? *Blast* through!"

"*Affirmative!*" the Marine shouted back.

Reaching their destination, Richard became suspicious. Grabbing the radio, he ordered, "We're bypassing the Embassy! Drive on and we'll circle back! Spotters watch for anything suspicious! *Over!*"

"*Roger.*" came the reply over the radio. Circling the abandoned building, they eventually made their way to an adjacent field; the huge metal doors of the front gate locked closed with concertina wire topping every wall.

Spotting a solitary Afghani ahead, Richard pointed. "*There!* Pull up!" The vehicle slowing next to the man, Richard noted that he was dressed like a western businessman in a suit and tie. He was also the only Afghani he'd seen that day that was smiling at their presence. Another similarly dressed man opened the makeshift driveway, pulling aside a spike strip that they'd put in place. Richard watched them as they pulled through when he caught sight of something even more rare, a young Afghani woman holding a clipboard and wearing a normal American-style dress and no burka. The young woman shyly marked down each vehicle as it entered.

Pulling to a halt, Richard barked, "*Deploy!*" and their vehicle emptied in a second. One man moved the crewed gun position on top of the HUMVEE to point it at the entrance of the compound, ready to send hundreds of fifty-caliber rounds into anything that would threaten them. Moving his squad up, Richard nodded to the Embassy Guard Marines that had already taken up their post. Handing over his Military ID, he collected a visitor's badge and looked with pride at the Marine guidon that was posted. Taking his squad past the '*Clear Your Weapon*' barrel, Richard spat in it.

Behind him he heard, "No way I'm unloading my weapon so long as I'm in country, Embassy or *no!*"

"*Affirmative!*" he replied. Making their way into the building, the sound of broken glass echoed as it crunched under their boots, the scent and taste of dust in every breath. The place was like a time capsule. Half-smoked cigars sat in ashtrays where they'd been abandoned when Richard was still eighteen and in jail and Jack was in a coma; a photo of then President Ronald Reagan still hanging on a wall. After clearing the room, Richard saw something that nearly made him cry with pride. Folded neatly, an American flag that had been removed from a locked vault in the basement sat waiting to be flown again. Moving over to it, he noticed a hand-written note and read it aloud.

"Marines, take care of it. For those of us that were here, it means a lot. For those of you who enter Kabul, it could mean a lot to you. Semper Fi. We Kabul Marines endured as I'm sure you will. Think of us as needed."

"Ooo Raa." someone said quietly.

"Alright, split by teams and begin your sweep! *Move!*" he ordered.

After securing the building, his squad got the detail of sweeping up the floors and moving trash out. They piled up dirt, dust, and broken glass around the floor. Some time later, Richard stood outside the building when that same American Flag was once more raised to fly in the cold Afghan wind.

Jack stood as Corporal of the Watch at the Embassy in Kabul, having flown into Kandahar the previous December, and then deployed with nearly eighty other Marines to secure the embassy in preparation for its re-opening. He saw Richard arrive with the Ambassador, his half-smile the only outward sign of seeing of his oldest friend who he hadn't seen since August two years earlier when he and Erica lost their second child and the hope of having any more. He immediately went back to his duty, seeing to it that all military IDs were checked and re-checked.

Hours later, Jack was finally relieved and took some time to write his letter home. Setting it aside among his personal effects to mail later when he was somewhere more hospitable, he set out to find Richard. Walking the halls of the almost empty building, he saw something that nearly made him laugh out loud. Richard was pushing a broom down the hall, making another sweep of dirt and dust that had accumulated over the many years. "What's the matter, Sergeant? Couldn't find any *Snuffies* to do that *for* you?"

Richard knew who was asking before he even looked up. Pursing his lips and coming to a sudden halt, he slowly raised his head. "*Jack*, you son of a..."

"*Ah!*" he interrupted as he leaned against a wall. "No salt on duty, *Sergeant!*"

Leaning the broom against a wall so it wouldn't fall over, he slowly walked up to Jack. "I could always get *you* to do it, *Corporal!*"

"Not a *chance*, Rich!" he smiled his half-smile. "I'm off duty... and not even in your *chain!*" He pushed off from the wall and stood in front of Richard. "So... what's *up?*"

Richard smiled and wrapped his brother-in-law in a tight hug, each slapping the other on the back. "*God!* It's good to see you, Jack! How did you end up here?"

"I got here *first*, slowpoke!" Jack retorted. "I'm with the twenty-sixth MEU. We took Kandahar and then about eighty of us were ordered here to secure the place before you showed up doing *babysitting* duty!"

"Oh, you think *you* got it so hard?" Richard retorted. "You guys are shipping *out* soon! We're gonna be stuck here for *months!*"

The two started walking back down the hallway together. "Oh, *yeah!* Hard duty! Sitting cushy behind metal doors and enough wire and emplacements to guard Fort Knox! Can't the *Embassy Guard* do your job?" The two happily

bantered back and forth for a while before Jack asked, "So when do you go off duty?"

"I've *been* off for an hour!" Richard laughed. "I got bored and I wanted to help get this place ready... so..."

"So you decided to pilot a *push-broom*? Wow!" Jack laughed. "Come on! I'll introduce you to some of the guys!"

Two hours later, they were both in the back of a HUMVEE laughing as they recalled various stories from their childhood. On a lark, they'd decided to volunteer for vehicular patrol around the area near the Embassy, along with two members of Jack's unit, just so they could spend more time together. The sun had set by the time they pulled out, making the cold of winter bite a little harder. Richard found himself wishing that, for just a few minutes, he could be back in the hot HUMVEE he'd been in several hours earlier.

"*Damn*, it gets cold out here at night fast!" Jack commented to nobody in particular. "Not like *The Sandbox*. Remember that, Rich?"

He nodded and chuckled. "Yeah! Hot as hell and twice as unfriendly!"

"So, did Hathaway go back in, too?" Jack asked after a lull.

He nodded and looked away. "*Yeah*. She got sent to *Miramar*. Lucky girl!"

At that, Jack poked his head up. "*Miramar*? MWS-three-seven-three?"

"Yep." Richard nodded. "She got a nice and safe *stateside* assignment fixing generators while we're busting our rumps here!"

"Don't count her lucky *yet*, Rich." Jack shook his head. "I heard they may be deployed to *Bagram* later this year! Security cleared a Lieutenant from there to go check out the field and see if they can use Harriers there."

"*Bagram?* That old *Soviet* airfield?" Richard balked. "*Jack!* That's right on the edge of controlled territory! You *sure?*"

He nodded. "*Positive.* Man, Jenny'll go *ape shit* if they deploy there! *Oh!* Heather! Man, her husband, brother-in-law, *and* Maid-of-Honor all deployed at the same time? *She'll* be the one needing a shrink!" Pausing a moment as he saw the worry on Richard's face, he changed directions and tried to set his best friend's mind at ease. "Of course they may *not* deploy there. From what I hear the place is a disaster area. The runway's so cracked they're thinking of using it as an example of how *not* to build an airfield!"

Laughing briefly, the two looked at each other silently before Jack broke it. "How's Heather and Faith? Heard anything from them since you shipped?"

Richard nodded his head as the HUMVEE turned a corner sharply and sent them both leaning to one side. Recovering, he tried to answer again. "Yeah, they're *fine*, just miss me. Heather took a two-year sabbatical. Faith asked a few ticklish questions about where I was going and when I'd be back. *Damn*, but if that kid didn't make me almost change my mind! She was *so* cute and sad when I told her I wouldn't be back for her fourth birthday!"

His best friend nodded in understanding. "Same thing with Eric! He's quiet for a three-year-old boy, though! I remember raising *hell* when I was his age! Playing in the mud, running through the yard yelling at the top of my lungs! But not *Eric*. No, he'd rather play in his sandbox or do other things with his girlfriend!"

"*Girlfriend?*" Richard balked. "At *three?*"

"What can I *say*, Rich!" Jack grinned. "He takes after his old man! That same charming power over the ladies! Poor little girl didn't stand a *chance*, what with my charm mixed with Erica's good looks! But yeah, seriously his best friend's this girl named April that lives down our street. Those two are nearly *inseparable!* They glommed onto each other about a year ago. See, she lives

about halfway between our house and Dad's place, so every time we'd walk by, Eric would *have* to stop and play with her for a minute or two. He does *everything* with her now!"

"Dad's place? I thought Mom was talking about moving back in?"

"Yeah, well as far as *I'm* concerned, the old witch doesn't *count*!"

"I thought you and Mom buried the hatchet?"

"I did, but she's still trying to bury it in our *marriage*!" Jack huffed. "When Erica got that ectopic pregnancy, *she* goes and blames *me* for it! Like it's *my* fault Erica and I can't have any more kids! We're more torn up over it than *she* is! She hardly even *tries* to see Eric anymore! Dad's over every weekend for Sunday dinner, though."

Shaking his head, Richard looked out a window at the few lights they could see. "I'm sorry, Jack. Mom took Heather's loss badly, too. She blamed the surgeon that did her C-section for a while, but when Heather stood up to her about it, she let it go. Maybe it was just too much for her when Erica couldn't have any more kids, either. *I dunno*. Maybe you're right. I *still* can't believe she lost her shit over Brooke and Jenny the way she did!"

"Ah!" Jack waved his hand dismissively. "Makes no difference to me. I'm *used* to her hating me, but you shoulda *heard* her, Rich! She thinks God is *punishing* all of us because we're accepting of Jenny and Brooke! What *galls* me though is how she takes it out on Eric by *avoiding* him. Poor kid! As bad as she ever was to me, she's still his grandma! He should be dropping by her and Dad's place seven days a week for *cookies*! Instead he gets a grandma with a chocolate *chip* on her shoulder!"

Richard was about to comment on how lame Jack's joke was, but he never got the chance.

TO: Erica Dunning - Newport Beach, California

It is with a heavy heart that I regret to inform you that your husband, Lance Corporal Jack Dunning, was killed yesterday in an attack on a patrol vehicle protecting the American Embassy in Kabul, Afghanistan. Corporal Dunning distinguished himself by volunteering for the duty.

I know this will come as little comfort to you in this time of grief, but I took the time to review his record before sending you this letter. Your husband was the epitome of what it means to be a Marine. He served with distinction in the Gulf War, returning home to serve at Alameda NAS where he retired in June of '96. His reserve status had ended more than a year before he volunteered once more to fight for his country at its greatest time of need. It takes a special kind of man to twice put his life on the line for his country, and I am saddened that he paid The Last Full Measure to ensure that you and his son would never know fear from an enemy aggressor again.

While it is not my responsibility to do so, I also wanted to advise you that Sergeant Richard Hargrave, who I have come to learn is your brother, was in the vehicle when the improvised explosive device was set off, killing both men instantly. You will be receiving another letter of condolence soon from his Commanding Officer. Words cannot express my sympathies or the depth of sorrow this single act of hate has wrought on you and your family. Rest assured that my command will do whatever it takes to see to it that the people responsible are brought to swift and final justice.

Your husband's personal effects will be returned to you as soon as feasible. Due to the nature of their deaths, two empty caskets will be flown back to be interred in Arlington National Cemetery for their final rest.

May God grant you the strength and perseverance necessary to see this time of sorrow pass.

Col. Andrew P. Frick C.O. 26th MEU

Chapter 24 - Every Day is Your Last

I didn't hear about Jack or Rich until I'd been deployed to Bagram for over six months. When they extended our deployment another six, we were given ten-day Leaves. Mine came up first in rotation, so I got to fly back to Guam where I called Jenny as soon as I could get off base. She told me and I dug up the details after they were already buried and gone.

Heather got a letter from Rich's CO that he'd been killed while volunteering for picket duty, but he didn't know about the association between Rich and Jack, so Heather didn't find out about *his* death until she called to break the news to Erica. They met up at Arlington and it was the last time any of us in New Hampshire would see any of the California families again. Jenny was there to represent me as a 'friend of the family'. No one ever knew about us while I was serving. I made sure it never showed and Jenny was a *rock!* She passed the time I was gone with Heather, Faith, her folks, and a promise.

After the funeral, everyone just stopped communicating. It... it was like their deaths killed more than their bodies. It killed their *families*. Last I ever heard from Erica was a Christmas card from her that she must have sent before she got the letter about Jack, but I didn't even know about *that* until almost two years later when I came home. After so much time and pain, I just couldn't bring myself to call or write her.

When Erica finally wrote Heather, and she wrote back, none of us knew just how important those letters would become or how much they would change all our lives.

Erica sat at the table as she tried to hand write the letter to Heather. They hadn't communicated since the funeral over eight years earlier, and sitting there, she found it hard to know where to begin. She stared at the salutation with vast blank space beneath it, waiting for words of regret and sorrow.

Unable to focus, she looked out the window to the front yard and smiled. Eric and April were sitting on the curb out in front of her house, Erica sure her eleven-year-old was telling his young friend a story that the two would act out together sometime; praying that he might be blissfully unaware of the upheaval that was sure to await after writing and sending her letter. She loved listening to the playful duo and the elaborate stories the two children made up together in their gentle way with one another. It was the one bright spot in her life of heartache since Jack's death.

She just sat there watching them until the two got up and started walking to April's house before turning back to her letter. Finally knowing what to say, she began scratching out the long overdue letter to the woman who'd been her Maid of Honor and so much more, but was unable to finish it for months.

Heather went into the library to read the letter her sister-in-law sent her the month before, having put off reading it for fear of what it might say after so long a time apart. As she began, her worst fears were realized as her hopes of reconciliation with that lost branch of her family faded into tears. Unable to believe what she was reading, she started again.

Dear Heather,

I know it's been a long time since we've spoken. I think it's just been too hard for either of us to breach the pain of our mutual losses. Even as I write this, my heart aches for Jack and Richie, begging for the chance to see them just one more time. It seems that day will come for me very soon.

I'm sorry that it took this to reach out to you, to bridge the gap that grew out of their deaths, but I've been diagnosed with leukemia. It's aggressive and isn't responding to treatment, so I was admitted to the hospital for radical radiation treatment and chemotherapy in an attempt to halt its spread. I have less than a one-percent chance of survival and only been given two months, at best. I tried writing when I was admitted, but it was just too hard.

I hope life has been better for you these last eight years. Do you still have your practice? I kept busy doing HR consulting; writing Conflict Resolution guidelines for companies all over the western states. Eric would stay with a friend of his, the Stone family, on the occasions I was away, which is where he's staying now. I don't know if you were ever told about my parents. I'm sorry I never did so myself. They were killed February of last year when their car was hit by a drunk driver. He was a Frenchman who didn't have a license or insurance and had been living here illegally for over ten years.

Mom did finally learn to respect Jack before she died. She once told me she thought he was going to 'ruin her girl's life' and drag me down into poverty and misery. I think it wasn't until she saw me crying when they handed me Jack's flag that it dawned on her just how happy he'd always made me. Once he was gone, she could see what I was without him... destitute and void.

All I have left of Jack now is Eric. One thing I regret most in life is that we've been so far apart and so distant with one another that he never has had a chance to know his family and the best friends I ever had... you, Faith, and Brooke. I would like to correct that mistake.

I know it's asking a lot, but if the doctors are right, soon Eric will have no one left to love him. I don't want to see him end up in foster care. It would break poor Jack's heart... and mine. So I am asking, please. Would you take care of him for us once I'm gone to be with Jack and Richie? You and Faith may soon be the only family he has left in the world.

I miss you and Brooke so much and have done so for years, but it was always just too hard to try and reach out after so much time and pain. I'd thought briefly about maybe moving nearer to you two once Jack was gone, but Mom and Dad needed Eric and I close with Richie gone. I was thinking about it again after they died, but only days after the accident I was diagnosed and too busy fighting for my life. Pulling up roots and moving across the country at that time was just unthinkable. I hope you can forgive me for not telling

you sooner about Mom and Dad... or me... or Eric... or any of the thousands of things we've missed about each other's lives over the years.

Since I'm sending this to you, I wanted to also tell you something else. About a month after the funeral at Arlington, I got a letter from Jack. He'd written it hours before he and Richie were killed and hadn't even had a chance to mail it before they died. I included a copy of it with this letter so you can get a glimpse at their final hours, along with a copy of the letter I got from Jack's Commanding Officer.

I think I'll take Eric and his friend to the beach tomorrow. I should probably be getting ready with making final arrangements and all, but I'm going to take Jack's advice from his last letter to me instead.

*All my love to you, Faith, Brooke, and all,
Erica Dunning*

Heather's eyes burned with tears that rained down her cheeks. To go so long without news and then to suddenly be handed so much sadness and loss all at once, she was sorely tempted to take the letter to the fireplace in the living room and throw it in; hoping to burn away the pain and perhaps someday forget she'd ever even gotten it. She knew though that it was impossible. There was an innocent life involved that would forever suffer the fallout of such a callous act of selfishness.

Jack and Erica's child.

Putting down Erica's letter, she looked at the copy of the letter her sister-in-law had gotten from Jack's Commanding Officer informing her of Jack and Richard's simultaneous deaths. Turning at last to the final letter Erica had gotten from Jack, she read it slowly and carefully, feeling a chill run down her spine at the words that came so close to her husband and friends' last moments on Earth.

My Dearest Buttons,

Hello from Kabul! Finally got a chance to write you. We've been busy for what seems like forever! My unit got tapped to secure the old abandoned Embassy building here. Lucky us! We've been guarding it for over a month and guess who I see rolling up this morning but Rich! His unit is taking over so we can get shipped out.

You asked me to be careful and I told you I wouldn't. I'll be a ruthless killer and bury our enemies in their own ashes and drown them in their own blood. We did that back at Kandahar. Took a lot of POWs too, but most of them ran or died. I'm still not going to be careful. The minute you do, start looking over your shoulder and listening for the bullet with your name on it, that's the minute your card is punched. I have to live every day here as though it's my last, making sure the threat is eliminated so I can survive to come home to you and Eric.

That's about all. Oh, there's a whole lot more, but nothing I can put in this letter. Remember that every day is your last, too! Don't be afraid to do things without me! Live! Have fun! Take Eric to Disneyland or the beach! Don't sit around pining for me to come home! If you're too scared to live, you'll die long before your body catches up with you.

They say we'll be home for Liberty by the end of the year at the latest, maybe as soon as this summer if things go well on this end. But don't wait on me! Live, have fun, and do it with me there in your heart! I want to hear all about it too, so do it and then write me so I can join you! Got that Buttons?

I think I'll go track Rich down and see if I can't convince him to volunteer for patrol with me. Give us a chance to catch up. That boy still needs me!

*Love you and still trying to deserve your love,
Your Jack*

Once more brought to tears with the memory of Jack's vibrant zest for life, Heather ached to have that in her life again. Without a second thought, she picked up a pen and stationary and began to write Erica back.

Dearest Erica,

I hardly know where to begin. I have to admit that when I first read about you not telling me about Richard's parents I was upset, but I understand that you've been dealing with something I am too terrified to even contemplate, leaving my Faith alone. Of course I will take care of Eric if the need should arise, but I will pray and ask God to see to it that, if it's His will, you recover fully and have many more years with him.

Speaking of more years, once you are feeling better, I would like to invite you both out to Hargrave House. To stay, if you like. Richard loved this place we made our home! In the years before he went back into the service, he spent more time than I can count restoring this place to almost the same as the day it was built. The rest of his time he spent with Faith; taking care of her and teaching her to walk, talk, and question everything! Don't worry about the cost. I'll take care of that just for the chance to see you again and give Faith and Eric the chance to know one another. They have so little family left that they need to keep who they have closer.

Gregory, my old butler, died of heart failure shortly before we moved out of Moore Estates. I'd saved him a pension that he refused to take and retire, so I donated it in his name to the Heart Association. Before he died, he found his own replacement, Fredrick. I'll have to admit, sometimes I don't know what I'd do without him. He seems to be able to do everything Gregory did, plus the work the groundskeepers used to do!

Theresa is still with me. I started calling her Cook after Richard wasn't here to keep doing it! Every time it's a little reminder that he is still here, that his spirit still lives in this house. She refuses to retire or take the pension I saved for her, either! She says she wasn't built for the easy life and would hate not

having a menu for five or more to prepare for! Personally, I think she just would miss us. I know we would miss her.

The only other member of the household that moved with us is Franchesca, the junior maid. She was going to stay in Concord with her fiancé, but she caught him cheating and moved with us instead. She doesn't smile at much anymore, which is a shame because she used to be so happy all the time.

Brooke and Jenny are married now. They got married last year when New Hampshire changed their laws. I can almost hear Jack ranting about how government has no right to get involved in private matters! I know he would have been proud to stand up for Brooke, and I know you had wanted to be her Matron of Honor, but the letter she wrote you was never answered, so I stood in your place. I'm guessing that was about the time you were dealing with your parent's death and the news of your illness.

I would like to share with you something I never got to tell Richard. Shortly after he was deployed, a doctor friend of mine came to me and told me about a procedure that would make me able to bear children again. I underwent the operation two months before they were killed. I was going to surprise him when he got back. Now it's just an empty reminder of what we never got to have; the large family he'd always wanted.

I hope this letter finds you healthy and strong. All my best to you and Eric.

*Love,
Heather*

Erica read the letter in her hospital bed, machines pumping her full of toxins to try and stop the cancer that was killing her. She wept when she finished it, knowing the heartbreak of things undone. Later she was back in her room recovering, penning her final reply to the family she'd loved so much and lost so long ago.

Dearest Heather,

Thank you for writing back. I was worried that on seeing a letter from me after so long that you just destroyed it unread. I wouldn't have blamed you.

I'm so glad to hear about all the happiness that you've managed to make for yourselves. I was sorry to hear about Franchesca's heartbreak. I remember her coming in to make the beds a few times and how cheery and fresh she seemed, taking pride in her work and never letting the daily grind wear down her spirit. It's a shame that her love's betrayal changed her so much.

Things are not going as well for me here. The radiation isn't working and the chemotherapy isn't slowing down the cancer. I'm afraid that very soon, within a matter of weeks now, it's His will that I'll leave this world and join Richie... and my Jack... after so many lonely years without his smile. I'll be OK though. Just knowing that Eric will be with family who loves him will be enough for me to stop worrying and just let go of what I cannot change.

I've done my best to live every day as though it's my last, as Jack asked me to. The only thing I think he'd be disappointed about is that I never looked for love again. I know he would have wanted me to move on, but nobody could ever replace the missing half of my heart and soul. So I kept busy with work I enjoyed and spent time with Eric cooking, cleaning, going to the park, reading together, and making his life as full of love and happiness as if Jack were here to do them with me.

I do worry about Eric sometimes. He's so quiet and shy, and so very unlike the boys he goes to school with. I think that not having Jack around has made him miss the lessons of how to be a man, so he has a hard time relating to his peers. He had Dad until last year, but I guess that wasn't enough. Instead he spends his time inventing stories and playing with the girls in his classes as they're more accepting of his gentle nature.

The only thing I was worried about him living with you is that he would have you, Faith, and Brooke, but no male role models he could look up to. I'm glad that you still have a man in the house, even if he is only your butler. I know that to you that means he's almost as close as family, so I can set my heart at ease on that issue as well.

I truly am sorry about not responding to Brooke. I would have been honored to stand up for her and Jenny, and I'm happy to know they're still together. Thank you for stepping in when I couldn't. Once you reminded me about her letter, I remembered it came the same day I got the lab results back from my biopsy. I never even opened it, I was so distraught. Since it was from Brooke and not you, I was certain it was just more bad news, that you or Faith had died, so I destroyed it; unable to face whatever horrible news Brooke had written to tell me. Please extend both my apologies and congratulations to them both. I'm so happy they were finally able to join together as one.

Words cannot express how sorry I am that had Richie returned home you two could have grown your family as you both so badly desired. I fear that now that you know it was Jack that convinced Richie to go on that patrol with him that you'll blame him for the loss of not only your husband, but also the loss of the children that you could have had with him. When I had to have my hysterectomy, Jack and I were beyond devastated, not just for the loss of our future children, but the poor baby that died inside me that day. So I know what it meant to you to have that hope rekindled. It seems that it was just not meant to be.

I'm sorry that I'll have to decline your request to come out to see you. I'm sure it's wonderful, unfortunately, my immune system is so weak from the attempts to halt the cancer that traveling is out of the question. I will take consolation that Eric will see it soon enough for the both of us.

I'm very tired from my last round of chemotherapy, so I'll have to close here. The results were no better than last time though, so it will be my last. No more radiation, no more toxins. I'm too tired to keep fighting a hopeless

battle. If it were even helping a little, I'd keep trying, but it just seems a waste of effort. Know that I still love you so very much, miss you terribly, and think of you often. I'll write more if and when I can.

*Love Always,
Erica*

Sitting in the library, once more reading a letter from her husband's sister, Heather wanted to cry, the news hurt so badly. All too soon three of the four people she'd loved as a young woman would be gone, leaving her alone.

Knowing she had to keep up a stoic and strong appearance for Faith's sake, she swallowed her pain and focused on the task at hand, whatever that might be at the moment. Once begun though, the habit was difficult to turn off and came off to those around her as an attitude of being much too proper, cold, and aloof.

Needing time to process the situation, Heather didn't replay right away. She knew time was short for her failing sister-in-law, but even just thinking about it would cause her to nearly break down and sob. After a week of putting it off, she knew that she had to respond before it was too late. Sequestering herself in the library once more, she sat down with pen and paper and wrote out her last words to Erica.

My Dear Sister Erica,

I don't know why I didn't start calling you that long ago, for that is what you are... my sister... the one I always wanted and never got to have. Sister of my heart and in fact. Knowing you will soon be gone breaks my heart over the time lost to us that we could have been closer, too late to make up for it.

More than anything, I wish I could come see you, but Faith has a bad flu and right now she needs me. It is tearing me up inside knowing that at this time when you need me the most, I can't even come to say goodbye. I just can't in

good conscience leave her. I'm sure Franchesca would take good care of her, but I could never live with myself if something happened to her while I was off trying to assuage my own guilty conscience over not coming to see you before now. I can't be that selfish, no matter how badly I want to see you.

I do understand why you never moved on to find love again. It is much the same with me. I've no shortage of admirers, but none of them are Richard. I guess nobody ever will be. True love is hard to find. Finding it twice in one lifetime is too much to ask, and I wouldn't want it with anyone else, anyway. Every moment would be a reminder of what I'd lost.

Brooke and Jenny don't know about your condition yet. I just don't know how to tell them without breaking down myself. I've told Faith and the rest of the household as they needed to know that Eric will be coming to live with us soon. It's a bittersweet thought, knowing that soon I'll have Jack's son here living with us, but at the most terrible cost. Losing you.

Regarding Eric, losing his father at such a young age could definitely explain his difficulty getting along with other boys. Fredrick is a good man, almost like a brother to me, and can help Eric learn how to become one himself. We also have social events, church groups, and there are plenty of boys his age at the school Faith attends. I promise I'll help him however I can to become a man just as full of life as Jack always was.

Thank you for your words of comfort regarding my constant reminder of just how much Richard and I lost the day he died. I know you of all people can appreciate the loss. Rest assured that I don't blame Jack for Richard's death, nor for my own monthly torment. Jack had no way of knowing that going on that patrol would cost him and Richard their lives, and I can't be angry at him for wanting to spend time with Richard. They loved each other as more than just friends, but as brothers and life-long companions.

Richard had only one regret in life, and that was moving so very far from you and Jack. If anything, I feel it is my fault that they died. If I had been

willing to give up my practice and move back to California, they wouldn't have been so desperate to spend time together that they volunteered for that patrol. I know it's irrational, but feelings usually are.

I have reached out to Social Services there in Orange County to advise them of your failing health and my relationship to Eric. They let me know that at the moment, the Stone family has custody per your written consent. However, they are willing to relinquish custody when the time comes, so Eric will be sent out here to live with me then.

Since I don't have contact information for them, Social Services contacted them for me to advise that I will soon be sending them airfare and traveling expenses for Eric to join us here, however long he needs to stay close to you in this time you have left together. I don't want to take him away and leave you there to face the end alone. As soon as Faith's health improves enough to travel, she and I will come out to see you and stay with you until the end, however long that takes.

I still pray every night for the miracle to come that will spare your life and let us reunite the two branches of our family after so long apart.

*Love and Hope,
Your Sister, Heather*

Erica read the last letter from Heather with great difficulty. Her doctors had stopped her treatments weeks ago and now were just focused on making her as comfortable as possible in her final hours. She didn't have the strength to pen a reply to her sister, even though she desperately wanted to; if for no other reason than to express how much she loved her as the sister she never had and the sorrow that they wouldn't see each other ever again in this life.

She had just put the letter aside when she heard the knock on her doorway.

"Hey, Mom! Looking *beautiful* as always! Coming home today?" her child chirped.

She tried to smile at Eric, but her strength was ebbing fast. Her usual reply of '*Thank you, Eric! I bet I'm home by tomorrow!*' was just false hope, so today she just sadly shook her head. "No, sweetie."

Pausing as the child's smile fell like sunset, Eric was crestfallen. "*No, Mom! You're supposed to say...*"

She coughed painfully, and simply reached her hand out to her only child. "I'm *sorry*, sweetie! I'm afraid today I'll be going Home to be with your *father*." Her eyes drifted away aimlessly. "*My Jack!*" she almost whispered, her heart breaking for him just one more time.

Epilogue

Sitting in Erica's office reading the printed copy of the finished manuscript, Brooke flipped through the final pages as she read the words, tears filling her eyes at the remembered heartbreak of losing her best friends. Wiping them away, she finally put down the papers.

"Wow!" she exhaled heavily. "That was..." She looked over at her niece and shook her head. "I... I can't *believe* it! You got all this from those tapes you recorded of me? *Erica!* Some of those lines were almost *verbatim*, and I don't mean the ones I told you! How..." Her voice trailed off as she looked at Jack's daughter, unable to formulate the words.

"I listened to your stories over and over, picturing them in my mind." Erica shrugged modestly. "The description and dialog just sort of flowed out from everything you told me about them. It just seemed... *natural*." She chuckled lightly. "I also did a whole lot of research! Learning Marine Corps slang took *months!* Did I get it right?"

Biting her lip while she considered the question, Brooke shrugged. "A *little* heavy at times, but not very noticeably. Some places it shows that you never served, but not so terribly that it's off-putting. I think it shows you wanted to re-create the feeling of it out of respect, not just to *sound* right."

Sighing, Erica nodded. "I could trim it up if you tell me where. I want this to be as perfect as it *can* be, Aunt Brooke."

"No." she replied. "Thank you for the compliment, thinking I could improve on what you've done here, but it really does work as a story. Anything more authentic would come off as sounding *too* real. See?" She flipped back to the beginning chapters. "I *love* the way you depicted Jack as a kid! It's just the way I always imagined him! I don't know if he was really like that, but I think it's probably *pretty* close. I guess the only way to know would be to seek out people that were there and ask *them*."

"I *did*." Erica said as she stood and slowly paced her office. "I did a bit of searching, using the detective agency that found April for me. Wendy Evans seems to have changed her name or moved or both. I found copies of their Yearbook for the class of eighty-nine, so I know what she *looked* like, but I couldn't locate her, so..." She shrugged helplessly as she sat down behind her desk.

"Huh." Brooke said as she looked off in the distance. "Well, I can tell you for certain that there was *somebody* who did those things. The look on Rich's face when he would mention her was authentically loathing."

Nodding in acceptance, Erica sat up. "Unfortunately, there weren't enough details or names of other people that could give an honest account to dig much. I *did* find Uncle Richard's high school football coach and interviewed him briefly. He was able to corroborate the events that took place on the field after the locker incident, but he never really knew my father very well, other than just as, the way he put it, '*the skinny kid that always hung around with Rich*'. He gave me a little more insight into Uncle Richard as a kid, but no one seems to remember much about my father, except you and Mamma. The only ones to even remember him were teachers, and even then only vaguely."

Flipping through the chapters, Brooke stopped and laughed lightly at Erica's description of her own parents' wedding day. "How on earth did you get all the *details* of that day? I only gave you a rough idea of what we did!"

"Lots of research!" she answered with a tired laugh. "That's why this *took* so long. I wanted to make sure I got as many details right as I could. I looked up weather on specific dates, made sure I had the right day of the week, when was sunrise and sunset for each location and scene, *tons* of public records, some old maps, online databases of certain events... you know, *research*! The rest just came from the natural evolution of the characters. There was also the bartender at the club you went to. I found him, even though the club isn't there anymore. Heck, the casino it was *in* isn't even there anymore! He remembered you five, though. *Vividly!*"

She stood and placed the manuscript on Erica's desk. "Well, I don't think you could have done it better if you were *there!*" She sat back down and shook her head. "OK, I *have* to ask. How could you write that scene about Jack and Erica's first time? I mean, they're your *parents!* Wasn't that a little..."

"...creepy?" Erica finished for her. "Yeah, only a *lot!* But the story wouldn't flow right without it. I tried getting around it with a sort of 'fade to black' writing style, but it felt rushed and failed to capture their depth of feeling for one another. So I just pretended they were only characters in my head and nothing more. The rest was just imagining the natural flow of events and trying not to think about it too much!"

Laughing, Brooke clapped her hands together. "Well, you've got a stronger stomach than *I* do! I don't think I could write that about *my* parents!"

Erica laughed with her for a moment before getting serious once more. "So then, I told you when I asked you to help me with this that if you didn't think it was good enough that I wouldn't publish it, just keep it as a family record." Pausing as she closed her eyes and took in a breath, she let it out and asked. "What do you think? Is it *good* enough?"

Brooke looked away in thought. "I... I don't know, Erica. It's *good*, don't get me wrong! I'm just..." She sighed as she tried to express her concerns. "I just don't want people that were there to think it's trying to make them look bad, or telling about their lives without asking, you know?"

Sitting behind her desk, Erica flipped through the pages. "Well, I can change the names, make sure nobody is mentioned by their real name. That and publishing it as fiction with notation that it *is* a work of fiction that is only *based* on stories told second-hand, yadda, yadda, legalese and all. Would it be alright *then?*"

Sighing, she looked at Erica. "I *suppose* so. I guess it would be good to know that at least this much of Jack and Rich would live beyond them; that maybe

someone might be helped by the stories of their lives." She paused a moment before nodding. "Yeah, I think they would *like* that! *Especially* Jack! God! His ego must be *bursting* at the thought of it!"

"Well then," Erica said standing and picking up the papers. "I'll send it to final edit and put it out there! If people like it... or *not*... at least I know I did the best I could. I... I also know that now a little bit of my father and uncle lives in my mind. Now I understand what Mom meant when she said there were so many stories about him that she never got to tell me. It was one of her biggest regrets." She looked at Brooke wistfully. "Thank you for helping me put at least *some* of that to rest for her!"

Brooke stood and walked around the desk to hug her best friend's daughter. "It was my *pleasure*, Erica!" Holding it a moment, she pulled away to look at her watch. "Well, I think I need to be getting home soon. Jenny will skin me *alive* if I'm not there for dinner! I've been gone all weekend and she is *not* happy about it, but I think she understands. She never got much of a chance to know Jack or your mom, just those few days and the month after your mom had her hysterectomy, but she knows how important Jack was to me."

"Just tell her you were spending some time with Jack and Rich for a while." Erica offered. "I mean, from a certain point of view, you *were*!"

"*Yeah*..." she mused. "I guess I *was*!" Clearing her throat and holding her tears back, she stepped back toward the door. "Oh, give my best to the family for me?"

"I will, Aunt Brooke!" Erica answered dutifully.

"*Oh*! If you hear from that *cousin* of yours, tell her to *call* me sometime? Aunts and godmothers *worry*! I need to know she's OK."

"*Yes*, Aunt Brooke!" Erica replied again. "*I'll* make sure to call more, too!"

Blowing her honorary niece a kiss, Brooke turned and walked out the office door. Making her way out to the street, she climbed into her car and started it, still reminiscing about the years of happiness, love, sadness, fun, tears, laughter, and worry she'd shared with the two men who'd been, and always would be, her best friends. Pulling away from the curb slowly, she drove home almost without thought, guided simply by the desire to be back home in Jenny's arms where she belonged.

Absently, her thoughts wandered. *I wonder if Jenny would still like a baby? After all, she's only forty-three, and I'm the same age Jack's parents were when he was born!*

About the Author

Roberta Elder is a first time novelist. Her first attempt at writing a novel-length story, *Lost Faith*, was an original story that came to her in a dream in 2010, while the companion story, *Every Day Is Your Last* grew naturally from the background information for *Lost Faith*.

Mrs. Elder was born in the summer of 1973 in Carson City, Nevada to a loving family who named her after a Great Uncle who'd recently passed on. Along with her older sister, she started life in a large family of dozens of aunts, uncles, cousins, great aunts, and grandparents.

Meeting and marrying her first wife Tami in 1999, and meeting her second wife Rachel in 2006, she was finally able to transition from male to female in 2008 with the full support of both. All three were married together in a religious ceremony in 2016, and she does her best to maintain a healthy relationship with the two of them without showing favoritism or preference.

Showing an aptitude for math as a pre-teen, she's now a retired Statistical Data Analyst. Enjoying her early retirement, she currently spends her days with the complex calculus of household budgets, grocery shopping, young adult maintenance (raising two children), and the day-to-day cooking and cleaning of being a housewife, all on top of the writing she began in 2019.

Between being 'Wife and Mother', she finds time to spend with her mother, father, sister, brother-in-law, niece, nephews, and friends. In addition to writing, she enjoys old movies, black and white TV shows, dancing to 80's music, playing tabletop role-playing games and older computer games, target shooting, and discussing everything from theoretical physics to politics.

A staunch conservative libertarian, she most values her faith, family, friends, country, personal liberties, and her right to defend herself from oppression from those who would try to define or limit her based on who or what they think she is, who or what she should be, or what she should believe in.