Father of Daughters

by Gabriela and Amber [archived by westwingfanfictioncentral_archivist]

Summary

It's a year of milestones for the Bartlets - Jed and Abbey make decisions about their future while Elizabeth explores her own; Zoey begins kindergarten; and Ellie's faith is tested

Notes

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Early August 1985

On a breezy summer day in 1985, Jed gave his family a visual tour of the grand Yosemite Valley. The Bartlet clan gathered at the railing at Glacier Point, a lookout that hosted a panoramic view of Yosemite National Park and the jagged peaks of the Sierra Nevada mountain range. Out in front of them, as far as their eyes could see, were the rolling creeks and lush green meadows the park was known for, and to either side, several trickling cascades that in the spring were full-force waterfalls, plunged into sunlit-glittering pools. Below them, the rugged trails that criss-crossed the valley were clogged with hikers and horseback riders, and above, there were granite domes, so high and majestic, they were picture postcards, even from 3000 feet.

Legendary Half Dome was of particular interest. The girls, like their parents, had been looking forward to hiking the trail to the top, but the rigorous all-day hike would have surely been too steep for Zoey and maybe even Ellie, so Jed and Abbey were forced to say no to their two younger daughters and that pretty much choked Liz's enthusiasm as well. They all agreed that Half Dome could wait for their next trip to Yosemite and instead, took to shorter hikes, like the one along the Panorama Trail where they headed after satisfying their curiosity at Glacier Point.

"I wanna be the leader!" Zoey jogged up to Jed, passing him to take the lead on the way to the trailhead.

"Wait a second, you don't even know where we're going!"

"I'll figure it out, like Ellie did yesterday."

Ellie had appointed herself chief the day before. She took charge on the way to the lower loop of the Mariposa Grove to see the native sequoias - among them, the upturned base of the famous Fallen Monarch, a few feet from the Grizzly Giant, the grandfather of them all. They later journeyed through the California tunnel tree, an experience that had Zoey talking for hours.

But knowing this hike was going to be more strenuous than the one Ellie led, Abbey stepped in. "How about you walk with me this time, Zoey?"

"No way! You walk too slow!"
Jed snickered at his wife. "Yeah, you're a real slowpoke."

It wasn't that Abbey was a slow hiker - back in New Hampshire, she took the trails at the farm and the ones in the White Mountains by storm - but when visiting the national parks, she was so taken by the beauty around her that she strolled the flatter paths and had a tendency to stop to get pictures at the tops of the steeper ones, much like Ellie who she sometimes called the official Bartlet photographer.

"Slowpoke or not, you're walking with me," she said to her youngest daughter, giving her husband an elbow to the ribs at the same time.

"Ow," he grumbled, rubbing his side.

"Wimp." She rebuked that ploy for sympathy, lashes fluttering. "I barely touched you."

"You don't know your own strength."

The view from the trail was spectacular. The breathtaking mountain crests that dipped into stunning vistas of valley were so incredible that Jed promised to make a dozen slides of Abbey and Ellie's pictures. They stopped every few minutes for a new one, sometimes of the scenery on its own and other times, a group photo, like the one Abbey took of the girls on an open bridge that crossed the Illilouette Gorge or the candid Ellie captured of Jed holding his hand out to Abbey to help her over a rushing stream.

They enjoyed taking their time down the winding dirt path - all but Zoey. The rambunctious little girl heard the sound of water showering the rocks in the distance and spotted the Illilouette Falls before the rest of the family. Excited, she dismissed her mother's objections and challenged her father towards the canyon.

"I'll race you, Daddy!"

"Don't you dare!" Abbey grabbed her arm before she could take off.

"Mommy!"

"I don't want you climbing up those rocks by yourself. You're going to fall and crack your head open."

"But I wanna see the waterfall!"

"We'll get there. Relax."

"Why do I always have to stay with you?"

"Because that's the way it is. I told you that on day one."

"But Lizzie and Ellie don't have to."

"Lizzie and Ellie are older."

"But..."

"Zoey, I'm not going to argue with you. You have two choices - you can either walk with me or I can take you back to camp. What's it gonna be?"

Zoey looked up at her father to stand up for her. "Daddy?"
"Sorry, kiddo. Your mom's right. It's wet and slippery up there."

Rejected a second time, she kicked at the dirt and pouted as she waited for her parents to help her navigate the trail over the rock formation through the fall's mist.

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"Tell me you hired a violinist to serenade me with a tune." Jed was sitting across from Abbey. She and the girls were treating him to a special birthday dinner at the Ahwahnee Dining Room, one of the fancier restaurants in Yosemite Valley.

"You said you wanted quiet and peaceful," she replied.

"Didn't you throw that request out window when you brought me here?"

"You would have been happy eating out of a tin container on your birthday?"

"I look forward to campfire meals," he said as he handled the stem of his wine glass, bringing the rim to his mouth and pausing before he took a drink to add, "And the irony of this moment isn't lost on me."

Liz shook her head as she cut her veal. "I don't know, Dad. How wise do you think it is to complain after Mom went to all this trouble? Remember, there's no couch out here. If she kicks you out of your 'room,' you're sleeping in the wilderness."

"In all the years we've been married, she's never kicked me out of our room, smarty pants."

"You slept in the guest room once last summer."

"By choice."

"Yeah, but whose choice?"

Jed glared at her. "I'm going to make you eat cabbage for dessert."

"And then send me to my tent before bedtime?" she snarked.

"That's silly, Lizzie," Zoey assured her. "There's no bedtime out here."

"Uh oh, why's Lizzie in trouble?" Ellie, who returned to the table after excusing herself to wash her hands, had heard only the tail end of the conversation and didn't detect the obvious ribbing.

"I'm not."

"Then why's Dad sending you to bed?"

"Never mind," Abbey curtly chimed in. "Your father wanted quiet and peaceful."

"That's just what he said. He didn't mean it."

"I'm never taken seriously around here." Jed was baiting them now. It was true, he enjoyed a good campfire supper with his family under the stars, alone in nature's company, but on his birthday, he didn't mind a little fine dining at a place that boasted the best menu in the entire park.

Ahwahnee was an intimate restaurant with sugar pine trestles and window boxes that stretched from the floor to the ceiling for a view of Yosemite's most historic landmarks. Even if Abbey
hadn't brought him here for his special day, he probably would have suggested a visit.

"You're taken seriously when you're being serious," she said. "Just be glad the waiters here don't sing."

"Did you order a cake?"

"She tried, but all those candles were against the fire code or something." Liz smirked fearlessly.

"You know, Elizabeth, I'm not required by law to take you back home with us."

Ellie gestured Abbey for the butter and asked, "When can we give Dad his present?"

"When we get back to camp."

"A present too?" Jed couldn't hide behind that playful tone of disapproval this time.

"The girls went all out." It was typical of Abbey to give her daughters all the credit.

"It was my idea, Daddy!" It was even more typical of Zoey to claim all the credit.

"It was not," Ellie countered.

"Girls," Abbey warned them. "It was a family decision."

"Everyone but me. I suggested something else."

Jed turned his attention to Liz. "What was your suggestion?"

"I can't tell you or else you'll know what we got."

"You could beat around the bush without giving it away."

"Jed."

"Okay, okay." In response to his wife's stare, his eyes wandered over to the daughter with the loose lips. "So Zoey, you say it was your idea?"

"Jed!" Abbey slipped out of the strapless summer sandals she wore to dinner and kicked him under the table with her bare feet.

"You're spoiling my fun, babe."

"Didn't you have something you wanted to tell the girls?"

"A story?" Ellie looked forward to her father's stories. He seemed to know everything about Yosemite, from the legends that haunted the deep canyons and sun-bleached domes to the history of the turquoise waterways that flowed through the woodlands. She always listened closely so that she could scrapbook the stories along with her pictures when they returned to New Hampshire.

"More like a tall tale," Abbey said.

Jed raised his brow. "Since when do I tell tall tales?"

"Since you quoted Paul Bunyan in the sequoia grove."

"That was folklore."
"What's the difference?" Liz asked.

"It sounds better."

Amused, Abbey replied, "You know what, it's your birthday. Tell any tall tale or folklore or flat-out lie you want and I'll do my best to keep the commentary to a minimum."

"Until I break out into a chorus of 'I'm a lumberjack'?" His lips curved to a lopsided smile when he felt her toes wander up his leg.

"Give me a warning. I'd like to get that on tape." She nodded subtly and bowed her head as she noticed the waiter approaching.

"Excuse me, Mr. Bartlet?" the waiter interrupted.

"Yes?"

"There's a phone call for you."

"A phone call?" Jed looked to Abbey. "Who knows we're here?"

"Your guess is as good as mine," she shrugged.

Had Jed waited a moment longer, he might have seen the sly grin that crossed Abbey's face the second he rose to his feet to follow the waiter to the phone. With a cloud of ignorance following him, he put the receiver to his ear and tried repeatedly to reach out to the phantom on the other end of the line. Eventually, he hung up and returned to the table to see a dozen candles blazing atop a three-tier French chocolate cake and Abbey and the girls ready to greet him.

Happy Birthday to you Happy Birthday to you Happy Birthday dear Dad Happy Birthday to you

Following dinner, the Bartlets took a twilight stroll before heading back to their campsite. They passed a chain of cottages shaded by dogwoods and pines and a ribbon of water that spiraled the property with a footbridge that crossed the rapids of a creek. Flanked by a small ravine, the trail appealed to Zoey. She walked ahead of the rest of the family, despite knowing that Abbey would try to stop her.

"Zoey, I want you back here with us."

The young girl pretended not to hear her mother's nagging call and instead, leaned over to throw a penny into the water. But when she started to run back to the bridge towards her family, her sneakers hit a slippery patch of mud that caused her to lose her balance and slide down the top of the embankment.

"ZOEY!" Ellie grabbed her with a sturdy yank of her shirt that kept Zoey from tumbling the rest of the way downhill.

In a blink, Abbey was at her daughter's side. "Are you all right?"

"Yeah," she said softly, embarrassed.

"Did you hurt yourself?"

"No."
Abbey examined her from head to toe, sweeping her hand over Zoey's soft strawberry hair when she was done. "Why did you ignore me when I called for you?"

"Because you were gonna tell me to stay with you."

"That's right and if you had, this wouldn't have happened. Thank God Ellie was close by. You could have fallen into the creek." Her tone was one of concern more than anger.

"But I didn't."

"That doesn't make it okay. From now on, no more running ahead. Got it?"

"All I wanted to do was throw a penny!"

"And you did. Next time, you wait for us and if you don't, you'll spend the rest of this trip back at camp."

Angry about her lack of independence, Zoey heaved a sigh, then spun around and followed her sisters down the crooked path that would lead them back to their campsite as Jed and Abbey lagged behind. He took her hand, threading his fingers through hers.

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"Ellie, can you get me some more tape for this ribbon?" Liz stood at the picnic table with a roll of the shiny blue wrapping paper they had picked out for Jed's presents.

"You should put the ribbons on right before we give them to him so they won't get wrinkled."

"Okay, but I still need tape."

"Where is it?"

"In Mom and Dad's tent."

"Where?"

"In the same bag as your father's lighter." Abbey returned the silent stares her girls threw her way.

"What? Did you think I wasn't aware he snuck his cigarettes on this trip?"

"How'd you know?" Ellie asked on her way into her parents' tent.

"I've been married to him for almost 20 years. I know everything that man does, whether he thinks I do or not."

This was home base - the Yosemite campground in the Upper Pines where the Bartlets were staying. While Jed had gone into the village to pick up more marshmallows for their nightly campfire snack, Ellie and Lizzie wrapped his gifts and Abbey prepared the leftover birthday cake to store in the food locker. Zoey, still in the doghouse with her mother, sat at the picnic table quietly, her palms resting under her chin.

"Here you go." Ellie returned with a roll of scotch tape which she handed to Liz. "Mom, if smoking is so dangerous, why do you let Dad do it?"

"Why do I *let* him? Have you met your father?"

"You know what I mean."
"I hate to break it to you, Ellie, but even husbands and wives have their own free will. I can't force your dad to quit, no matter how much I'd like to."

"But he'd quit if you asked him to," Liz suggested. "He quit last year when we went to Acadia. Why did he start up again?"

"The campaign," Abbey told her. "It was a stressful campaign."

Ellie couldn't understand that. "If it was so stressful, why didn't he quit that too?"

"It doesn't work that way, sweetheart. You don't give up the fight just because it becomes harder than you thought it would be. He ran a good campaign and he won."

"Is he gonna run again?"

"I don't know."

"Why not?"

"Because we haven't decided yet. It's not a simple yes or no decision. It's something that's going to take time and patience to work through and when we're ready, we'll have a family meeting about it." With the cake ready to go, Abbey turned to face Zoey. "Do you want to help me?"

"No."

"If you help me, I'll let you turn the lock."

"I don't want to."

"I think you have this backwards, Zoey. I'm the one who's supposed to be upset with you." She waited to get a reaction. When she didn't, she continued, "You're mad at me though, huh?"

"Yes," Zoey confirmed.

"Do you want to talk about it?"

"No."

"All right then." Abbey started on her way towards the food locker, disappointment in her voice. "I'll be back."

Once she was out of earshot, Ellie addressed her little sister. "Geez, Zoey, why are you so mad? You're lucky you're not in serious trouble. When I ran off with Mallory last year at Acadia, I was grounded for a week after we got home."

"Mallory almost drowned, El," Liz reminded her. "It's not exactly the same thing."

"Still. You know how Mom is when you don't do what she says."

"But she doesn't let me do anything!"

Liz joined Zoey at the picnic table. "Let me tell you something about Mom, Zo. She's overprotective but she's reasonable. If you think she's being unfair, then you have to tell her. She'll compromise."

"She will?"
"Yeah. She doesn't like being mad at us any more than we like being mad at her."

Abbey heard Liz's words from a distance. "Is this the start of a conspiracy?"

"Zoey wants to say something." Liz nudged her.

"Are you her lawyer?"

"Unofficially."

Abbey neared the table and sat opposite her two daughters. "Well?"

Heeding Liz's advice, Zoey began, "I don't think it's right that you don't let me do anything. You let Lizzie and Ellie do whatever they want, but not me. It's not fair."

Abbey acknowledged the statement with a nod. "I'm open to the possibility that I haven't been even-handed. When you don't listen to me, Zoey, you don't get much freedom. Just ask Ellie how much more freedom she had before the incident at Acadia."

"But I didn't listen to you BECAUSE you don't let me do anything."

"You know better than to use that as an excuse. And by the way, what are these things you want to do? Run ahead of us up a hill of wet rocks?"

Reacting to Zoey's grunt of frustration, Liz spoke on her behalf. "Zoey admits she was wrong about that."

"Good."

"And in the future, she'll do whatever you say."

"Yeah?" That question was directed at Zoey

"Yeah," the five-year-old answered.

Liz pushed further. "Would you consider letting her lead a hike as long as she promises she'll follow the rules?"

Abbey played along. "Am I supposed to be responding you or your client?"

"Either of us."

She looked Zoey in the eye. "You ignored me on the trail when I was trying to warn you how slippery it was."

"I'm sorry," Zoey sheepishly replied. "I won't do it again."

Abbey softened her tone. "I want you to have fun. But I want you to be careful too. The terrain out here is tricky. It's unfamiliar to all of us and I just don't want you to get hurt. So how about you promise me that you won't be so careless and that you'll listen to me from now on and I promise you that I'll back off a little. Is that a deal?"

"Will you let me lead a hike?"

"If I have your word on those two things, we'll plan a hike before bed tonight. We'll even practice with the compass. Deal?"
"It's a deal!" That was all it took to make Zoey's night.

As mother and daughter shook on their agreement, Jed strolled up the dirt path towards the campsite.

"I've got marshmallows, graham crackers, and chocolate bars!" he proudly shouted out to his family.

"Jed, I said no S'mores tonight."

"It's not camping unless we have S'mores."

"The kids have already had cake. They're going to go insane with the amount of sugar you plan to give them. They'll never get to sleep."

"They will if we get started right away." Opening the bag of marshmallows, he threw a big, fluffy one to Abbey.

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Some time later, the Bartlets sat around the campfire, laughing and teasing each other, with their usual snack of roasted marshmallows and gooey milk chocolate sandwiched between two graham crackers. This was the best part of camping as far as Jed was concerned. He watched the faces of his lively children and their enthusiastic expressions when bantering back and forth. His eyes then rested on his wife, the fire crackling around her like a halo highlighting her auburn waves as she helped Zoey pull her toasty marshmallow out of the flame and deliver it to the waiting cracker.

Once she had a grip on the tasty treat, she whispered something in her mother's ear and Abbey replied by nodding and asking Lizzie to help. The sisters disappeared inside their tent without a hint of what they were up to while Jed helped Ellie strap his binoculars around her neck and stand to scan the valley through the lens.

"You're gonna be disappointed," he warned.

"Maybe you're wrong."

"Me, wrong about a moonbow? Highly unlikely."

Jed had told her all about the beautiful rainbows that formed by way of the refraction and reflection of light from the moon. Nowhere was it more spectacular, he said, than in Yosemite National Park. It was one reason that Ellie couldn't wait for the trip. He had also told her that spotting one took patience. They wouldn't be visible from the campgrounds and if they did see one, it would be during a moonlit hike to the falls. Still, Ellie had her hopes up.

"I can't see anything good through these things!" she complained, tearing the binoculars off her eyes and joining her parents back by the fire. "I want to see one so badly."

Jed offered her a marshmallow and offered the seat beside him. "I told you, you can't see it from here. We'll take a hike tomorrow night and we'll check it out."

"What if we don't see one? They're not out every night."

"Then we'll go up to Glacier Point at sunset on Saturday and we'll look all over the park. Believe me, Ellie, before we leave, we will see a moonbow. Count on it."
"If we don't..."
"We will."

"Okay, but if we don't, can we stay longer?"
"Longer than a week? I don't know that your mom and sisters would be excited about that."
"Can't they go home while we stay?"

Abbey interjected, "I have to tell you, I definitely feel the love."
"Sorry Mom. It's just that you don't like astronomy."

"What makes you say that?"

"Whenever I ask you a question about the stars or the galaxy, you never know the answer."

Astronomy was a hobby of both father and daughter. Jed piqued Ellie's interest in the subject after he introduced her to the constellations when he took her Girl Scout troop camping four years earlier. That interest grew stronger when she spent a week with him at Space Camp in July.

"Just because I don't know the answer doesn't mean I don't like astronomy." Abbey maintained. "I like it very much."

"Do you like stargazing?"
"Mmm hmm. I like the comfortable version."

"What does that mean?"

"What I'm doing now, sitting back and looking up at the sky. It's not important to me to know exactly what I'm looking at, just that it's out there and it's pretty incredible."

"But if you knew what they were, you'd think it was even more incredible!"

"You think so?"
"Yeah."

"Okay, then you can teach me."

"Really?" Ellie beamed.

"Sure. By next summer, I want to know all about astronomy. Teach me everything you learned about the constellations and about space exploration in general."

"Cool!"

"Hey now," Jed elbowed his wife. "I feel like someone's invading my turf."

"It's okay, Dad, you can help me. We'll both teach her." Ellie turned to her mother. "You know what's super neat? NASA is sending a teacher up to space this year, right? They chose that lady from New Hampshire - Christa Mc.."

"McAuliffe," Abbey finished, remembering all the articles and news reports she had heard about the famed high school teacher from Concord. She had been chosen as part of a NASA project to
allow teachers to teach lessons from space.

"Yeah. Anyway, Dad's gonna get to meet her in congress and he's gonna see if I can come too."

"Really? When?"

"We don't know yet," Jed replied. "She's going to be in training for a while, but the New Hampshire delegation has invited her to Capitol Hill before her shuttle goes up in January."

"I can't wait!" Ellie's expression lit up even more when she saw her sisters approaching. Liz was carrying three gift-wrapped boxes and Zoey was carrying one - the important one.

The preschooler charged towards him. "Happy Birthday, Daddy!"

"Will you look at that?" Jed accepted the boxes. "I don't think I've ever seen such beautifully wrapped gifts in all my life."

"Just wait till you see what's inside," Ellie teased.

"A lot of thought went into this, Jed. Take your time opening them."

"I will." To appease Abbey, he detached the tape one flap at a time until he heard a round of sighs from the girls. Speeding up, he tipped the lid of the first box to find a book. "Inside the Valley of the Kings."

"We thought you'd like it," Liz said.

"You thought right!" Jed set it aside to open the next gift she handed him. Another book. "Beyond the Pyramids: A Guide to Ancient Egypt."

"There's more." Liz gave him yet another box.

"I'm detecting a theme here." Already happy with the presents, Jed was suspicious where it was all going as he opened another box to find a leather-bound travelogue. "Oh wow, this is beautiful."

"You like it?"

"It's gorgeous," he replied, turning it over and running his fingers over the soft leather. "Do I dare get my hopes up about what's in that last box?"

"Open it."

And he did, gasping with delight as he lifted a travel agency brochure and five tickets. "We're going to Egypt? Ah, you've gotta be kidding me!"

"Nope" Abbey told him. "You're always saying we don't travel overseas as much as you'd like. We thought Egypt would be perfect, not just for you but for all of us." She looked over at Liz. "Well, most of us."

"Lizzie wanted a shopping spree in Paris," Ellie informed her father.

"How are you my child?" Jed threw the crumpled up wrapping paper at his eldest daughter.

"HEY! I didn't say shopping spree. That's just what Ellie assumed. The truth is, I wanted to tour all of France, to visit the museums, to see all the impressionist paintings and the sculptures at the Musee d'Orsay, to spend some time on the Riviera, tour the castles and the French Cathedral, stuff
"like that."

"You're so full of it."

"It's the truth. Of course I wouldn't have minded shopping a few Parisian boutiques, but I planned to soak up the culture. I always wanted to speak French."

"You can speak it without going to France."

"I yearn to use my knowledge with others. I want to speak French with the French."

"I'll warn them you're coming. They might need earplugs."

Liz rolled her eyes at him, adding sarcastically, "You're hilarious, Dad."

Zoey grabbed her father's attention. "Did you really like our present, Daddy?"

"Like is an understatement, my dear. I can't wait! I think we should start on the itinerary tonight!"

Abbey shook her head at her husband's predictability, then snuggled up beside him as he opened up the travelogue to read the inscription - a birthday wish from his wife and daughters - while Liz and Ellie thumbed through the books and Zoey tore through the brochures looking for whatever caught her eye.

TBC
Overnight, a light sprinkle of rain showered the Upper Pines at Yosemite National Park where the Bartlets made camp. The rhythm of the water drizzling over their tent had lulled Jed and Abbey to sleep in each others arms, zipped up together in their couple's sleeping bag. The park had large canvas tents pitched on wooden plateaus so that campers wouldn't be sleeping on the bare ground. It wasn't quite as comfortable as the rustic cabins at other sites, but the Bartlets agreed that camping outside would give them a chance to see Yosemite the way it was meant to be seen.

The Upper Pines wasn't the quietest campground either. It was crowded with visitors, mostly families enjoying the last month of a hot summer in the Sierra Nevada Mountains. Every site had its own picnic table and fire ring, food lockers were close by to keep the edibles out of the hands of the hungry bears that roamed the outlying woods looking for leftovers, and every morning, at about a quarter to five, a parade of hikers boarded the shuttle to head off to an all-day hike at Half Dome.

Jed woke up to the sound of their laughter, stirred from a dream about making love to Abbey, and disappointed that it wasn't real. Though they had their own tent - separate from the one their daughters shared - snuggling up together had been their only form of physical intimacy on this trip thanks to the crowd factor. They tried to make love their first night there, but the risk of interruption, both from the girls and from the hundreds of other campers talking, laughing, and joking just a few feet away, ruined the mood and they hadn't yet been able to recapture it.

It was day four now and husband and wife were reluctantly approaching acceptance that their sexual cravings would have to wait until they returned to New Hampshire and in the meantime, snuggling up would have to do. So when Jed woke up alone, he was surprised. A quick scan of tent and the open duffle bag that stored her towel, robe, and shampoo, told him exactly where Abbey was - the shower house. Liz and Ellie liked to shower at night so they could sleep in and Zoey followed their lead, but Abbey preferred to head to the public stalls at daybreak, a time when most campers were still asleep and she could have some semblance of privacy.

She had left earlier than usual on that morning, which made Jed suspicious. The sun was still hovering below the horizon and it was too dark to navigate the grounds safely. After stretching for a second or two, he unzipped his side of the sleeping bag, slipped into his shoes, and grabbed his flashlight to trek to the showers to find her.
When he got there, he found the women's stalls closed for overnight cleaning with a note that read that the men's stalls were coed until daybreak. In the changing area, he saw Abbey's brush and hair clip and he heard her humming a tune he didn't recognize. A foxy grin plastered across his face, he stripped out of his clothes, opened the door to the stall she was using, and stepped in, scaring her out of her wits until she turned to see his face.

"What the hell are you doing?" she asked in a high-pitched voice still reeling from the momentary panic.

"I didn't mean to scare you," he said, a tad amused that she looked so flushed.

"You're lucky I didn't hit the security alarm."

"Why are you up so early?"

"I wanted to get a jump-start."

"A jump start would be 5 a.m. Why did you leave camp before light?"

"I had a dream, okay?" Her twinkling eyes convinced him it was a sex dream.

"Yeah?" he replied, smugly.

"What are you doing?"

"Showering."

"I'm already here."

"Excuse me, what does the door say? That's right, this is the men's shower so technically..."

"The women's stall is closed."

"Guess we'll have to share." Once more with the foxy grin.

"I get the feeling you're not the least bit upset about that." Abbey arched her brow. "Did you have something to do with this?"

"The cleaning? No, I'm not part of the janitorial staff at the park."

"You know what I mean. Did you plan it?"

"Yes, Abigail, I planned it. In my infinite wisdom, I predicted you'd get up in the middle of the night to take a shower so I paid off the cleaning crew to close the women's stalls and force you into the men's so that I could show up and scare you. Are you impressed?"

"It's never good when you start the day with sarcasm." She moved closer to him, turning her head to kiss him under the spray of the shower.

Her touch made Jed weak in the knees. He had stolen several kisses over the past few days, but none as steamy as the one she planted on his mouth in that shower. Her hands roamed his backside, from his spine, over the swell of his rear, to his thighs. His heart was racing.

The feeling was mutual. The real reason Abbey was up so early was because she knew he was dreaming about her, she felt it in his swelling erection when their bodies were cuddled together. She thought about making love to him right there in the tent to relieve the sexual frustration they
were both feeling, but it was almost time for the hikers to leave for Half Dome and she decided to wait until the crowds passed in order to protect what little privacy they had. It was clear now that the shower house was the answer to their problem and they both wondered why they hadn't thought of it before.

Hesitantly, Jed broke his lips from hers so he could turn her around. It was the only way he could push himself against her body and massage her breasts at the same time. His mouth moved to her ears and he lifted her damp ringlets to kiss the side of her neck, sucking lightly the way she liked it, but careful not to leave a mark - this time. His palms molded to her breasts, squeezing them until she moaned in pleasure.

His hands, delicate yet strong, traced a path down her naval to the top of her thighs. She had shaved there in preparation for their day at the river so instead of stopping to twirl his fingers around her hair, he continued further until he reached the sensitive little nub that threatened to unhinge her from stem to stern. He stroked her there, over and over again while she wriggled in his hold, so strongly that her rear rubbed up against his erection as if torridly teasing it.

He let out a gasp and she turned towards him.

"I want you inside me just as badly as you do," she breathed.

There were two shower benches - a lower one for sitting and a higher one for toiletries. Perfect, Jed thought as he backed her up against the second one. "I want to see your face."

"And here I thought you just wanted me to bend over," she kidded. Down and dirty sex was certainly fun, but knowing that Jed took so much pleasure in watching her hit her climax made their lovemaking even more erotic.

She took his straining shaft in her hands. He was just as ready as she was. More even. That's what she did to him by squirming in his arms moments earlier and when her fingers glided down his swollen appendage, it took an unbelievable amount of self control to contain himself.

"Sweetheart, if you don't let go, this is going to be over before we get to the good stuff," he warned.

Abbey's arms circled his neck. Jed bent his knees slightly and as Abbey lifted herself up, he penetrated her. With the steam rising around them, she leaned back against the tile, using the bench to prop herself up so she could stand on one leg and wrap the other one around Jed. He braced his hand under her thigh to keep it at waist-level, allowing himself to push further into her feminine depths. He kissed her on her mouth and her chin and her neck, rocking her back and forth as he thrust in and out of her.

His movements sent Abbey over the edge. Digging her nails into his shoulder, she arched her back and raced towards a shattering climax, cheering Jed on to a faster rhythm until he poured every last bit of momentum into one final thrust, looked deep into her eyes, and exploded inside her. Abbey kept the position until he slipped out of her, spent and exhausted.

"God, I love you," she said, stroking his damp hair off his forehead.

"Was it worth the wait?" he asked, out of breath.

"And then some."
Later that morning, Abbey, Liz, and Ellie hopped on a shuttle into Curry Village to buy some more sunblock and some lunch meat for their visit to Mirror Lake. It was late summer, the time of year when tens of thousands of tourists flocked to the park, sometimes luring wildlife out of the shadows.

Yosemite law required campers to store all food in a food locker or special bear-resistant bags or canisters when walking the grounds outside designated picnic areas to keep those famous black bears from invading campsites and pedestrian trails. Jed and Abbey warned their daughters about this before they ever set foot on the plane to California, but on that particular day, the safeguards they had been taught slipped Elizabeth's mind and she stuffed an open bag of peanuts into her purse, occasionally snacking on them.

"Mom, can we stay at the lake until after sunset?" Ellie asked on the way back to camp. "I wanna get some pictures of the sun going down behind Half Dome."

"We'll see."

"What does that mean?"

"It means she and Dad had other plans for us and she's going to talk to him about it first," Liz surmised, looking to her mother for confirmation.

"You know, Lizzie, if you eavesdrop on a conversation, you should at least admit it."

"That wasn't from eavesdropping. That was just intuition."

"Intuition?"

"Yup! I know how you and Dad operate. These trips are always loaded with surprises."

The women crested a hill minutes from camp and passed a maze of trees that hid a 300-pound bear behind its dense timber. The scent of Liz's peanuts enticed him and he lunged from the forest, growling at the trio from behind. They all turned, startled.

"Girls," Abbey called quietly, her hands instinctively jutting out to the sides to shove her daughters behind her.

"Is that what I think it is?" It was a wave of disbelief and shock that caused Ellie to ask the obvious question, her voice small with fear.

"It's a black bear," Abbey answered. They had seen many bears over the years during their travels to the national parks, but they had never before been cornered by one. Slowly, they started to back up, but the bear huffed at them, forcing them to stop where they were.

"We can't leave. He'll chase after us if we do."

"It's all right, Ellie. We'll get out of this. On the count of three, I want us all to scream. Make as much noise as possible, okay?"

"Yeah," both girls replied.

"Here we go. One...two...three."

A chorus of screams pierced the air, but those screams died pretty quickly, drowned out by the bear's thunderous growl, the strength of which overpowered them into submission. He growled
once more for good measure. He didn't take a step towards them though, which gave Abbey some relief. Showing his dominance, that's all he was doing, she told her girls. Ellie's hands clutched her mother's, trembling. Liz was breathing so hard, Abbey had to stroke her fingers to calm her before she started to hyperventilate.

"Mom," Lizzie quietly muttered once she got control of herself. "I forgot...I'm sorry."

"What is it?"

"I didn't put the peanuts in the bear bag. I put them in my purse. I was hungry and wanted a snack on the way back."

Abbey restrained her irritation with her daughter's irresponsibility, saying only, "Give them to me."

She held out her hand for the peanuts and when she had them, she took a step forward and set them on the ground in front of the bear, cautiously watching him the whole time. He busied himself for a moment and Abbey crept back to her girls, hoping to make a careful escape, but the bear growled louder this time, stopping them once again.

Frightened, Ellie's eyes pooled with tears. "What are we gonna do?"

"He's not going to hurt us," Abbey said. "If he wanted to hurt us, he would have done it already."

"But he won't let us go."

One of the things Jed always carried with him when hiking in the woods with his children was a flare gun. It was a precaution in case they got lost and needed to notify someone, and as he frequently pointed out, nothing scared off wild animals more affectively than hearing the echo of a flare being shot into the sky. Bears were especially receptive, he said.

Oh, how Abbey wished she had Jed's flare gun now.

"Do either of you have any more food? In your purses, in your pockets, anywhere?"

"Just the groceries in the bag," Liz told her.

"He can't smell that. It's bear-proof. If you don't have any more food that he can see or smell, then I want you to back up very, very slowly and follow the trail back to camp. It's only a few minutes from here. When you get there, tell your father to call a ranger."

Liz looked over to Ellie. "You know the way, right?"

"What about you?"

"I'm staying."

"Elizabeth, I want you to go!" Abbey demanded.

"I'm NOT leaving you, Mom!"

Her declaration was so strong that it agitated the bear. Abbey pushed both girls further behind her.

"I don't wanna leave either," Ellie said.

"Don't be scared, Ellie." Abbey tried to remain calm for her daughter's sake. "Once you get to that bend a few feet away, it's a straight line back to the campground. People will see you. Just tell them
with encouragement from both Abbey and Liz, Ellie timidly let go of her mother’s arm and started to back up. The older women spread their stance slightly to try to shield her departure and when they did, they noticed the bear backing down.

Suddenly, Liz had an idea. "Mom, remember all those times you and Dad went over what we should do if we were cornered by a bear? One of the things you said was that if we weren't alone, we should spread out. Remember?"

"Yes, but we also said that you should make noise and you saw where that got us."

"But we have to do something."

Liz was right. Jed and Abbey had schooled their children on bears before every camping trip and now that it came time to put their words to the test, Abbey was afraid, not for herself, but for her teenage daughter. It was the only chance they had, she began to convince herself. Though she was terrified of putting her Elizabeth’s life at risk, they had to find a way out of the situation before the bear attacked them both.

With a prayer for their safety, Abbey reached out her hand. "Liz?" Their palms touched. "If he makes a move, I want you to go, you hear me? Duck behind the trees until you can get away."

Liz ignored the idea. If the bear made a move, the last thing she wanted to do was abandon Abbey. She summoned the courage to stand beside her mom and in that moment, she made the decision that she wouldn’t leave without her, no matter what. Stretching their arms to hold each others hand from a couple of feet away, both women brazenly stared down the bear in an intimidating yet non-threatening way. They hid their fear and stood their ground. And it worked. It took several minutes, but the bear hunched over. Mother and daughter held their stance and waited even longer for the bear to eventually take the peanuts and vanish into the forest behind him.

Sweating profusely, Abbey heaved a sigh of relief, throwing one arm around Liz and taking the back of her other hand to her forehead. "It turns out you were listening to all those camp safety lectures after all."

"I listen to you more often than you give me credit for," Liz replied, elated. "I can't believe he went away just like that."

"He wasn't out to hurt anyone. He just wanted food."

"That was my fault for having those stupid peanuts. Sorry."

"I'll forgive you this time, but if you EVER pull a stunt like that again, I'm gonna feed YOU to the bear!"

The duo was well on their way back to the campground, laughing and teasing each other, when Jed came charging towards them, his adrenaline on fire. The second Ellie told him what happened, he had bolted towards the trail.

"We're okay," Abbey shouted to him as he raced down the dirt path.

"We scared him off," Liz added proudly.

Jed hugged both his girls. "What happened?"
"Lizzie beat him up."

Liz chuckled. "Nah, I just roughed him up a little. You should have seen Mom, though, with her
karate chop. I don't think that bear will be bothering anyone for quite some time."

"And once he tells all his little bear friends, I bet they'll all return for early hibernation."

With one arm around Lizzie and one around Abbey as they headed to camp, Jed showed his
skepticism. "I'm being bamboozled."

"It's true, Dad."

"It sure is," Abbey agreed. "Just rent us some Bear Buster capes and let us free in the woods.
Right, Lizzie?"

Liz nodded. "Next year, we'll take on the grizzlies!"

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In the Tenaya Creek Valley, the glassy waters of Mirror Lake made it one of the most popular
mountain lakes in country in the 1980s. So named because of its amazing reflective powers,
everything from Half Dome to the walls of Tenaya Canyon could be seen on the water's surface,
shaded only by the pine trees that lined the shore.

This was where Ellie went on a photography blitz, snapping away on her camera while Liz, Zoey,
and Jed dipped their feet into the calm and clear water. Because it had been such a hot summer, the
lake had dried up too much to swim so Jed and Abbey allowed Ellie enough time to take her
pictures and Liz and Zoey time to splash around in the shallow pool, then they were off on the trail
towards the adjacent meadow where they stopped for a picnic on the lush field of grass dotted by
wildflowers.

"You promised we'd get to swim today!" Zoey complained as Jed handed her her favorite
lunchtime meal - a peanut butter and jelly sandwich.

"Today's not over."

"But the lake's dry."

"Mom and Dad have other plans, Zo," Liz assured her.

"Be quiet and eat," Abbey ordered. She had packed plenty of food for the day's activities. Zoey got
her PB and J while the rest of the family lunched on cold-cuts and fruit.

"I'll eat but why do I have to be quiet?"

"Because I said so."

Liz laughed. "You want me quiet because you think I'm going to give away the surprise."

"There is no surprise." Abbey looked to her husband. "Jed, don't you have some completely useless
trivia stored away for a moment just like this?"

"When you put it like that, babe..." Jed never needed a reason to engage his daughters in trivia.
"There's one place technically within Yosemite that's so spectacular yet so seeped in its
independent history that it's part of its own national park. It was particularly well-known in the
1800s when horsedrawn carriages used to stop to rest there while crossing the Sierra Nevada.
"Anyone know where it is?"

"Um, is it Half Dome?" Ellie guessed.

"Yeah, Ellie, they forced the horses up the cable to get to the top of Half Dome," Liz sniped playfully before taking a sip of apple juice.

Ellie stuck her tongue out at her sister. "I meant the base!"

"It wasn't Half Dome. It was Yosemite Falls," the teen rebutted.

"Nope. Yosemite Falls isn't part of another park."

"So there, Lizzie! You're not so smart after all."

"Was it Mirror Lake, Daddy?" That was Zoey using a curious tone.

"No, it wasn't."

"At the base of El Capitan," Abbey offered, knowing full and well her answer was wrong. It was fun for the girls when she played Jed's trivia games.

"That's not even close." It gave Jed special pleasure to zap his wife. "This is easier than you think, gang. Think back to where you all wanted to go after the sequoia grove."

It suddenly hit Ellie. "King's River!"

"Absolutely right! Someone give the girl a gold star."

Ellie smiled as Jed treated them to the story of King's River, the place they were headed to next.

---

The Yosemite portion of the King's River was embedded in a deep canyon narrowly lined by a forest of trees. The Bartlets made their way to the calmer end, where the water was clear and the canyon wall was low enough that it was open and accessible to the public, a popular place for swimming or tubing.

While Liz drenched herself with suntan lotion, put on her sunglasses and a pair of headphones, and laid back on a towel on the riverbank to catch a little sun, Ellie and Zoey ran towards the water with their rented inner-tubes.

"Watch, Daddy! Watch!"

"I'm watching, Zoey."

Abbey had just taught her how to twirl herself around inside the tube and Zoey couldn't have been prouder - at first. She glanced at Ellie turning faster and stronger and with furrowed brows, she dropped down until the tips of her fingers could barely hang on, mustered as much power as she could, and popped back up.

Still, she came up short. "How come Ellie can do it better?"

"Ellie's had plenty of practice," Abbey told her. "You will too in a couple more years."

"I think you're doing great, Zoey." Jed gave her a nod of reassurance. "How about a race?"
Abbey bowed out. "Not me."

"Yes you. We need you or else we can't do teams."

"Get Lizzie," she said with her first stroke towards shore.

Jed's eyes wandered over to where Liz was lounging. "She's pretending she doesn't know us again."

"Not such a bad idea," Abbey smirked as she climbed out of the water.

"Chicken!"

"Be careful, Jed. They're little girls."

"You think I'd risk their safety?" He flicked water at her.

"I'm not worried about them, I'm worried about you." She chuckled when Ellie and Zoey dunked him right on cue. "Have fun!"

"You're gonna get it now, you scheming little hooligans!" Jed barked when he rose to the surface and clawed his arms at Zoey and Ellie.

That roaring grumble almost lured Abbey back to the fun of the river, but feeling a kink in her neck, she opted for a few minutes on dry land, so she tossed out her own towel on the riverbank and joined Liz.

"Too much sun is bad for you."

"Leave me alone." Liz had heard her mother's lectures about the dangers of tanning many times before.

"At least put on some more sunblock."

"Mom, I've got so much sunblock on, I'm as shiny as a glazed donut. I want a tan."

"Tanning now means wrinkles later."

Liz turned onto her stomach while Abbey tucked her hand under her neck to massage her muscles.

"You okay?" Jed called from the water.

"Yeah, just a little sore."

Like her prince charming always eager to help, he hopped out of the water. "Here, let me see."

Abbey rolled over, sweeping her damp hair over her shoulder to allow Jed room to put his magic fingers to work. "Give me one of your famous rubdowns."

"I wish I could, but we're in public."

"Jackass," she mumbled as she untied her halter. "That feels so good."

"It'd feel better if you took your top off."

"Jed, I'm wearing a one-piece."

"That you are." Jed's stare followed the curves of her figure in that black-haltered one-piece
swimsuit. It was no longer tied around her neck and with the low scoop back that left most of her skin uncovered, his fingers gave in to temptation and trailed the small of her back towards the bottom of her spine.

"Easy, buddy. You go any further and I won't let you stop."

"You say that like it's a bad thing."

"Did you come here just to flirt with me?"

"Made you forget all about your neck, didn't it?"

"Not yet. I think I need more."

"More rubbing?"

"More dirty talk."

Liz turned up her music.

"Hey!" Jed shouted at her. "You're gonna bust an eardrum."

"If you guys insist on making out, I'm not going to listen!"

"We're not making out, we're talking. What are you listening to anyway? What are those lyrics?"

"You don't want to know," Abbey told him. She didn't care for her daughter's taste in music either, but she recognized the song when she heard the tune vibrating from Liz's headphones.

"Sure I do. What is it?"

Elizabeth flipped her sunglasses and said, "Like a Virgin. It's Madonna's new hit."

"That's the name of a song? What the hell kind of song is that?"

"It's number one on the charts, Dad."

Rolling to her side, Abbey propped herself up on her elbow. "Let's just ponder that silently, shall we?"

"For the sake of my blood pressure, I'll agree to that," Jed replied as he stood and started toward the river. "All right, girls, one-on-one to the pedestrian bridge and back."

"Jed?"

"Yeah?" He stopped where he was to answer Abbey.

"The weather's not looking so good." The sky was starting to turn and the darker clouds concerned her.

"It's not so bad. I promised the girls a quick race and then we'll leave."

Liz turned onto her back and took off her shades. "No wonder I'm feeling chilly. Where's the sun?"

"Clouds are rolling in. I think we should go." Abbey sat up.

"Please, Mom!" Ellie begged. "Just one race!"
When the wind started to pick up, Jed realized Abbey was right. They had read so many stories about summer thunderstorms in the valley, the sudden onslaught of ominous clouds followed by powerful downpours that often passed just as quickly as they came.

"Your mom's right," he said as he dashed to the river to get Ellie and Zoey.

A few feet away, Abbey started to gather her things. She reached for her sarong, her hand barely touching it when a gust of wind blew it out of her hold. She remained calm, picking up the belongings she could and looking to Liz for help with the rest.

"Why do we have to get out? It's not raining yet!" Zoey was only familiar with New Hampshire storms. She had no idea how much energy a Yosemite storm could pack.

"Both of you, out now." Jed, on the other hand, knew. A month earlier, hikers ascending up Half Dome were killed by the violent lightning in similar weather.

Ellie did as he said. Zoey tried to as well and if not for another gust of wind that spurred surface waves on the river, pushing her inner tube - and her tiny body floating on top - further away, she would have made it. The tube began to turn, riding the swells in the river and scaring her into holding on tight.

"MOMMY!" she cried when she sped towards another wave. Her legs were dangling over the edge and her fingers were gripping the tube out of fear of the turbulent water below.

Jed and Abbey both ran in after her. They swam as fast as they could, but the weather got worse and the tube picked up speed and since Zoey wasn't that strong a swimmer, jumping off might have proved to be even more dangerous. There wasn't much time for thinking so Jed followed his instincts and dove under the rapids to the calmer water beneath. He managed to overshoot his target and grab the tube so Zoey could jump into the safety of her mother's arms.

"I got you!" Abbey said, squeezing her tight, then handing her off to Jed to carry her to shore while she tried to retrieve the tube.

"Let it go," he said as it slipped out of Abbey's hold and churned from side to side, hitting some rocks on its way downstream. "Come on."

He reached for her hand then. Husband and wife limped back to shore, their youngest daughter beside them, with the first rumble of thunder. Liz and Ellie, who had huddled together while they watched, rushed to help their parents and together, the five of them ran towards the overhead shelter a few feet away.

Once they were safe, Abbey ran her hand over Zoey's head. "Are you okay, sweetheart?"

"Yeah. It was sorta fun." She wasn't quite so scared now that she was on land.

"Maybe for you. You just about gave your mom a heart attack." Jed turned towards Abbey. "It's been two years in a row these girls have gotten themselves into trouble. What do you say next time, we go some place without any water?"

TBC
Sunrise in Yosemite National Park was a phenomenon not to be missed, Jed used to say. So on the Bartlets' last morning there, Abbey and Zoey planned a memorable way to witness the sun's unforgettable glow on the thick forests, signature stone mountains, and the lush valley that carved miniature hamlets in the center of it all.

Elizabeth and Ellie weren't happy about breaking camp so early in the morning, but once they splashed some water on their faces and sat down to a hearty pre-dawn breakfast of muffins, eggs, toast, and juice at the Curry Village cafeteria, they were good to go. Abbey had warned them not to weigh themselves down with their usual campfire treats of sausage and bacon, so they each loaded up on a side of fresh fruit salad instead, and with five individual bear-resistant bags of granola to stuff in their backpacks afterwards, the family headed out to begin the day's activities.

It was still dark when they reached the bicycle rental stand. Since this was Zoey's hike - the one that Jed and Abbey agreed to let her lead - she hopped on her bike in front of her sisters and hit the pedals. Flanked by Liz and Ellie and Jed and Abbey immediately behind them, they criss-crossed the heart of the valley on paved trails through a looped path over the old scenic bridges that guarded the famed Merced River as the sun broke the horizon, bursting with streaks of red and orange hues that exploded around them.

There were plenty of stops along the way for Ellie and Abbey to flash their cameras and for Jed to entertain his daughters with yet another history lesson about the wonders of Yosemite. Awestruck by the park coming to life under the first hint of daylight and the harmonic sounds of nature that began to penetrate the silence of the night before, they trudged along quietly until Zoey reached a fork in the trail that stopped her in her tracks.
That way,” Abbey told her, gesturing to the right.

Zoey's sense of direction wasn't very good. It didn't have to be for this outing since they were on a straight path without many choices. Once Abbey gave her the clue she needed to continue, she pedaled her heart out over the next few hills, heading directly towards the riverbank.

"We're here!"

"Thank God," Ellie said. "My legs were getting tired."

"You're grumpy, Ellie!” the five-year-old accused, knowing exactly how her big sister reacted to being dragged out of bed before she was ready.

"Do you think I'll be less grumpy if you tell me that?"

"Are we spending the whole day here?" Liz asked.

"As long as you guys want," Jed replied as he urged everyone off their bikes so he could lock them up at the bike stand.

The Merced River was Yosemite's longest and most versatile waterway. From the lazy rafting available at one end to the rocky outcrops that flowed into rougher waters, it was a beacon of activity on hot summer days. Minutes past sunrise, the crowd was already starting to thunder in, leaving little space for private swimming. Fortunately, Jed and Abbey had other plans.

While he collected the backpacks to store in a locker, Abbey watched her daughters approach the water's edge, ready dip their toes into the river.

"Girls, don't take off your shoes yet," she warned. "We still have a little ways to go."

"I thought we came here to swim," Ellie said.

"We swim every day. Don't you think it would be more fun to do something we haven't done before?"

Skeptically creasing her brow, Liz turned to her mother. "Like what?"

"How do you feel about white-water rafting?"

---

It was a beautiful day on the river. The winds were calm, the sky was clear, and there wasn't a hint of the kind of weather that turned the King's River into a raging bath of rapids just a couple of days earlier. A dozen rafts were lined up along the sandy shore while rafters prepared for their adventure.

Abbey helped the girls into the Bartlet raft and handed them life vests to put on over their swimsuit tops and shorts. Liz and Ellie did fine, but little Zoey was nearly swallowed by hers. It packed some extra weight on her shoulders and hung down to her thighs which made it uncomfortable, but she never once whined.

Ordinarily, kids as young as Zoey wouldn't be allowed on rafting trips. It was only because the river was calmer this time of year and Jed and Abbey hired an outfitter to take them through the novice Class One and Class Two rapids that they made an exception. Zoey was well aware of this and she promised to follow every rule to the letter or else, Abbey threatened, they'd call the whole
thing off.
Ellie, on the other hand, had no trouble complaining.
"Why do we need it?" she grumbled, cradling a helmet under her arm.
"Because there are big and dangerous rocks out there and if you fall out, I want your head protected."

"If I fall out of the raft, my main problem will be getting back in."
"That will be one problem, yes."
"So why do I need this stupid helmet?"
"Do you want to sit this one out, Ellie?" Abbey challenged in a way that made it clear she was serious.
"No."

"Then watch your tone and put on the helmet."
"Ellie has a point, Mom." Liz struggled to get her own helmet on. "This thing's so heavy, it's gonna give me a headache."

"If you guys want to ditch the helmets, that's fine, but don't think you're setting foot on the raft without it. You can either put them on or you can wait here on the shore until we get back."

Ellie heaved a sigh and addressed her mother with the helmet sitting crooked on her head. "Better?"

"Come here." Abbey fixed it for her, loosening the strap so it would rest comfortably under her chin without cutting into her cheeks. She then cupped her chin. "Is there any chance we'll get to see that pretty smile of yours some time today?"

Encouraged to smile, Ellie replied a bit more cheerfully. "Maybe after a nap."

Liz helped Zoey fasten her vest as the guide went over the safety rules with Abbey. A few feet away, Jed kicked at the sand and sped up towards the raft with a life jacket thrown haphazardly around his chest and no helmet, either in his hands or on his head.

"Okay, are we ready to go?"

"You need a helmet, Dad," Liz told him.
"Screw the helmet, I'm fine."

"Jed." Abbey glared at him.

"Just this morning you were telling me what a hard head I have."

"You do and I'd prefer it was left undented by the rocks." She held out his helmet for him. "If you don't wear it, you don't go."

"You're ordering me to wear a helmet?"

"Yes."
"I'm a grown man."

"Start acting like it."

He called her bluff. "I'm not putting it on."

"Then you can wait on the shore."

It was a face-off. Husband and wife stood perfectly still, each waiting for the other to relent. Jed knew that Abbey was serious, but he was confident he could wear her down. Likewise, Abbey suspected he'd give in. And even if he didn't, the guide wouldn't allow him on the raft until his helmet was securely in place so it was either giving in to her or giving in to him.

When the pros and cons of that particular thought occurred to Jed, he barked at his wife, "Give me the damn helmet!"

Abbey smiled coyly at him as the helmet strap twirled on her outstretched index and ring fingers. "Here."

He took it from her and said, "I don't mind telling you, I'm not at all turned on by this domineering side of yours."

"That's not what you said the other night."

He slapped her rear on the way to the raft.

- - -

"Come on, Lizzie, put some power behind that stroke!"

"I am!"

"You call that power? You paddle like a girl!"

Jed chided Elizabeth for one simple reason - because he could. His taunting was done with love and not only did she know it, she gave as good as she got. Liz summoned her strength, dipped her paddle into the river, and forced it up with a vengeance, splashing her father and, inadvertently, the rest of the family and the guide who was in the back steering.

"LIZZIE! I wasn't ready to get wet!" Zoey was clearly annoyed by the move.

"I have news for you, Zo, you're on a raft in the river. You're already wet!"

"I was still dry. I wanted to wait for the rapids!"

Abbey calmed her youngest daughter. "It wasn't her fault, Zoey. She was egged on by the 40-year-old kid sitting beside her."

She directed her stare at Jed, who looked back at her and said innocently, "What? Lizzie did the splashing."

"Who provoked her?"

"My money's on Ellie. You know what they say about the quiet ones."

She raised her brow at him. "How can you say that with a straight face?"
"I'm just that talented."

"If you don't behave yourself, I'm going to take your paddle away."

"Since when do you threaten me?"

"Since today."

"You know I could toss you overboard with the flip of my hand, right?"

He definitely could. From Jed's position on the side of the raft, it would have taken little effort to grab Abbey by her shoulders and pretend to push her into the river. The temptation was there, but what stopped him was the sudden onslaught of surging rapids that sent them tumbling over a small waterfall to the swells at the base.

Screams and laughter permeated the air as the raft turned in the current, tipping over the waves so quickly that Abbey held Zoey to keep her from falling into the water. Liz and Ellie paddled straight into the next rapid as Jed worked with them to spin the raft around until everyone was soaked from head to toe.

"Let's do it again!" Zoey cheered when they hit their first lull.

"There's more coming up. Look." Abbey pointed to the whirlpool in the close distance. "Here we go!"

And with another round of screams, Liz, Ellie, and Jed paddled through. This series wasn't quite as sudden as the last, so Abbey coached Zoey on how to paddle along with her sisters as they charged over the rapids. The extra strokes didn't seem to help though. They got stuck by a particularly stubborn boulder that forced them into a spin before leaving them stationary at the mercy of crashing waves that soaked them even worse than the ones before.

"BACK PADDLE!" the guide called out to them.

"BACK, Ellie, not forward!" Liz shouted.

"I AM doing back, just like he taught us!"

"Then why isn't it working?"

"FORWARD PADDLE!" the guide corrected.

Several minutes passed with no luck.

"Forward paddling is this way?" Ellie asked.

"No, this way!" Liz told her.

Ellie looked down at the paddle. "That's dumb. Why would it go that way?"

"It just does."

She pulled it back. "But if it goes this way, won't the current help dislodge us?"

"Ellie, quit analyzing it! Who the hell knows why..."

"Hey!" Abbey scolded her teenage daughter.
"Sorry. Who the 'heck' knows why!"

"If we knew why we're supposed to do it this way, maybe we could figure out why it's not working."

"You're such a nerd."

Ellie scooped up her paddle and splashed her. "Take it back."

"I won't." And there went another splash. "You think I'm scared of water?"

"You should be. You're gonna melt."

"You little..." Liz swatted at her, intentionally missing, but drawing a laugh from Ellie nonetheless.

"If one of you falls overboard, I'm not fishing you out." Jed turned from the girls to address the guide, out of breath. "Tell me something, all our paddling, is it gonna make a difference?"

"Not if you don't start doing it right."

"See?" Ellie's retort was smug.

Abbey hit the river even deeper with her paddle after another wave crashed over them. "All right, come on, guys, quit horsing around. Let's get serious! This water is freezing!"

The guide was impressed with the way they worked together, compensating for one another until they managed to gain some leverage.

"FORWARD PADDLE! NOW BACK PADDLE! TURN. TURN. THAT'S IT, WE'RE ALMOST THERE! GET DOWN!"

Their teamwork paid off as they freed themselves under a flood of water that buried their raft until they hit a stretch of calmer waters just before it was time to ride the next rapid. Zoey paddled alone this time with Abbey beside her, Liz and Ellie paddled in unison, and Jed countered their strokes to keep them on a forward path towards another waterfall.

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"Let's do Class Three next time!" Zoey took Jed's hand to help her out of the raft and onto the shore.

"Forget Class Three," Liz hollered as she joined Zoey and Jed, her voice hoarse from all the screaming. "I heard you get EIGHT FOOT waterfalls on Class Five!"

"No way!" Ellie was the next to step onto dry land. She turned back to look at Abbey who stumbled out of the raft with Jed's help. "Can we do a Class Five before we go home?"

"Not this year. Zoey's too young for anything more advanced than what we did."

"Geez, Zo, you ruin everything," Liz playfully shoved her little sister.

"I do not!" Zoey protested, though she knew Liz was kidding. "If it wasn't for me, you wouldn't have even gotten to go today!"

Jed confirmed that statement. "That's right, it was Zoey's idea to come down here. And she didn't even spill the beans to you and Ellie."
"Nope, I didn't." She beamed proudly.

"All right, how about we get you girls into some dry clothes for the ride back to camp?" Running a towel over her hair, Abbey ushered her daughters towards the changing room. "Jed, we'll meet you right here in a few minutes."

"Yeah."

"Hope you know the way back, Zo." That was Ellie, her voice also strained.

"I don't."

"What do you mean you don't? You're the one who's supposed to be leading us."

"I said I could get you here. I didn't say I could get you back."

They heard Jed's hardy chuckle as they disappeared into the changing station.

---

After a dinner of hot dogs and fries, Jed treated his daughters to ice cream cones while they took in a show at the amphitheater at the Upper Pines. Every Friday night, the campgrounds hosted a G-rated program and on this night, the line-up included a dozen performers in a one-act play about the legend of ancient love in the valley.

The show entranced Abbey. She found herself captivated by the storyline, moved by the characters, and tangled up in the emotions provoked by the music. And it wasn't just her. She looked over at Elizabeth and realized she, too, was involved in the play. Liz's thoughts strayed though. Initially, it had been the performance that intrigued her, but the more she listened, the more she watched, she caught herself fantasizing, not just about love, but about what that love could blossom into over time. Always a dreamer, this was nothing new to Lizzie. When she was five years old, she and her friends ran into a wedding procession while playing tag outside. They climbed the tree in the yard and watched as the bride and groom ran out of the white-steeple church, hand-in-hand, under a shower of rice kernels. Later, they slipped into their fanciest Easter dresses and planned out their own weddings.

It wasn't a question of if Elizabeth would one day get married, it was always a question of when. She wanted the fairy tale - the husband, the white-picket fence, a career of her own to be proud of, and maybe, someday - if she found the perfect balance between work and marriage - she'd consider having children. But for the first time in her life, she saw another face in the fantasy, and it was a face she didn't quite expect. The man she had gotten to know a little better the last few months, the man that no one - not her parents, not her sisters, not even her friends - knew she had spent time with over the summer, had finagled his way into her mind even when he wasn't around.

Abbey wrapped an arm around her and Liz smiled sweetly as she laid her head on her mother's shoulder, not yet willing to share her secret crush on Doug Westin.

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"It doesn't hurt." Ellie was lying on her tummy on top of her sleeping bag so Abbey could rub lotion over her sunburned shoulders and arms.

"It's going to tomorrow."

"I used sunblock."
"If you hadn't, it would have been much worse."

"But if it doesn't work anyway, what's the point?"

Liz walked into the tent and collapsed tiredly on her sleeping bag so she could take off her shoes.

"How are you, Baby Doll?" Abbey fixed the straps to Ellie's tank top, then moved over to Liz.

"It's not too bad."

"Let me see." She swept Liz's ponytail to the side to rub the lotion on her shoulder.

"Mom, how real do you think that play was? The legend, I mean."

"I'm sure parts were real."

"Like a lot of it?"

"You never know with legends. Some are the product of a generations' vivid imagination and others...I like to think others are true. Why?"

"It was romantic, don't you think?" Liz laid back and pulled her sleeping bag up over her legs. "It reminded me of a cross between Sleeping Beauty, Rapunzel, and a bit of West Side Story."

"That's quite a combination."

"I think it was more like Cinderella," Ellie countered.

"Why?" Liz asked. "The play we saw tonight was about love that overcame evil."

"Cinderella's like that. What do you think the wicked step-sisters were?"

"They were a symbol of evil, but it's not the same. Akule and Mona had so many hurdles. Their love really did conquer all, even their own differences. Cinderella was a totally different story. If you think about it, it was a story of a woman who had to change herself to find love."

"That's not true. The prince wanted to marry Cinderella the next day, even after he saw what she was really like. And isn't that like overcoming their differences?"

"I didn't mean those kinds of differences. Those are cosmetic. I meant philosophical differences."

"They might have had those too."

"Not that we'd ever know. The prince in Cinderella probably wouldn't have noticed her at all if her Fairy Godmother hadn't transformed her the way she did."

"The Fairy Godmother just made her prettier. What's wrong with that?"

"All I'm saying is you should never have to change yourself to attract a man. Right, Mom?"

"That's right," Abbey said as she zipped up Liz's sleeping bag and dropped a kiss to her forehead.

"And the man shouldn't have to change either. If two people love each other, that's all that should matter."

"Right again."
"I still say it's a Cinderella story," Ellie persisted.

"It did have a Cinderella flair to it too, didn't it?" Abbey tried to tuck her in, but Ellie sat up, too wound up to sleep.

"It did! There wasn't a Fairy Godmother or a pumpkin coach, but when Akule put the ring on Mona's finger and it fit the way it did, it was just like the glass slipper. And her family watched, knowing there was nothing they could to stop it, just like Cinderella's family!"

"I think it was like Cinderella too," Zoey piped up.

"Come on, lay down," Abbey encouraged her middle daughter. "I don't want deal with you if you're grumpy on the flight back home tomorrow."

"I won't be, I promise."

She gave Ellie a kiss and moved on to Zoey. "So then, we're agreed that it was a mix of Sleeping Beauty, Rapunzel, West Side Story, and Cinderella. Are we covered?"

"What's West Side Story?" Zoey questioned.

"It's a play you haven't seen yet. I'll take you to it someday." She leaned down for the final kiss she saved for Zoey and as she did, Zoey grabbed her neck and give her a kiss first.

"I love you."

"I love you too, sweetheart." Abbey swept her bangs off her face, zipped up the zipper to her bag, then stood up. "Night, girls. See you in the morning."

"Goodnight."

When Abbey closed the flaps and walked away from the tent, Ellie turned to her side and propped herself up on her elbow. "Who's the boy, Lizzie?"

"What boy?"

"You always talk about fairy tales when you like a boy. Who is he?"

Zoey prodded as well. "Yeah, who is he?"

"There is no boy," Liz insisted as she turned her back to them to ignore Zoey, who began singing an all-too-familiar tune.

"Lizzie's got a boyfriend, Lizzie's got a boyfriend!"

The teen turned back around and fired her pillow at her baby sister, triggering a spree of contagious giggles.

- - -

"I'd say 'penny for your thoughts' if it wasn't such a cliché...and if I actually had a penny on me."

Abbey found Jed sitting in front of the fire. She approached him from the side.

"I never understood that." Jed held out his hand to her and when she took it, she straddled his thighs and sat in his lap, facing him. "Penny for your thoughts? A penny is all my thoughts are
worth? What kind of insult is that?"

"Not quite as insulting as pushing you to unload for free," she replied, running her fingers through his thick mane of hair. "What are you thinking about?"

"That my toenails have grown to epic proportions."

He got a soft chuckle for that, but she went on. "Seriously."

"Oh you know, how much I don't want to return to real life."

"Real life as in New Hampshire or real life as in..."

He kissed the back of her hand. "Real life."

There were issues waiting for them back home - reelection and the possibility of adoption. Neither of those things had been resolved over the summer and while the vacation in Yosemite postponed the inevitable, Jed wasn't looking forward to probing the next chapter of their lives. At least not yet.

"I'm with you on that," she said just before she felt the bulge in his shirt pocket and reached in to pull out the pack of cigarettes he had there. "Ellie was asking me about these the other day. She wanted to know why I let you smoke."

"Why you let me, huh?"

"That's what I said. But you know, she's not wrong. I'm a thoracic surgeon. Human lungs are my specialty. I see lung cancer every single day in the O.R., Jed, and yet, I haven't done enough to make you to quit."

"You tried. You've always tried, from the day we got married. Remember cutting up my cigarettes in London?"

Abbey snickered at the memory. "I thought you were going to file for annulment."

"I still might," Jed teased.

"Lizzie was talking about Cinderella tonight."

"Uh oh, who's the boy?"

"She didn't say," Abbey answered, unfazed by the interruption. "And I didn't want to embarrass her in front of Ellie and Zoey. Anyway, her point was that no one should have to change for anyone else."

"That's true."

"That we are who we are and all that matters is whether or not we love each other."

"True again. What are you driving at?"

"Your smoking is part of you. You were doing it before we got married and you're doing it now."

"Are you saying you're okay with it, that you're not going to try to change me?" Jed brazenly put a cigarette in his mouth. "Cause I could live with that."
"That's not what I'm saying." Abbey couldn't hide her disapproval even if she tried.

"Then what?"

She snatched the cigarette from his lips before he lit it and tossed it into the fire. "This isn't a fairy tale."

"That was cold, Abigail."

"Did you really think I was going to give you the green light to kill yourself?"

"That's a bit of an exaggeration."

"I don't think so."

"What was your point?"

"That I can't change you any more than you can change me. I want you to quit, you don't want to. So how about a compromise? I won't ask you to trash the cigarettes..."

"That'll be a first."

"As long as you cut down." She could tell instantly that he wasn't receptive to the idea. "I know it's hard. I know you've tried it before, but I think it's time to try again."

"This is all because of what Ellie said?"

"Some of it, yes. She reminded me that I can't force you to quit. But I can appeal to you as your wife, the person who wants to grow old with you."

"Don't you think this is a little unfair?"

"What's unfair about it?"

"You can't just sit on my lap, all cute and sassy, sucking up to me so you can ask me to do something I don't really want to do."

"Why not?" she asked with feigned innocence.

"Because you know I can't resist you when you're like this."

"Yeah, I guess I do."

He turned a stern look to her guilty smile. "We've danced this dance before. Say I do cut down, then what?"

"Then we deal with real life." She circled her arms around him.

"Are you afraid my smoking's going to get worse in the coming months?"

"If you want to know the truth, yes. I'm afraid that when you start campaigning..."

"When?" He was delighted to hear her say that.

"IF you start campaigning again..."

"I liked the first way better." He propped up her chin with his fingers and ran his thumb over the
edge of her bottom lip. "I hate that I can't say no to you."

"Yeah, that's a real shame," she quipped as she leaned into his frame.

TBC
In the middle of a downpour in South Bend, Indiana, Jed and Elizabeth ran from their rental car into their hotel room, leaving their luggage locked in the trunk until the rain let up. Liz hustled past her father as soon as he opened the door. She flipped the switch, then dragged her feet as she got a look at their room under the domed light on the ceiling.

After pivoting in his spot, Jed admitted, "Okay, so it's smaller than I remember."

"Is it too late for the Holiday Inn?" Liz had been wanting to stay at a chain, but Jed insisted on the charming hotel that hosted scores of potential Notre Dame students - including himself when he visited with his mother as a high school senior.

"Come on, give it a chance." He slipped out of his wet jacket.

Still hesitant, Liz dropped her purse on one of the two double beds, then aimed for the television stationed on the wall while Jed checked out the bathroom and dresser drawers.

"No reception?" she asked, flipping through the channels.

"It must be out because of the storm."

"Great, no TV."

"It's no big deal."

"You already said you don't want to drive in the storm, there's no TV, and I didn't bring any books. What are we supposed to do all night? And don't tell me we're going to play Parcheesi."

"You used to like Parcheesi." Jed was grateful for their luck if it meant spending quality time with his daughter.

"Dad."

"Relax, Lizzie. Have a seat, take off your jacket. Let's just talk for a little while."

"Talk?" a disappointed Liz asked as she sat on the bed across from her father's.

"Yes, talk. You remember how to talk. It's when you open your mouth and words come out,
hopefully cheerful ones."

"What's there to talk about?"

"Anything. You and I don't talk anymore."

"We talk plenty."

"No, we don't." He sat down on his bed. "I feel like we haven't talked at all since Yosemite...before Yosemite even. You've been locked up in your room since we got back. What do you do up there anyway?"

Liz shrugged. "Hang out."

"It would be nice if you'd hang out with us sometimes."

"Dad, you weren't even around after Yosemite. You went to Washington for that special session for two weeks, remember?"

"I came back, not that you noticed. Remember when you used to run into my arms when I'd come home at night? You couldn't wait to tell me all about your day. You haven't done that in years."

"I'm 17."

"Seventeen year olds no longer like their fathers?"

"Why are you giving me a hard time?"

"It's what I do." He grinned.

"All right, fine. You wanna know what's up with me? Nothing. School starts on Tuesday and I'm nowhere near ready to go back. I need another week of summer vacation."

"To do what, lay around?"

"I haven't been laying around all summer. I worked at Friendly's all of June and most of July. I practiced with the girls. We've officially transformed the cheerleading squad into a dance line."

"That's great!"

"It could be. We're going to compete at the New Hampshire state finals next month. A lot of the girls are hoping to get scholarship money for college out of it."

"You don't have to worry about that." He knew that Liz was bound to get a few academic scholarships. She had carried straight A's since freshman year and was ranked first in her class going into 12th grade. And if the scholarships didn't work out for her, she was fortunate enough to have parents who started a college fund when she was born.

"I hope I don't, but some of the other girls do. If we rank at the state finals, we'll go on to nationals. That's where the real scholarships are at."

"And you wouldn't have a chance of getting there if it hadn't been for the hard work you put in to organize and choreograph. Am I right?"

"Yeah."
"So then, it sounds to me like you had a great summer! You got stuff done. So what's all this about not being ready to go back to school?"

"I dunno, I guess I just want a little more time to myself."

"You'll get it at Thanksgiving."

"A whole two and a half months away." She gathered her legs up on the bed, Indian-style, and they stared at each other in silence. "How about I drive and you just sit there and enjoy the ride?"

"Lizzie, we're not going out," Jed firmly maintained. "Now come on, we were having fun. Tell me more about this dance line."

"I've told you everything already. I won't know anything more until school starts."

"In that case, tell me what you've been up to the last two weeks."

"Nothing."

"Don't say nothing. It's not like you were a zombie for 14 days. You must have done something. Come on, talk to me."

She looked him squarely in the eye and impishly - to make him feel as annoyed as she was - said, "I got a tattoo."

"Be serious."

Liz raised her jeans just high enough to roll down her sock and show him the green shamrock on her ankle. "Notre Dame enough for you?"

"What the hell is that?"

"I told you, it's a tattoo."

"Your mother never would have allowed that."

"What makes you think she knew? I snuck out of the house one night after she had gone to bed. My friend Randy picked me up on his motorcycle and drove me to Boston where his friend James tattooed me in his garage."

Jed sat in a furious shock. Out of the corner of his eyes, he kept a watchful eye on Liz as she folded her hands under her chin. "You better be lying."

"Lying's a sin, Dad."

"Elizabeth."

Her sock was still wet from the rain, so she used a bit of the moisture to wipe at the very edge of her tattoo. "Tori and I got a bunch of fake tattoos out of a gumball machine at the mall. Comes right off."

"I oughta ground you for your entire senior year."

Liz dismissed the threat. "It was funny!"

"Do I look like I'm laughing?"
"You should be, Mr. Sourpuss."

"The trouble with you is you're a smartass," Jed barked. "A little trip to military school when we get back might put an end to that."

"It's going to be a fun 24 hours."

-D- -

"Dad?" Liz whispered across the room to her father in the middle of the night. "Dad, are you up? Dad?"

"Hmm?" Jed stirred from his sleep.

"Are you up?"

"I am now. What's wrong?"

"Just wondering if you're having trouble sleeping."

He wiped at his eyes. "No, I was doing fine until you woke me. What's going on?" Greeted by silence from her followed by a clap of thunder, he knew the answer. "Oh, the storm. Lizzie, storms like this are common in Indiana."

"I know. It's not the storm."

"Then what?"

"It's just...other stuff."

He didn't believe her. Ever since she was a little girl, Elizabeth was terrified of thunderstorms. The older she got, the more hesitant she was to admit it, but as much as she tried, she couldn't hide her fear from Jed. He turned on the light and popped up to rest his head on the headboard. In her own bed, Liz followed his lead, eager to hear what he had to say.

"Did I ever tell you about the time a tornado hit my apartment complex?"

"A tornado story isn't likely to make me feel better," she warned.

"Ah ha! So it is the storm that's got you twisted in knots!"

"I hate when you do that."

Jed chuckled. "Close your eyes and listen. One night back in '65, this twister passed through, damn near took out a few of the neighboring towns with it."

"Where were you?"

"I was inside my apartment when I heard the sirens go off. I had never heard tornado sirens before so I went out on the porch and looked up at the sky; scariest sight I ever saw. I heard my neighbor yelling for me to get back inside. And I did. I was terrified."

"What did you do then?"

"I went next door, rode out the storm with a couple of other guys. It wasn't that bad."
"Didn't you have a basement?"

"Not in the complex. But we didn't need one. Apartments in this town are built strong enough to withstand nature's darkest fury." He looked at her, more than a glint of sincerity in his eyes. "So are hotel rooms. We're fine. Trust me, okay?"

"Ask me again in the morning."

"Count on it. And when I do, little girl, you'll have to admit that sometimes, father really does know best." He fluffed his pillow and prepared, once again, for sleep.

"Oh brother." Liz laid on her side, facing his bed. "Dad, how come you didn't live in the dorms?"

"Where did that come from?"

"I'm curious."

"I did live in the dorms my first year. I moved into my own place because all my roommate ever wanted to do was party. Our dorm room was one endless party. My whole floor was, to tell you the truth."

"It was hard to study, huh?"

"It was hard to do anything besides drink and make out with girls."

"Is that why you never pledged a fraternity?"

"That's one reason. Also, no fraternities at Notre Dame. That's okay, I did other things in college, I had other goals."

"Like what?"

"I did some counseling at the local chapter of the CYO." The Catholic Youth Organization took up most of Jed's time his first couple of years of college.

"I meant in school. What sports or clubs did you belong to?"

He sat up again. "Crew. I loved crew. I was also a part of the service club - we worked at homeless shelters, soup kitchens, that sort of thing. I wrote for the student newspaper and the campus business magazine and I was a member of the debate club for two semesters."

"And the chess club," Liz added. "Did you play basketball?"

"All the time."

"For Notre Dame?"

"Silly Lizzie," he laughed. "You had to be good to play for Notre Dame. I wasn't very good. I wouldn't have been much of a real player."

"Why not?"

"I don't know, I guess I never really wanted the ball. I just wanted to be on a team. I played with my friends every Thursday night outside the student center. It was our own little tradition."

"It sounds like you had a fun college experience."
"I did. And you will too."

"You met Mom your last year at Notre Dame, right?"

"Junior year actually. It was New Year's Eve, junior year. I went back home for Christmas vacation and some of my old prep school friends dragged me to this party. Thank God I went because there she was, standing behind a railing above me. I looked up and saw her, the most beautiful woman I had ever laid eyes on."

"That's where it all started."

"That's where it all started," Jed agreed by echoing her sentiment. "The day I met your mother, one of the best days of my life."

"One of?"

"Our wedding day and, of course, the day you were born, the day Ellie was born, and the day Zoey was born."

Liz smiled at that. "Dad, I've always wondered, why Notre Dame? I mean, besides the obvious."

"Why Notre Dame? It's an amazing school, Lizzie. Never underestimate the history, the prestige, the reputation of Notre Dame. I knew I was going to get a quality education and given the fact that I wanted to be a priest, the real question should be, why not Notre Dame?"

"I know, but I was hoping for a real answer."

"That wasn't a real answer?"

"There are lots of Catholic universities that offer a quality education and plenty of places in New England that could have prepared you to be a priest."

"None were as good as Notre Dame, at least not to me. Now don't get me wrong, I looked at Catholic colleges in New England. Providence College offered me a scholarship."

"Okay, so then, I ask again, why Notre Dame? Why did you decide to move so far away from home?"

"Elizabeth, being away from home was one of the plusses in my situation."

"Because of your father?"

"Let's just say, I was ready to move out on my own. I was ready to spread my wings."

"That's code for you were trying to get away from your father. I don't blame you. He was such a jerk."

"He wasn't that bad."

"He was the king of jerks! You don't have to defend him to me. I know what he did."

Jed would never forget that through her open bedroom window one night, Lizzie heard that volatile argument he had with John. His secret was out that evening and the one thing he didn't want to happen, happened - Liz saw her grandfather for the man he truly was, a man she'd never be able to forgive for the physical and emotional scars he had inflicted on Jed.
"You know what he did," he affirmed. "That doesn't mean we're going to sit here and bash him."

"Why not?"

"Because he's still my father. He made a lot of mistakes believe me, I'm the first to admit that, but he's still my father. And he's dead. We're going to pay him some respect whether you think he deserves it or not."

Liz could accept that. She and Abbey were John's harshest critics, but she knew that despite the tormented relationship he had with him, Jed was still quick to defend him. So out of her love for Jed, she didn't fight him.

"He wasn't Catholic," she said instead.

"What?"

"Your father wasn't Catholic. He wasn't deeply religious at all, not like you. How did he react to you wanting to become a priest?"

His mind churning with memories, Jed stared straight ahead and replied, "He wasn't happy about it...at first. Then, a couple of years later, when he found out I changed my mind - after I met your mother - he went ballistic, as if it had been his lifelong goal for me to become a priest."

"Why?"

"To be ornery maybe? I really didn't know at the time, but now I think he just didn't want me to give up my dreams for someone else, for something that might not last."

"So he wanted you to do it? He wanted you to become a priest?"

"I don't know if I'd go that far. He definitely would have preferred I do something else. But yeah, I like to think he accepted it because it's what I wanted. He didn't want me to give it up for someone I didn't know that well."

"He was looking out for you."

"That's what I tell myself." Whether it was true or not.

"That's because he loved you. He wanted you to do whatever made you happy. He loved you a lot." Like any daughter, Liz's only concern was Jed. Her feelings towards John didn't matter. Her own father took precedence.

"I guess maybe he did love me, in his own way."

There were times when Jed clung to that belief. John treated him horribly as a child and even as an adult, but the little boy inside him still thought, from time to time, that his father loved him, even if he so rarely showed it. The problem was, love and like were two separate emotions and just because he might have felt one, didn't mean he necessarily felt the other.

"If there's one thing I've learned as a parent," he continued. "It's that it's impossible not to love your children. It just isn't human."

"It's impossible not to love your parents too. That's why you stick up for him."

"That's not why..."
"It's okay, Dad. I think it's cool."

"You think what's cool?"

"That you're so loyal to him. It says a lot."

"About me or him?"

"Both of you."

A man's character is judged by his loyalty to those he holds dear, Jed used to say. He taught his girls that their integrity was measured in how they treated others, and fidelity to their loved ones was paramount to how they'd be remembered when they weren't around. In that hotel room that night, he realized that Elizabeth had been listening.

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If there was one thing Jed hated, it was waiting. He paced back and forth outside the car as Liz dabbed at her lip gloss in the rearview mirror. They had left the hotel in a rush after sleeping through their alarm. It was Abbey's call that woke them and started them on the hurried journey to Notre Dame for their tour. Already running late for registration, Jed prodded his daughter over and over, but Liz insisted she had to look perfect to meet the esteemed Notre Dame faculty.

"Elizabeth, come on already!"

"I'm coming! Don't have a cow!" And with that grumpy retort, Liz stepped out of the car and followed her father down the shaded sidewalk that led to the commons.

"Of all the wonderful qualities you could have gotten from your mother, you had to inherit the primping gene."

"If you're this patient with her, I can see why she makes you wait."

"Stifle the sass and walk faster."

"Do I look okay?"

Jed threw his head back for a quick glance. "Yeah."

Liz was nearly running to keep up. "Dad?"

He stopped then and turned to get a better look. "Your hair...it looks better thrown behind your shoulders."

"Like this?" She brushed her chestnut locks off her collar.

"Yeah."

"How is it?"

She looked so professional, not at all like the girl she used to be and still sometimes was in Jed's mind - the giggly and carefree little girl running around the playground in jeans and pigtails. Wearing a pink suit with white piping that she and Abbey had picked out together, Liz was the epitome of class - sophisticated enough that she looked mature and yet, young and trendy enough that she looked her age. The outfit, the hair, and the light hint of make-up was just right for a 17-year-old high school senior.
He eyed her from head to toe and said, "Perfect."

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The path that led to Notre Dame's most historic and recognizable landmark - the Golden Dome, with its statue of the Virgin Mary sparkling under the rays of the morning sun - housed the administration building where Jed and Elizabeth were headed. They had parked in a perimeter parking lot along Notre Dame Avenue and as they walked through the gates across the main road towards the dome, a wave of nostalgia swept over Jed. Just being on campus unlocked a wealth of memories for him, but he didn't expect the rush he felt at seeing the stained-glass windows of the Basilica of the Sacred Heart, the chapel where he had spent so many precious hours in worship.

Jed's eye was on the priesthood back then. He had his doubts, sure. He wondered if it really was his noble calling or if it was his love for God that inspired him to become a man of the cloth. But his own reservations aside, he never imagined that another person could derail him from his pursuit, so when Abigail Barrington sashayed into his life, the world he had known toppled over and the only constant that kept him grounded was the faith he had in his heart. The university's chapel was where he went and the confessional was where he realized his love for the woman that would end the journey he was already on and start him on a journey he couldn't have possibly predicted.

"Dad?" Liz called out for him when she saw him lost in his thoughts.

"Hmm?"

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing."

"Are you sure?"

Jed reached out his hand to bring his daughter close enough to drop a kiss on her forehead. "I'm positive."

Nothing was wrong. The choice he made - to trust his heart, to marry Abbey and start a family - had been the right one. He never regretted it for a moment and though his fleeting memories captured his attention for a few minutes, hearing Elizabeth's voice bring him out of his trance was enough to remind him of the blessings he had in his life. Energized, he escorted Liz up the steps under the golden dome.

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"Dr. Bartlet! Excuse me, Congressman Bartlet..."

After waiting only a few minutes, Jed and Liz looked up to see the dean of students approach with an outreached hand. The other students were sitting with their parents in an adjoining room, but the Bartlets had been ushered into a private waiting area for a special introduction.

"Hello," Jed replied as he shook the man's hand.

"It's a pleasure to meet you in person, sir." Dean O'Rourke turned his glance from Jed to Liz. "You must be Elizabeth."

"It's nice to meet you."
"The pleasure's all mine. Your father's one of our most notable alums. You know we offered him a
teaching position at Notre Dame? He turned us down. It was more important that Mr. Big Shot
here run for the U.S. House of Representatives. Can you believe it?"

Liz took the teasing in stride, shaking his hand with a smile. "My dad's one of a kind, that's for
sure."

"Is this an official roast?" Jed asked, a lopsided grin tugging on his lip.

"We'll get to that in due time," O'Rourke replied. "How about a tour first?"

Liz interjected, "I assumed we'd be touring with the other students and parents."

"This will be a private tour," the Dean told her. "It's standard protocol for the daughter of our Nobel
Prize-winning alumni. Follow me."

Liz waited until the Dean was well in front of them before she nudged her father, embarrassed.
"Dad..."

"I swear, I had nothing to do with it."

"I don't want any special treatment."

"Well, that's just tough, young lady...because you're special." Jed put his hand on her back and gave
her a gentle shove.

- - -

Just as Dean O'Rourke promised, Jed and Liz were treated to a private tour of all of Notre Dame's
facilities. From the Mendoza College of Business to the UND Law School to the College of Arts
and Letters, the department that awarded Jed his Bachelor's degree in American Studies, they saw
all that Notre Dame had to offer. But it wasn't the prestigious programs that struck Liz that day. It
wasn't even the beautiful campus. It was the dorms.

The residence halls were where all freshman were required to live their first year at Notre Dame.
The rooms were nice, bigger than she expected. There was a bit of disorder in the building because
some students were moving in to begin their freshman year and others were back after spending the
summer at their respective homes. Standing in the middle of it all, Liz was hit with a dose of
reality.

She wanted to move out. She had been looking forward to being on her own when she started
college, but now that she was less than a year away, she just wasn't sure that she wanted to live so
far from her family, the people she loved most in the world. It would be hard enough adjusting to
college life, she thought. Doing it in a different state would be more than she could handle.

As she and Jed crossed the quad during an hour-long lunch break that allowed them to explore the
campus on their own before heading back for a question-and-answer session with the other
students and parents, she broached the subject with her father.

"I really like Notre Dame," she began, taking a bite of her ice cream. After they had their lunch, Jed
had bought them a couple of chocolate Hoodsies, the ones in the little plastic cups with the flat
wooden spoons. They were a special treat between father and daughter and had been since their
Friday night ice cream runs in Boston when Lizzie was five years old.

"I'm glad."
"It's nice."

"I sense a 'but' coming." He knew her so well.

"But I'm not so sure about Indiana."

"Indiana's a beautiful state."

"It rains a lot."

"It rains in New Hampshire."

"Our storms aren't as bad."

"Elizabeth, don't tell me you're basing a decision like this on the weather."

"No. It's just that..."

"What?" He still couldn't see where her thoughts were going.

"Who are we kidding? I'm not gonna get into Notre Dame."

"Of course you are!"

"Dad..." Liz dragged her feet to throw away her ice cream, forcing Jed to stop too.

"Lizzie, I'm telling you, the dean loved you."

"I don't want you pulling any strings."

"I haven't and I won't, I swear it! You earned this all on your own, sweetheart. You're an incredible young woman. Sometimes I forget just how incredible because...well, because you're Lizzie and I know what your room looks like." That drew a chuckle out of Liz. "But then I'm reminded that you're not a little girl anymore. You're this smart, articulate, accomplished young lady with a heart of gold and a bottomless capacity to make your mark on the world. You have so much potential, angel. More than I ever did. You're going to get into Notre Dame, not because of me, not because of anything I said or did, but because you deserve it. No one deserves it more than you."

Her eyes tearing up, Liz grumbled as she started walking, "I wish you hadn't said all that."

"Why?"

"Because I don't know how I'm supposed to tell you I don't wanna go to Notre Dame."

Jed dropped his spoon. "You what?"

Liz stopped again. "I'm sorry, Dad. But I don't wanna go to Notre Dame."

An awkward moment passed between them as Jed bent down to pick up his spoon. He then tossed it, along with his ice cream, into the trash can nearby and returned to face Elizabeth. There they stood, eye-to-eye. Uncertainty was painted all over her face and he didn't know if it stemmed from her feelings about the school or about his reaction to what she had just told him.

"You just said you liked it."

"I do. It's not the school I have doubts about, it's the distance. I don't think I want to be so far away
"from home."

"Then why are we here?"

"Because I didn't know for sure until now."

"Why were you beating around the bush? Why not just tell me?"

"I knew how much it meant to you." She bowed her head. "I didn't want to disappoint you."

"You never disappoint me."

"You say that now, but I know what being here means. You went to Notre Dame, you looked forward to it. You wanted the same for me. But the truth is, I'm not like you. I'd rather go to school in New England, some place where I can come home on the weekends if I want, some place where I won't miss everyone so much. I know I'll be miserable here all by myself."

Jed had been excited about the possibility of his eldest daughter attending school at his alma mater. He could picture it all in his head - Elizabeth moving into the dorms, sprinting across campus to classes, walking up and down the very steps he strolled for four years - but in denying him that reality, she had given him a gift he never expected. Unlike what John Bartlet did for him, Jed had managed to create a loving and stable home for his child, one that she didn't want to leave. Knowing that Liz's upbringing charted a path radically different from his made him swell with pride, pride for himself and Abbey and for the daughter who stood before him, practically all grown up and ready to start a new life, but reluctant to leave her old one.

"Sweetheart, you didn't have to go through all this for me. I might not have said it, but I would miss you terribly if you went to Notre Dame. I would be thrilled - thrilled beyond words - if you decided to attend college in New England instead."

"You would?"

"Yeah. I want you to come home every weekend too, I want to know that you're just a short car ride away if you ever get sick or if you need me. Not just for college, but always. Hell, if it was up to me, I'd prefer you live at home, in your room, forever. You know, I always wanted to build a guest house on the farm for you and your husband and your children to someday move into. I could get started on it now, you could move in by next fall."

"Don't get carried away, Dad." Though she nixed the thought, Liz was touched by that.

"Okay, okay, I'll put the blueprints on hold. Seriously, there are so many good colleges back home. Of course you should stay there."

"I thought it was your dream to send me to Notre Dame."

"I love Notre Dame. I had some of my best boyhood years on this campus. I found myself, grew up, matured. Being here changed my life. But that was my experience, those are my memories. I'm not going to push them on to you. My dream, Lizzie, isn't for you to go to Notre Dame. It's for you to be happy. That's all I've ever wanted for you."

"You mean it?"

"With everything inside me." He took a deep breath to lighten things up. "And the added bonus is, the closer you are to home, the happier your mother and I will be too."
"I'm so glad you're okay with it. I was afraid you wouldn't be cool."

"I am the epitome of cool, Lizzieloo." He clasped her hand and wiggled her arm until she laughed. "Rad Dad, that's who I am."

"Oh God, please don't say that loud enough for people to hear!"

"Are you embarrassed by your old man?"

"Embarrassed by you?" Liz shook her head. "Isn't that a crime on this campus?"

"Right you are." Jed looped his arm around her neck to lead her towards the administration building. "Come on, let's go thank our hosts and then catch an early flight to New Hampshire. I have a call to make when we get back."

"A call? To who?"

"The dean of admissions at Dartmouth owes me a favor."

"DAD!"

The duo cut across the quad, teasing and laughing, as they passed under the bell tower towards the Golden Dome.

TBC
Ellie held the ball in her palm and poised herself for an underhanded serve while Abbey waited on the other side of the net. Jed had taught the girls to play basketball, football, and soccer, but volleyball in the Bartlet household was coached by Abbey. She had taught Elizabeth how to play once upon a time and now it was Ellie's turn.

"Start the swing from behind your hip," she told her middle daughter. "Now use your wrist and follow through, just like I showed you."

Ellie was already a decent player. Her serve was what needed a little work, so she stepped forward and following her mother's instructions to the letter, successfully swung at the ball, sending it clear over the net. "YES!"

"That's it, you did it!" Instead of smacking the ball back, Abbey let it pass overhead to give Ellie an extra rush of accomplishment.

"It didn't even touch the net! Did you see?"

"I sure did!"

"How was it? Was it as good as Lizzie when she first started playing?"

"I think with a little more practice, you could give even Lizzie a run for her money." She tossed the ball back over. "Try it again."

"Is this how you taught her?"

"Yes, Ma'am. And you're just as talented as she is."

Ellie rolled her shoulders back, got into position, and served it once more. "Mom?"

"Yeah?" Abbey promptly hit it back.

"Why Notre Dame?" Ellie returned the ball.

"You know why."

"I know Notre Dame is a good school and Dad always talks about it like he wants to send all of us
there, but it's so far away. Don't you want Lizzie to stay here?"

That question cost Abbey a point. She missed the ball and had to restart. "Of course I do."

"Then why don't you tell her she's not allowed to go to Notre Dame?" The thought of her sister moving out of the house in less than a year was already bothering Ellie.

"Because it's not up to me. She's almost an adult and what college she chooses to attend is the first grown-up decision she gets to make all by herself."

"Even if it's 1000 miles away?"

"I'm afraid so." Abbey served a floater that Ellie missed.

"Well, I want you to know that even though I'll be happy that Lizzie's happy, deep down, I won't like it if she goes."

"Duly noted. And just so you know, I won't like it much either. But that'll be our little secret. We don't want her to miss out on something she wants because of us." Another missed ball. This time, it was Abbey's foul. "I think you're wearing me out, Ellie."

"We've only been at it an hour and we spent most of that time on the serve."

"Yeah, and now that you've mastered that, it's one less thing to work on next time. How about we call it a day, huh?"

"Okay." Ellie tossed the ball in the air a couple of times, then followed her mother. "Can you show me how to do an overhanded serve tomorrow?"

"Maybe. We'll see if your dad has any plans."

"We should have a family game. Me and you against Dad and Lizzie."

"And what about Zoey?"

"We have to teach her to play first."

"That'll be your job," Abbey ordered as she scanned the field for Zoey. "Zoey, it's time to go!"

While Abbey and Ellie practiced, Zoey had taken off on her bicycle. Bike-riding had become her second favorite hobby that summer, right after horseback riding and just before swimming. Though she still struggled with her speed, she had been getting better and better ever since Jed removed her training wheels and taught her how to ride a two-wheeler.

"Five more minutes!" she hollered, whizzing past her mom and sister on her way down the winding trail that circled the barn. "I wanna turn without getting scared."

"Good, turn around and let's go home."

"Waaaaaiiittt!"

"No waiting, now! We have to get ready to leave for the airport."

A stubborn Zoey ignored Abbey and continued riding. "In a minute!"

"Zoey Patricia..."
"I'm coming!" She hastily spun her wheels before the narrow curve she'd been anticipating, causing her to lose her balance. She quickly dropped her feet to catch herself.

"Zoey!" Abbey ran to help her. "You have to be careful! You can't expect to hit a curve like that without slowing down."

"I did slow down!"

"Not enough. Besides, you leaned the wrong way."

"I don't know how to do it!"

"We'll work on it. I'll help you."

"Will you help me tomorrow?"

"Maybe."

"Promise."

"I promise we'll work on it."

"Tomorrow?"

"We'll see."

"Why won't you promise?"

"Because I don't like breaking my promises." Abbey propped her up on her bike. "Now come on, I'll race you home!"

And with that challenge, she took off. Zoey and Ellie rose to the occasion, Zoey hitting the pedals full-force as Ellie sprinted as fast as she could to catch her mother. Abbey slowed down on purpose to give them a chance to pass her. Ellie had no problem, but Zoey wobbled on her bike, even though it was a straight shot home without any turns or curves to cause her trouble. Abbey warned her to slow down, but the five-year-old sped up to win the race. She put as much power as she could behind her strokes and just as her front tire reached the edge of the gravel, she lost control - and her hold on the handle bars - as she careened back and forth until she finally hit the ground.

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"So what's our lesson for the day?"

"Don't trust Ellie!" a disgruntled Zoey barked. Abbey was tending to her cut with peroxide while the little girl sat on the bathroom counter and held her arm over the sink.

"Ellie? It wasn't Ellie's fault."

"Ow, ow, ow, ow, ow!"

"I'm sorry, I know it stings."

Zoey wiped at her tears and said, "I like blaming her more than I like blaming me."

"In that case, how about we not blame either one of you? It was an accident. That happens, especially when you're learning, and when you go faster than you're used to going, it's unavoidable."
You're not an experienced rider yet, Zoey."

"But it's no fun unless I can go fast."

"Listen to me." Abbey leaned down to brush the bangs off Zoey's forehead and look her squarely in the eye. "As much as I love your enthusiasm when you get involved in something new, I worry about you. When I tell you to slow down, it's for your own good, and when you don't do it, it makes me think you're not ready to ride your bike by yourself."

"I am ready."

"Then from now on, you let me or your father teach you and when we say slow down, you slow down. The more practice you get, the faster you'll learn to go. But in the meantime, trust me when I tell you I'm not trying to spoil your fun. I just want you to be safe."

"Are you mad at me?"

"I would be except I challenged you to that race and I shouldn't have."

"So it's your fault?" Zoey asked hopefully, her lips creasing into a naughty little grin.

"Nice try," Abbey poked at her tummy. "I'm sticking to 'it was an accident.' That was good though. It took Ellie and Lizzie a lot longer to learn how to use my words against me."

"I'm better at it than they were."

"You'd have to be since they prepared me so well to take you on." Winking at her, Abbey covered the scrape with a band-aid. "There we go. Good as new."

"You forgot to kiss it."

"I did, didn't I? Let's fix that," she said with a kiss to bandage-covered wound. "Is that better?"

"Lots," Zoey nodded.

As they began cleaning up, they heard the deep echo of a male voice outside. Abbey peered out the window and saw him - Jed. He and Liz were out of the car and heading to the porch, keys in-hand.

Jed jiggled the lock and barged in singing the Notre Dame fight song. "Rally sons of Notre Dame, sing her glory and sound her fame, raise her gold and blue, and cheer with voices true..."

"Jed?" Abbey came barreling downstairs, Zoey right behind her.

Jed dropped his bag just in time for his youngest daughter to leap off the steps and into his arms. "Daddy, I fell off my bike!" she pouted.

"Aw, you poor baby. Looks like Mom's got you all fixed up." Jed gave her a sympathetic hug, then he turned his attention to Abbey. "We took an earlier flight."

"We were going to meet you at the airport."

"I know, but it was just as easy our way."

"So...don't keep me in suspense. Lizzie, how was Notre Dame?"
"It was great!" Liz said. "Just as beautiful as Dad described. Everything about it was wonderful, the faculty was super nice, the architecture was gorgeous, the courtyard, the commons, the chapel, it was all perfect. It was weird, from the moment we got there, I felt...I don't know, proud to be there. Like I belonged or something. Sounds corny, huh?"

"Not at all," Abbey assured her. "I'm glad you felt so comfortable on campus. I guess this means we've lost all hope in Boston University though, huh?" She had been trying to goad Liz into giving her alma mater a shot.

"Let her finish," Jed replied.

"Mom, you'll be happy to know Boston U. has a better chance now than it ever did before. Notre Dame's out of the running."

"I don't understand. You just said how much you loved it. Why is it out of the running?"

"It's an incredible school. It's just not for me."

Hearing her sister's voice, Ellie emerged at the top landing and called down to Liz. "Guess what, Lizzie?"

"Hey, El."

"We turned your room into a fort while you were gone."

"Yeah, right."

"Your bed made a great guard post! We used your sheets for curtains."

Liz dropped her bag and dashed up the steps, oblivious to Ellie snickering as she passed. There was nothing like a little white lie to pull Elizabeth upstairs and monopolize her attention for at least a few minutes. It was much easier than telling her she missed her and wanted to hear all about Notre Dame.

Unwilling to be left out, Zoey wiggled out of Jed's arms and followed, leaving her parents alone downstairs.

"Well?" Her brow arched, Abbey prodded Jed for information.

"Believe it or not, our high-spirited daughter who barely leaves her room to hang out with her folks these days, wants to stay closer to home. She's afraid she'll be homesick in Indiana."

"You're kidding. She wants to live at home?"

"That would be nice wouldn't it?" Jed beamed for a moment, then came back to reality. "No, she's definitely moving out next year, but she'd like to attend school in New England."

"That's great!" She noticed that his voice dropped off slightly. "What's the problem?"

"There's no problem."

They walked to the living room.

"Jed, how was Notre Dame for you?"

"For me? It was fantastic. Why?"
"Did it bring back memories?"

"Yeah, good ones. No, Abbey, that's not what..."

"Then what?"

"Nah, it's nothing."

"It's something. Tell me."

"Did you take the girls back-to-school shopping today?"

"This morning."

"I was thinking about that on the plane, about taking Lizzie school shopping for the first time right before she started kindergarten. Remember how independent she was back then? She couldn't wait to start school like all the neighborhood children. She told us all summer how she wanted to ride the bus on her first day."

"And then she chickened out." Abbey sat with him on the sofa.

"She tried, but we didn't let her. We talked her into getting on the bus because it was all she talked about for months and the second she did, she felt right at home. She was fine without us, just like we knew she'd be. With Ellie, we took a different approach, remember? I wanted to send her on the bus with Lizzie and you said no because Ellie wasn't like Lizzie. She was shy and scared and if we had let her go by herself, she would have cried all the way to school. Ellie wasn't Lizzie and Lizzie wasn't Ellie. That was the case you made."

"So what are you getting at? Are you wondering if you should have talked Elizabeth into Notre Dame, helped her get over her fear of leaving us like we did on the first day of school?"

"Maybe a little," he said, slipping out of his sneakers. "All the way home, I kept wondering if it was an Ellie situation or a Lizzie situation. I don't know what I was supposed to do. I did what felt right, but was it right for me because I want her to live closer to us or was it right for her because she wants to? Can you believe I still don't know when we're supposed to comfort them and when we're supposed to encourage them to spread their wings? I'm still asking myself, was this like the first day of school?"

"It's an entirely different situation. You did the right thing."

"Yeah?"

Abbey got up and walked behind him to give him a back rub. "I'm almost certain."

With a chuckle, Jed leaned back against the cushion and tipped his head to look at her. They had been partners in the parenting game for 17 years and still, they didn't have all the answers. They weren't perfect parents. They made mistakes just like everyone else, but they were aware of it and despite the stumbles from time to time, one of the greatest joys of their lives was raising their three daughters, together.

...-

"I assume you know what we're here to accomplish today?"

That night, in a stuffy old office building downtown, Jed and Abbey sat on a leather sofa across
from an adoption counselor, a psychologist who was to evaluate the Bartlets on behalf of the adoption agency as one of the necessary hurdles couples had to cross in order to adopt a child in New Hampshire. It was important that they understood the process and it was equally important to the agency to get a glimpse at their marriage and their parenting skills.

The female therapist, Dr. Beth Wheeler, had a notepad and pen in her hand, ready to scribble away. The session was also to be audiotaped on a cassette recorder that sat on the table between them. Abbey, sitting with her legs crossed, answered Beth's first question with ease, a powerful tone in her voice.

"We know the agency said adoption counseling was recommended to make things go more smoothly."

"We're not really sure why," Jed replied more honestly. "We've already raised children. We know what it entails."

Beth countered, "But do you know what adoption entails? Adopting a child isn't the same as having one naturally."

"How different can it be?"

"When a mother carries a child, the family has nine months to bond with that child before it ever enters the world. It's going to be different in adoption, both for you and for your other children. You'd be surprised at the ups and downs you're in for. The first few months, it's the red tape, the interviews, the random home studies..."

"Random home studies?"

"Yes. A social worker will come by a couple of times on unannounced visits to evaluate your home life, see how you live, how you communicate, how you interact with your daughters, the kind of relationship you have with them and they have with each other."

"We talked about that, Jed," Abbey reminded him.

"Yeah, I know. I guess I misunderstood. I thought these visits would be planned." He looked at Beth. "See, I travel back and forth from Washington. I'd like to be there during the home studies."

"I'm afraid it has to be spontaneous. That's the only way it can work. Otherwise, we'd have families coordinating every detail of the evening so they come off looking like they're Currier and Ives. That's not what the home study is for; it's to get a sense of what the Bartlet family is like on a day-to-day basis, completely natural, no bells and whistles."

"What else?" he asked stoically.

"After the evaluation, there's the excitement of looking through profiles of birth mothers, followed by the anxiety of waiting for a birth mother to pick you, and after that, it's your job to understand the psychological experience of the birth parents. That's crucial to a clean transition. And finally, introducing a new person, a complete stranger, into your family. It's the greatest experience in the world, but it can also lead to a lot of stress before it's all over. You have to be ready to deal with all of that."

"We will be." Abbey slipped her palm into Jed's.

"Are you okay?" Beth aimed that question to Abbey, detecting her sudden fidgety demeanor.
"Yeah. I just thought we had already done our homework and now I'm finding out there's a lot we don't know."

"There's always more to learn."

"Well..." she threw her husband a glance. "That's why we're here, right?"

Returning that glance, Jed reassuringly squeezed her hand before turning to face Beth. "Yes, it is. Just tell us where to begin."

TBC
Abbey toweled herself off in the master bathroom after her morning shower. With her hair in damp ringlets on one shoulder, she stepped into the bedroom and looked over at Jed still asleep under the covers. She had nudged him earlier and he had given her a tired groan and a toss of his head, but she figured he'd find his way out bed by the time she was finished showering.

She tiptoed closer to see him sound asleep with his feet peeking out from under the blanket. Once, then twice, she wiggled his toes and when he didn't respond, she ran her fingernail across his bare foot, forcing a reflex. He spread his legs too quickly for her to move. They shot up into the air and came down to land right on her hips, trapping her between his ankles.

"Fraud!"

"In some countries..." he said in a dry, almost strained voice. "men get to have their way with women who disturb them during sleep."

"Yeah? Which country?"

"Bartletland. And as president of Bartletland, I declare action upon you, Abigail Ann." He tightened his sandwiched grip on her and shimmied down to where she was until she lifted his legs over her head and dropped them, turning from the foot of the bed. "Hey! You used to like a little role-playing."

"I still do, just not in the middle of a coup." She threw him a wash cloth. "The girls are up."

"I'm pretty sure they know we're not virgins." He sat up. "I remember when you weren't afraid of a little tumble under the sheets no matter who was right outside the door. Careless and uninhibited, that's how I'd describe you. You'd throw me down on the bed and take me whenever you wanted. What happened to that wild woman I married?"

"You don't recognize her?"

"At the moment, no. Is the honeymoon phase over?"

Abbey stood directly in front of him, unbelted her bathrobe, and let it glide right off her body.
"You tell me."

His lips curled in anticipation as he took in her sexy nude form.

- - -

"Z - o - e - y."

Down the hall, Zoey was sitting on a chair at Elizabeth's homework desk, calling out the letters of her name as she wrote them on a notepad while Liz stood behind her and braided her strawberry pigtails for her first day of kindergarten.

"You got it, Zo. Now try Bartlet."

"Lizzie?" Ellie called from the hall before she walked into her sister's room. "Can I borrow your shoelaces?"

"My shoelaces? Why?"

The blonde girl stared at Zoey, who promptly ignored her and began to scribble her name again.

"Let's just say mine are being used for a greater purpose."

"So are Lizzie's," Zoey confessed softly.

"What does that mean?" Liz ran to her closet and pulled out a pair of unlaced Keds. "Zoey, where are my laces?"

"Some place safe."

"Like where?"

"I'll give them back to you tomorrow."

"I want them now or I'll tell Mom."

"Then you'll be a tattle-tale."

"Zoey..."

"I'm gonna show Mommy that I can write my name. Thanks for braiding my hair, Lizzie." Notepad in hand, Zoey hopped off the chair and made a beeline for her parent's bedroom.

- - -

On mornings that he had to be, Jed was an early riser. On the weekends and work holidays, he'd snooze as late as Abbey and the girls would let him, but one thing that always sent his pulse racing, even before his eyes fluttered enough to absorb the first ray of daylight, was seeing his wife's naked body.

Abbey's bathrobe had pooled around her ankles and she stepped out of it, approaching him. She was so beautiful like this - natural, without a stitch of make-up, her hair wavy and damp from her shower. He held out his hand as she climbed on top of him. Immediately focused on his shirt, she pulled it off him and pressed her palms to his bare chest, then lowered her head to kiss him there.

"Mommy?"
There was this rule in the Bartlet house - the girls knew that if their parents' bedroom door was locked, they weren't to disturb them unless it was a dire emergency. Elizabeth and Ellie faithfully followed that rule, but little Zoey had yet to understand what a locked door really meant.

Brows furrowed in confusion, she tried to open it once again. "Mommy, I can't get in."

"Not now, Zoey!" a frustrated Abbey barked.

Jed raised his hips to rid himself of his shorts before his daughter's interruption spoiled the mood.

"Look what I did!" Zoey slipped her notepad under the door. "Does it look neater than yesterday?"

"Zoey, wait for me downstairs!" There was an edge to Abbey's voice this time.

"Why? Are you mad at me?" Zoey laid down on her tummy and stuck her fingers under the door, wiggling them on the other side. "What are you doing?"

Liz, who had left her room after she heard her sister bargaining with their parents, caught her.

"Zoey, get away from there!"

Zoey stood up, innocence flashing in her green eyes. "Mommy won't let me in. The door's locked."

"Let's go downstairs."

"But why can't I go in? What are they doing?"

"Don't worry about it."

"I AM worried about it! Tell me, Lizzie. What are they doing?"

"They're having SEX, okay?"

And that little exchange pretty much took the heat out of Jed's engine. He sighed and grumbled, "Not anymore" as Abbey rolled to his side.

Out in the hall, Zoey followed Liz. "What's sex?"

---

7:15 a.m.

Now dressed and ready for the day ahead, Abbey made her way to the kitchen where the girls were preparing for breakfast. Liz had poured Zoey a bowl of cereal and was now cooking at the stove while Ellie waited for her blueberry Pop Tart. When it finally shot out of the toaster, it was Abbey who grabbed it.

"Hey!" Ellie complained.

"Sit down, I'll scramble up some eggs."

"I'm a step ahead of you, Mom." Liz tipped the pan to empty a half dozen eggs onto a serving dish.

"Oh, Lizzie, thank you. You're a doll."

"Are you mad at me, Mommy?" Zoey asked from the table.

"Not this time. But from now on, when our door's locked, it means we don't want to be interrupted.
unless it's an emergency, okay?"

"But it WAS an emergency! I wrote my name again. See?"

"I see," Abbey replied, proudly admiring Zoey's handwriting. "This is good, Zoey. Much better than yesterday."

"Is it the best I've done it?"

"It is. It definitely is."

"Lizzie helped me. She did my hair too."

Abbey glanced at her eldest daughter. "You've had a busy morning, haven't you? How long have you been up?"

"A while."

"She's excited about getting to school because she's a senior now," Ellie informed their mother. It was no secret that usually on the first day of school, it was next to impossible to drag Liz out of bed.

"So are we over the disappointment from the end last year?"

Liz shrugged. "I guess."

"Elizabeth?" Unconvinced, Abbey cupped her chin to lift her head and look her in the eye.

"I lost. I'm okay with it."

"You mean it?"

"Yeah," Liz said, then almost as quickly, she shook her head. "No."

It had been a competitive election for student body president last spring and after a long campaign, Liz lost by one vote. She tried to take it in stride, to pretend it didn't bother her the day the results were announced at school, but to a girl who excelled at nearly everything she tried, the first time she lost something she really cared about was a crushing defeat.

She had cast it out of her mind to enjoy her summer, but now that school was starting up again, the disappointment reared its ugly head and she couldn't deny it anymore. Not to her family anyway.

"Lizzie, you can't win at everything."

"It's not about winning, Mom. I wanted to accomplish something this year. I wanted to make a difference at school."

"You can still do that."

"Not the way I wanted to."

Waltzing into the kitchen fresh from his shower, Jed picked up on the conversation. "Still bitter about the election, Lizzie?"

"I'm not bitter, Dad."
"It was a close election and you lost," he said bluntly. "It means nothing in the long run. You're still
the same person you were before and whether you're student body president or not, you still have a
voice in what happens at that school."

"Not much of one."

"Bull. You were junior class vice-president, were you not?"

"Yes."

"And you've been a part of student government every single year. You know how it works, you
know what you have to do to represent your peers. This kid who beat you...he knows nothing about
it."

"That's what bugs me!" Liz griped. "I worked so hard for three years. I really cared about what we
were doing! Ricky only ran to put it down on his college application. He has no idea what he's
doing."

"So help him learn the ropes."

"Why should I?"

"Because you have to work with him. You're still a member of student government," Abbey
reminded her.

"Working with him doesn't mean that I have to help him." With a rebellious sway in her step, she
added, "In fact, there's nothing that says I can't work against him if I wanted to."

"Elizabeth." Jed gave her that disapproving tone.

"I didn't say I would. I'm just saying, if I wanted to be angry and selfish about it, I could. Anyway,
I thought you were on my side."

"I was. I am. Always. You know that."

"When he beat me, you had a few choice words to say about him. Why are you all roses and
butterflies now?"

"I still have some choice words to say about him and about the clowns who elected him. No one
would have been as good a student body president as you."

"So why do you think I should help him?"

"Because, sweetheart, it's not about you. It's not about him. It's not about either one of you. Do you
care about the glory of being president or do you care about the school?" He leveled that question
somewhat rhetorically. Jed already knew what was in Liz's heart, despite her resentment.

"About the school."

"Then show it. Help him be an effective leader for the sake of the school."

"The school didn't vote for me."

"They DID vote for you. He got one extra vote. One measly vote, that's it."

"Is that how you would have looked at it if you had lost your election?"
It was one of those questions that gave Jed pause. His congressional race had been a particularly nasty one because Elliot Roush had targeted him by going after Abbey. If Roush had won, Jed suspected he wouldn't have been as a gracious runner-up as he encouraged Elizabeth to be, but to avoid sounding contrary, he chose not to tell her the two circumstances weren't the same.

Instead, he offered a qualification. "If my opponent had played fairly, I'd like to think I would. Do you dispute that this was a fair election? This guy Ricky...he didn't have any dirty tricks up his sleeve, right?"

"You already know he didn't."

"Then, there's your answer. You don't have to like him. Hell, I don't like him and I don't even know him. But like him or not, you owe it to yourself to show that school what you're made of."

Abbey managed a slightly different approach to get through to her daughter. "Elizabeth, it all comes down to character. It's easy to win graciously with a big smile on your face. It's what you do when you lose that people are going to remember. Over 500 kids voted for you because they believed you were genuine and honest and that you wanted to represent them. Go prove them right, prove that what they saw in you was the real thing and that your loyalty is to the school, even if you didn't win."

"You already gave me that lecture, Mom."

"It's not a lecture this time."

"Then what are you peddling?"

"Wisdom." Jed tapped on his forehead as he retrieved his paper from the counter and sat down at the table. "You can dismiss it and roll your eyes if you want, but this conversation will mean something to you, if not now, then later. You'll find the older you get, the wiser your mother and I become."

"That's a new one."

"It happens to be true. Think about what we said, huh?"

"I will."

Desperate to soak up some of her father's attention, Zoey confronted him. "I'm gonna ride the bus, Daddy!"

"Did Mom say yes?"

"No, she didn't." Abbey brought Jed a glass of water, her eyes narrowing at Zoey as she passed.

"I'd rather have juice," Jed told her.

"You're fasting for your doctor's appointment."

"I canceled that appointment."

"I rebooked."

"You what?"

"Please, Mommy!" Zoey whined.
"Hang on, Zoey." Jed turned in his chair to face Abbey who was at the fridge. "How could you rebook without telling me?"

"You're flying back to Washington tomorrow. If you don't go now, Dr. Hanley can't see you until December."

"Fine by me."

"Not by me."

"Abbey, I had my day all planned out. I'm supposed to go to work. My district staff hasn't seen me in two weeks."

"Then one more day won't matter."

"Mommy, why can't I ride the bus?"

"Zoey, we talked about this."

Zoey had been pushing for permission to ride the bus to school by herself, just as Lizzie had done when she started kindergarten. Abbey, however, had other ideas. Unlike Elizabeth, Zoey had had a difficult time at preschool and that sent Abbey's maternal instincts into overdrive. Over the summer, she, Jed, Ellie, and Liz had helped Zoey fine-tune the basic skills that gave her trouble, like cutting and coloring, and they taught her to develop other skills as well. She was reading now and although she still stumbled over the occasional word, learning to read had bolstered her self-esteem. She was not only ready for her first day of school - even if Abbey wasn't - she was looking forward to it.

"But I wanna ride the bus!"

"What's the big deal?" Liz interjected as she poured herself a glass of milk. "You let me do it. It was a lot of fun. I met one of my classmates on the bus and by the time we got to school, there was a group of us together, so we picked out our table and got to know each other while the other kids were still begging their parents to take them back home."

"I was one of those kids," Ellie admitted. The shy girl still remembered how much she hated starting school. "I didn't like the first day of kindergarten. I'm so glad Mom and Dad were there with me. I didn't wanna talk to anyone."

"You were fine when we got there, Ellie." Just as Jed knew she'd be. "You got your crayons out and coloring book and you shared with another little girl. Don't you remember?"

"I still didn't like it very much."

"Well, I'm gonna like it!" Zoey declared cheerfully. "I'm gonna have fun just like Lizzie did...if you let me ride the bus. Please? You always say I'm a big girl now. Why can't I go by myself?"

Jed didn't say a word. To him, it wasn't a problem letting Zoey board the bus if that's what she wanted to do. After all, on the day he started school, his father told him he had to be a man about it and asked his mother to point him in the direction of the school and send the little boy on his way. He did it without complaint and so when Liz asked to do the same, it was natural to him. It was only after he saw the fear in Ellie's eyes on her first day that he realized how scary starting school could be for some children.

Still, Zoey wasn't Ellie. She wasn't Liz either. He had envisioned he and Abbey taking her, helping
her get settled in and meet her new classmates. But if she was determined to ride the bus to school, he could adapt. He'd do all his hugging and kissing beforehand, whisper some warm wishes in her ear, and wave to her from the sidewalk so that she could experience her first day the way she wanted.

Standing beside his chair, Abbey prodded him. "You don't have anything to say?"

"I'm leaving it up to you."

Meanwhile, Liz grabbed her backpack. "I have to get going."

"You haven't had breakfast."

"I promised Tori I'd pick up some croissants on the way. Besides, I want a good parking spot." She took a few steps, then stopped to say, "Oh yeah, and don't forget, I have Key Club after school."

Abbey snagged the schedule of the girls' activities off the fridge. "When will you be out?"

"4:30ish."

"Ellie has band practice until then. Can you swing by and pick her up?"

"Yeah, sure."

"And take me shoe shopping?" Ellie asked. "I need a new pair of cleats for soccer."

"It's cruel to make me go into a shoe store when I'm broke, El." Liz had inherited her mom's taste in shoes, but unlike Abbey, Elizabeth wasn't much of a saver. Her allowance was frequently spent before it was in her hands and if it hadn't been for her parents insisting that her paychecks from her summer job go straight to the bank, she wouldn't have a cent to her name.

"Lizzie will bring you home, I'll take you shopping," Abbey replied.

"How come I don't have Key Club or band practice after school?" Zoey questioned her mother.

"You'll have school activities just as soon as you're a little older."

"Everything's about being older! I wanna do things now...like ride the bus. Can't I ride the bus?"

Jed was amused at how she came back around to that. Relentless. That was the word to describe Zoey.

"Please Mommy?" Her eyes twinkling, the five-year-old clasped her hands together and pleaded. "Pretty, pretty please?"

---

8:00 a.m.

"You know where you're going, right? You remember your classroom from parents’ night last week?"

"Uh huh. It's classroom 2 and it's the first one inside the building and Mrs. Roberts will be waiting in the hall just like she was on parents’ night."

So it had been decided - Zoey would get to ride the bus and go to school by herself, just like she
wanted. As Abbey rushed to get her ready so they could walk her out to the bus stop, Jed was still wandering around upstairs.

"Jed, we're about to leave!" she hollered.

"I'm coming!" He bounded down the steps. "I can't find my shoelaces."

"Aren't they on your shoes?"

A guilty Zoey lowered her head when Ellie turned an accusatory stare her way.

"If they were on my shoes, they wouldn't be missing."

"You probably took them off and forgot. I'll look for them later; we have to go or Zoey's going to miss the bus."

Instead of ratting her sister out, the ten-year-old pulled her backup up on her shoulders and reached for her lunchbox.

"I'm going too."

"You don't have to, Ellie. We can drop you off." He sometimes had trouble understanding his middle daughter, but Jed always tried to respect her feelings. He knew how nervous she got at the start of a new school year.

"No, it's okay," Ellie maintained. "If Zoey can go by herself, I can too."

It was a big step for Ellie. The first day made her jittery. The idea of seeing her friends again after a long summer was appealing to her, but the anxiety of meeting new people - a new teacher and new classmates - sent her stomach tumbling.

"Are you sure?" Abbey helped her straighten her straps.

"I'm sure. And this way, I can help Zoey so she won't get lost." Ellie turned her attention to her little sister. "It'll be fun, Zo. I'll show you where all the cool kids sit on the bus."

"Can I sit with you?"

"If you let me sit by the window."

"Can I meet all your school friends when we get there?" Zoey was excited by the thought of that. Ellie and her friends were going into the 6th grade, the senior class of the elementary school.

"If we have time, I'll introduce you. But there are some ground rules. First, Olivia likes to talk and she talks fast so just let her ramble on and try to keep up, Kerry got a new haircut she doesn't like so tell her she looks nice to make her feel better, and Jordan's filling out so don't drop your mouth at her new boobs. Got it?"

"I think so. Being with your friends must be hard if you have to remember rules, Ellie."

"Don't worry, they're nice. They'll like you."

As Abbey ushered Zoey out, Jed picked up Ellie's abandoned musical instrument.

"Don't forget your flute, Ellie."
"It's a clarinet, Dad."

"I'm kidding when I do that."

"Are you mad that I'm not playing the trombone like you did?"

"Me? Mad about a silly thing like that? Don't be ridiculous. You play what you want to play."

"Really?"

"Yeah. Don't worry about turning down the trombone." He grabbed his keys and followed her out, teasing, "It's the start of the school year, princess. I bet you'll come to your senses by January."

---

After a round of hugs and kisses - and tears on Abbey's part - that ended with Zoey and Ellie boarding the bus on the main road a few blocks from the farmhouse, Jed and Abbey jumped in their car and drove to the school. They beat the bus, so they waited in the parking lot for their girls to arrive. When they did, Ellie led Zoey through the crowded bus circle and into the building. Zoey loved every moment. Her smile wide as could be, she held Ellie's hand and skipped along beside her big sis past the double doors.

This was a new experience for Ellie. Her nerves were calmer than they had been in years past, her anxiety wasn't nearly as strong. She didn't stop to analyze it, but if she had, she would have realized that it was because of Zoey. Jed and Abbey were always the ones in charge and if they weren't around, that role belonged to Liz. It was the first time that Ellie was solely responsible for Zoey and that responsibility overshadowed her fears and brought her out of her shell.

She walked Zoey to her classroom and stayed for a minute to make sure she was okay. She then turned to Mrs. Roberts to tell her that she was in classroom 28 in case Zoey needed her. As she headed out to begin the short trek towards the 6th grade wing, Zoey called for her, gave her a hug in the hallway, and wished her good luck.

From the other end of the building, out of the 10-year-old's sight, Abbey kept her eye on Ellie and watched as she stopped outside her own classroom to take a deep breath, then calmed herself, straightened her posture, and walked through door.

"She's fine," Jed whispered softly to his wife. "There's nothing like taking care of Zoey to bring out Ellie's confidence." He noticed and instantly understood the change in Ellie.

"You're right," Abbey replied, her voice shaky.

"Don't, Abbey. I'm out of tissues."

"I'm not gonna cry."

"Really?"

"I'll try not to." She gave him a smile. "I can't help it. I can't help thinking there won't be anymore first days of kindergarten."

Jed took note of that statement. "Abbey?"

She looked at him for several seconds and then said weakly, "I meant if the adoption doesn't go through for some reason."
"Do you want it to go through?"

"Of course I do. Why would you ask that?"

"It just sounded like..."

"I misspoke."

Jed had noticed the clues all summer, but he had dismissed them in hopes that Abbey would be the one to broach the subject first. Though she still wanted more children, the grief she had felt after the miscarriage had healed over time and she was starting to realize what he'd known all along - that they already had their hands full with Elizabeth, Ellie, and Zoey.

Where that left them on the adoption question, he didn't know. They had already been to their first counseling session and she hadn't been candid, so he assumed she wasn't ready to be and he wasn't about to push her on such an important topic. If they weren't going to add another baby to the mix, he wanted it to be a decision Abbey came to on her own, not one she felt forced to make because he pressured her to do what he felt was best.

Changing the subject, he reached for her hand. "Ready to go home?"

"I'm ready, but I'm not going home. I'm going with you to your appointment."

"Abbey, I can go to the doctor by myself."

"Are you forgetting I work in that building?"

"You didn't schedule any patients today."

"I have paperwork to catch up on."

"Liar. You just want to tell on me."

"If I did, you'd have it coming," she said. "Did you think you could get away with a double bacon cheeseburger for breakfast yesterday?"

"You knew about that?"

"I know everything. If I wasn't watching you like a hawk today, you would have done the same thing."

"Ah ha, so that's why you called to reschedule my appointment!"

She admitted that with a guilty, closed-lipped smile. "It seemed to be a fair trade-off. You can splurge on greasy, fat-saturated garbage now and then without a lecture on proper nutrition as long as I get your cholesterol levels and test results."

"If the appointment is in place of the lecture, why are you lecturing me?"

"Do you have any idea how fat is metabolized?"

Jed rolled his eyes. "This conversation's gonna to kill me before that cheeseburger does."

"You don't take it seriously."

"Believe me, I do."
"Not as seriously as you should, being married to a doctor."

"Trust me, babe, if I wasn't married to a doctor, I'd be a lot less serious."

"Triglycerides are real, Jed," she began on the way to the car. "They bind to proteins..."

"Oh God." He grabbed her at the waist and pretended to cover her mouth to shut her up.

Suppressing a laugh as she swatted at his hand, Abbey continued, "They leave fatty deposits in your arteries. You know what narrow arteries mean? High blood pressure..."

He jabbed at her belly, holding her from behind now. "I wish you came with a fast forward button!"

TBC
Father of Daughters

Series: Snapshots of the Past
Story: Father of Daughters
Chapter 7
Disclaimer: See Chapter 1
Previously: On the first day of school, Jed and Abbey's morning tryst was interrupted by Zoey; Ellie accompanied Zoey to kindergarten before starting 6th grade; Jed and Abbey taught Liz a lesson about sportsmanship; Jed caught Abbey in a moment of doubt about adopting a baby
Summary: Jed and Abbey spend the day flirting with each other; Jed teaches Zoey how to limbo; Liz wants concert tickets; Abbey is hungry for her husband

10:30 a.m.
"How many servings of fruits and vegetables does the USDA recommend each day?"
"Zero."
"Zero?"

Jed hated this. He was sitting in a doctor's waiting room and being quizzed on nutritional guidelines by his physician wife who was thumbing through a magazine left on one of the end tables. His arm still stung from the needle prick where he had to have his blood drawn at the lab and he was rolling his sleeve down over the bandage.

"You never cease to amaze me, Jed."

"I am pretty astonishing, aren't I?" he mocked.

"You have the IQ of a genius and yet you plead ignorance to refuse taking care of yourself."

"Are we back to my diet? Because in my defense, I'd like to point out that you have some unhealthy habits yourself."

"Are we back to my diet? Because in my defense, I'd like to point out that you have some unhealthy habits yourself."

She raised a brow at him, the sign of a challenge. "How is pointing out my unhealthy habits - or lack thereof - in your defense?"

"It's a matter of fairness. You don't see me on your case non-stop. I could be, you know." He glanced at her feet. "I'd start with those."

"What's wrong with my shoes?"

"They're not shoes, they're stilts. How easy would it be to break your ankle in those things, especially when you're running around a hospital all day?"
"I don't wear them to the hospital."

Jed looked around to confirm they were, in fact, in a medical building attached to the hospital.

"I meant when I'm working." Abbey continued to browse her magazine. "Besides, I was under the impression you liked my heels."

She had him there. It did things to him, the way her legs looked in those high heels, even when she was wearing pants. She knew it too. He was convinced she wore them just to entice him from time to time, not that he was complaining. He was as much a lover of her shoes as she was.

"You know I do. That's why you wore them today."

"To flirt with you?"

"Yeah."

"In a place where we can't do anything about it? Does that sound like me?"

"Forgive the pun, Sweet Knees, but if the shoe fits..."

"Hon, if I wanted to turn you on in public, there are other ways I could go about it without resorting to heels." She turned in her chair to face him and rested her elbow on his shoulder while her fingers played in his hair.

"That's not fair."

"Hmm?"

"You're hitting below the belt."

"Just the spot I was aiming for."

"Abbey..."

"You practically dared me."

"And you always take a dare." Unable to resist when her hands massaged his scalp and her eyes bore into him with the same passion as when he was making love to her, he whispered, "Your office is right around the corner. What do you say we blow this joint and christen an exam room?"

That impish twinkle in her eye dulled, suggesting that her mind and her heart were at war. Oh, how she desperately wanted to lead him to one of her exam rooms, to let him help her up on the table, to feel his strong hands holding her hips, burying himself deep inside her, and thrusting rapidly towards orgasm.

"You don't think it'll be a little suspicious with all the patients around?"

"I'm gonna go out on a limb and assume most of them know about the birds and the bees."

"True as that might be, our morning tango is going to have to wait. You're not getting out of this doctor's appointment, no matter how hard you try."

"Give me a little credit."

"Are you saying that's not what's going on?"
"Maybe a little. But just because I'd like nothing more than to get out of something I never wanted to do in the first place, doesn't mean I'm not up for a little hanky panky." He returned her adoring stare. "All right, suit yourself, but I should warn you that it's likely I won't be in the mood after this appointment."

"I'll take my chances."

---

1:00 p.m.

The appointment ran later than expected, so the Bartlets went straight to Zoey's school to pick her up and Jed, who had been fasting for his blood work, treated his two ladies to lunch to celebrate his youngest daughter's first day of kindergarten. Zoey impressed her parents with stories of her classmates. Peter was the boy who didn't like anyone, she said, and Bobby was the one who leapt over her during story time, a stunt she didn't particularly enjoy. Then there was Cindy, the girl who sat at her table, and Shelley, another girl she talked to while they polished off their mid-morning snack.

She gushed, "Cindy and Shelley are my new best friends!"

Her ears open to every tidbit she shared, Abbey listened with genuine interest. "Why don't you invite them over this weekend for a tea party?"

"With you?"

"Of course."

Abbey was a tea-party pro and after raising three girls, so was Jed. Zoey turned to him before she got too excited.

"What about you, Daddy? Will you come too?"

"Oh sweetheart, I'll be in Washington this weekend. I'm afraid the introduction's going to have to wait until the skating party."

"When is the skating party?"

Jed looked over at Abbey. "A few weeks, isn't it?"

The annual Manchester Elementary skating party was always held at the local roller rink in September. Ellie was still sore about missing it last year and she vowed that this year, she'd reclaim her title as limbo champion. Zoey had been looking forward to playing along so that she could continue the family tradition in the years to come, but the five-year-old struggled with visual-spatial activities and she wasn't yet steady on her skates, at least not enough for limbo.

Abbey noticed her frown. "Zoey, what's wrong?"

"I still can't duck under the limbo bar without falling."

"You'll get better at it."

"What if I lose on the first try?"

"All you need is a little practice." Believing that Zoey was just being hard on herself, Jed dismissed her concern. "Trust me, limbo's a piece of cake."
His encouragement didn't seem to faze her.

"Not for me."

"Yes, for you, Zoey. There is nothing in this world you can't do if you set your mind to it. Eat your lunch and I'll prove it to you."

---

True to his words, the next stop after lunch was the roller rink across town. The trio rented their skates and hit the rink at full steam. Unlike ice skating - a sport that Abbey was better at - Jed dominated the floor when it came to regular skating with control and speed, slowing down only to hold Zoey's hand and lead her to the center to teach her to stop and circle around smoothly.

Abbey watched father and daughter as they danced around each other, not a teeter in their step. Never was she more attracted to her husband than when he was teaching one of their girls. His inner child always came shining through and he abandoned his adult stature to become a peer to them. For a man who wasn't even sure if he wanted kids while they were dating, it seemed to Abbey that Jed Bartlet was born to have them. A father so gentle, so kind, yet stern when he had to be, he had developed unique bonds with three very different daughters - even Ellie, the one with whom he sometimes felt so disconnected.

The girls were getting older and as much as Abbey enjoyed seeing him with babies, it was particularly special seeing him react to them as young women. Elizabeth was nearly an adult and Jed was starting to treat her that way. From politics and world affairs to high school dances and cheerleading try-outs, Jed and Lizzie could talk about anything. It was nice, Abbey thought, to see him morph into a different kind of father with Liz than he was with Zoey.

She had just started imagining him with another infant when Jed whizzed past her and grabbed her hand to take her for a stroll. Jolted from her daydream, Abbey had no choice but to skate along.

"Time for limbo!" he called, pointing out that the rink masters were assembling the equipment.

It was a casual session that afternoon with only a couple dozen skaters. The Bartlets lined up to take their turn and in true family spirit, they challenged each other to go lower and lower until the bar sunk so low that it took enormous concentration to roll under it without touching it. Zoey was energized by her parents' enthusiasm. They had faith in her, so much faith that it made up for her lack of faith in herself. What seemed like an impossible feat just an hour earlier was easy with them beside her. She made it under the bar with room to spare and after every round, her confidence rose a little bit more.

On the fifth or sixth cycle, Abbey crouched as low as she could. Her flexibility wasn't what it used to be and unlike Ellie and Liz, she wasn't able to slide into a split to make it through, so she leaned to the right and hoped for the best. Just before reaching the bar, she lost her balance, her hands slamming the ground as she went forward onto her knees.

"Do over," she dictatorially declared as she backed up to give it another shot.

"Forget it!" Jed sputtered. "There are no do-overs!"

"There ARE do-overs in limbo! It's part of the rules."

"You're making that up."

"What do you care?"
"Get outta here!" Chuckling, he gave her a gentle shove to the railing where the other disqualified skaters were standing. He then turned to Zoey. "Watch how it's done, Zo."

He took a second to focus tightly on the bar and when he went under, he extended one leg and ducked so low, his abdominal muscles twitched. Zoey cheered for him as he rose on the other side and circled to make it to the back of the line. She tried to emulate him and did a pretty good job, clearing the bar with her tiny body without a problem.

She hopped in her skates and high-fived Abbey as she passed. "I made it again!"

"Yes, you did! I saw!" Abbey cheered her on. "Now get back in there and beat Daddy."

Jed's eye on was on the skater in front of him on the next go-round until he caught Abbey manipulatively twirling her hair around her finger. He loved when she did that. It always looked so innocent, so spontaneous, even when it wasn't. He shrugged his shoulders in an effort to rid himself of the image and look straight ahead as he prepared to go. Just then, Abbey leaned back on the railing with her elbows, heaving her breasts forward, an act that captured Jed's attention the moment he reached the bar, causing him to fall flat on his butt directly under it.

He stood back up and skated towards her with a vengeance. "You disqualified me, you evil, evil woman."

She gave him a crooked smile. "We reap what we sow, darling."

"That wasn't funny, Abigail."

"Depends on who you ask. If you had allowed for do-overs, you'd still be in the game."

"You will be punished..." he said, his arms folded over his chest. "later."

"I can hardly wait." Cheeks flushing a deep shade of red, she broadened that guilty smile.

- - -

5:00 p.m.

"MOM?" Liz came leaping down the steps and turned towards the living room. "MOM?"

"What?"

"Ellie won't get off the phone and I need it."

Folding laundry with Zoey, Abbey replied, "Wait your turn."

"But the radio station's about to give away Wham concert tickets to the 21st caller!"

"Then ask Ellie nicely if she'll get off."

"I tried. She said no. Tori and I HAVE to win these tickets. Will you talk to her?"

Jed breezed through the living room. "Abbey, we're out of beer and chips. I'm going to the market. You need anything?"

"Take the grocery list."

"See, when I say that, I'm just being polite."
"Jed." Abbey threw him a glare.

"I'm barbecuing, Abbey. I have to get in and out if I want to see my Red Sox CRUSH the Yankees right from the first pitch."

Liz's friend Tori, who was upstairs monitoring the radio contest, called down. "LIZ, THEY'RE ABOUT TO TAKE CALLS!"

The teen pleaded with Abbey. "Mom?"

"What's happening?" Jed asked.

"Ellie's on the phone and I'm trying to win concert tickets."

"So use the line in the study."

"I thought you said that line was just for you and Mom."

"This once, you can use it for this. Is Tori staying for dinner?"

"If it's okay?"

"Hope she likes hamburgers." He gestured to his youngest daughter. "Come on, Zoey, let's go get some goodies. Back in a bit."

"Don't buy any junk!" Abbey ordered.

"You mean besides the chips and the beer?"

"I want ice cream, Daddy!"

"So do I, sweetheart."

As father and daughter walked out, Liz began to head to the study until Abbey stopped her.

"Where is this concert?"

Hoping that question would come much later, she answered meekly, "Boston Garden."

"How do you plan to get there?"

"I plan to drive."

Abbey laughed. "Nice try."

"Mom, I know you think concerts are dangerous and you're not too wild about the idea of me being in Boston by myself, but I promise...I SWEAR...I will be a model daughter. Straight to the concert, straight back. No stopping, no talking to people we don't know, nothing. I swear."

"No."

"Please? There's no commuter train from Manchester to Boston!"

"I don't feel comfortable with it, Liz."

"That's what you said about the Duran Duran concert last year. I'm not a child anymore. You have to trust me to do things alone."
"Boston Garden is a madhouse when there are concerts. You're going to have to park several blocks away, which means you'll have to walk to and from the concert, then navigate traffic out of the city after midnight. No, forget it. The only way I would even entertain the thought of letting you go is if your father and I drove you there and picked you up afterwards."

Liz's expression said it all. "Are you trying to humiliate me?"

"A little humiliation never hurt anyone."

"Would you be serious?"

"Elizabeth, as hard as it may be to believe, I set rules for you because I love you. One of those rules happens to be, I don't want you wandering around Boston alone at night."

"I won't be alone. Tori, Kimberly, and Morgan will be with me."

"That's supposed to help your case?"

"Mom..."

"Boston's a no-go, I'm sorry."

"How about I win the tickets and then we'll talk about it?"

"We already talked. You can go if I can drive you."

It was a lost cause, Liz thought, and every second she spent arguing with Abbey was a second she could be winning the tickets. "Fine. What's the point of driving if you won't let me go anywhere?"

"Maybe it's time to forfeit your license."

"I'm not amused," she said, stomping her way to the study.

Once she was gone, Abbey picked up the laundry basket with a stack of folded clothes to take upstairs. She was crossing the foyer when Jed burst back in.

"I forgot my cigarettes."

"I threw them away."

He approached her, his eyes narrowing. "Say that again."

"I threw them away."

He called her bluff. "You're a terrible liar. You get worse at it every day."

"What happened to cutting back?"

She dropped the basket on the stairs and followed him into the kitchen where he found his half-empty pack and his lighter.

"I did cut back. What I didn't do was quit."

"Maybe it's time to talk about quitting."

"Not now it's not." Once again, he opened the door to leave.
"Okay, I'll wait til we're in bed and you're at your most agreeable." She grinned as he closed the door. She knew he'd do that.

He spun around to face her. "You've been doing this all day."

"Turning you on?"

"Teasing me."

He was right. It all started with Zoey interrupting their morning rendezvous. Ever since then, Abbey had been so hungry for her husband that her desire couldn't be disguised.

"Is it really considered teasing you if we're married?"

"It is if you're getting me all hot and bothered and then not following through."

"Is it my fault we can't manage a little private time?"

"Tonight. You and me. Put your you-know-what where your mouth is."

"I'd rather put your you-know-what where my mouth is."

"You naughty, naughty girl." Jed had to shrug that one off before the raging fire in his pants became visible to the naked eye.

"It's how you want me, right?"

"Do I get to play the milkman?"

"You can play whatever role you want."

"If I don't get out of here right now, I'm gonna need a cold shower!"

And with that, he raced out of the house, leaving Abbey to lean against the closed door, her eyes shut, fantasizing about his promise of what was yet to come that evening. When she heard footsteps climbing the porch stairs, she smiled to herself, thinking Jed was back for more.

"How do you feel about my black lace g-string? And what ever happened to those handcuffs we found..." She swung the door open and to her utter shock, a well-dressed woman stood before her, holding a leather portfolio and a pen.

"I assume that question wasn't for me?" the woman asked.

"May I help you?"

"I'm Evelyn Conner. The adoption agency sent me to do a home study on the Bartlet family. Are you Mrs. Bartlet?"

TBC
Evelyn Conner had been welcomed with many colorful greetings over the years, but Abbey Bartlet's "what do you think of my black G-string" still caught the seasoned social worker off-guard. Abbey was frazzled when she learned who Evelyn was and as the seconds wore on, she grew increasingly mortified.

"I'm sorry, I thought you were my husband," she said, fully aware that her cheeks were turning ten shades of red.

"I figured that wasn't for me," Evelyn replied as Abbey stepped aside and invited her into the house. "The adoption agency told you we'd have to do a home visit, right?"

"Yes."

"Does tonight work then?"

"It's fine."

In New Hampshire, potential adoptive parents had to be screened extensively. They had to take part in interviews, attend adoption counseling, meet with attorneys, draft contracts, and agree to a number of terms and stipulations to finalize the process. For something as intimate as parenting, Jed once said, adoption was as formal as a business transaction.

To weed out unacceptable candidates, all couples had to be scrutinized and one of the ways they were judged was in their home environment - unprompted, unrehearsed, and completely spontaneous.

"We were planning a quiet evening at home," Abbey continued. "My husband and youngest daughter just left for the store. We're barbecuing when they get back."

"I don't know how much research you've done into what my visit will entail, so let me be frank. I'm here to understand what your family is like. It'll give us get a sense of who you all are and if you're approved, it'll help when it comes time to match you with a birth mother. Some of the things I'll be looking for is to see how you and your husband parent, how you relate to one another and your children, how your children relate to each other, and how the family unit functions."
Okay.

I'll need to see all areas of the house, particularly where the children sleep, where they play, what kinds of things they do around the house - chores or what have you. It all goes in my report. You may feel I'm intruding on your privacy, but it's necessary if you want things to go smoothly.

It was just as invasive as it sounded, but Abbey nodded without pause, an indication to Evelyn that she had done her homework and knew what to expect. "Afterwards, we'll find out what you wrote?"

"Yes, you'll get to read the report I file."

And with that, the tour began.

Evelyn followed her hostess through the house and towards the kitchen, the first room that Abbey wanted to show her because it was the room in which the family spent much of their time. It was a country kitchen decorated in oak and granite with a center island and windows that opened up to the back pasture. A stack of party cards were scattered around the table. Birthday invitations, Abbey explained. She and Ellie had been planning her 11th birthday party. A couple of dirty dishes were stacked on the counter alongside a bowl of leftover pasta salad from the kids' after-school snack.

"I think of the kitchen as the all-purpose room. It's not used just for cooking and eating. We also have family meetings here and the girls sometimes bring their books after dinner so Jed and I can help them with their homework."

"They don't do their homework in their room?"

"They can. They have homework desks up there, but Ellie and Liz like to do it here."

"Do you eat dinner together?"

"Most nights. I miss dinner now and then if I have a late surgery."

"And what about when your husband's in Washington?"

"If Lizzie's here, I'll ask her to watch her sisters, but we also have a housekeeper who will stay until I get home."

"What about breakfast?"

"Breakfast is more spontaneous. With everyone running around getting ready, most mornings we don't have time to sit down to a formal meal together, though I always make sure they have something nutritious to eat. I also try not to schedule any surgeries very early in the morning at least two days a week so I don't have to make 5 a.m. rounds."

"You can do that?"

"I set up my practice that way intentionally. Of course, there are exceptions certain weeks, especially if I'm on-call. Many mornings though, I'm here to scramble up some eggs, check homework, make lunches, sign permission slips, that sort of thing."

"What happens on the mornings that you're not?"

"Mrs. Wilburforce will be here to help out. It all depends on the day."

Abbey then took Evelyn to the formal dining room around the corner. It had a much larger table,
high ceilings, and a bank of windows that framed the vegetable garden and the side pasture, but the kitchen, Abbey said, was where the Bartlets shared their meals - and a lot of family moments - when they weren't entertaining guests.

The next room they visited was the family room. It was cluttered with stacks of cards, toys, and games, a welcomed sight to Evelyn who saw evidence of sisters who played everything from Candyland, Checkers, and Trouble together to the more challenging games they played with their parents, like Operation and Trivial Pursuit, Abbey and Jed's favorites respectively. Marbles from Ellie and Zoey's last round of Hungry, Hungry Hippos had rolled under the coffee table and on top, a knight left behind from Jed and Abbey's last game of chess had fallen next to a worn-out Scrabble board. The score sheet beside it had Lizzie's name as the winner with "Dad" a point behind and a note scribbled on the side promised a father-daughter re-match his next weekend home from D.C.

"Do you play a lot as a family?"

"We try. We used to have family night before Jed was elected to congress. Now, we make the best of it when he's home for the weekend or when congress is in recess."

The women then journeyed through the living room toward the sun room, where Abbey liked to have breakfast on the rare day off. After a quick glance in there, they passed the side entryway to a room tucked away in the back that the Bartlets had turned into den. It was cozy and comfortable with a fireplace, a leather loveseat, an overstuffed chair and cherry wood floors peaking out from a large area rug. On the mantle, there were framed photographs - one of the whole family, one of the girls by themselves, and one of Jed and Abbey smiling at each other, each gazing into the other's eyes. If a picture really was worth a thousand words, it told Evelyn everything she needed to know about the Bartlet marriage. It showed a couple very much in love with one another, caught in a moment that was just as intimate as it was innocent. She remembered Abbey's provocative reception when she thought it was Jed at the door and upon hearing that the den was the room used for reading and quiet time, she couldn't help but wonder if it was also used for romantic evenings between husband and wife.

"Jed and I love a roaring fire on cold winter nights."

"This is where you spend quality time together?"

"How much quality time is there really with three kids in the house? We started something several months ago where every Saturday that he's home, we have date night. Just me and him, alone. On nights we don’t feel like going out, we come here."

"And the girls give you your privacy?"

"Jed made a 'do not disturb' sign he hangs in the hallway. Liz and Ellie know what's going on when they see that sign and unless they're on fire, they don't disturb us. Zoey's in the process learning that lesson now."

The next stop was the study, but before they ventured in, a dark-haired teen came bursting out. She had blue eyes and long brunette locks that had been pulled into a high ponytail. Elizabeth, Evelyn assumed from reading the Bartlets' biography.

"ELLIE!" Liz shouted as she ran right into Abbey. "Sorry, I need Ellie."

"What's your hurry?" Abbey asked her.

"Ellie's upstairs with Tori. They're trying to get through on our line and I'm trying down here."
"I thought the reason you were down here was because Ellie was on the phone upstairs."

"She's not anymore," Liz noticed Evelyn then. "Hi."

"Hello. I'm Evelyn Conner."

Abbey turned so that she was no longer facing Liz but standing beside her. "Remember I told you the adoption agency would be sending over a social worker?"

"Oh yeah." Liz extended her hand. "I'm Elizabeth. Nice to meet you."

"Lizzie's our oldest," Abbey added.

Since the cat was already out of the bag, Evelyn went ahead and prodded Liz. "So how do you feel about having a new brother or sister around the house?"

Not a moment's hesitation in Liz's response. "I think it'll be fun. My parents are pretty cool so..."

Evelyn usually got a variety of answers to that question, from kids who were candid enough to admit they already hated the siblings they had to ones who loved the idea of expanding their family. She'd later find out that Liz was initially against her parents adopting because of Jed's weekly commute to Washington, but in talking to her face-to-face, she never would have guessed it.

Liz had come around somewhat since expressing her doubts to Abbey five months earlier. She still couldn't imagine how hectic things would be with a newborn in the house while her parents dealt with a long-distance marriage, but she had faith in them and that's why she was willing to support them, despite her personal doubts about the situation.

"A teenager who actually thinks her parents are cool?" Evelyn questioned, delighted more than skeptical. "Am I in the Twilight Zone?"

"I didn't pay her to say that," Abbey chimed in.

"Not this time." Liz swung an arm around her mom's shoulder and nudged her with her hip. "The last time we had a social worker in the house, I got ten bucks per lie!"

Abbey nudged back harder. "Watch it, baby doll. You're not too old to be put up for adoption."

"Promises, promises."

That sense of humor and flash of good-natured ribbing and spirited rapport in the short exchange between mother and daughter left a positive first impression.

"Seriously though," Liz started on a more serious note. "I'd like another brother or sister. I get along well with the two I have...most of the time. And speaking of that, will you excuse me? I'm right in the middle of trying to win a radio contest and if Ellie hasn't hung up the phone, I'm gonna shave those little blonde curls right off her head."

Evelyn chuckled. "Of course."

In typical big sister fashion, Liz shouted for Ellie as she went sprinting towards the stairs.

"They're giving away concert tickets," Abbey told Evelyn.

"Would it be okay if we followed her upstairs? I'd like to see your daughters' rooms."
Abbey led the way to the foyer where they would have to turn to head up the stairway, which is exactly what they would have done if the front door hadn't swung open. Evelyn looked on as a little girl with strawberry blonde pigtails and big green eyes stormed in. Zoey, she thought, remembering the Bartlet file.

"What's wrong, sweetheart?" Abbey asked.

"Daddy won't take me bike riding tonight!"

"I'll take you."

"He said I can't go at all until I give back his shoelaces!"

"Ah, so you're the one behind the great shoelace caper. Why did you take everyone's shoelaces?"

"I didn't take everyone's," Zoey countered. "I left yours alone."

It was common knowledge in the house that no one was to mess with Abbey's shoes.

"Why did you take the others?"

"I needed them to tie down my new basket on my bike."

"You already had a basket on your bike."

"But that one was too small for Ginger."

"You know Ginger's not allowed to ride with you." Abbey looked over at Evelyn who was standing behind Zoey. "Ginger's our cat."

Zoey spun around to see the stranger in the house. She furrowed her brows at Evelyn. "Who are you?"

"Evelyn Conner. And I bet you're Zoey."

"How'd you know my name?"

Trained not to give away too much to children in case their parents hadn't yet told them about their adoption plans, Evelyn kneeled down to the young girl's level and said, "I'm psychic?"

"REALLY? Can you teach me how to be psychic?"

Warmed by her reaction, she tweaked Zoey's nose. "That's probably a trick you should learn from your parents."

The door opened again and this time, Jed came barging in wearing faded blue jeans and a Red Sox T-shirt. Evelyn instantly remembered all she had read about Jed Bartlet - the former professor-turned-congressman whose adoption agency picture had been taken in a formal suit and tie. Seeing him in casual clothes made him look more real, more approachable. And unlike Zoey, his spirits were flying high as he strolled in holding a six-pack of beer and a grocery bag.

"I've got my chips, my beer, and my cigarettes; I'm ready for a ball game!" He breezed right past them without a flinch.

Because Evelyn was standing behind the door, Jed never even saw her when he walked in the house and made a beeline for the kitchen. After he whizzed by, Abbey, once again, felt she had
some explaining to do.

"The Red Sox are playing the Yankees tonight. Really, Jed hardly ever drinks and he's cut back on his smoking quite a bit."

From the kitchen, he shouted to his wife. "Incidentally, did you know we're raising a kleptomaniac?"

"He's also a huge kidder," Abbey assured Evelyn. "Zoey's not a kleptomaniac. She just likes to drive us all crazy."

"You don't have to explain everything."

"I don't want you to get the wrong impression of us."

"My impressions are rarely wrong. We're not looking for families with robotic parents and Stepford children. All we want is a close-knit family who laughs and loves together. Things like drinking beer on the night of a Red Sox game aren't going to affect your chances. A child who steals her father's shoelaces on the other hand..." Evelyn allowed a second for that to register, then piped up to say, "I'm kidding."

Abbey heaved a sigh of relief at that bit of humor. "I can tell you right now, we're not perfect - not us and not the kids."

"Perfection isn't on the checklist, trust me." If she could have, Evelyn would have told her that so far, she would have pegged the Bartlets as a lovely family having a hectic day with some unfortunate slip-ups. But agency guidelines didn't allow that.

"Will you excuse me one second?"

"Of course."

Abbey went chasing after Jed to tell him to stuff it with the family secrets while Evelyn looked over at Zoey.

"Do you want to show me your room?"

"Sure!"

Upstairs, a whole new scene was playing out. The music was blaring from the radio that was stationed on the half-moon console in the hallway. Elizabeth and her friend Tori had moved two phones - one from Liz's room and one from her parents' room - out into the hall so that they could make their calls side-by-side, leaving phone cords criss-crossing the floor while they repeatedly tried to get through to the contest line.

"We're going to lose these tickets, I know we are!" Tori complained.

"Come on, ring, ring." Ellie was cheering them on, her hands flaring in excitement. When Zoey and Evelyn hit the top landing, her attention shifted and she greeted Evelyn cautiously. "Hi."

"Hi there. You're Eleanor, right?"

"I go by Ellie."

Liz cradled the phone receiver under her chin and interrupted to straighten things out for her sister. "This is Evelyn, El. She's doing some work for Mom and Dad."
"Oh. Nice to meet you."

She was just as polite as Liz had been earlier, though with a little more trepidation. Evelyn shook her hand and then tried not to disturb the contest staging area as she walked around to peer into the bedrooms. Jed and Abbey's master suite was at the end of the hall, Liz's room was on one side, and Ellie and Zoey's rooms were on the other. There were also two spare rooms, both furnished and ready for guests.

On her way downstairs, she made a mental note to ask Jed and Abbey what their younger daughters knew about their plans for their family. It was obvious that Zoey was still in the dark and she suspected that was because her parents hadn't yet been approved to adopt, but she couldn't read Ellie's reaction. Whether she was suspicious because she was an observant girl or whether Jed and Abbey had already sat her down and told her, she didn't know.

She approached the kitchen, trying not to eavesdrop on the conversation Jed and Abbey were having as they washed and dried dishes at the sink. They weren't exactly whispering, though, and it was hard not to overhear.

"Lizzie?" Jed was asking. "I thought you said she wasn't excited about a new baby in the house."

"She wasn't...back in April."

"So what happened?"

"I guess she changed her mind? I don't know, I haven't talked to her about it."

Evelyn waited for a lull in their conversation and when they each took a beat, she intruded. "You must be Jed Bartlet."

"Hi." Jed wiped his hands on a towel. "I'm sorry I walked right past you before."

"It's okay. It's game night, I understand. My husband's probably decked out on our sofa getting ready for the opening pitch."

"If you're gonna be with us tonight, I have to warn you it's gonna get loud."

"I'm fully prepared. I'm a born and bred Red Sox fan myself."

"That's what I like to hear! So did Abbey show you around?"

"Yes and I saw the girls' rooms upstairs. Are you planning to double-up or will one of the extra rooms be used for the new baby?"

"During the first few months, the baby will sleep in a crib in our room," Abbey replied. "That's what we did with our girls. After that, he or she will get one of the other bedrooms."

"Yeah, unless they want to bunk together." Jed offered Evelyn a drink. "When Ellie was a baby, Lizzie insisted she sleep in her room. Just last week, Zoey was trying to talk Ellie into sharing a room."

"Your daughters are very close." It wasn't a question; it was a statement based on her brief observations.

"They are. They get into tiffs now and then like all sisters, but they are extremely close."

"How do you handle discipline?"
"Depends on what they did. When they were younger, we relied on time-out. Nowadays, we send
them to their rooms or ground them, take away privileges, that sort of thing."

"Corporal punishment?"

"No." Abbey was quick with that answer. "We don't spank or paddle them. We never have."

"Abbey and I have found there are other ways to get through to our children without reacting
physically. It works for us." Jed didn't divulge anything about his own childhood and how his
experience with his father convinced him that spanking or hitting wouldn't be an option for their
kids even before Elizabeth was born.

"That's good to know." Finishing her glass of water, Evelyn set it down and looked to her hosts.
"Well, now that I've had the grand tour of the house, I'm going to need to see the rest of the
property."

Jed volunteered to take her out in the old red pick-up truck so he could show her every nook and
cranny on the farm, from the running and biking trails to the apple orchard to the pumpkin patch
where the girls would soon start growing their pumpkins for Halloween. They also stopped at the
stables once he told her about the Bartlet horses. While Liz and Ellie enjoyed horseback riding, he
said, it was really more Zoey's sport. She had only been taking lessons for less than a year, but she
loved everything about it.

"Do you spend much time here?" Evelyn asked when they neared the stalls.

"Me, I'm not much of a rider, but Abbey and the girls come out occasionally. Gives them some
nice mother-daughter bonding time."

"And if you add another baby to the household?"

"I'm sure Abbey will teach him or her how to ride just as soon as the kid can sit up without any
help. That's what she did with Zoey."

He introduced her to their black Morgan Horse, Shadow. Abbey's favorite, he said. There wasn't a
day that went by that Zoey didn't ask her mother if she could have Shadow when she was old
enough to ride him on her own.

"Do the girls have chores?"

"Yeah, just like every other kid. They clean up around the house, set the table, wash the dishes,
clean their rooms..."

"I meant out here."

"They do some things out here. They like taking care of the horses. We have farm hands to do most
of the work, but the girls like to exercise and groom them."

"Who cleans up after them?"

Jed gave a hardy laugh as they walked back outside. "Have you ever seen three squeamish girls
who scream bloody murder at anything remotely gross mucking out a barn?"

"Must be a sight to see."

"You can say that again. Lizzie's the worst about that kind of stuff. The other two follow her lead."
Walking the fields, Evelyn's attention was drawn to the cows that were being led back into the barn. "And the cows?"

"Farm hands. We don't have a pasteurizing system on the property so the milk is sent out to be pasteurized and distributed at the local market. Every spring, Ellie gets on our case about milking the mama cows when their calves need to be nourished." He noted that Evelyn was jotting things down. "Why do you need all this detail anyway?"

"We take adoption very seriously. If we place a child in your care, we want to have a pretty good idea of what kind of life that child will have. I want to make sure I don't forget anything."

"Are we passing the test so far?" It was tough being under a microscope.

"Unfortunately, I can't discuss my observations with you. You'll get a copy of my report when I'm finished." As clouds cast a shadow over the landscape, she said, "Looks like rain."

"I was planning an outdoor barbecue tonight!"

The duo hopped back in the truck and after a quick spin behind the house to see the backyard, the gazebo, and one of the many ponds on the property, they pulled around and up the gravel drive. Abbey was in the kitchen slicing tomatoes for a dinner salad when she heard them come in.

"Jed?" she called.

"Yeah." He walked in and headed to the kitchen, Evelyn trailing a few steps behind. "We're in for a rainstorm."

"So I see. I can pop some chicken in the oven."

"This isn't Yosemite, Abbey. It's a New Hampshire storm. It'll be over in no time."

"If it's not, you're going to be awfully hungry watching the game on an empty stomach."

"Fat chance! I'm ordering a pizza just in case."

"Chicken's no trouble."

"Chicken's not game food."

As Jed picked up the phone to call the pizza place, a chorus of shrieking screams jolted him.

"GET OFF THE PHONE! GET OFF THE PHONE!"

The receiver tumbled out of his hands out of fright. "What the HELL is going on?"

"The radio contest," Abbey reminded him, turning on the portable radio in the kitchen just in time to hear her daughter's voice echo through the airwaves.

"Elizabeth Bartlet!" Liz answered joyously when the DJ asked for her name.

"Elizabeth Bartlet, you've just won two tickets to the Wham concert at Boston Garden."

"Oh my God, we WON!" When it sunk in, Liz stopped suddenly. "Wait, two tickets? I thought you were giving away four tickets."

"Four tickets total," the DJ told her. "Two now and two in an hour. Since you've already won,
you're ineligible to try again."

The rush of victory was trampled by the blow. The tickets were supposed to be for Liz, Tori, and their friends Morgan and Kimberly. It was a pact. As devoted fans, the four girls had spent an hour trying to win - Liz and Tori at the Bartlet house and Kim and Morgan at Morgan's place. They had agreed that whoever got through to the contest line would take the other three.

Defeated, Liz and Tori returned downstairs with Ellie to meet Jed and Abbey in the kitchen.

"We heard." Abbey's tone was just as somber as theirs. "I'm sorry."

"Morgan and Kimberly are gonna call any minute. What am I supposed to tell them?"

Jed wasn't yet keyed in. "What am I missing here?"

"They won two tickets," Abbey explained.

"Yeah?"

"There are four girls."

The dilemma was still unclear. "So two of them just won't go."

Five pairs of steely eyes turned Jed's away. Even Evelyn glared at him, for he had forgotten the cardinal rule of high school - you never break a pact with your girlfriends. He stared back at each of them as he pieced together the ill-spoken words that earned him that response.

"I didn't realize it was such a big deal."

Quick to take the heat off of him, Abbey suggested, "Why don't the four of you pool your money together and buy two more tickets?"

"If any of us had any money, we wouldn't have needed to win the contest." Liz looked to her father, the big softy. "Will you help us?"

Jed rolled his eyes. "Here we go."

"I just spent all my allowance on back-to-school clothes. Can I have an advance?"

"No."

Time for plan B. "Mom?"

"You heard your dad." Abbey handed her some cucumbers so she could help with the salad. "Give me a hand, will you?"

"Will you at least think about it?"

"Elizabeth, you have to learn to be more careful with your money." Jed dialed the pizza place.

"What would your parents say, Tori?" Abbey asked.

"They'd probably say no. I've already borrowed too much money this month."

"What if we don't borrow?" Liz persisted. "What about a loan - with interest?"

"I'll loan you the money, Lizzie." Ellie wasn’t usually good at saving, but she hadn’t seen anything
she wanted in months, so her piggy bank was full.

Liz turned her attention to her little sister. "You will, El? I swear I'll pay you back! How much do you have?"

"Enough for one ticket at least. If Kimberly and Morgan can pay for the other one, I'll let you have it. But will you do me a favor?"

"Anything."

"Will you let me come with you to the concert?"

"Ellie, think about that. If you only have enough for one ticket, how are we gonna pay for two?"

"Just say you'll let me come with you."

"All right, fine. If you loan me the money for one ticket and can still afford another one, I'll be so grateful, I'll take you to the concert."

Ellie shook her sister's hand to close the deal, then approached the counter where her mother was standing. "Mom, for my birthday, will you buy me a ticket to the Wham concert?"

Amused by the way Ellie took advantage of the situation, Tori laughed. "Liz, your sister's pretty cool."

It happened so fast, Abbey never saw it coming. She looked at her middle daughter and said firmly, "No way. You're not allowed to go to rock concerts."

"Why not? Lizzie said she'll watch me."

Jed hung up the phone to join the conversation. "Pizza's ordered in case our barbecue is rained out."

Just then, Zoey came waltzing in with a pair of shoelaces that she handed to her father. "Here."

"Thank you." He took them. "Now say you're sorry."

"I'm sorry."

"Why are you sorry?"

"Because you TOLD me to be!"

Jed buzzed at her, "Wrong answer."

She took a deep breath, then gave him the reason he wanted to hear. "Because it's wrong to take things?"

"Right," he said, gently tugging on one pigtail.

"Can I ride my bike now?"

"No."

Indignant that he still refused her, she replied, "That's not fair!"

Meanwhile, Ellie, embroiled in her own situation, tried to appeal to her father. "Dad, don't you
think it's okay for me to be able to attend a musical event with Lizzie?"

"Musical event," Abbey scoffed. "She wants to go to the Wham concert."

"Forget it!" Jed quickly dismissed the notion.

"Will you at least hear me out?"

"Yes, but I can promise you the answer will still be no."

"It's not fair that Lizzie can go and I can't!"

Hit with that same complaint twice in one minute, he gestured to his younger daughters. "Listen up you two, we have rules in this house." He glanced at Zoey. "One of them is, you don't take things that don't belong to you." It was Ellie's turn next. "And the other is, ten-year-olds don't go to rock concerts. And before you start, Lizzie didn't go when she was 10 either so it's not a double-standard."

"Fine! But what if Zoey and I don't like the rules?"

"You don't have to like them," Abbey answered. "You have to abide by them."

"That's right," Jed agreed. "Think of our rules as the Bartlet Constitution."

"Constitutions can be amended," Ellie reminded him.

"Yes, they can. Tell me how the U.S. Constitution is amended." Always a teacher.

"Two-thirds vote in both Houses of congress and three-fourths vote by the states." And Ellie was always a model student. "How do we amend the Bartlet Constitution?"

Grinning, Jed said, "Write to your congressman."

"We will!" Zoey promised without much thought.

"Zoey, HE'S our congressman!" Ellie charged.

"Oh yeah."

"Nice one," Abbey snickered.

"I thought you might like that," Jed snickered back.

"OWWWWW!" Liz screamed, dropping the knife into the sink.

Jumping into doctor mode, Abbey grabbed the girl's hand to hold her finger under running water to examine it. "It's okay. It's just a little cut. Jed?"

"I'm on my way." Jed left to get the first-aid kit.

"It doesn't feel little," Liz cried.

Abbey pressed down on the wound until Jed returned with a band-aid and some Neosporin.

"Thanks."

"You're okay, sweetheart," he offered as he rubbed Liz's back with soothing strokes.
Zoey gave her a big hug to make her feel better and a worried Ellie stood by her side. Once the drama was over, Abbey cleaned out the wound and wrapped the band-aid around Liz's finger and Tori and Zoey followed her to the table while Jed helped Abbey finish the salad.

"Does it still hurt, Lizzie?"

"It's fine, El."

"Ellie, do me a favor and get the plates?" Jed asked.

As the sixth grader reached for a stack of paper plates, she knocked on the counter and announced, "I wanna call a family meeting about the rules."

"Now? We're about to start barbecuing."

"Can't we have the meeting outside?" she pleaded.

Jed glanced at Abbey hoping she'd veto the idea. He was in no mood to hear moaning and groaning over dinner.

"Fine by me," Abbey replied instead.

Jed grumbled, "Abigail, you missed my signal."

"I told you, Jed, when you give subtle signals, I'm not always going to pick them up."

"I have to give subtle signals." He tipped his chin at Zoey. "This one watches me like a hawk and then squeals so her co-conspirators can pounce on me before I even get a breath out."

Abbey smiled endearingly at her husband. "You're just so much fun to gang up on."

"Yeah, we'll see how you like it when they tag-team you outside. Let's go. Come on Tori, you too."

"But it's gonna rain," Liz objected.

"It's not raining yet."

"It will. Why not wait for the pizza instead of starting the shortest barbecue in history?"

Jed snatched the hamburger buns. "Because I already nixed the idea of the steaks and I'll be damned if I'm not going to barbecue SOMETHING today. Let's go. Keep your hand covered."

Abbey leaned into him as they headed to the door and whispered in reference to the family meeting, "Good cop, bad cop?"

"It's your turn to be bad cop," he replied.

"Damn."

Liz, usually the leader of the pack, waited for her parents to leave and then grabbed Ellie's arm. "I'll back you up if you throw in letting me drive to the concert."

"They're never gonna agree to that."

"They might. And just by asking, you up your chances of getting what you want. They'll seem unreasonable if they say no to everything, right?"
"That's true. Okay, you're in!"

"Hit them with Zoey's thing first." Liz glanced at the five-year-old who so badly wanted to ride her bike. "Remember that if it rains, they're gonna say no so you have to be flexible."

"Why do I have to go first?" Zoey complained.

"Because yours is the easiest. And by the way, I want my shoelaces back before you go to bed."

After a three-way pinkie promise between the sisters, they headed out the back door.

"I love this family!" Tori gushed as she followed.

Evelyn had been watching the entire scene from the corner and thinking that for the first time, she was seeing the real Bartlets. They had forgotten that she was lurking in the background and they were free to be who they had always been. She saw the support when Ellie tried to help Liz out of a jam, the partnership between Jed and Abbey when their daughters griped about the rules, the concern from all of them when Liz got hurt, and the teamwork between the Bartlet girls when they planned to challenge their parents.

The laughter, affection, and warmth she had witnessed in the one hour she had spent at their home would be the basis of her analysis. Tucking away her pen, she went after them, looking forward to a front-row seat to a family meeting that was sure to be every bit as animated as they were.

TBC
Late September 1985

The basement of the Rayburn House Office Building in Washington, D.C. held many secrets from those outside of Beltway politics. Behind an unmarked door was a swimming pool, basketball court, and even a fitness room, the place that served as Jed's first stop on a breezy Friday morning in late September.

Ever since his blood test results came back showing elevated cholesterol levels and blood pressure readings, he promised Abbey he'd start exercising the way he used to before being elected to congress. It was the first day of his new regime and he had coerced his staff into gathering around the exercise room for their morning meeting so his time on the treadmill wouldn't be a complete waste.

"Talk to me about stem cells," he said while keeping a steady walking pace only five minutes into his work-out.

"We knew you were watching that report on Nightline!" Deputy Chief of Staff Lindsay Griffith had Jed's enthusiasm pegged - nearly a year in office and this was his first mention of stem cells. "It's a bad idea."

"Says who?"

"Says me and about 40 other representatives who won't support it."

"Forty out of 435. That's less than 10 percent. You want me to bury an idea because 10 percent of my colleagues disagree with me?"

"It's a random sampling. Forty out of forty is a 100 percent."

"Screw the sampling. How can I get a real head count?"

"A head count of what? It will never be up for a vote."

"Rick, what's the basis for the public interest in stem cells now?"
Rick Page, Jed's press secretary was dressed in a pair of sweats so he could work out alongside his boss on the stationary bike. "When the NOTA passed last year, it included language that allowed for the possibility of a national donor registry which led some groups to take steps towards starting a marrow donor program."

The National Organ Transplant Act was a measure Jed vehemently supported. "Surely we're not against that."

"We're not against it because it involves adult stem cells. But it also opened the door to scientists who want to test embryos."

"So that's the ethical dilemma."

"Since 1973, there's been a moratorium on government funding for human embryo research despite NIH recommendations."

"Twelve years ago. A law that's 12 years old and probably hasn't been revisited since the day it passed and we want to dodge challenging it, even with the NIH backing us?" Jed addressed Lindsay. "It's 1985. We're living in a different world than we were in 1973. What's your objection?"

"It's not just controversial; it's radioactive."

"So was AIDS and it didn't keep me from getting elected."

"You're talking about destroying embryos. The mere mention of it will piss people off and resurrect the abortion debate."

"Resurrect it from where? The abortion debate has been on the table for as long as I can remember."

"Not to mention there are religious implications. The biggest opponent to stem cell research is the Catholic Church. Tackling the issue as a Catholic congressman..."

"Will start the debate. Look, I'm not entirely sold on stem cell research. I understand it's a dicey issue. It is for me too. But it's also an area of medical science that could help us understand a multitude of diseases. All I want is to look into it, find out where we're at, where doctors want to go, and how we can work with the NIH. Maybe there's a compromise that no one's yet seen."

"You're not sold on it, huh?"

"No."

"Then why did you want a head count?"

"To investigate the possibility. What's the harm in that?"

Lindsay listened to his reasoning while browsing her briefing book to search for something - anything - to get his mind off of stem cells. "It's my job to advise you and my advice is that poking around about this, whether or not you intend to follow through, is a bad idea, at least for now. Why don't you focus your energy on the First Lady's Just Say No initiative and what it's doing to public schools?"

"Second." That was Samantha Lloyd, the communications director who had been absorbing the conversation from all sides while curling her arm with a weight in her hand. "School districts have
been given carte blanche to search lockers, backpacks..."

"I know there are some kinks, but surely it's not that bad," Jed said.

"Three stories in the Post today alone. Principals have unrestricted authority even without probable cause. You're in a spectacular position to speak out on it."

"Because I have three daughters in the public school system?"

"Bingo. And if you do it, you have to do it now or else Congressman Rigby will fight you tooth and nail when he gets back. I still say he engineered the whole project, right down to the White House rally."

"Drug awareness is a good thing. Give credit where it's due."

"I will as soon as we're all agreed that the Constitution extends inside the classroom," Samantha replied.

Ignoring the argument further, Jed asked, "Rigby's not here?"

"He's flying back to his district right now," Rick told him. "Something about a police shooting last night."

"Oh right. It was on the morning news. Forget Just Say No, maybe what we need to speak out about is trigger-happy cops. They killed a young man returning home from church, did you know that?"

"They thought he was holding a gun."

"I knew those pistol-shaped bibles were a bad idea," Jed scoffed, upping his pace to a jog.

"Let's get fired up about cops on a day when we have nothing else to do," Lindsay suggested.

"What day is that?" There was hardly a moment to catch a breath on the Hill, let alone search for something to care about. "I want legislative background on stem cells."

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After a busy morning of surgeries, Abbey had just returned to her medical office to pick up the patient census and a stack of new and old charts. She used a back door and stopped by the reception desk, anticipating a hectic afternoon by the sight of the crowded waiting room.

"You've got a wound check in exam room six, a consult in nine, and your husband on line one," one of the nurses informed her, stopping for a moment as Abbey's lips betrayed the hint of a smile at the mention of Jed's call. "Oh, and there's a young woman without an appointment who insisted on seeing you."

"Is she a referral?"

"No. She wouldn't elaborate on why she's here, but she said she's a friend of your daughter's. She's right over there."

Abbey glanced over to see Courtney Johnson flipping the pages of a magazine. Courtney and Elizabeth practically grew up together. When the Bartlets moved from Hanover to Manchester, Courtney had been the first friend Liz had made. They were basketball teammates, ran track together, and even co-starred together in the school play their first year in high school. Though they
weren't as close now as they once were, they were still part of the same social circle - cheering and
dancing together on the cheerleading squad and serving together on student government and on the
school's community service organization - Key Club.

Abbey saw the teenager's creased forehead from the side profile. It was obvious there was
something on her mind. "I'll take her now," she said to the nurse. "Courtney? Come on back."

Courtney grabbed her purse and followed Abbey to a vacant exam room. "I'm sorry for just
coming by like this. I know you're so busy."

"It's not a problem. I'm going to ask you to stay here for one second and I'll be right back."

"Okay."

Abbey shut the door, then rushed to her office to pick up her phone. "Jed?"

"Did I catch you in the middle of rounds?"

"Office visits. What's up?"

"I'll make it quick." At his desk in his office, Jed was skimming a science book on human cells. "In
layman's terms, cell differentiation...does it mean what I think it does?"

"Every cell in the body has its own structure and function. Differentiation is what happens when it
matures and goes from an unspecialized cell to a specialized one."

"And the unspecialized cells are stem cells?"

"The unspecialized ancestor cells are. When they divide, they give rise to cells that undergo
differentiation. That's why they're so important - they can theoretically be used for anything. Why?"

"What do you think of legislation that would allow government funding for embryonic stem cell
research?"

Abbey had been sitting beside him when they'd watched the Nightline report on stem cells. It
immediately struck a chord with Jed who had returned to Washington with the kind of vigor he'd
had last January, before he was blindsided by political games and manipulation. She suspected he
might look into it further and she did nothing to discourage him.

Still, when faced with the question, she paused for a beat and then asked, "As a Catholic, a
constituent, a doctor, or an advisor?"

"All four."

"I don't know, yes, yes, and YES!"

Jed chuckled. "Three out of four isn't bad. We'll talk later."

"Love you."

"Love you too."

She hung up the phone and walked down the hall to the exam room that Courtney was in.
Knocking once, she opened the door. "Sorry about that. Shouldn't you be in school?" Her
expression softened when she saw Courtney nervously shifting and picking at her fingernails.
"What's the matter?"

"I can't go to the school nurse. She'll call my mom. My mom can't know about this. You're the only doctor I know...well, besides my pediatrician and I can't go to her."

"Can't go to her about what? Are you sick?"

"I don't know." Struggling with whatever was on her mind, Courtney rubbed her forehead.

"Courtney, if you're having symptoms it's important to get it checked out, whatever it is."

"I'm not having any symptoms."

"Then I don't understand. Do you need to talk about something?"

"Mrs. Bartlet, I came to you because you've always been nice to me and I need to trust someone who won't tell my parents. Will you promise me you won't tell them, no matter what?"

The request made Abbey nervous. "You're asking me to make an awfully big promise. I don't even know what you're talking about."

"I just need to know what I should do." Courtney's anxiety caused her voice to break.

"About what?" Sitting in a chair across from her, Abbey reached out her hand. "Tell me what's going on. I promise you, I will do whatever I can to help."

Courtney believed her. She had spent so many nights at the Bartlet house, so many hours with Liz when Abbey was doing her fellowship in thoracic surgery. Liz used to complain that she worked a lot and that she wasn't always around for things like school events and dance recitals. But Liz was her daughter; as far as Courtney was concerned, she was supposed to complain about her mom.

To Courtney, Abbey was great. The few times Abbey was off-call and home during one of their legendary sleepovers, she got to know her and what she knew, she liked. Abbey had always made it clear to her children that nothing was ever taboo in their house. There were sensitive subjects, sure, but she always had an open-door policy if the girls were troubled by something. Liz knew that and so did her friends. It endeared Abbey to them. It made them trust her, sometimes more than they did their own mothers.

"Sophomore year," Courtney began. "There was this guy. He was a senior. I went out with him for about eight months. I thought I was in love with him and then he went away to college and we broke up."

"Yeah?"

"Long story short, while we were dating, I did it with him."

"You mean you slept with him?"

"Yeah. No one other than my best friend knew anything about it. I couldn't even admit it to Liz. I hadn't been with anyone before or since."

"It's been about two years so why is it bothering you now?"

"I just found out that he died this summer."

"I'm so sorry." Abbey stroked her hand. "How did he die?"
"I don't know for sure. I mean, I was told...but I don't want to believe it."

"Believe what?"

"A friend of his told me he had...that he...that he died from AIDS." Unable to hide her tears any longer, Courtney wiped at her eyes. "How would I know if I have it too?"

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"Leo?" After a special caucus of the labor committee broke up, Jed dodged his colleagues to call for his old friend Leo who had been there as the committee's legal counsel.

"You okay?"

"Walk with me. I want to talk to you about something."

The two men crossed the capitol lobby to the pedestrian tunnel that would take them to the Rayburn Building.

"What's on your mind?"

"Lots of things. Among them, embryonic stem cells. You know anything about them?"

"I don't know what they are, but I know what they can do." Leo lowered his voice. "I also know that you ought not to say it too loud around here."

"Why's everyone so scared of bringing it up?"

"Everyone?"

"My staff."

"Your staff's right. Stem cell research is political suicide at the moment."

"Seriously?"

"Kidding. Scream it from the rooftop."

"Now see, you just contradicted yourself for cheap entertainment at my expense. How am I supposed to know when you're mocking me?"

"What makes you think I know when I'm mocking you?"

"Leo."

"What do you want from me? I know next to nothing about embryos, let alone embryonic stem cells, except that the phrase alone causes sane people to lose their marbles. You can't concentrate on adult stem cells?"

"Maybe I will." Jed led the way to his office. "The thing is, I saw a report on Nightline the other night."

"Uh oh."

"What?"

"You always get like this when you're spoiling for a fight."
"Like what?"

"You position yourself to knock down walls and take out people who don't agree with you all in the name of the greater good."

"You've never run from a fight."

"No, but I'm afraid you might."

"Excuse me, have we met?"

Leo followed Jed into his congressional suite and his personal office. "If you talk adult stem cells, you're okay. You talk about harming embryos, you're looking at a lot of bad press. It might not matter to you now, but when you're running for re-election..."

Jed turned from Leo's stare. Though he wanted to run for re-election, he and Abbey hadn't yet sorted all that out. "Forget about that, that's the future. I'm talking about the here and now."

"We can't forget about it because everything you do now is going to affect what happens next year when you're running again. You're fundraising already aren't you?"

"I never really stopped fundraising."

"Well, you do this, you're gonna piss off a lot of people. You're not gonna be the most popular guy around here or around your district or your church for that matter. You have to know that and you have to accept it."

"Do you think it's worth the fight to lift the government ban on funding stem cell research if it can help cure diseases that people are suffering from, diseases like diabetes and heart disease? There's talk it could help with Parkinson's, maybe multiple sclerosis, maybe even cancer."

"Do I think it would be wonderful if we could cure all those? Of course. Do I think you'll get anywhere talking about destroying embryos when there's so little known about the benefits it can bring?" Leo shook his head. "No. This battle's gonna be a long one and it's unlikely this congress will gear up for it."

"So you're saying let it go?"

"I'm saying prepare to get trounced."

"That's all you've got?"

"You wanna know the truth? If it were me, I'd get ready for a fight and I'd do it anyway."

"You would?"

"You pave the road now, you can ride it next term."

If there was going to be a next term, Jed thought. "So you DO think it's worth it?"

"I think it has to be your decision."

"Well that's completely unhelpful."

"Always here to serve." Leo smiled. "But I'll give you this - if you need assistance with the legal mumbo jumbo - I mean, besides what your legislative aides can do - if you need personal
Back in New Hampshire that evening, an autumn chill energized a packed stadium of screaming fans rooting on the home team to rack up a few more points at Manchester High's homecoming game as the clock ticked down to half-time. Off-field, the cheerleaders, minus three - Elizabeth, Courtney, and Tori - ramped up the crowd when the kicker kicked a field goal that took their school into the half with a lead over their rival. They then deserted the sidelines for the start of the half-time show and the parade of the 1985-1986 Homecoming Queen candidates.

Seconds later, a line of flashy corvettes began to stream along the paved track that circled the football field. Each car transported one candidate who sat on top to wave to the crowd while a magnetic sign on the car's panel gave the name of the school club she was representing. Traditionally in New Hampshire, each club would nominate a male and a female to the court and in the week leading up to homecoming weekend, the student body would cast secret ballots for the two seniors they believed most embodied the spirit of the graduating class. During the game on Friday night, the queen was to be crowned and at the dance on Saturday, the king.

Among the 15 nominees for queen was Elizabeth Bartlet and her friends Courtney and Tori. One by one, the young ladies were helped out of their cars and lined up at the far end of the field to be announced. While most of the others were all decked out in fancy party dresses or sequined gowns, Liz, like the rest of her cheerleading squad, was wearing a pair of official school warm-ups - blue and white windpants and jacket with the letters MHS on the sleeve. But even though she wasn't covered in rhinestones and glitter, she didn't feel any less comfortable or confident than her classmates. Beaming, she looped her arm through her escort's and prepared to take her walk.

From the bleachers, Ellie and Zoey watched with bated breath and Abbey stood by with a camera to take loads of pictures for Jed who couldn't make it because a late-Friday vote forced him to miss his flight home.

"Representing the school's National Honor Society, Elizabeth Bartlet..." the announcer shouted into the microphone.

Liz had been up for three separate clubs. Since she had clocked the most community service hours for Key Club, they had submitted her name and since she was the captain of the varsity cheerleading squad, it was expected that she'd get their nod as well. But in the end, it was the Honor Society that turned in their nomination forms first and selected her as their official representative. Courtney was the back-up for Key Club while Tori took the field to represent the cheerleaders.

Abbey stared out onto the field where Liz and Courtney were standing side-by-side. Her daughter was just steps from a girl her own age, a girl she had so much in common with at one time. It was heartbreaking to see them together and to remember the conversation she had with Courtney early that afternoon. She couldn't help thinking about Courtney's mother and what she would be going through if she knew about her daughter's emotional turmoil. She felt for her and for her entire family, but she would be lying to say she wasn't grateful for Liz's health.

For a second, the thought occurred to Abbey that if Courtney was sexually active and her mom didn't know, Liz might have been as well. She rejected the notion almost immediately though. She wasn't the kind of mother who believed her children were always innocent angels who never did anything wrong, but she knew their hearts and she was convinced that Liz would never harbor such a secret, not when she grew up in a house where she was encouraged to sit down and talk openly about anything on her mind.
As the nominees all took their place, Abbey shrugged her concern away.

"The Homecoming Queen for the Class of 1986 is..." during the drumroll from the marching band, the girls all glanced down the line at each other. "ELIZABETH BARTLET!"

In the stands, Zoey and Ellie leapt to their feet and Abbey furiously flashed picture after picture. Following tradition, Liz accepted a bouquet of roses and was crowned with a tiara by the previous year's Homecoming Queen. It was an honor she didn't expect. Knowing that the school voted for her as the most spirited senior was enough to bring tears to her eyes.

It wasn't a popularity contest at Manchester High. Elizabeth won because of the hours she spent in the library - on her own time - tutoring underclassmen in history and math, because of her commitment to school activities and student government, because of her dedication to the athletics department from the volleyball team to basketball to cheerleading, and because of her standing in the National Honor Society as the girl with the highest GPA in her class. Even her teachers were applauding with glee as she took her victory walk and then left the field, making a beeline for her family.

After a few goofy photos with Liz climbing up the front railing of the stands to place her tiara on Ellie's head, who then passed it on Zoey, Abbey wanted a real picture of all of her daughters together. She, Ellie, and Zoey climbed down the steps to where Liz was being hugged and congratulated by her fellow cheerleaders and a crowd of football players, majorettes, and members of the marching band. They reached the ground just in time to hear a voice echo from behind them.

"LIZ!"

Elizabeth had barely seen him when he brazenly grabbed her and spun her around, shouting his congratulations. It was all in fun and Liz was laughing as he did it. Had it been a classmate, Abbey wouldn't have thought anything of it, but the so-called stranger who had interrupted their family photo was Doug Westin, the college guy Liz had introduced her to at the Take Back The Night rally at the University of New Hampshire last spring. He was someone Liz hardly knew, someone she didn't even like, she had said. Abbey was surprised by his appearance and in that instant, her fleeting thoughts about teenagers and what they sometimes kept to themselves crept back in her mind.

TBC
Abbey, Ellie, and Zoey stepped off the bleachers in time to hear Doug Westin shouting Elizabeth's name. He grabbed her and spun her around and Abbey watched as the college guy she had met only once literally swept her daughter off her feet. Had Liz not been laughing, she might have intervened, but the two or three seconds that played out in front of her didn't seem to faze the teenager at all.

"Doug!" Liz chided him, forcing him to set her down. "Get carried away much?" She fixed her jacket. "What are you doing here?"

"It's homecoming - welcoming back alumni."

"You went to Manchester High?"

"Nashua. But my buddies went to MHS. Class of '83." He gestured to his fraternity brothers sitting in the stands. "They dragged me here. Why didn't you tell me you were up for queen?"

"It never came up." Liz looked to her mother. "You remember Doug Westin?"

Abbey nodded, approaching the young man to say hello. Ellie and Zoey followed their mother's lead and afterwards, Doug excused himself to join his pals up in the stands. But before he left, he turned to address Liz once more.

"The first tumbling pass?" he asked.

"Second. It's supposed to be a double full." Liz had been struggling with that move for weeks.

"Not that I know what that is, but I'll keep my eye on it anyway. I'll catch you later."

Her stare was fixed on him even as he walked away.

"So..." Abbey began when Doug was out of earshot. "What was that?"
"What?" Liz recognized that look immediately, the one that was part worry and part warning. "Mom, it's cool. I see him now and then and we talk."

"Now and then?"

"Over the summer, he came by Friendly's occasionally to get ice cream when I was working. No biggie."

"You've seen him since the end of the summer. He knew you were having trouble with your tumbling pass, the one you didn't even choreograph until the start of the school year."

"Yeah. He works at the bakery I stop at on the way to school so I guess I mentioned it to him. Big deal."

Abbey had witnessed the way the pair interacted at the anti-violence rally last spring and noted the way Doug had picked her up just moments earlier and the look on Liz's face when he put her back down. There might have been nothing deeper than friendship going on between them, but she knew her Lizzie well enough to know that there was the slightest glimmer of interest on her part.

"He's a lot older than you. I can't believe you have anything in common."

"Just because he's older doesn't mean I can't carry on a decent conversation with him or that he wouldn't be interested in what I have to say. Anyway, maturity and age don't always go hand-in-hand. There are lots of guys in high school more mature than Doug."

"I'm sure that's true." Abbey fixed a strand of Liz's hair that had fallen out of her ponytail. "I'm not making any judgments, I'm just surprised, okay?"

Had Doug been her own age or even still in high school, Abbey would have teased her daughter about her obvious crush. But that wasn't the case. He wasn't just older, he was in his third year of college, far removed from the experiences of high school life and the trials and tribulations that went with them. While Liz was learning who she was and exploring her independence on the verge of adulthood, Doug was miles ahead of her and the feelings she was developing for him concerned Abbey.

Liz sensed her mother's discomfort. Grateful that she didn't have time to discuss the situation, she said, "I have to stretch. We're about to start."

"Wait a sec. I want a picture of you and your sisters." Abbey huddled the girls together and snapped a photo for Jed, then looked to her eldest daughter. "Go knock 'em dead. I'll watch for your double full."

A thankful Liz handed her tiara to her mom. "After the game, I'm going out with Tori and the girls. You said it was all right?"

"Remember your curfew."

"I will." Liz took off her warm-ups and dashed across the field in her uniform to join her squad as they prepared to give the school a sneak peek at the choreographed dance routine they would use for the Northeast Regional Finals - the competition that would qualify them for nationals.

Returning to the stands to watch the half-time show with Ellie and Zoey as the first beat of techno music rang out from the speakers, Abbey refused the Doug distraction, choosing to devote her attention solely to Liz. Like her biggest fan, she clapped for her when she hit her mark on her first back handspring and then held her breath when a basket toss launched her into a mid-air
somersault.

The gymnastics was more than Abbey would have liked, having always been afraid that Liz would someday land on her head with some of the acrobatic stunts she tried. Why she always wanted to be the flyer, Abbey didn't know. Liz had been a dancer and gymnast since she was eight years old and every year, she became more daring than the last. Now that she had organized her squad into a danceline for state and national team competitions, she had put together a routine that truly tested the limits - a flashy, high-energy number that required great athletic skill and immunity to the fear of getting hurt.

Abbey's heart practically stopped with every leap and she burst into cheers of relief with every landing. At the edge of her seat the entire time, no one was happier than she was when the last tumbling pass went off without a hitch and Liz ended the number right-side-up as the stadium exploded in the roar of applause for the finale.

- - -

Back at home later that night, Abbey let herself in to Ellie's room following a single knock. "You should be getting ready for bed."

"I will in a minute." Ellie was hanging up a poster of Christa McAuliffe, the Concord High School teacher who had been chosen to ride along with the space shuttle Challenger in January.

"You know she'll be back in New Hampshire for a couple of weeks after her training at NASA." Abbey helped hold the poster straight while Ellie stood on a chair and tacked it to the wall.

"Daddy told me. He's gonna get to meet her and he said he's gonna try to take me too. I can't wait!" Ellie noticed her mom's expression - a combination of pride and awe. "What?"

"I just like seeing you so excited. I wish I could share it with you."

"Why didn't you ever learn about astronomy? You love science."

"The kind of science I love is biological. It's how the body functions that I find fascinating. Physics, mechanics, those kinds of things never really appealed to me."

"Is astronomy physics?"

"A lot of it is. You had to understand physics pretty well to do your science fair project last year, remember?"

"Yeah. Dad helped me with a lot of that stuff. He's good at rockets."

"Yes, he is. He loves figuring out how things work and why." Charmed by her husband's infinite curiosity, Abbey smiled just thinking about him. "And anything numbers-oriented he can solve in a snap! You get that from him."

"You think I'm like him?"

"In a lot of ways. You're analytical like he is and when you run into a problem, you don't give up. Even when you struggle at first, like you did with your multiplication tables, you stick with it until you figure it out. You're a problem solver."

"I guess I am." Ellie liked the idea of sharing some of her father's qualities. "Do you think I could be an astronaut when I grow up?"
No hesitation on Abbey's part. "If that's what you want, I have no doubt that you can do it."

"Do you mean it?" she questioned. "Or are you saying that because you're my mom and you have to?"

Abbey chuckled. "Even if I wasn't your mom, Ellie, I'd still tell you that you can be an astronaut when you grow up if you set your mind to it. You're a hard worker, sweetheart, and even though you have natural ability and you're incredibly bright, it's your tenacity that's going to help you succeed at whatever your heart desires."

"What's tenacity?"

"It means you're relentless. Persistent. If you see something you want to do, you find a way to do it. That's what I meant when I said you don't give up. With that tenacious quality of yours, you can make all your dreams come true."

The sixth grader cruised to her bed with a boost of confidence. She knew her parents believed in her, but it was still comforting to hear. "One day, I'm gonna fly to the moon."

"And I'm gonna be right there at the shuttle landing to see you off." Abbey pulled her covers up around her to tuck her in. "Now get some sleep. I'm going to wake you up early tomorrow so you can help Liz and me put the finishing touches on her Homecoming dress."

"Will I get to wear it?" Ellie had already volunteered to slip into her sister's black chiffon gown and stand on a chair so Liz and Abbey could sew half a dozen crystals and rhinestones along the bottom.

"We couldn't do it without you." Abbey leaned in to drop a kiss to her forehead. "See you in the morning."

"Goodnight."

- - -

It was after 11 p.m. in Washington when Jed finally left his office after a grueling day of meetings, conferences, debates, and votes on the House floor. He had been so energized by the work he was doing, so engrossed in his agenda for the next day that he hadn't yet realized how late it was. It hadn't even dawned on him that he was returning to an empty apartment until he took the underground escalator to board the metro for the ride home. Because of construction, traffic had been diverted on the street and it was easier to take the train than to drive. Squeezing into the car crowded with couples and families either returning from a night on the town or heading to late-night bars and restaurants reminded him instantly of how much he missed his wife and how much he'd give for her to be there with him, especially with the weekend he had planned.

It was a short walk from the metro stop to the apartment and along the way, he checked his watch to see just how late it was. Good thing he had already talked to Ellie and Zoey, he thought, since he knew they'd be in bed by now. He wasn't even sure that Abbey would still be up, but he always called her at the end of the night regardless because only her voice could bring him a peaceful sleep. Without hearing it, he was destined to toss and turn all night, just as he did when he first got to Washington. As much as he loved representing his district in the nation's capital, the thing he hated most about DC was that Abbey wasn't there.

They had been doing the long distance thing since January and slowly but surely, it was getting a little easier. The weekdays were busy for both of them and the time usually flew by. The weekends
were nice, at least the ones where Jed was able to make it home and Abbey wasn't trapped at the hospital. The anticipation of seeing each other after a long week was as exciting now as it had been when they carried on a long distance romance in college. And Friday night reunions - after the kids were tucked in bed - were usually incredible. He still missed Abbey very much, but it was bearable now. He wondered if it was for her too and if they could do it for another few years. If he was to be honest, he'd have to admit he wasn't ready to end his stint in Washington. It was overpowering, this thing he was doing. It wasn't about him, it was about them - the constituents and the country, the people who put him in office and trusted him with their will. He was just learning the game, starting to get good at it. He needed more time to make an impact and accomplish what he'd set out to do when he kicked off his campaign 18 months earlier.

He had to talk to Abbey. He had to tell her that his job wasn't done yet, that he wanted to run again. He owed it to her, to the girls, to the New Hampshire Democratic Party, and to himself to come to terms with planning a re-election campaign without apology or regret.

When he reached his apartment, he headed immediately for the phone.

"Hey, gorgeous," he said when she picked up.

"I never get tired of that greeting. Have I told you that?"

"Once or twice. What are you doing?"

"Making some warm milk," she said, standing at the stove.

"You're waiting up for Lizzie." She couldn't fool him. "Is she on her regular curfew?"

"For tonight."

"And tomorrow?"

"You already know the answer to that. Tomorrow's the dance. We had a deal - homecoming and prom senior year, she can stay out as late as she wants."

"I was hoping she forgot."

"No chance of that. They already rented the limo."

"Is she going with this Alex kid? Did you meet him?"

"Yes, I met him, not that it matters. They're going as friends in a group with all the other girls and their dates. It's nothing."

"She doesn't like him in that way?"

"No." Abbey was slightly ambiguous in her answer.

"What kind of 'no' was that? What's wrong?"

"It's silly. I just...there's this boy...no, this man that Liz met last year. He volunteered on your campaign - Doug Westin."

"I don't remember that name."

"There's a shocker," she teased.
"Are you gonna pick on me or tell me what you mean by 'a man'?"

"I mean he's a tad older and I think our daughter is developing a little crush. She says they're friends, but I can tell there's something going on there. I met him last year at that rally Liz and I went to at UNH and I suspected it even then. She told me I was wrong."

"You're not?"

"I don't think so. He works at the bakery. You know how she's developed a taste for croissants and all those mornings she stops to get them on her way to school? That's where she's been going - to see him."

"When you say older what do you mean?"


"What year?"

"He was a sophomore when I met him last year so he's a..."

"A junior? Forget it. She can't."

"She can't what? She hasn't even asked for permission yet. She insists they're friends. Are we going to tell her she's not allowed to be friends with him? We've always trusted her to pick her own friends and she's never given us a reason to take that away from her."

"A college junior isn't going to want to be friends with a high school senior for platonic reasons. What could they possibly have in common?"

"I said something similar when she told me. But she is mature beyond her years."

"I'm not saying she's not worthy of his attention, I'm saying they're at different points in their lives. What's the attraction?"

"Who knows? Maybe it's puppy love. Maybe something even more benign."

"Abbey, you can think I'm being an overprotective father, but..."

"I'm with you." Abbey poured the milk into a mug. "I'll talk to her about it, flesh things out."

"Make sure you do." He slipped out of his jacket.

"Surrender the Father Dearest cape and move on to something else," she asked, walking to the table and sipping her milk. "I've been waiting all day to talk to you about stem cells. Are you considering legislation?"

"Possibly. There's a lot more to it than a simple yes or no. I met with Leo to go over it."

"Oh yeah?"

"He doesn't think legislation will make it past the gatekeepers in this congress. There's too much rubbish to get through before we can make any headway."

"So what's the alternative?"

"I'm gonna make some noise and see what kind of reception I get. If it's promising, maybe
something will come of it."

"Well, if anyone can command attention on something like this, it's you."

It was motivating, the faith she had in him. "Abbey?"

"Yeah?"

"One of the things Leo said was that even if I get the ball rolling now, it might be too late. It could help pave the way later on though...next term."

Abbey took a deep breath. "I guess we can't put off that discussion any longer, can we?"

"No, we can't." A quick wait and then, "I want to run again, Abbey."

It didn't surprise her. "I know."

"What do you think?"

"My honest take?"

"Always."

"I wasn't so sure last year. I was against it after the whole Bennett thing because I was worried what it was doing to you being in an environment corrupted by people like him, but I'm beginning to think I was wrong."


"Don't be a jackass," she barked.

"Go on," he snickered.

"You have so much on your plate right now - every day, it's a new proposal or new bill that you're fighting or supporting. You're juggling things so well and you're doing it without losing yourself, who you are and what you went to Washington to do. And the thing is, I've thought long and hard about this. I'm not just your wife, Jed. I'm also your constituent and I can't think of anyone else I want representing me in Washington. How can I ask you not to run again?"

He was touched. "Sweetheart, as pleased as I am to hear you say all that, there's something else to consider. I miss you and our girls very much and I wouldn't blame you for having doubts about continuing to live like this."

"We miss you too, but..."

"Is it getting easier?"

"That's a trick question," she accused. "If I say no, it might change your mind about running and if I say yes, you'll ask..."

"Why the hell is it so easy to live without me?" He harassed her to make her smile. "I just do that for the laugh."

"Yeah, you're a real clown." She sipped her milk. "It's late. You'll be home tomorrow. Why don't we wait to talk about it then?"
Guilty, he took a beat and then said softly, "About that..."

"Don't."

"I have meetings."

"Jed!"

"There was nothing I could do."

"I was supposed to be on-call this weekend. I switched so I could be here with you because you were supposed to be home!"

"I didn't know Jergens was gonna pull this."

"Don't give me a line."

"It's not a line! He went behind my back and asked for a floor vote tonight and when it failed, he called for committee tomorrow to fix the language."

"On what?"

"Childcare subsidies for welfare mothers."

How could she argue with that? "Fine."

"Abbey."

"It might be unreasonable, but I'm gonna be mad at you for a few minutes, okay?"

"A minute ago, you thought I was juggling everything well."

"What did I know?"

"Abigail..."

"You were home for one night last weekend and the week before that, I was on-call the entire time. I was looking forward to snuggling up and falling asleep in your arms. We don't get to do that too much anymore."

"That's not all we don't do much anymore."

"Whose fault is that?"

"Boy, you really are testy tonight."

"I'm disappointed."

"Yeah, well so am I." He allowed a minute to pass. "Look, it doesn't have to be a total loss."

Arching his brow, he asked flirtatiously, "What are you wearing?"

"Nice try."

"Come on, play with me here. What are you wearing?"

Abbey glanced down at her outfit. She couldn't very well tell him flannel pajamas without spoiling the mood. "My pink silk night gown. The one with the lace around the waist."
"And the popping cleavage?" Jed sighed. "God, I wish I was there."

Mission accomplished. "What about you? What are you wearing?"

"Nothing but my boxers," he said as he stripped out of his dress shirt and fumbled with his belt. In a few seconds, it would be true.

"Mmm." Her eyes closed, she pictured him in all his naked glory.

"I take it you approve?"

"Take off your boxers," she ordered, her voice seductive and sultry and her fingers twirling the curls in her hair.

"My, you are demanding." Jed obliged. "Boxers gone. Your turn. Take off the night gown."

Abbey felt a tingling rush of excitement. She set her mug aside and replied, "I think I'm gonna have to take this upstairs."

"Hurry up. My mind is racing with the things it wants to do to you."

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It was a game of verbal sexual pleasure between husband and wife and the provocative suggestions that floated back and forth between them had them gasping for air. Abbey was piled into bed on her back, under the covers with her head on a pillow and one hand clutching the headboard above as Jed explained - in detail - all the areas his tongue longed to roam, from the peaks of her perky breasts down her stomach to her belly button and the path that led to the bundle of nerves hidden between her legs.

"I love the taste of you," he said. "I'm turned on by the way you wiggle when I touch you there, the way your inner thighs tense up and the way your muscles relax when I gently rub them. I run my finger up and down your center and my thumbs knead you just as I open my mouth to take you over and over again."

She was squirming from the thought of him between her legs, his warm breath rippling across her most sensitive little nub. His sexy voice continued to push her to the brink of ecstasy when the moment was shattered. She heard the front door open followed by the warning sound of the alarm before it was reset.

"Abbey?" Jed called. "You stopped moaning."

"I'm sorry, it's the door. I think Lizzie's home."

"I'm glad she's home, but our children sure know how to kill the mood."

"It's radar," Abbey agreed. "She's on her way up. Let me call you after I talk to her?"

"I'm gonna have to foreplay-you-up again, aren't I?"

"I thought you liked foreplay."

"Only when I'm guaranteed the real thing."

Liz knocked on the door. "Mom?"
"Come in." Abbey passed her the phone. "Say hi to Dad."

"Hey, Dad."

"What'd you do and who'd you do it with?"

Liz gave him an exasperated roll of the eyes. "I was with the girls."

"What'd you do?"

"I swore I wouldn't tell. You'll just have to read about it in the police roster tomorrow."

Abbey, still lying on the bed, poked her daughter with her foot.

"Hope you had the good sense to take off your tiara for the mug shot." Jed used his stern tone to needle her.

"So Mom told you they voted for me?"

"It's gonna go to your head, isn't it?"

"You don't think it has already? I'm Manchester royalty." She bit down on her bottom lip to keep from laughing after Abbey threw a pillow at her.

"Get your royal self ready for bed before he banishes you to the dungeon."

"What she said," Jed agreed over the phone.

"You guys are no fun," Liz grouched.

"Seriously, congratulations sweetheart. How'd your dance number go?"

"Good, I think. We fixed the mistakes we made at the pep rally and Mom said she was holding her breath the whole time which tells me our stunts have just the right level of difficulty. We need to clean up the middle and polish the whole thing and then we'll be ready for regionals in three weeks. You'll be there, right?"

"I wouldn't miss it," he promised. "I'm gonna let you go talk to your mom for a bit. Tell her to call me before she goes to bed."

"I will. Night." Liz looked over at Abbey after she hung up the phone. "He said you wanted to talk to me?"

"Yeah. I was hoping we could chat about what you did tonight."

"We went out for pizza and hung out, nothing exciting."

"Just you and the girls?"

"If you're asking if Doug went, the answer's no."

"Can we talk about him for a minute?"

"Mom, I told you..."

Abbey followed her down the hall to Liz's room. "I know what you told me, but you know what doesn't add up? You never mentioned him. I know all your friends, Lizzie, why didn't I know this
"one?"

Liz shrugged, taking off her letterman jacket. "Because he's not even that good a friend. More like an acquaintance. Why does it matter?"

"I like knowing what's going on with you."

"You like checking up on me, you mean."

"No."

"Mom, come on. You treat me like a child. You won't even let me drive to the Wham concert by myself. When are you going to let me grow up?"

"When did this become a conversation about you growing up?"

"The minute you gave me that look at the game. You're suspicious of Doug, right? You're afraid that I'm dating a college guy behind your back. I'm not. I wouldn't do that. If I was interested in Doug, I'd talk to you about it."

"You see him practically every morning, you saw him all summer long, and not once did you mention him. Why go out of your way to keep him a secret?"

"Why all the questions?"

"Do you have a crush on him?"

"NO!" It was an impulsive response. Liz wasn't ready to admit her feelings.

"Then why?"

"I didn't go out of my way to keep it from you. It didn't come up." That and she knew that Abbey would see through her and the puppy love - or whatever it was - dancing in her eyes would give away her infatuation with the guy.

"You could have brought it up."

"Why are you giving me the third degree?"

"I don't mean for this to be the third degree, Elizabeth, I swear I don't. I'm not trying to invade your privacy. I just want you to know that you can talk to me about things." Abbey was thinking about Courtney now and what she was going through with the AIDS scare that she refused to share with her mother.

"I already know that."

"You're almost 18 and you feel like you're an adult and your life is your own, and in some ways, maybe you're right, maybe I do need to back off a little, but if I'm holding on too tight, it's only because I love you. I don't want there to be anything that you're afraid to tell me, ever."

"Did something happen? Is there something I should know?"

"No." As a doctor, Abbey couldn't betray her patient. If she could, she would have taken Liz into her arms and made her promise that she'd never try to go through what Courtney is going through alone. "It's just a conversation we haven't had in a while."
"That's because there's nothing to talk about. I know I can come to you and I will if I need to. But do I have to tell you everything?"

"It'd be great if you would." She lightened up when Liz shot her a glare. "Do you want me to lie?"

Liz took off her earrings and released her hair from a ponytail. "Hypothetically speaking, what would you say if I told you I did have a crush on Doug? You'd say forget it, right? You'd forbid me from seeing him?"

"Are you confessing something?"

"Only hypothetically." To say that she was being playful would be an overstatement, but Liz's expression wasn't entirely serious or rigid.

"Hypothetically, I wouldn't forbid you from doing anything unless I wanted you turn around and do it."

She might have been a mother, but Abbey still remembered what it was like to be 17, so close to going off to college and starting a new life. When Liz was younger, it was easy - there were certain things she just wasn't allowed to do. It was more complicated now. It was no longer about rules or boundaries, but about making sound decisions for herself, a skill that she wanted Liz to work on before leaving home.

"So what would you say then?"

"I'd say that he's too old for you and I'd encourage you to focus on your studies this year. And if you wanted to date, I'd suggest you consider boys your own age, at least until you graduate."

"And if I made a case for a boy not my age?"

"Let's not play games, Elizabeth. If you have something to say about Doug, then say it - for real."

At least it wasn't a non-starter, Liz thought. "He's interesting to me. I haven't asked him out and he hasn't asked me either."

"But you're thinking about it?"

"If you want to know the truth, yes. Go ahead, tell me he's too old."

"He is."

"Maybe, but when I talk to him...I don't know, he's different than any guy I've ever known before. I thought he was so annoying when I first met him, but he's grown on me."

"What do you talk about?"

"Mom..." she grumbled. "That's private."

"You're right. I just assumed that if it was no big deal, you could share." Abbey clasped her daughter's hands. "Listen, all I want is for you to feel comfortable coming to me."

"That's what I'm doing by telling you this."

"And you'd like it if I could step out of my mommy bubble for a minute?"

"I don't think you can. All you see is our age difference."
"It's a big thing, Liz."

"Not to me," she said, letting go of Abbey's hands. "I understand that you want to be there for me, but I'm not ready to talk about Doug. I don't even know how I feel about him yet. How can I possibly explain it to you?"

"That's fair."

"I want to sort it out for myself."

"Without any help?"

Liz shook her head. "Not yet."

"Okay." Abbey swept her hair out of the way to give her a kiss goodnight when Liz unexpectedly embraced her. "Whenever you're ready, I'm here. I love you...very much."

"I love you too."

"Get some sleep." And with that, she left Liz alone and returned to the master bedroom, knowing that Doug would come up again and contemplating what to say when he did.

TBC
October 1985

On a chilly autumn day in October, the breezy weather turned the Bartlet farm into kaleidoscope of color under the straggled hues of reds, yellows, oranges, and browns. The peak of foliage season was here and the elms, maples, oaks, and birches that shaded the property were beginning to lose their leaves. Apples in the orchard were ready to be picked for warm and tasty homemade cider, the smell of woodsmoke scented the air, and mysterious ripples of spooky noises from the outlying woods were sure to drive the kids in a tizzy as they tried to outscare each other during the most haunting month of the year.

The decorations were set for Ellie's 11th birthday party. She wanted an outdoor autumn harvest theme, complete with pumpkins and hay bails. Picnic tables were topped with gold and rusty brown tablecloth and centered with dried leaves. On each table, Jed left a bouquet of helium balloons weighed down on the ends and a jar brimming with candy corn for the first of many games.

He was rolling up maps for the pumpkin scavenger hunt they'd planned when Ellie came shrieking out the back door.

"DDDDAAAAAAAAAAAAAADDDDDDDDDDDDDDDD!

Zoey was trailing behind her. "You're a tattletale, Ellie!"

"DDDDAAAADD!

"WHAT?" Jed shouted back, setting the maps on the table. "What's going on?"

Ellie was furious. "Zoey hid all the party hats and she won't give them back!"

Jed turned a disapproving eye to his youngest daughter who bowed her head and glanced up at him through her long lashes. "Did you take the hats?"

Zoey shook her head.

"She did!" Ellie insisted.

It would have taken a lot to fool Jed. He was no amateur at this parenting thing. "If you're lying,
you're going to be in big trouble. I'll ask again - did you take the hats?"

Reluctantly, Zoey nodded. "But I was just playing."

"Okay, I want you to give them back to Ellie." No reaction on the part of the little girl. "Right now. I'm not messing around."

Annoyed, Zoey stomped back into the house and returned with a stack of hats. "Here."

"Thank you," Ellie grumbled.

"Now that that's settled, are the goodie bags almost done?" Jed asked the birthday girl.

"Almost. Mom was supposed to write the names on them with glitter."

"We can do that. Go get the bags, I'll get the glitter pen and meet you in the kitchen."

"Do you know how?"

"It's glitter. How hard could it be?"

- - -

With a dozen goodie bags dangling from her wrists, Ellie was on her way downstairs when she heard her grandparents climbing the steps on the front porch. She stopped to open the door and help them carry in a handful of gift-wrapped presents, leading them to the kitchen where Jed was setting up the glitter station. James went for Zoey, scooping her up into his arms while Mary watched as her son-in-law tested his penmanship on a blank sheet of paper, frustrated at the blob of sparkles that oozed out of the glitter pen in one big clump.

"Want some help?"

He shook the pen. "I don't know why Abbey thinks these things are easier. I'd rather work with glue and a bottle of glitter like the good ole days."

"Give it here." Mary held out her hand. "You wanna help me, Zoey?"

"Yeah!"

"Where's Abigail?" James asked.

"Hospital. A post-op patient of hers had some kind of complication last night. She was there until three in the morning and then came home for a couple of hours of sleep and headed back at 7 a.m."

"Today of all days."

"She'll be back for the party, don't worry."

"What about Lizzie?"

"Senior pictures. She's going to swing by and pick up the banner and cake on the way home." Jed made sure to order the cake from a bakery downtown instead of the one where Doug worked. He and Liz had clashed on the Doug issue earlier in the week and the last thing he wanted was to give her another excuse to visit him.

Feeling left out when Mary handed Ellie the glitter pen, Zoey whined, "I wanna do it!"
"Forget it, Zo! You can't write in cursive."

"Yes, I can! I wanna do it!"

Mary tried to comfort the five-year-old, but Ellie was right. Zoey was just learning how to print. She'd make a mess of it if they let her. "Zoey, why don't we let Ellie do it and then you and I can fill in the skips?"

As good a compromise as she was going to get. "Okay."

Out front, Liz barged in and shouted, "DDDAAAADDD, I need you!"

Interrupted for the tenth time that morning, Jed hurried out of the kitchen to face the newest problem. "What is it?"

She unrolled a vinyl banner splashed with the colors of the season. "They spelled her name wrong. They left out the 'i' so it looks like 'Happy Birthday, ELLE.' I didn't notice it until I got here."

How hard could it have been to spell out 'Ellie,' Jed wondered. "Can you go back and ask them to fix it?"

"They closed at noon."

"Damn. All right, we'll have to fix it ourselves."

"You don't have a vinyl cutter. Would you even know how?"

"I don't need a vinyl cutter, I'll use a razor. Where's the cake?"

"In the car. I'll go get it. Are you gonna order the pizza?"

"We're not having pizza."

"Then what are we having?"

"Hamburgers and hot dogs on the grill. I'm making my special chili for the topping."

"Mom's not gonna like that."

"Mom's not here. And mind your own business. Now go get the cake and I'll get the razor."

Liz smirked, "Fun, fun."

Jed started upstairs, but stopped when he heard the sound of glass breaking, followed by Ellie shouting in the kitchen.

"Zoey, how could you!" she barked.

"It's okay," James offered. "We'll clean it up."

Jed ran in. "What happened?"

"Zoey broke the candy corn jar!" Ellie complained.

"I didn't do it on purpose!" Zoey shuffled her feet as she avoided her father's stare.

"Zoey, I told you not to touch that jar!" Jed was irritated, but he backed off, sensing that Zoey was
already feeling bad. "All right, look, you guys find another jar we can use and I'll run to the store and pick up another bag of candy corn."

"And this time, you're not allowed anywhere near it!" Ellie sniped.

Noticing the handful of candy corn still on the table, Zoey picked one up to throw at her sister.

"That's ENOUGH!" Jed warned both girls. "Ellie, let it go. What's done is done. And Zoey, you know better. Apologize."

"No." Her feelings hurt, Zoey folded her arms over her chest and refused.

"Now. Or you can sit in your room while the rest of us enjoy the party." When she didn't budge, Jed picked her up to carry her upstairs.

"NOOOOO," Zoey cried.

"Then apologize."

"NO!"

And with that stubborn response, she sulked as Jed took her upstairs.

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By 2 p.m., things had settled down and Jed proved he was in control - with some help from his in-laws. A row of twelve goodie bags, overstuffed with party favors, lined the kitchen counter, each beautifully scripted with the names of Ellie's friends. Shiny red candy apples, still hot and dripping with cinnamon from the candy mixture Jed had whipped up sat on a baking sheet to cool. The birthday banner had been fixed. Jed and James razored off the legs on the "L's" in Ellie's name and created an "i," then stripped the last "E" of its arm to make it a lowercase "e" to match the rest. It wasn't perfect, but it worked.

Zoey had been allowed to leave her room after she apologized to Ellie and Ellie, hoping to smooth things over once and for all, invited her to help greet her friends and pass out the party hats and noise makers. She even agreed to let Ginger wear a hat, a privilege the furry little cat didn't seem to appreciate as much as her mistresses.

When all the guests had arrived, Ellie dropped off the sleeping bags in the family room - where they'd be sleeping that night - then led them all to the backyard where Jed handed each girl a map to begin the scavenger hunt.

In the kitchen, Mary and Elizabeth counted the new batch of candy corn in the jar and prepared a prize for the girl whose guess came closest to the actual number.

"I've got 334," Liz said.

"342 here for a total of..." Mary arched a brow. "You're your father's daughter. What is it?"

Liz scoffed as she scribbled on a sheet of paper. She might have been Jed's daughter, but she hadn't inherited his talent with numbers. "676."

"676 what?" Abbey rushed in, looking and feeling exhausted. She was operating on a few hours of sleep and desperately wanted a nap.

"Number of candy corns in the jar."
Mary helped her granddaughter sweep the candy into the container. "Lizzie, why don't you go set this outside and your mom and I will get everything ready for dinner." Once the teen was gone, she looked to her daughter. "Took you a while, huh?"

"I couldn't help it," Abbey replied. "I almost lost a patient."

"You didn't, did you?"

"No, thank goodness." She peaked into the pot to see Jed's chili simmering. "Chili? He made chili? His chili is way too spicy for those girls."

"Oh, leave him alone. The poor guy's had a hell of a trying day running around getting things ready for the party. If he wants to serve chili, let him do it."

"I wasn't going to tell him he can't. What kind of trying day?"

"There was a mishap with the banner, Ellie and Zoey had a fight, the first batch of candy apples was ruined, Lizzie nearly dropped the birthday cake, the candy corn jar had to be replaced, and all of that was before Ginger got into the prize bag."

"Oh no."

"Jed had to scrounge around for those plastic rings that pop out of gumball machines at the store to replace the stuff Ginger chewed up. He's been working hard all day - by himself for the most part."

"Are you trying to make me feel guilty?"

"Of course not, darling. I didn't mean it to sound like that."

"Jed understood that I had to leave."

"I'm certain he did."

"But you don't?"

"I'm always surprised by all the emergencies you handle. Now that you're out of residency, I expected your life to be more predictable." Mary reached for condiments for dinner.

"There are always emergencies, in or out of residency. Maybe not as many nowadays, but it happens from time to time. That's the life of a doctor." Abbey sensed her mother biting her tongue. God, how she hated that. "What?"

"It's none of my business."

"Shoot, Mom."

"Okay, fine. The adoption agency called about that testimonial we gave them about you and Jed."

"And?"

"Abigail, I haven't said anything because you're a grown woman and you don't need me meddling in your life - especially in your marriage..."

"But?"

"But have you thought about what you're doing? What having another child means? With Jed in
"Washington half the time..."

"Yes, I have thought about it. This wasn't something I dreamed up on a whim."

Mary noted the way she turned from her stare, just like Zoey had done with Jed earlier. "Could it be it's something you dreamed up when you were overwhelmed by grief?"

"I know where you're going and you're wrong."

"Do you really think it's a good idea? Deep down in your soul, do you think you're making the right choice?"

"Do you think we can't handle it? Or that we're too old to deal with an infant?"

"I don't think you're old. To the contrary, dear, I'd suggest waiting a few years and if you still want to adopt a child, do it then."

"What's wrong with doing it now?"

"It would introduce more chaos into your world the way it is now. Come on, I was with you in London when Lizzie was a newborn. I saw you learning how to hold her, how to feed her and then the way you took over like an old pro after Ellie's birth. I've seen you grow into a nurturing, caring mother right before my eyes. My concern isn't how good you'll be; it's that you're spreading yourself too thin."

"How thin is too thin?"

"Your marriage looks to me to be a never-ending cycle of hectic days you spend apart strung together by occasional weekend visits. You and Jed chose very busy careers for yourselves, but it works for you and it's no one's place to judge. But as an observer, I have to tell you, I think you're jumping into this adoption idea for the wrong reasons."

"What does that mean?"

Mary spoke from experience. "I wouldn't have stopped at you and Katherine if I had a choice. After Kate's birth, I was told I could never get pregnant again. I was devastated, probably as much as you were when you had that miscarriage last year."

The reminder of the miscarriage hit Abbey at a place she was most vulnerable. Her heart hadn't healed yet, not completely. "Why didn't you adopt? If you wanted another child, why didn't you take one in who needed a loving family?"

"Because our family was already complete. It just took me a while to realize it. What I'm trying to say is that after I found out I couldn't carry another child to term, the thing I wanted more than anything else was to prove those doctors wrong, to get pregnant, however I could, however much it cost, however I put my body, my family, and my husband through. It was that important to me. It became all I thought about for a while."

"That's not what I'm doing."

"I hope it's not. As much of a blessing adopting a baby would be, it should be something you do when and only when you've mended your broken heart over the baby you lost."

"I know that."
Only Mary could be so bold with Abbey. Well, Mary and Jed, but he hadn't peeled away at this subject for months. "You and Jed and the girls were blissfully happy before you got pregnant this last time. You said you weren't even trying. So what else could have made you long for a baby if it wasn't carrying one for a short amount of time?"

"You're assuming I wouldn't want another child if I hadn't miscarried."

"You might want one, but to be perfectly frank, my sweet, I don't think you would have one, not at this point in your life. Not now, when you're building your practice and Jed is traveling back and forth to DC."

She might have had a point. She and Jed both did, but Abbey wasn't ready to acknowledge that out loud. "You know what, today's not the day for this. I haven't even wished Ellie a happy birthday yet."

"You're right. I shouldn't have upset you today."

"It's not that you upset me. It's just that I don't feel like getting into it."

"Abigail, if I'm butting in where I shouldn't..."

"You're not. Okay?" Abbey remembered a similar phrase between herself and Liz just a few weeks earlier. It wasn't rude or judgmental, the meddling Mary was doing. It was out of love and concern that her mother had been so blunt. She opened her arms to embrace Mary, gave her a kiss on the cheek, then walked out the back door to join Jed who had lined the girls up for the pumpkin roll.

"Abigail, there you are!" James stretched his arm out to her.

"I tried to get here as fast as I could. What did I miss?"

"Don't worry about it. We've only been going for a half hour. They just finished the scavenger hunt. Time now for the pumpkin roll."

"Everyone ready?" Jed called out. He received a resounding 'YES' in response. "One...two...you're sure you're ready?" An even louder and more affirmative reply. "THREE!"

The rules dictated the girls only touch the pumpkin with their hands so they all crouched down and individually rolled their pumpkins towards the finish line, knowing they'd all get ribbons at the end just for participating and the winner would get to pick the next game. Liz stood on the sidelines and cheered them on, especially the stragglers who weren't as quick as their peers.

"Jed's a pretty good host, isn't he?" Abbey asked James, watching.

"If ever there was a man who could keep kids entertained...but look who I'm telling."

Abbey chuckled proudly. "That's why I married him."

The pumpkin roll ended just in time for the kids to snack on an early dinner of hamburgers and chili dogs before cake and ice cream while Jed and Abbey went inside to retrieve the prize bag and reveal the winner of the candy corn guessing game. It was the first moment they had been alone all afternoon.

"We might as well get the cake," she said.
"Okay, just as soon as you tell me what's on your mind." Jed leaned into the counter, facing her.

"What makes you think anything is on my mind?"

"Ever since you got home, you've been thinking about something. What is it?"

She should have known she couldn't hide anything from him. "I had a conversation with my mom that's been lingering. I'll tell you about it later when we're not being overrun by children."

"When was the last time we weren't overrun by children?" He grabbed a box of candles and stuffed them into his shirt pocket.

"Well..." Abbey thought aloud. "there were those few seconds right after Zoey knocked over the grill and sent everyone into the house screaming 'FIRE.'"

"Yeah, next time we host an autumn harvest party, remind me to spread out the hay bails."

"Next time we host ANY party, I'm in charge of the grill." Tweaking him, she placed a party hat on his head before they headed back out. "Say cheese."

The day's itinerary had been carefully planned, with Ellie's help, so that there was a challenge that played to every girl's strength. From contests like the candy corn game and the pumpkin roll to group activities like breaking the bat-shaped pinata and decorating pine cones, it was an afternoon fit for casual fun and an innocent prelude to the spookier adventures awaiting them.

After Ellie opened her presents, the girls outlined designs on their pumpkins with magic markers so the adults could carve them. Jed and James then helped them all onto the wagon for a ghostly hayride up to the orchard to fill their baskets for the apple bob Abbey promised before bed. They returned to find the path to the farmhouse lit with a dozen jack-o-lanterns and as they jumped out of the wagon, they ran screaming towards the others with tales of the cries and howls they swore they heard in the woods.

"Who do you think it was?" one girl asked.

"It had to be the Lydia!" another said.

Her eyes wide, Zoey questioned, "Who's Lydia?"

"She's a ghost who lives in the woods."

"A GHOST? A real one?"

"Yeah, you know the story - on a dark October night a long, long time ago a bunch of guys picked up a teenage girl named Lydia Bridge who was hitch-hiking down a dark road outside Manchester. She was all dressed up in a white blood-stained gown and she told them that she was on her way back from a Halloween party. She begged them to take her home, but she was so bloody that they asked if she wanted to go to the hospital first. She said no, she just wanted to go home. So they took her. Only, when they got to the address she gave them, she was too frightened. She jumped out of the car and disappeared into the woods never to be seen or heard from again. They knocked on the door and when Mrs. Bridge answered, she told them that her daughter Lydia had been murdered on Halloween night...15 years ago."

Ellie finished, "So the guys went to the cemetery to see her grave so they'd know for sure that she was dead and right there, in front of her tombstone, they found her white bloody gown and on the grave, there was a smear of fresh blood."
Another girl picked it up from there. "They say that Lydia's ghost lives in the New Hampshire woods now and on some nights, if you listen real carefully, you can hear her crying for someone to take her home."

Abbey covered Zoey's ears when she heard her gasp at the young woman's haunted plight. "I think the ghost stories are going to have to wait until I get this one to bed."

"Noooo, I wanna hear more!" Zoey was engrossed already, though she was disturbed by what she heard. "Can't I sleep with Ellie and her friends tonight?"

"I don't think so."

"You'll be too scared, Zo," Ellie agreed. "We're gonna play Light As A Feather, Stiff As A Board and then, we're gonna bust out the Ouija board."

"It'll be another week of sleepless nights," Jed said to Abbey as he helped her clean up the pumpkin mess. The Ouija board was a birthday present from Ellie's friend Sydney. Otherwise, he would have reminded Ellie that it was the curse of the Ouija at a Halloween party that gave Lizzie a string of nightmares when she was little.

"This is what girls do at slumber parties, Jed - they scare each other silly and end up waking the neighborhood with blood-curling screams."

"Better the neighborhood than us. Can't we let them sleep outside tonight?"

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Despite Jed's suggestion and the pleas from the girls, Abbey ex-nayed the idea of an outdoor sleepover because of the colder temperatures that evening. She made sure all twelve girls were tucked snug in their sleeping bags in the family room with snacks and treats to keep the games and ghost stories going all night before she retired upstairs for some quality time with Jed.

It had been a long day for both of them. She had been exhausted from the moment she came home, but Jed kept right on going. The party had fueled his energy, that was obvious. So when she opened the door to the master bedroom, the last thing she expected was to find him asleep on the bed, still wearing a pair of jeans and an old Dartmouth sweatshirt. He hadn't even bothered to change, she thought, shaking her head as she flipped him over on his back and started to untie his shoes. After the shoes were off his feet, she unbuttoned his pants to pull them down over his thighs.

He fluttered his eyes then and mumbled, "If you're going to take advantage of me, the least you can do is wake me up to enjoy it."

"I'll take advantage of you anytime you want." She yanked his pants off when he lifted his hips.

"Are you trying to turn me on, Dr. Bartlet?" He clutched her wrist and pulled her on top of him.

"Do I have to try?" She pressed her lips to his for a quick kiss. "Take off your shirt and roll over."

"Down and dirty right off the bat - just how I like it." He amused her.

Abbey straddled his hips, then dug her fingertips into his back. "I saw you straightening out your back earlier. Why won't you take your pills?"

"I hate those pills."
"They'll make you feel better."

He moaned as her hands kneaded his muscles. "On the list of things that will make me feel better tonight, Abbey, I promise you the pills are at the very bottom."

The silence between them as Jed succumbed to her soothing strokes gave Abbey a chance to think back to her conversation with her mother in the kitchen. 'Your marriage looks to me to be a never-ending cycle of hectic days you spend apart strung together by occasional weekend visits,' she had said. And she was right. It was Jed's first weekend home in two weeks and with her hospital emergency on Friday night, Ellie's birthday party on Saturday, and Jed's mid-morning flight back to DC on Sunday, they'd barely see each other.

It wasn't a shattering observation. Abbey had already come to terms with how busy their lives were at this point in their careers and she'd been wavering on the adoption for issue for months, though she had yet to confess her feelings to anyone other than herself. After the miscarriage, another baby seemed to be the only way to numb the grief. It wasn't logical in the long run, but just the thought of holding a newborn in her arms once again, helped to drag her out of the funk she was in.

She preferred a natural pregnancy, just like with her girls. But Jed had been concerned about what another pregnancy might do to her health because of her age, especially after the miscarriage and Zoey's premature birth. Adoption had been his idea, his compromise if she wanted another little Bartlet running around the house, and she took him up on it because it was a band-aid to heal her emotional wounds. Or at least cover them up. It gave her optimism for a fresh start, a chance to do it right this time and to rid herself of that maternal guilt, guilt for working such crazy hours when her daughters were little and for not striking the balance she always dreamed she would.

But now, she saw things more clearly. The grief had dulled on its own and though she wouldn't soon forget the infant she never bore, she was at the stage where she could accept it and realize that another baby wouldn't replace the one she lost, nor would it make up for her so-called mistakes as a mother.

And what about those mistakes, she began to question. There wasn't a mother alive who was immune to them, not even her own. Abbey wasn't perfect, but she never claimed to be. She loved her children and raised them the best she could, so why was she so determined to rewrite history by controlling the future instead of closing the book on the past and opening up a new chapter?

As she continued her massage, little by little, she was losing Jed to sleep. If she had any hope of talking this out with him tonight, she knew it was now or never. "Jed?" No answer. "Honey?"

"Hm?" It was a weak response.

Abbey paused for a beat and then said, "Never mind. It can wait. Go back to sleep."

"You sure?"

"Yeah." She bent down to place a kiss on the back of his head. "Goodnight."

"Goodnight."

Their big talk would have to wait.

TBC
Father of Daughters

Series: Snapshots of the Past

Story: Father of Daughters

Chapter 12

Disclaimer: See Chapter 1

Previously: An emergency at the hospital left Jed to prepare for Ellie's 11th birthday party without Abbey; Abbey's mother, Mary, forced her to confront the real reasons she wants another baby

Summary: Abbey opens up to Jed and admits they may not be ready for adoption

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The weekend before Halloween signaled the beginning of a congressional recess and gave Jed and Abbey a chance to regroup without their daughters. Abbey had left New Hampshire on Friday night so that she and Jed could spend the weekend alone and attend the congressional costume party on Sunday afternoon. Husband and wife were planning to return home together in time for Halloween.

Standing in the kitchen of their Porter Street apartment cooking together - something they used to do before Jed ran for congress - Abbey quizzed Jed about the end of the session and the bills and proposals that were left dangling until January. It was Saturday and they were making an Italian casserole for dinner. Neither was a gourmet chef, but both had learned to cook early in their marriage and soon discovered that cooking for one another was fun and cooking together was even better.

"What's the story with Rogers?" Abbey asked, whacking a garlic clove to add to her special Marinara sauce.

"He didn't get his school construction bill so he attached an amendment to the federal crime package." Ordinarily, Jed had great respect for Jonathan Rogers. He was a smart, compassionate, and capable congressman from Rhode Island, but he was also a crafty manipulator who knew how to use the system to get what he wanted.

"Saying what?"

"Imposing limitations on Affirmative Action."

"He went after Affirmative Action? Why would he do that?"

"Democrats buried school construction in committee so this is his way of wielding his power against us."

"He didn't get his way so he's throwing a temper tantrum," Abbey translated.

"Basically. I sometimes wish I could put him in time-out like Zoey."

"He has to know it's not going to work."

"I'm not sure he does. And we've got Pete Olson challenging him, which muddies the water even
more. Olson's a lightbulb short of a marquee, you know what I'm saying?"

"What can be done?"

"I really don't know. If the Speaker can't talk him down, it's a clear victory for Seaver and the Republicans on Appropriations."

"How so?"

"They didn't want the crime package in the first place." Jed set a bottle of red wine and two wine glasses down on the counter, as Abbey had asked him to, and noticed her quick glance in his direction before she went back to her sauce. "What?"

"You used to be able to talk to Rogers. Why can't you talk to him now?"

"He doesn't want to hear from me."

Abbey guessed why. "Where did you stand on school construction?"

"I'm all for school construction, you know that. But it was a poor bill. There wasn't enough money and he thoroughly underestimated the cost."

"It's a pro for urban education."

"And I'm behind that 100 percent. But I'm an economist, Abbey. The bill he drafted would have put a paralyzing strain on education in neighboring districts. You don't take from one to give to the other. It wasn't a good plan. I told him that his legislative team needed to rework it. He decided to go ahead anyway."

"And it failed."

"His problem was he went too large. Had the bill stipulated a little less, it might have been passable. I couldn't support it the way it was and neither could the others and now we're in this mess."

"Well, at least you won't have to deal with it for a while. That's a comfort, right?"

"No, it's even worse. It's going to be on my mind through the holidays." He drained the pasta while she continued to brown the garlic in olive oil.

"I'm sure we can come up with something to take your mind off it." She gave him that flirty eye thing he loved.

"You look at me like that once a day for the next two months, hot pants, and I'll be saying 'Olson who'?" He set the pasta strainer on a plate. "When are you going to be ready for this?"

She had just added the peeled tomatoes. "Sauce should take another 20 minutes."

Jed retrieved a baking dish from the cupboard. "Anyway, there's nothing like leaving things like this unresolved to go back to district work. Don't be surprised if I'm called back to Washington for a special session by Christmas. By the way, before this weekend's over, I'd like to pick your brain again about stem cells."

"Does it bother you that the only place we can have sex anymore is in Washington?" Totally out of the blue, but Abbey couldn't help it. It had been on her mind all day and she had to tell him. Jed stared at her blankly, both stunned and speechless. "Well, does it?"
"What?"

"Does it bother you? Every time we try to steal some time alone at home, the girls barge in or there's some kind of emergency."

Jed coated the dish with cooking spray and laid out the first layer of pasta. "I haven't..." She'd never buy that he hadn't noticed. "Yeah...I guess it does seem...inconvenient. But that's what goes along with having three kids."

"Even our date nights haven't been working out. Last weekend, you couldn't come home, the weekend before we had Lizzie's dance team competition in New York, and the week before that was Ellie's birthday party."

"I couldn't help it last week." He lowered his voice and gave her a more flirty tone. "I made it up to you last night, didn't I?"

"I'm not just talking about the sex, Romeo." She couldn't help but blush. Their lovemaking the night before had been pretty spectacular. "We promised months ago that we'd make time for us. Those weren't empty words, were they? Because they weren't to me. With you in DC half the time, I want every second of us we can get."

"Is this about me running again?" he asked more seriously now. The last time they talked about his running for re-election, she sounded supportive. Was she changing her mind, he wondered.

"No."

"Then what is it?"

Abbey added salt and crushed peppers to the boiling liquid, then let it simmer as she moved away from the stove, wiped her hands on a towel, and poured herself a glass of wine while Jed spread a thin layer of pasta and shredded cheese in the dish, waiting to mix in Abbey's sauce before adding the chunks of grilled chicken they had prepared. Jed had wanted miniature meatballs, but Abbey insisted there was too much red meat in his diet already.

"You know that conversation I had with my mom during Ellie's party? It was about our plans for adoption."

"Uh oh. Did she upset you?"

"No, because she didn't say anything I wasn't already thinking. What if I'm not so sure anymore, Jed?"

He turned from the counter to look at her as she took a seat on a bar stool near the other side. He knew she had been having doubts for weeks and had been waiting for her to open up about it.

"Then that's something we have to talk about."

"Let's." She poured him a glass of wine, a gesture to encourage him to join her.

"Okay." He wiped his hands before accepting the wine glass. "You first."

"I thought it was the right thing. It felt right at the time. Lately, though, I've been thinking maybe I was just trying to heal my broken heart, like you said from the beginning."

"You denied it."
"To myself as well as to you. I can't keep doing that. And you can't let me. I feel like I'm jerking you around and that's not fair."

"Are you saying you don't want another baby?" He held his breath waiting for her answer. Abbey's maternal instincts had been buzzing strong ever since their wedding night, when she told him, for the first time, that she was pregnant. She had only found out that day.

"I'm saying I want you."

"You've got me." He was standing in front of her stool now, between her legs. His glass was on the counter and his arms were gripping her at the waist. "Now what?"

"Why don't you tell me what you want? Did I force this down your throat?"

"No, Abbey, you didn't. If I can be honest with you, I knew after Zoey was born that we were going to deal with the question of having more children at some point. We never talked about it, but I knew it had to come up sooner or later. The miscarriage was the catalyst, not the cause."

"So why weren't you prepared for that conversation?"

"How can anyone prepare for it under the circumstances? Three of the best days of my life, after our wedding day, were the days that Lizzie, Ellie, and Zoey came into the world. Adding a fourth day to the calendar would have been a dream. But had we sat down and talked about whether or not we wanted to get pregnant again, I would have expressed concern after what we went through with Zoey. It took us a long time to heal and the fact that you were five years older would have added to my worry. To tell you the truth, I wasn't prepared because I dreaded the thought of that conversation."

"Because you thought I'd disagree?"

"I didn't want to break your heart and I thought if I laid it all out for you like that, I would."

"You have a fair point. But we've crossed that bridge already and the topic is no longer another pregnancy."

"It's adoption."

"Yes. You had the right idea, Jed. I would have feared carrying another baby too."

"Adoption is a great plan..."

"If we had another 30 hours in the day," Abbey finished for him.

He stared at her adoringly, sweeping her hair off her face. "I know you had it all sketched out as a little girl. You wanted the big house, the big family, a bunch of kids, and a nice career. That's what you wanted, and it's what you got."

"A nice career - check. Three fabulous daughters - check." As a child, Abbey always wanted girls. "And I also wanted a wonderful, handsome husband. The jury's still out on that one."

Jed lowered his finger slightly to pinch her hip. "Don't press your luck, doll face. This husband could use himself as bait for all the other fish in the sea."

"He wouldn't dare!" Abbey grabbed his arms before he could let go of her and soon, they were back in position with him in front of her stool with his arms around her. "I think something went
haywire with my childhood fairy tale."

"No, it didn't."

When Jed waltzed into her life like Prince Charming on New Year's Eve 1965, Abbey's whole world changed. Her medical school aspirations, still alive in her heart, were postponed so she could follow him to the London School of Economics. They waited until the summer after their college graduations to marry and going to London afterwards was Abbey's idea. She knew Jed wanted to study at LSE as much as she wanted to study at Harvard. They were young with nothing holding them back, so they reached a compromise before they tied the knot - four years in London and then they'd return to the States so Abbey could pursue medicine. But Elizabeth was born and Abbey was torn between motherhood and entering a demanding field that would eat up her time for much of her daughter's childhood. She thought she could survive the juggling act and to some extent, she was right, but occasionally, she missed her mark and she felt that sometimes, Lizzie still held it against her. It was hard to blame her from Abbey's point of view since in some ways, she still held it against herself.

Elizabeth didn't resent Abbey. She just wished now and then that her mother didn't have such a time-intensive career. It would have been easier if Abbey had wanted to be a school teacher - just as noble a profession without all the crazy on-call hours that came with medicine. Of all the girls, Abbey's professional commitments were the hardest on Lizzie because for the first several years of her life, she was her mom's shining star, the center of her universe, along with her father. Even through the first two years of med school, Abbey managed her studies without losing too much quality time with Liz. During her third year, when Liz was 5, it was a little more complicated and at the start of residency, when Liz turned 7, everything changed. Ellie was less than a year old Abbey's first month of residency so she didn't know any better and Zoey wasn't even born until Abbey was almost finished with her training. Liz was the one who knew how it felt having her mother to herself those early years and though she realized it was selfish, she missed it.

"You're right on-course and this fairy tale will end in a happily ever after," Jed went on. He was always such an optimist. "This is how life is supposed to be. It's supposed to have ups and downs and what-ifs and should'ves and could'ves and would'ves. If we had always done everything, made all the right decisions, and followed the one and only path available to us, we'd have nothing to talk about."

It was a way to make her smile and it worked. "That's what I'm getting at. Cynical realities - real or imagined - aside, I think I drew us into adoption for the wrong reasons. I'm seeing that now, slowly but surely."

"Let me ask you something. Last year, when we found out that you lost the baby and you wanted so badly to have another one, you looked me in the eye and told me you weren't trying to make up for the past. Was that for my benefit?"

"It was true for the most part. I mean, I also told you that I wanted to experience motherhood at this point in my life, remember? That was where my head was at. Now that I had some control over my schedule, I thought it would be easier, more laid back. I felt that I could do it right, whatever that means. I even flirted with the idea of closing up my practice and being a stay-at-home mom for a few years."

"Come on."

"I'm serious. When I found out I was pregnant, Jed, I was so excited thinking that this time, it would be perfect. I didn't have any real obligations. Why couldn't I close up shop?"
"Of course you could, but there are a truckload of reasons why you wouldn't." That was a thought Jed couldn't take seriously. Abbey had told him a thousand times that it took many years to build a decent practice. Giving hers up at this stage wouldn't have been practical. She might have entertained staying home with the baby, but she would have soon realized that she was at her happiest when she could be a mother and a career woman all at once.

"You're right. I wouldn't have been content, especially without you around. What I'm getting at is that as unreasonable as it was, the only thing that put a dent in the grief of the miscarriage was my fantasy of raising another child - undistracted, without the commitments I had when our girls were little."

"Why did that help?"

"Because it gave me an answer to the question 'why did we lose our baby'? The miscarriage wasn't in vain if it was God's way of telling us it was the right time to have another child. It sounds silly, I know. It even sounds silly to me right now."

"It doesn't sound silly." Jed struggled for a response. "I've gotta be honest with you, sweetheart, you kinda caught me off-guard. I didn't expect to have this discussion today."

"I needed to get it out. It's been eating at me for weeks. My wanting another baby - now - wasn't the right decision. And it wasn't for the right reasons, on either of our parts. I know you only went along with it for me."

"I'd do anything for you, but having another child...it's not like that was going to be my gift to you. I love our children. I'd have ten more if we could."

"It's just not the time for another one." He shook his head in agreement as she sipped her wine. "Now that I'm hitting you with all this, there's something that's been bugging me for a while and I haven't wanted to bring it up because I figured you dealt with it in your way and I have no right to judge."

"Spit it out."

"Why didn't you cry?" He didn't say anything. "When we lost the baby, you didn't cry. I cried...a lot. Why didn't you? Did it not seem real to you because you had just found out?"

"Abbey..." He let go of her, stunned by the direction of the conversation for the second time.

"That's what I kept telling myself. I had known I was pregnant for days while you only found out several hours before. Plus, people deal with loss differently and you've never been much of a crier. Even when your mom died, you held it in. You didn't let go until the day of her funeral, but this time..."

"Stop," he said. "What makes you think I didn't cry? I didn't cry in front of you, no. I had to take care of things, to take care of you. But that doesn't mean that I didn't shed private tears when you weren't around."

"When?"

"When they took you into surgery, I went to the hospital chapel and I lit a candle for the...for our child. I cried. I cried in the shower, in the car, when I was alone."

"Why not around me?"
There was no other way to say it. "You were consumed by grief. When I took you home after the procedure, you were inconsolable. You needed to mourn in your own way. The last thing I wanted was you worrying about me."

"But it would have helped."

"I can't imagine how it would."

"I wanted to know that you were feeling what I was feeling. I know you, Jed. I know that the man I love would have been as devastated as I was. But you kept it all in and I didn't understand why."

"I wanted to be there for you."

"You were there for you."

"I mean really there, without my own crap getting in the way."

"Are you kidding me?" Looking into his eyes, she cupped the back of his neck. "You were there for me in ways I'll never forget. You comforted me, you held me while I sobbed, you even took me away to the Poconos to help me heal - emotionally and physically. I wouldn't have made it through without your patience. You were my rock, Jed - then, now, always."

"I did what any husband who loved his wife would have done. I did what you would do for me." Modest to a fault.

She stroked his cheek with the back of her hand. "Every day you find new ways to remind me why I'm blessed to be married to you."

That drew a smile out of him. "Do you remember when you told me you were pregnant the first time? I was petrified. But you weren't. You said that it was going to be the most incredible adventure. That's when I knew, without a doubt, that you didn't know what the hell you were talking about." She laughed. "You were right though. And over the years, there have been moments when one of us has veered off-track and it's been up to the other to take over for a while. It's like a pendulum swinging back and forth. Sometimes you need me, sometimes I need you. That's what this was - you needed me and I had to be there. That's how it's supposed to be. It's gonna happen again, we know it is. Next time, it'll be my turn."

"And we'll get through it, like we always do." She framed his face with her hands, still looking him in the eye. "No more hiding your feelings for my sake. We tear down our walls around each other - or at least, we should."

"We do most of the time."

"Let's try for all of the time."

"You're on."

Abbey threw her arms around him as Jed moved in to kiss her.

"So, what do you say?" she asked after they pulled away. "I'll call the adoption agency on Monday and tell them that we're not ready for an addition to our family just yet."

"I'd prefer to wait. It's not the end, it can be something we consider in the future. Or not. We'll figure it out one way or another."
"I can live with that. If it feels right later, we'll do it. If not, it'll just be the five of us."

"Yeah."

"And who knows, maybe once the girls grow up and leave the nest, we'll find that we like the peace and quiet."

"Yeah, right." Not much chance of that, he thought. Abbey was born to mother someone and if it wasn't the girls, it would be - much to his chagrin - him.

"Excuse me?" She feigned being offended. "You think I'm going to mother you, don't you? Go ahead, call me a nag, I dare you."

Jed slid her wine glass away before she drenched him with it. "Boo boo, you're the sexiest nag I know!" That didn't stop her from tossing the dish towel at his back as he turned to check on the casserole. "If I don't get this thing in the oven, we'll have to skip dinner."

"Don't touch my sauce! I'll do it myself."

"Did you or did you not abandon it on the stove?"

"For a minute. I'm back now."

"And as protective of it as ever I see."

"You would be too." She dipped her spoon into the saucepan and pulled it back out, covered with her thick and delicious marinara. "Here, taste."

"Mmm." Savoring it, Jed closed his eyes. "That's incredible."

"It's all in the herbs." She stepped in front of him to stir a bit more.

"And the chef," he said from behind her as he leaned forward to plant a kiss on her cheek.

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After an early evening dinner, Jed and Abbey had to get ready for their night on the town. Jed had managed to score two tickets to see the National Symphony Orchestra perform at the Kennedy Center. They enjoyed the top-tiered Boston Symphony and visited Symphony Hall or Tanglewood whenever they could back home, so they were looking forward to hearing the highly respected and closely ranked National Symphony in person for the first time.

Abbey was giving herself the once-over in the floor-length mirror when Jed walked into the bedroom.

"You're gonna stop traffic in that thing," he said, watching his wife shimmy the sexy black number over her hips. It was a Tadashi cocktail dress with a cut-out at the waist that was covered with sheer see-through black mesh. It had a sweetheart neckline outlined with a string of Swarovski crystals. The sleeves were long and cupped at the wrist and like her waist, they too were done in sheer black mesh. It hugged her in all the right spots, from her breasts to her hips to her rear. She was gorgeous.

"You don't look so bad yourself," she replied. He was always dashing in his tux, but tonight, he had a particular glow about him. And his piercing blue eyes were so playful, it was hard to resist not yanking his chain. "I've worn this dress before by the way."
"No you haven't."

"Of course I have. I'm delighted that you noticed it this time."

"Abigail, I'm telling you, if you had worn that dress before, I'd know it. And so would you because it would have holes in it from where I ripped it off your body." He closed the space between them. "Which is precisely what I want to do now."

"Yeah?" If only the concert started an hour later.

"Why are you giving me a bad time?" He reluctantly brought himself back down to earth to finish getting ready.

"Because it's fun." With her dress on and her make up finished, Abbey ran her brush under her thick mane of hair. Under so that she wouldn't disturb the soft waves that tumbled slightly past her shoulders. She had already run her fingers through them to get out any tangles, but she didn't want to ruin the curl with a brush. "Is it possible I'll be ready before you?"

"Highly unlikely." He held his ground though he was still searching for his silver cufflinks.

"Why?"

"Some things are so predictable, they should be law."

He had a point. In 20 years, not once had she been ready before him - until tonight. Jed's tux fit beautifully, but as he flipped his jacket over his head, he tore the seam and had to wait for Abbey to sew it for him. She needled him about his 'universal law' philosophy and overconfidence, pointing out the irony over and over again. Jed had been a good sport about it, but he made it clear that her ribbing would be dealt with later, when he had more time to give her a taste of her own medicine.

Once Abbey was finished sewing, she handed him his jacket and this time, she held it out for him so he wouldn't risk another tear and then, she straightened his bowtie as she always did when he wore his tux and after Jed wrapped her black cocktail jacket over her shoulders, they left their apartment, arm-in-arm.

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"Well, they're okay, but they're no Boston Symphony," Jed said as he and Abbey stepped onto the sidewalk outside the Kennedy Center. He wouldn't have dared mention it inside the concert hall, but when they were out of the building, he couldn't help comparing the National Symphony to his hometown orchestra.

"You could tell the difference?" Abbey was used to Jed favoring everything New England - from sports teams to syrup to symphonies.

"You couldn't? The National Symphony doesn't have a very deep bench in the string section. You can clearly see that the last desk string players here aren't nearly the artists that we have in Boston."

"Right." She looked straight while they crossed the street. "You're a snob."

"Couldn't you hear the thinness of their brass section compared to the full, rich, organ-like tone of our Boston players in the chordal sections? Thank goodness they weren't playing Bruckner!" He gestured to the line of taxicabs. "You think I'm a snob?"

They were heading to a trendy French café in Georgetown. His staff had told him that it catered to
the after-theater crowd and after hearing about it, he was sure that Abbey would love it. They decided to take a cab rather than navigate crowded DC parking garages on a Saturday night.

"Yes." She looped her arm through his and teased him further. "When it comes to New England - and New Hampshire - you're a bit of a snob. If New Hampshire had a baseball franchise, they'd be ranked higher than the Red Sox if you had something to say about it."

"It's called pride in where you come from, my love." He would have gone on with that thought, but he saw a vendor on the corner and he uncoiled their arms to approach.

"Jed." Abbey watched as he paid the man and returned to her with a single long-stemmed rose.

"And where I come from isn't the only thing I'm proud of," he said, handing her the flower. "You look so beautiful tonight."

She brought it to her nose, taking in the scent and beaming at her romantic and considerate husband. "Did you set that up?"

"It was completely spontaneous."

"Always quick on your feet."

"I have to be with you, sweet knees." He opened the door to the cab for her, then walked around to the other side to slide in beside her. "You like to keep me on my toes."

They gave the address to the driver and joked and laughed together all the way to the café.

TBC
"You said once to the foot bridge."

"The trail goes much further than the foot bridge." Jogging beside him, Abbey looked over at her husband. Her legs were burning from their run, but she wanted him to be the first to bail, so she gave him an out. "What's the matter? Tired already?"

"Me?" He sped up slightly to her disappointment. "I could go another five miles!"

"Careful there, Bartlet. I might just hold you to it."

"Do I look worried?"

It was a beautiful Sunday morning in Washington, D.C. Sundays in the District weren't like Sundays in New Hampshire. Even on the weekends, the bustling streets of the nation's capital never slowed down, though things were more casual - pedestrians wore jeans and jackets instead of business suits and coats, tourists flocked to the zoo and the museums instead of lining up for Capitol tours, and the parks were alive with crowds turning out for arts, jazz, and food festivals along with joggers, rollerbladers, and skate boarders taking advantage of the crisp autumn weather.

Holy Trinity Catholic Church just around the corner from the Bartlets' apartment was where Jed and Abbey had attended Sunday services early that morning. Jed had been there a handful of times - on those weekends that he couldn't make it back to New Hampshire - but it was a first-time visit for Abbey. He introduced her to the parishioners, many of whom had non-political backgrounds, which was a relief to them both. Most of the congregation had heard a lot about Abbey so they couldn't wait to meet her and within five minutes of mingling, Abbey learned that her husband had been talking her up all these months. To ask them, they'd have described her as a smart and dedicated wife, mother, and doctor. "Superwoman," that's how Jed referred to her. She teased him about it when they left. After all his bragging, they were bound to be disappointed in anyone short of a comic book superhero, she'd said. But she loved him for it and she made sure he knew that too.

They strolled through Rock Creek Park on the way home and Abbey had talked Jed into changing
into sweats for a quick run before sitting down to brunch.

"So, what ever happened with the sex ed bill?" she asked as they jogged past the fork in the path and ignored the trail that would lead them home.

"Which one?"

"The one from last winter - condom distribution in schools, the one you fought Ernie Bennett about."

"It didn't pass," Jed told her, feeling the need to explain like he always did when this subject came up. "I'm all for sex education, but like I said at the time, his bill made condoms as accessible as getting them out of vending machines. No adult supervision, no guidance, nothing, not even in health class."

"You say that a lot, you know."

"What?"

"That you're for a particular bill, 'but...'" Abbey reminded him about the school construction bill he had also supported with exception. "No bill is ever good enough as it is."

"That's not true."

"No?"

"The minimum wage bill passed as is. And I voted for it."

"That's because your office wrote it," she pointed out.

"It still counts," Jed insisted, breathing harder since he was close to a sprint at this point. "There are plenty of bills I voted for as is. Sex ed happened to be one I disapproved of for reasons I've already explained."

"Explain it to me again." Abbey struggled to keep up with him.

"It wasn't even sex ed. Sex ed implies there's an educational component. Bennett's bill required no such thing. Tell me something, do you want Lizzie dropping a dime for a condom at school without so much as a word to an adult? Without anyone talking to her about it?"

She shrugged. "I don't know, it depends."

"That's what you said last year."

"So why are you surprised I'm saying it now?"

"I thought you changed your mind. Sex education is important, Abbey."

"Yes, it is."

"Then why is it okay to get rid of the education part?"

There was a lull in the conversation as they jogged past a trio of rollerbladers. Once they were alone, Abbey started again. "I had a young girl come see me last month. She's a senior in high school and she thought she was HIV positive."
"You're kidding."

"No, I'm not. If it's a choice between Lizzie having sex and Lizzie dying, guess which one I'm going to choose."

He threw her a momentary glance, then looked straight ahead. "What happened with your patient?"

"It turned out she was negative." Abbey didn't need to tell him the girl was Courtney, a friend of Liz's and someone Jed had known since the two girls were in ninth grade.

"Thank God."

"You're right, it's not okay to get rid of the education part. That's why I'm bringing this up. I'm thinking about organizing a sex ed program at the hospital - for teenagers. It's beyond getting pregnant now. I want them to know the facts about AIDS and how to protect themselves. If the schools won't do it, there's no reason I can't."

"How would that work?"

"They always have classes going on in the auditorium and the classrooms in the lobby. I used to teach child and infant CPR to new parents down there, remember?"

"I'm talking about the other stuff. How would it work? Would kids come see you if they have questions?"

"No, it would be an actual class. Like a health class, except it wouldn't be taught in school. We'd meet once a week. It would have to be approved by the hospital and available to all teenagers whose parents allow them to be there."

"What about the ones whose parents say no?"

"There's nothing I can do about that. They're minors. I can't include them if their parents don't agree."

"What about Lizzie?"

Abbey sputtered at the thought. She didn't even have to ask. Elizabeth would never contemplate showing up to a sex education class taught by her mother, especially when there was a chance that her friends or schoolmates might be there. She would be mortified by the mere suggestion and probably beg Abbey to reconsider the whole thing.

"Lizzie knows she can come to me whenever she wants," she said. "We've already been down this road."

"When?"

"Last year, when I found her home alone with Scott."

"I thought you said nothing happened between them."

"Nothing did, but it gave me an opening. I always told Liz that if she had any questions about sex, she could ask me. Scott coming over just gave me a chance to reaffirm and to convince her there was nothing she couldn't tell me."

As they followed the curve along the shaded jogging trail, Jed asked, "So would you have time to do this? The class, I mean?"
"I'd have to make time. Maybe Wednesday evenings. Ellie and Lizzie won't be home anyway. Mrs. Wilburforce can take Zoey to her Girl Scout meetings."

Zoey had just joined a Daisy troop, Ellie was usually at soccer practice on Wednesdays, and Lizzie had cheerleading.

"You have it all worked out."

"I've given it some thought."

He paused for a minute and then said, "I think you teaching sex education is a good idea."

"Yeah?"

"It's the AIDS thing. That patient who came to see you...I don't know what I'd do if it was one of our girls who needed an AIDS test. It was easier when we were teenagers to be told not to do it, period. But in this day and age, with so many STDs we need a broader approach. With you teaching, these kids will have enough knowledge to make a well-informed choice."

"That's the goal."

"You understand it wasn't the condom part of Bennett's bill that I objected to? It was the lack of education that went with it."

"And the fact that abstinence wasn't even mentioned?"

"I'm not one of those parents who thinks that sex ed gives the green light for kids to have sex. I just don't think we should short-change teens by not making it clear that there IS a choice and waiting until their older isn't taboo, no matter what their peers might say."

"I want you to know from the get-go, Jed, I'm not gonna be there to lecture to them about abstinence. It'll be in the literature and I'll present it as one of the options, but from a medical standpoint, I can't have them feeling like I'm judging them, regardless of my own feelings about waiting."

"Presenting it as an option is all I ask."

"Done. So..." She stopped running and waited for Jed to stop too. "Will this hurt you?"

"Hurt me?"

"Politically. Are there any political ramifications I'm not considering."

Jed appreciated her concern about how this would affect him. "Everything's political when you're running for office. But you know what, let me handle that. I'm the candidate, not you, Abbey. They can make all the noise they want, they don't get to dictate what you do. And I never will either."

"If it comes up during the campaign..."

"If it comes up, I'll deal with it."

"This is important to me, Jed," she said, stretching her hamstring. "But I don't want it to be used against you."

"It'll be fine, trust me."
"So we're good?"

"As good as can be." He looked her over as he stretched his arms. She was as exhausted as he was.

"Ready to go again?" Abbey would never admit to being winded. She was breathing hard and damp strands of hair were falling out of her ponytail and curling around her face, but she still challenged him. "I'll race you to the oak tree."

"Which oak tree?"

"Over there."

Jed looked to where she was pointing - way, way, way off into the distance. He needed binoculars just to SEE that particular oak tree. He turned to face her then and saw a glimmer of defiance in her eyes, the look that convinced him that she knew what she was doing. He'd never give up a challenge. He'd run until he was falling over if she kept raising his competitive hackles and she was sure to do it unless he forced her to stop. Catching her mischievous tight-lipped grin, he bent down, lifted her up at the knees, and threw her over his shoulder. Abbey screamed and clawed at his back. "Yeah, I'm ready," he announced as he began walking home.

"JED! What are you doing?" She was upside down, bent over his shoulder, and kicking at his front. "PUT ME DOWN!"

Good thing they were on a deserted trail with no one around, he thought, or else someone might have thought he was kidnapping her with the way she was carrying on. "I'll put you down just as soon as I get you home."

"You said you could do another five miles!"

"Yeah, I lied. And so did you."

"JED!" She shouted with a mixture of outrage and laughter, so annoyed at him that she smacked his rear. "Oh, you are going to pay for this! If your back hurts tonight, you can forget a back rub! Put me down right now!"

"Relax, sweet knees. I'll put you down after we walk through the door and I unlace your running shoes." Chuckling, he returned the gesture by slapping her on her rear.

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Meanwhile back in New Hampshire, the Bartlet daughters were talking to their friends outside of church. This was the first time Jed and Abbey - after much prodding from Lizzie, Ellie, and Zoey - had trusted their girls to stay home alone for the weekend. Husband and wife decided that Liz was old enough to handle things without Abbey's parents babysitting, as long as Ellie and Zoey promised they'd respect the fact that she was in charge. Abbey was still a tad worried that something would go wrong, but Jed assured her that Mrs. Wilburforce was a phone call away in case of emergencies and her parents said they were happy to drive up from Boston if Liz needed them. So after a bit of trepidation, Abbey agreed.

That morning, Elizabeth had gotten her sisters up and ready for Sunday mass. Church wasn't just a family thing they had to do. They each had friends there and they enjoyed going, even when their parents were in Washington. After the service, Liz and Ellie said their goodbyes to their peers and headed towards Liz's car.
"Where's Zoey?" the older girl asked. No one was more apt to slip away unnoticed than Zoey.

"She was over there." Ellie scanned the crowd. "There she is, talking to Rachel. Zoey, come on, we're leaving."

Zoey skipped over to them. "Can Rachel come with us?"

"No," Liz told her.

"Why not?"

"Because Mom and Dad would rather we not have friends over."

"Your friends came over last night," Ellie reminded her.

"Tori and Kimberly came over to return my sunglasses."

"That's still not fair!" Zoey pouted. "I wanna call Mommy and ask her if Rachel can come over."

"Fine, you can call her when we get home." Liz unlocked the back door for Zoey and the front passenger side for Ellie. "So what do you guys want to do about lunch? I can heat up Mom's chicken stew or we can go out."

"OUT!" Zoey and Ellie both shouted. They were grateful that Abbey had left them homecooked meals in the freezer for the days she'd be in Washington, but if given the choice, going out was tops on the list.

"Okay then. How about we try that new place on Pine?" Liz suggested.

"Do they have grilled cheese sandwiches?" Zoey wanted to know.

"Forget grilled cheese! Do they have sweets?" It was all about dessert for Ellie. That was especially true when Abbey wasn't home.

"I don't know."

"If they don't have chocolate, I don't wanna go," Zoey agreed.

"If it's chocolate you want, we could go to this bakery I know later on. They have the BEST chocolate muffins!" Plus, Liz hadn't seen Doug in weeks and this gave her an excuse.

"Fine by me." Ellie nudged her sister with her elbow, knowing what she was up to.

"What?"

"Is this the bakery Doug works at?"

Ignoring the question, Liz looked up to her rearview mirror before pulling out of her parking space. "Buckle up, Zo."

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"Friends, Romans, Countrymen..." Jed's voice boomed with authority. "No, that's not it!"

Dressed in his Roman soldier costume, he was staring at himself in the bedroom mirror. He had on a rich brown tunic and cape with gold metallic trim, a jeweled brocade cuirass, leg guards that he
promised Abbey he'd take off because she wanted him in his bare legs, a Gallic helmet, and brown leather-strap Gladiator sandals. He couldn't have looked more like Mark Antony if he had stepped out of a history book.

"Are you still at it?" Abbey waltzed into the room in search of her costume earrings. "It's been a half hour."

She was wearing a white satin dress with gold accents around the edges. It was pleated from the waist down with a gold hip drape. She had a gold pleated cape, attached to wrist and arm cuffs, a gold-jeweled collar and beaded headpiece, and a pair of gold-strapped sandals. With her jet-black wig and long fake lashes, she looked every bit the part - the Queen of the Nile with a sexy little twist that only Abbey Bartlet could bring.

"I can't get it right," Jed grumbled.

"No one actually expects you to BE Mark Antony, you know."

"It's all in the presentation, my little flower of the Nile. No one will believe you are who you are unless you believe it yourself."

"And you're Mark Antony?"

"For today, yes. And you're my Egyptian warrior, sweet cakes."

"Don't call me that."

"Am I out of the doghouse yet?"

"For picking me up against my will and carrying home from the park?"

"Yes."

"No."

"Then I'll call you sweet cakes whenever I want."

Cleopatra and Mark Antony seemed like perfect costumes for the congressional costume party, especially this year when they were in the midst of planning their family trip to Egypt. Abbey had suggested it and Jed was thrilled by the thought of seeing her in her get-up, but he debated his entrance as Antony or Caesar for a good two weeks before he settled on one. An overzealous intern in his office wondered if someone would try to make political hay out of his choice, but Jed reminded him that sometimes a costume party was just a costume party and he was free to wear what he wanted for Halloween, politics be damned.

"Did you call the girls?" she asked.

"No answer. They must be at church still."

"Still?"

"You know how Ellie is in the mornings. They probably went to the late mass. I left them a message and said we'll call them tonight."

"Unless they call us first. Zoey called a dozen times yesterday."

Once Abbey slipped on her earrings, the pair left their apartment. It was a short drive to the Four
Seasons, where the party was being held. Jed and Abbey were helped out of their car by a valet and
they walked down a grand corridor to the ballroom. Along the way, Abbey's headpiece was giving
her trouble and when she tried to fix it, one of her clip-on Cleopatra earrings slipped off her ear.

As she bent down to pick it up, Jed chanted again beside her.

"Friends, Romans, Countrymen, lend me an ear..."

"Oh, shut up, Jed!" Abbey scolded playfully.

"I'm almost positive that's not what Shakespeare intended to come next." He pinched back her
raven-haired wig so she could clip her earring in place.

"Shakespeare never met you."

"Is it my imagination or have I provoked your sarcastic side today?"

"It's not your imagination. And that was not sarcasm." She looped her arm through his as they
continued walking.

"Everything I say today is gonna be in Latin. Will that bother you?"

"I can't imagine why I'd think that obnoxious."

"See there? Sarcasm. You're back to mocking my quest for historical accuracy."

"I keep forgetting that's what you're doing. Did the Romans wear boxers or briefs under their
tunics?"

"You're playing me now." He noted her grinning like a Cheshire cat. "I know a thing or two about
my Roman soldiers. Livy didn't cover the age-old question of boxers or briefs, but ten to one the
frisky ones would have gone commando if they could, right before they ravished their Egyptian
queens."

"Why didn't you go commando?"

"Would you prefer I had?"

"I could have gotten into that."

"What'd you say tonight, Rome invades Egypt?"

"Complete with sword play?"

"Don't kid, hot pants. It is a mighty sword."

"Who's kidding? I was merely pointing out my scabbard is ready and willing to take your sword
whenever and wherever you'd like."

"Now you're talking! Parry or thrust, what's your pleasure?"

"Why not both?"

"Let's ditch the party. I'm feeling the urge for a tumble between the sheets."

They shared one last laugh as they turned the corner to the ballroom.
The party had been going for an hour when Abbey excused herself to the powder room to adjust her headpiece. It was heavy and had been causing a headache ever since they left the apartment. After giving herself a quick reprieve, she ran her fingers through her wig, slipped the headpiece back on, and headed to the ballroom, looking forward to another dance with Jed.

Unlike other congressional parties, this one was casual and relaxed. There was some political maneuvering going on, but for the most part, it was a time to hobnob with colleagues and celebrate the adjournment for the holidays. Right up Jed's alley, Abbey thought as she crossed the entrance to the ballroom. She searched for her husband and found him cornered in the back of the hall by a familiar face, one she wished she could forget.

It was Christine Price, Jed's former communications director, the woman he had fired after her loose-lipped comments to Elizabeth and Ellie made both girls feel uncomfortable and compelled Liz to run to her father with a warning that a woman on his staff, the most trusted advisor in his office, was falling for him. When Jed confronted her, Christine admitted her attraction and then planted seeds of doubt in his mind, undermining his confidence and making him feel like a wide-eyed idealist not ready for Beltway politics. Of all her transgressions, the latter was what steamed Abbey the most. She could get past the inappropriate remarks and the school-girl crush the moment Christine left the building, for she knew that Jed had never led her on, but the fact that she had the nerve to peck at him after being called out on it, to make him feel incompetent - and at a time when Jed was just finding his footing in Washington - was unforgivable.

Abbey watched as Jed tried to skirt around her. From what she could hear, Jed wasn't being receptive and Christine was keeping a distance between them, though it sounded like she was wishing him well. Once again, Jed tried to leave and this time, Abbey threaded her way through the crowd to help, her jewels making enough noise that it turned Christine's head. She saw Abbey heading towards them and excused herself quickly.

"What was that?" Abbey asked Jed.

"She's here with a legislative aide in Congressman Bennett's office - where she'll be working starting in January."

"Bennett hired her? So what, she wanted to let you know? Did she think you'd give a damn?"

He saw a spark of jealousy in her eyes. "I don't know what she thought when she walked over here, but I assure you, I don't give a damn."

"Did she say anything else?"

"She said she regrets the way we left things."

"I'll give her something to regret." Her eyes on Christine, Abbey charged forward with a purpose.

"Whoa!" Jed grabbed her by her cape. "This is why I call you my Egyptian warrior."

"Are you mocking me?"

"No," he smiled. "Though it would serve you right after all the mocking YOU did today. But no, I'm not mocking you. I love you and I don't want Christine to ruin the party for us. Promise me you'll let her be."

"Bennett hired her out of the blue? Did he do it to provoke you?" It wasn't top secret that Ernie
Bennett was a political rival of Jed's.

"I don't know why Bennett does anything he does, including this. But I'm not going to let it get to me. He can have her and all the drama that comes with her." He extended his hand to Abbey. "Let's dance."

And so, they swayed in each other's arms, lost in the melody for a good long while as Christine worked the room, occasionally looking over at them. Her feelings for Jed were as good as buried, but she was still infatuated. She had never met such a strong and charismatic man, as charming and sincere as he was handsome. She threw them one long glance that didn't go unnoticed by Abbey, and when she made contact with her, Christine was immediately intimidated.

Abbey Bartlet could shred leather with her eyes. She had a soft and gentle side to her, but when anyone dared to harm her family, she transformed into a lioness, protecting those she loved. In this case, Christine had hurt Jed with her criticisms and Abbey had never gotten over it. It was easy to ignore since she hadn't seen or heard from Christine since Jed fired her, but once their eyes met across the streamers and crate paper in that ballroom, it was clear that anger was still bubbling inside her.

Jed was called away moments later by one of his colleagues and Abbey took the opportunity to join Christine at the bar.

"Where's your date?" she asked, hopping up on the stool beside her.

"He'll be back any minute." Christine sipped her drink. "Cleopatra, huh? Wasn't she a little loose with her love?"

"Depends on which x-rated version you've been reading." Abbey looked her over. "Guinevere?"

Christine glanced down at her costume. "Yeah."

"Fitting." Abbey cocked her brow. "We didn't get a chance to talk after what happened with the girls."

"The girls? Nothing happened with the girls."

"My daughters are protective of their father so when you drooled over him that day at the office, they came home and told us."

"Oh, for chrissakes, I wasn't drooling. I remarked that their father was a good-looking man. Quick, get the Scarlet letter!"

"It wouldn't be your first." Abbey hit back with an icy tone. "I don't know exactly what you said to Liz and Ellie, but I do know that you made them uncomfortable and suspicious. And that aside, it no longer matters what you said because I heard about your confrontation with Jed when he asked you about it. The things you said to him directly were more than sufficient."

"Sufficient for what?"

"To know exactly what kind of woman you are. You had a crush on him. That's okay, I'm used to women finding Jed attractive. But when he made it clear you had no chance in hell, you lashed out like a woman scorned."

"That was hardly lashing out," Christine sniped. "Your husband thought I made a pass at him, which I didn't."
Abbey chuckled at that. "You didn't lose your job because of a misunderstood romantic overture. You lost your job because you proved you were no longer able to do it professionally by gushing over him to the girls. And when he confronted you about what you said to them, you tried to level the playing field, to tear him down. Your way of getting even, I presume, because he didn't return your feelings."

"Is that what he told you?"

"He didn't have to tell me. We shared a good laugh over the things you said." That was a little white lie. Jed was angry and hurt by Christine's venom, but there was no way Abbey would have told her that. "None of the things you said were true and we both knew it. It was just you being spiteful. It's not like we hadn't seen it before."

"That's telling."

"He and I used to joke back when he was a professor about some of the female students on campus who had a crush on him. It was harmless and we thought it was cute. In your case, it's...just sad. You're a grown woman, making goo-goo eyes at the boss? And a married one at that?"

Struck by her words, Christine fired back. "Do you ever think about what your husband does when you're not around? In his office at Dartmouth? On Capitol Hill? Do you really think he would never stray? Do you really think he's above it all?"

"Yes," Abbey answered firmly. "Hard as it may be for you to believe, there are some men who take marriage vows seriously. Jed happens to be one of them. Not that that matters in your case. Even without a ring, you're not his type. But I'm not here to talk to you about that."

"No?"

"I came to tell you that I know this wasn't a first for you. Jed never checked your references because Derek hired you for the campaign and Derek knew you from other projects the two of you worked on in the past. But I did check up on you after Jed let you go. It's a habit with you, isn't it? You work your way around Capitol Hill or on congressional campaigns and you seduce the men you work for. It's the power thing that attracts you."

"I don't know which references you called, but whoever told you that is lying."

"Do you want me to name names? I will - publicly."

"That's ridiculous."

"If you're planning to get back at Jed by compromising his reputation or attacking him personally, I promise you, I will sing like a bird." Her eyes wandered across the room to a woman chatting it up with a crowd. "You see that Roll Call reporter over there? She's been working the room all night for a scoop."

"Roll Call reports on congressional happenings. Their readers couldn't care less who I'm seeing socially."

"They will when they find out your little black book is filled with the phone numbers of senators and congressmen who happen to be married. They may not care so much about you, but how well does adultery go over at the ballot box these days?"

Christine's mouth tightened at the threat. She had dated extensively in Washington and though she denied it when accused, several of her lovers had been married. "Fine, you made your point."
Abbey didn't like threats, but when it came to Jed, she did what she had to do to protect him, especially since she thought he might be outnumbered. To her, it was no coincidence that Jed's biggest rival on the Hill hired the woman who had a score to settle. She wasn't about to let Ernie Bennett and Christine Price team up against Jed without warning them that if they came in fighting, she would fight them back.

Whether or not Abbey would actually do it was another story. She wasn't vindictive and she certainly didn't like the idea of intentionally hurting anyone innocent - in this case, the wives of those adulterous men - but there was no reason Christine had to know that. If she believed Abbey's threat and thought that Abbey would follow through, then she wouldn't cause Jed any problems.

"Your new boss is no fan of my husband's," Abbey went on. "And I suspect that's why he hired you. Jed is trying to do some good. He's not here to play high school games with you or Congressman Bennett. He's trying to serve his district. You're going to drop the woman-scorned act while he does. You have genuine political matters to discuss? Fine. Don't make it personal."

"And this conversation..."

"Will stay between us." She casually rose from her seat, then paused to whisper softly to Christine, "I've always wondered what kind of person it takes to sleep with a married man. Someone with no conscious, no self respect, and no regard for the woman sitting at home wearing his ring. The men you're seeing are scum. They're the ones who owe their wives their fidelity. But just because you didn't take a vow doesn't mean you're entirely off the hook. There's a special place in hell for women who knowingly help to screw over other women."

And with that, she left Christine to ponder what she had said. But as she walked away, she found herself coming face-to-face with Jed. He had heard the very last part of her speech and knew right away that he had missed Abbey at her most feisty. Part of him was turned on by her like this and the other part was slightly annoyed that she had confronted Christine after he asked her not to.

Abbey bumped his shoulder as she walked past. He followed her out to the terrace.

"Looks like I missed quite a show," he said outside.

"Don't be angry."

"What did she say?"

"Nothing she hadn't said to you already. I just needed to confront her. I never got a chance to last spring."

"What good did it do?"

"It was something I felt I had to do. Can you try to understand that?"

"Do you feel better now?"

"No. I won't feel better until you say you're not mad at me." She would tell him about Christine's extracurricular activities later. Now wasn't the time, not with the party still going on around them. "Come on, say you forgive me?"

Jed left her squirming for a few minutes, then realized he couldn't stay mad at her. He leaned in to give her a kiss. "Leave it alone for the rest of the party, okay? I wanna forget about Christine tonight."
She melted into his arms, happy that he wasn't miffed. "I promise. I'm sorry I ignored you the first time."

"Do you regret it?"

"I didn't say that," she replied, razzing him with a smile. "I wish I had explained to you why I had to talk to her and I wish you had been okay with it before I did."

"Well, at least you admit you were wrong for once," he said superiorly. "I'll hold on to that."

Abbey swayed her hips, still smiling at him with her hands holding his. "I'd rather you hold on to me. Dance with me, Jed."

Alone on the terrace, Abbey clasped her hands around his neck and stared into his eyes as they danced to Patsy Cline's "Crazy" and a few songs that followed. And then, they said their farewells to Jed's colleagues and left the party to get an early start on an evening at home.

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A round of historic trivia about Caesar, Cleopatra, and Antony in the car turned into sexy wordplay in the elevator and by the time they made it home, Jed and Abbey raced to the bedroom, where Abbey threw Jed on the mattress and crawled on top of him. Neither had changed out of their costumes, which only made it more erotic to them both.

Jed moaned breathlessly as his erection swelled against her hands. Abbey worked her fingers around him, gliding them up and down, gently massaging him until she was ready to open her mouth to take him. He clawed at the sheets when she did and the helmet that had fallen off his head when she first pushed him onto the bed, fell off the side and rolled across the floor. His tunic was easily manipulated and his cape had been ripped, his underwear torn off his body. He was naked from the waist down, but from the waist up, he was still her Roman soldier and even more alluring than that, he was still her Jed.

His eyes slid closed, but even behind the lids, he couldn't mask his desire. He gasped with every stroke of her tongue and every time she sucked gingerly at his tip while her hands were busy cupping him below, his back arched as if the bed was on fire. Abbey hungered for him, hungered to feel his now-throbbing appendage inside her body. She lifted her long, pleated skirt and straddled him, taking his penis and rubbing it along her center. Poised at her entrance, Jed pushed himself up and watched as Abbey threw her head back when he pierced her.

His hands grabbing her above the waist and pulling her forward so she was lying directly on top of him, he rolled them over so fiercely that her wig nearly fell off and stray strands of hair spilled out from under it. The headpiece, earrings, cape, and hip drape were gone, but her dress was still intact, though now it was pooled into a tangled mess at the top of her thighs. Jed bent down to kiss her on the mouth. Over and over again, he dropped kisses to her face, her neck, and down to her cleavage while moving inside her. His thrusts slowed to a rock and he savored the feeling of her feminine walls clenching around him, the way her hips pushed up against his, and the lustful sparkle in her pretty green eyes as her fingers roamed all over his back, from the top of his spine to below his rear, pulling him into her as if trying to meld their bodies together.

No one could read Abbey the way Jed could. He knew how she'd respond to every touch, every sensation. Whether it sent a chill up her spine or a tingle between her legs, he could see it in her eyes. That was one reason he always locked his eyes into hers when he made love to her. If she didn't like something, he stopped, and if she did, then he'd do it again and again until he had her writhing helplessly on the mattress.
He slowly pulled out of her and before she could protest, his mouth grazed the skin from her shoulders to her breasts and down towards her waist, over the fabric, and to her bare hips, exposed when he lifted her skirt up higher. She parted her thighs, opening herself up for him once again and waiting for him while her whole body quivered in anticipation. He dipped his head between her legs and kissed her at her core, that sensitive bundle of nerves that drove her out of her mind. Once, twice, a third time, he flicked the little nub with his tongue. His tongue jutted out to penetrate her then as he made love to her like this, his mouth open wide to blanket her most intimate parts with his hot breath. Abbey curled her fingers around his hair and when he pushed his tongue deeper and deeper inside her while his lips tightened around her, she lost control, hitting her climax and screaming his name.

Jed sat up when it was over and then, he entered her again, this time with his penis. He had done a good job of restraining himself up until now, but he needed his release and there was no faster way than with her muscles repeatedly contracting around him right after an orgasm. Feeling him thrust in and out of her sent Abbey over the edge again under a whirlwind of sensations that rendered her practically paralyzed from the waist down. It was a shorter climax than the last one, but it felt just as good. With her legs wrapped around his hips, she summoned her strength, held onto his back, and somehow managed enough momentum to roll them over once again. She took control this time, her hands pinning him down to give herself leverage to move on top of him. She leaned back and squeezed him tight when he was buried to the hilt. Jed grabbed her hips, his fingers digging into her tangled skirt and the bare flesh underneath as he helped her grind against his body, all while watching her breasts bounce inside the fabric of her Cleopatra top with such intensity, they were nearly busting out through the seams. Finally, unable to hold back any longer, he let go, exploding inside her with a cry of her name.

Abbey kept moving until he was no longer biting down on his lower lip, then slowed her pace, and eventually stopped. She leaned forward, running a finger over his sweat-stained brow. "I love you...every inch of you."

Fighting to catch his breath, Jed held her in his arms, their chests touching and their hearts beating rapidly. They stayed like that, quiet and exhausted, wrapped in a tight embrace until they both dozed off, awakened only minutes later by the ringing phone on the nightstand.

Abbey nudged Jed to get it, assuming it had to be Zoey.

Jed groggily reached for the receiver. "Hello?...yeah." He sat up with a start. "What? Where are they?"

"Jed?" Abbey was alarmed now. She sat up too. "What is it?"

He lowered the receiver and told her, "The girls were in an accident."

TBC
Previously: Abbey told Jed she had plans to organize a sex-ed program at the hospital; after running into Jed's former communications director at the congressional costume party, Abbey exchanged some not-so-friendly words with her and warned her not to make trouble for Jed or interfere with his political agenda on the Hill; Jed got a call that the girls were in an accident

Summary: The Bartlet girls are at the hospital following the accident; Jed is less than pleased about Liz and Doug

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The flight back to Manchester was a tense one. Jed and Abbey held hands as they soared through the dusky sky from D.C. to New Hampshire, neither of them saying a word. After the call from Abbey's parents, they had cleaned up and changed out of their costumes and into their regular clothes. Abbey packed their things while Jed called the airline and then they had hustled down to the lobby to flag a taxi for the airport in silence, their movements synchronized as if the whole thing had been choreographed and each had rehearsed the part they would play.

All they knew was that a driver had run a stop sign and plowed into their daughters as they were pulling out of a parking lot. Although Ellie had hit her head and was taken to the emergency room, no one was seriously hurt, they were told, but neither would breathe a sigh of relief until they saw all three girls with their own eyes.

As darkness fell over New England and the plane began its initial descent, Jed felt Abbey's fingers tighten around his. He leaned over and said steadily, "They're just fine," as much for her sake as his own.

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If there was one thing Elizabeth wished she had done differently that day, it was to wait for Ellie to be settled in her seat before taking off. The girls had left the bakery and gotten into the car when she had asked both her sisters to buckle up - Zoey, in the back seat and Ellie, up front in the passenger's side. The volume on the radio was low, the street was dry, and it was a lazy Sunday afternoon without any traffic.

Soon after Liz pulled out of the parking space, Ellie realized that the bag with the chocolate muffins was in the back. Too impatient to wait until they got home, she unbuckled her belt and turned around completely, on her knees, reaching behind her over the top of the passenger's seat. Liz, meanwhile, hit the brakes at the exit to the shopping center. She saw a pick-up truck off in the distance, beyond the stop sign that she thought would slow him down. It all happened so fast. She pulled out onto the narrow service road. The truck hit them before they even made it to the main road and the impact knocked Ellie off her knees and sent her crashing into the dashboard.

"ELLIE!" the older girl screamed from the depths of her lungs.
The next several minutes were a blur. Liz jumped out of the car - after seeing that Zoey wasn't hurt - and went around to the other side to help Ellie. The sound of the collision was heard in the bakery and Doug rushed out when he saw it was Liz who had been hit. He ran over to her, but she was too busy with Ellie to initially notice him. All those first-aid tips Abbey had taught her over the years came in handy as Liz tended to her younger sister, asking her questions about school and the latest sixth-grade trends to look for signs of confusion.

Ellie talked casually to both her sisters, insisting she was feeling well, despite the knot in the back of her head and a few bruises on her face from where she bounced off the dash and hit the seat. The fact that she had been dizzy for a few seconds and the force with which she was knocked around still concerned Liz, though, and she decided to take her to the hospital just to be safe. She gave Doug her grandparents' phone number when he offered to help and asked him to tell them to meet her at the emergency room.

"Make sure before you say anything else, you tell them that no one's badly hurt," she warned. "If you don't, they'll freak out and worry all the way up here and when my grandfather worries, he drives too fast."

"Do you want me to go with you to the hospital?" Doug asked.

"No, just call my grandparents please. I don't know if the doctors will treat Ellie without them there."

"Okay, I'll take care of it."

"Thanks."

He gave her a reassuring nod, then turned to walk back into the bakery with the Barringtons' phone number in-hand.

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"Grandma, I swear, she's fine," Liz insisted as she greeted James and Mary outside the E.R.

"Where is she?"

"Waiting room. We haven't been here too long. The triage nurse said it would be a few minutes, but she didn't seem all that concerned so I'm taking that as a good sign. I tried to call Mom and Dad, but I got no answer."

"We called them before we left," James said. "They left for the airport right away so you probably just missed them."

Liz nodded, relieved that her parents were on their way home. "How did you guys get here so fast?"

"It's a Sunday. The interstate was quiet."

The trio joined Ellie and Zoey in the waiting room and a short time later, Mary accompanied Ellie to an exam room while James stayed with Liz and Zoey. He noticed Liz rubbing her shoulder a few times, but didn't say anything until she creased her face as if she was in pain. It had been bruised by the seat belt, she told him, and now that the adrenaline had worn off, it was feeling sore. James urged her to get it looked at by a doctor. Liz agreed, adding her name to the patient list.

When the nurse called her back, the teen looked over at her grandfather. "I'd like to go alone, if
"That's okay."

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah. I doubt it'll take very long."

"I'm coming with you!" Zoey announced anyway, running towards Liz.

"You stay here with Gramps, Zo."

James held out his hand to his youngest granddaughter. "Come on, Zoey."

"No, Lizzie, I want you!" Zoey cried. She had been clinging to Liz the whole afternoon, distressed after the accident and scared for Ellie. Liz was the one who took charge, the one who knew what to do and how to do it. The last thing Zoey wanted was to be separated from her after the day they'd had.

"Zoey, they're gonna send me for an X-ray and you're not going to be allowed in the X-ray room."

Seeing the fear shining beneath a layer of fresh tears in Zoey's eyes, Liz kneeled down in front of her. "I'll be back before you know it. In the meantime, can you do me a huge favor? You've been so brave all day. Can you look after Grandpa, make sure he doesn't worry?"

Elizabeth could read her baby sister like a book. If there was one thing that Zoey always wanted, it was to feel like she was taking care of someone the way everyone else always took care of her. Being the youngest was tough, especially in a family like the Bartlets. They all looked out for each other - from Jed and Abbey to Liz to Ellie to Zoey, they were protective of one another. But while Liz frequently watched over Ellie and Ellie frequently watched over Zoey, it was Zoey who had no one to care for - usually.

"I will." As predicted, Zoey agreed. It made her feel important and in control on a day when she had been feeling so helpless.

"Thanks." Liz gave her a big hug. "I love you, Zo."

"I love you too."

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Jed and Abbey landed at the airport, collected their bags, and hurried to the emergency room, where Zoey was polishing off a donut Liz had bought her from the cafeteria when she returned from her X-ray. Doctor's orders called for an ice pack and some rest to heal her shoulder and she had been given a couple of aspirin to help with the pain and inflammation. Ellie was being prepped for a CT scan to confirm her doctor's suspicions that all she had was a bump on the head and Mary was told they would call for her as soon as the 11-year-old was finished. She and James were sitting with Liz and Zoey in the waiting room when Jed and Abbey burst through the double doors.

"Mommy!" Zoey jumped from her seat and ran into Abbey's arms.

"Oh, Zoey!" Abbey breathed her name, holding her tight. "Liz, get over here."

"I'm sorry," Liz said, standing. She had remorse written all over her face, feeling that she had let her parents down after they trusted her to stay home with her sisters. "I didn't see him coming."

Jed opened his arms to his eldest daughter, blame the furthest thing from his mind. "Forget that. Are you okay?"
"Yeah, we all are. They're running tests on Ellie, but they said it's just a goose egg, nothing serious."

"It wasn't Lizzie's fault," Mary volunteered so there would be no doubt.

"The police cited the other driver for running a stop sign," James added for the same reason. "The girls did nothing wrong."

No surprise to Jed. "That's what we thought. Liz is especially careful when she has Zoey and Ellie in the car."

Abbey set Zoey down and turned her doctor eyes to Elizabeth. "Lizzie, what hurts?"

"Nothing, Mom."

"You're lying."

It was uncanny how Abbey always knew. "It's just my shoulder. It's a bruised muscle or something. The doctor said to put ice on it."

"Fifteen on, fifteen off, starting now. I'll ask a nurse to get an ice pack." Abbey looked to her own parents. "Where's Ellie?"

"They're getting her ready for a CT scan," Mary informed her.

"I want to be with her."

"I asked. They wouldn't let me."

"I'm on staff. I have some pull around here. Jed?"

"Go ahead," he said. "Tell Ellie I'll be back to see her just as soon as they give the okay."

As Abbey raced towards the nurse's station, Doug drifted through the door, looking for Liz.

"Doug?" Liz called out to him.

"There you are!" He picked up his pace when he saw her. "Where's your sister? Is she all right?"

"The doctors are still with her, but I think she'll be fine." Liz gestured to her father and grandparents. "This is my family. Guys, this is Doug Westin. He's a friend of mine. He was there right after the accident and he's the one who called you, Grandma."

Jed shook the young man's hand, his lips tightly sealed even though he had a million questions for Elizabeth. He had told her he wasn't comfortable with her friendship with Doug, so what was she doing with him during the accident? It wasn't time yet to ask those kinds of things, so he bit his tongue. Until later.

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"All I'm saying is that you're not supposed to mess with medical supplies." Abbey unlocked the door to the farmhouse and ushered Ellie in, Jed, Zoey, and Lizzie right behind.

"Blah, blah, blah, blah, blah." Jed refused to defend himself anymore. Abbey had been harping on him ever since he grabbed a roll of gauze at the hospital and wrapped it around Ellie's head while entertaining her with little known facts about Egyptian mummies.
"Do you know how many times I've reached for gauze in the recovery room only to find there wasn't any because of pranksters like you?"

"No, how many?"

"You're not half as amusing as you think you are."

"I'm twice as amusing as I think I am." He smiled. "I wanted Ellie to know the bruises didn't have to ruin Halloween."

"She's not dressing up as a mummy."

"Who cares. It made her laugh, didn't it?"

He had a point. After he finished with Ellie and wrapped another roll of gauze around his own head, Ellie must have giggled for a good 15 minutes. Abbey lectured him afterwards because, as a doctor, it was the right thing to do, but she was secretly chuckling too, grateful for his sense of humor on an otherwise gloomy night.

"You're a bit of a comedian."

"Took you this long to figure it out?"

Shaking her head at her husband, Abbey addressed the girls. "All right, everyone upstairs. Get ready for bed. Liz, I'll bring your ice pack up for you. You can all sleep in our room tonight if you want."

"Like a big slumber party!" Ellie was thrilled by the thought and if Ellie was excited, so was Zoey.

"Elizabeth?" Jed waited until Zoey and Ellie were halfway to their rooms before calling for Liz.

She walked back down cautiously. She wasn't naive - at least not about this. She had seen her father's face at the hospital and knew he had more to say about Doug. "I'm tired, Dad."

"We all are, but this is important. What were you doing at the bakery today? I told you I didn't want you seeing Doug anymore."

"No, you didn't."

"Liz."

"Dad, you never said that. You said you were uncomfortable with our friendship and that I couldn't date him, but you never said I had to end it or that I couldn't go to the bakery."

"You didn't know that's what I meant?"

"Why would I? You've never told me who I was allowed to be friends with before. And I don't think you have a right to do it this time. There's nothing serious between us. We just talk - at a public place, in front of other people."

"He's 20 years old."

"And I'm 17! In some countries, I'd be old enough to get married without your consent."

"Not here, you're not."
"Time out, guys." Confused, Abbey interrupted. "I was with Ellie when Doug arrived. What did I miss?"

"Lizzie was driving out of the parking lot at the bakery when she was struck."

"We stopped in to buy chocolate muffins, that's all!" Liz was quick to point out. "Doug had nothing to do with the accident. He was just trying to help by showing up at the hospital. He was worried. You wanna blame someone for the crash, blame me."

"The only person I blame is the one who ran the stop sign," Jed assured her. "This isn't about the accident. It's about you getting in over your head."

"Like I told Mom, there's nothing other than friendship going on between me and Doug. Why is that so wrong?"

"Because it is."

"That's not an answer."

"Everything about it is wrong, Elizabeth. When you're older, you'll realize that as grown-up as you think you are now, you're really not. You're still somewhere between being a child and being an adult. You and Doug are in two entirely different worlds."

"Three years means nothing at our age."

"Three years means nothing at 27 and 30 maybe, but at 17 and 20, it's a lifetime. Look at how you've matured emotionally since you were 14. That was only three years ago."

"That's different."

"Doug's got three years on you. He's already finished two full years of college. That's two years of being on his own, two years of fraternity parties and girlfriends who spend the night, two years of God knows what else. Meanwhile, you still have stuffed animals on your bed."

"Why do you have to do that? Why can't you take my feelings seriously instead of acting like I'm a little girl who can't relate to people older than she is?"

"That's not what I meant."

"Mom's cool with this, why can't you be?"

"When did I say I was cool with it?" Abbey asked.

"We talked about it."

"Your translation's a little off. I told you I was concerned about you and I still am. The only reason I backed off that night is because you told me that once you figured out how you felt about Doug, you'd talk to me about it."

"Well, guess what - there's no need for a talk now because I already know what you're going to say. You're gonna agree with Dad. Terrific." Liz slammed her palm down on the banister, starting the trek upstairs.

"Before you stomp your way to your room, try to understand where we're coming from," Jed reasoned. "If the idea of Doug sounds the least bit romantic to you, we have a reason to be worried, especially now that your mother and I are telling you this. It probably sounds even more romantic
now - the forbidden love, Romeo and Juliet recreated in our own house. This isn't make-believe, Lizzie. This is real life and Doug is not your Romeo."

"Fine, I get it. But why can't you try to understand where I'M coming from? I'm not even asking to date Doug and you're freaking out. How do you think that makes me feel?"

"This isn't what I would call 'freaking out.' I just want to be clear so there aren't any misunderstandings."

"Then it's not working because I don't understand. Somehow, you managed to turn something platonic into something romantic."

"You're saying you never thought about Doug in that way?"

"So what if I did? It's not a crime to daydream, is it? And this isn't just about Doug, Dad, it's about me too. In less than a year, I'm going away to college. When do I get to make my own decisions about relationships?"

"When you prove you have good judgment."

"Is that supposed to be a dig about Scott?" Ordinarily, Liz knew her father would never throw something like that in her face, but it had been a long, stressful day and she was overly sensitive.

"Of course not."

"I got hurt last year with Scott, but I didn't break. So why can't you let my friendship with Doug play itself out and let whatever happens happen?"

"Spoken by someone who's never raised children," Abbey returned. "If we were just trying to save you from a broken heart, honey, you'd have a point. That's not all this is."

"Then tell me what else you're worried about so I can put your mind at ease."

It was Jed's turn now. "There's an entire world out there, Elizabeth, that you have never seen. You'll learn all about it in the coming years. This year, you're supposed to be having the time of your life. Your SATs are done, college essays are written, the applications are in the mail, all your hard work is paying off. Senior year is supposed to be a time to enjoy yourself - with your peers, people your own age who are going through the very things you're going through. We just don't want you to sacrifice one minute of your youth. Once you're in the real world, things get much, much harder."

"You're afraid Doug will drag me kicking and screaming into some other world, as if I don't have a mind of my own?" she complained rhetorically with an attitude that made Jed cringe.

"If you want to talk about this, adjust your tone."

Stepping between them, Abbey feared things were going downhill. "Look, it's obvious we're not getting through to each other tonight and the last thing any of us want is a fight. What do you say we sleep on it and resume this conversation tomorrow?"

"And in the meantime?" Liz asked. "Can I call him?"

"No," Jed said firmly.

"How did I know that was coming? You won't even give an inch."

"Whenever I give an inch, you want a mile. No, you can't call him."
As Liz took the stairs in a huff, Abbey waited until she was out of earshot, then stared at her husband.

"That wasn't necessary."

"I felt it was."

"We've never disapproved of her friends before," she told him, heading towards the kitchen with Liz's ice pack.

"She's never been friends with a grown man before." Jed followed. "And it's not just friends. Friends I can learn to cope with. You should have seen the way she said goodbye to him at the hospital, the look in her eyes. I think she's falling for him."

"That's what I thought when I saw them at the Homecoming game."

"Why can't she like guys her own age?"

"She did - last year. You didn't like him either." Abbey reached into the freezer for more ice.

"I did like Scott. I liked him a lot until the day he came over to get lucky when you and I weren't home. Other than him, I've been nice to every boy she's ever dated. This time, she's asking too much." He noted Abbey's lack of response. "You think I'm wrong?"

"No, I don't. Everything you said was right on, which is why I wish you had held it in until tomorrow when there's a chance that she might have been receptive."

"What makes you think she would have taken it any better tomorrow?"

"She was in an accident today, Jed. Her nerves were on-edge. The last thing she needed was to be lectured."

He took a beat, then said, "Yeah, you're right. I jumped the gun. It would have been better to wait." Another beat. "I made a mistake."

"Doug didn't impress you, did he?"

"I don't know him. I'm grateful that he was concerned enough to come to the hospital and maybe he really is a fine young man. If she was a few years older, I'd butt out and let her make up her own mind. But she's still 17 and that alone makes me question Doug's motives. He's on a campus full of women - women of legal age, I might add. What the hell does he want with a high school senior who's still a minor?"

"Maybe he has an innocent crush."

"I know Liz is a spectacular girl and all that jazz and guys her age couldn't do better, but I also know how a healthy college man's mind works. You and I met when I was Doug's age, remember?"

"I do." Her eyes twinkled at the fond memory of meeting her future husband for the very first time. "Did you have dirty thoughts about me that night?"

"How do you think I knew I couldn't be a priest?" His stroll down memory lane was short-lived. "And those are probably the kinds of thoughts Doug Westin's having about our underage daughter, which is why she can't go out with him. We're on the same page on this one, right?"
"For now."

"What does that mean?"

"Instead of us forbidding her, I'd rather Elizabeth come to the conclusion on her own that Doug's too old for her."

"She will eventually."

"I'd prefer we help her realize it. She's going to be faced with all kinds of decisions when she's at college. I want to know that she's capable of making the right ones."

"She IS capable, but that doesn't mean she's immune to the wrong ones. She's still a kid."

"No, Jed, she's not. Especially not after this past year. She's responsible and mature. And she steps up when we're not around. Look at today with Ellie and Zoey. They raved about her. They said she took charge and calmed everyone down, got Ellie to the hospital, called my parents to meet them there. She's not a child anymore."

"To me she is."

"She'll always be our baby, but she's not a child." Abbey set the ice pack on the counter and took her husband's hands. "It was hard for my dad too."

"What was?"

"Reminding himself that I was no longer five. People grow up, even daddy's little girls."

"Lizzie was much sweeter at five. When do they become sweet again?"

"Twenty-one, I think."

"Some days, I can hardly wait." His arm now wrapped around her, he led her out of the kitchen. "I'll go talk to her."

Abbey handed him the ice pack. "I'll get the bed ready."

"Slumber party in our room?" he questioned as they walked upstairs together.

"With a pillow fight."

"Maybe I should sleep in the spare room."

"And deprive me the chance to pummel you with my pillow?"

"You're all gonna gang up on me."

"Only because we love you."

He rolled his eyes as they reached the top landing. "You know, if we'd had boys instead of girls, I would have protected you from them."

"Oh poor Jed, about to beaten up by girls."

"Like hell, I'm fighting back this time. There's gonna be a knock-down drag-out and I'm gonna be standing at the end. You better warn them."
Abbey laughed. Jed was so gentle with the girls, he was sure to be the one knocked down. "You go get 'em, champ."

She was mocking him, but he didn't care. He simply made a mental note - his first target would be Abbey.

They parted ways then - Abbey heading in the direction of the master bedroom while Jed approached Lizzie's room. He knocked on the door twice, then let himself in when he heard a muffled response he thought sounded like "come in."

"Your mom stuck up for you after you stormed off to your room." It was important to Jed to tell her that. In the past, Liz sometimes felt that Abbey was the rigid one, unwilling to give her any freedom.

"I thought she agreed with you," the teenager replied, lying on her bed with her back to her father.

"She does, but she thinks I was a jerk to bring it up tonight. Do you think I'm a jerk?"

Liz turned her head to see him. "If I say yes, will I be grounded?"

"Yup."

A mutual smile.

"Can't you just get to know Doug?"

Jed sat down on the edge of her bed, brushing her long brown hair aside so he could apply the ice pack to her shoulder. "Why is he so important to you? Is it the principle? Is it that you want to spread your wings and he gives you a sense of independence? Is it that you're trying to rebel against your mother and me? What is it that draws you to him?"

"It's not about you and Mom. There's just something I like about him. It's how he makes me feel. I can be myself around him and he thinks that's super."

"I'd be willing to bet you a month's allowance that there are ten guys at your school who think of you just as highly as Doug does."

"It's not the same, Dad. Guys my age are still boys. Part of Doug's appeal is that he's beyond high school melodrama. He's different, you know? And when I talk to him, I feel different too. He's like one of my girlfriends, except that he's older and he has...I don't know, insight? About things and people. I like that about him. I like hanging out with him. I even like bickering with him. Did you know I started off not liking him at all? We had this crazy he-said-she-said dialogue where it was like we were in competition to try to get in the best one-liners."

"How did you go from that to this?"

"If I said I didn't know, would you believe me? Something just...happened. Over the summer, he and his buddies came to Friendly's and when he found out I worked there, he came back - a lot. During my breaks once or twice, we shared an ice cream cone at the walk-up window and I guess since neither of us was trying to impress the other, we were free to just talk. I got to know him. It's as simple as that."

His features scrunched slightly, Jed asked, "The same ice cream cone?"

"Different ice cream cones. He had his, I had mine."
"Ah." More acceptable. "He's more than a friend, isn't he?"

Liz thought about that question for several seconds, before she nodded, admitting it for the first time. "In my heart, he is."

"That's what I was afraid of." Jed stood up.

"Is it really that terrible?"

"Yes!"

"Why?"

"Because you're 17."

"So what?"

"It's wrong, Elizabeth. You're still a minor and he's...not."

Immediately regretting opening up to him, she barked, "Then why did you bother coming in here?"

"I wanted to say I was sorry for not holding off on Doug until tomorrow. But if I made you think I came in here because I changed my mind..."

"You used to tell us that if we came to you, you'd keep an open mind. You used to say the most important thing to you was for Ellie, Zoey, and I to feel like we could turn to you. When did that change?"

"It didn't."

"Yes, it did. I just told you how I felt about Doug and you're not even willing to hear me out. I didn't even admit it to Mom. I didn't tell anyone, not even my friends."

Jed always had a special bond with Liz and in that moment, the bond strengthened just a little more. "Why did you tell me?"

"Because you asked at the right time," she answered simply. After all the months of being confused and denying it, she was confident admitting it now. "I wasn't sure until today, when he came to the hospital because he was worried about Ellie. Yeah, I do like him as more than a friend. And I don't want to lie to you, Dad. That's why I'm giving it to you straight. If I visit Doug at the bakery now and then, does it really hurt anyone? It's not like we're alone at his apartment or even in his car. Why is it such a sin to hang out with someone I care about, someone who cares about me?"

"Sweetheart, I don't know anything about Doug, but I do know a thing or two about college men."

"Can't you put everything you know aside and get to know Doug...without any bias? You might find that he's unlike the college men you're thinking of."

"That's doubtful."

"Will you just meet him? Not like you did tonight, but a real meeting. I can invite him over for dinner so you can talk to him, flesh him out if you want to. Right now, you're judging him before you've even had a conversation."

"Nothing he says is going to make me think he's a suitable boyfriend for you."
"No kidding." She gave him a faint smile with that bit of sarcasm. "That's not why I want you to meet him."

"Then what's the point?"

"I want you to see that I haven't lost my mind, that I do have good judgment. I want you to have faith in me and in how I read people. One dinner, that's all I'm asking."

It was clearly important to her, partly because of his earlier words about her judgment, but Jed still had doubts. "And then what?"

"Nothing, on the dating front. I won't push any further right now. I just want you to be cool with me talking to him at the bakery."

"Until your 18th birthday, when you'll go riding off in the sunset with him?"

"When I'm 18, I'd like to revisit the subject, yes. If you get to know him now, that gives you almost five months to mull it over."

"Oh my God."

"What?"

"Five months? What kind of scary ass world do we live in that YOU'RE going to be an adult in five months?"

Liz threw her pillow at him. "Can I invite him over for dinner?"

It sounded fair. After all, once she was 18 and off at college, Jed knew he would have no say in her relationships. Meeting Doug now would undoubtedly lead to less stress and worry later. "All right, look, ONE dinner. He comes over, we meet him, we talk to him, and that's that. Don't you dare lead him to think you're going out with him afterwards."

"I promise. Dinner with the family and that's it."

"Regardless of what happens, the age difference is still going to be a sticking point for me, even when you're 18."

"We'll deal with it then." Liz was too happy to argue about it now. "I'll call him and set something up."

"Hold off on that until I break the news to your mother."

"Mom won't say no. And if she does, you and I can talk her into it."

"Let me deal with it. If I'm not in the doghouse when I'm finished, we'll sit down and set a date." Jed opened the door.

"Dad?" Liz rose to her feet and moved in to hug him. "Thank you."

"I'm agreeing to this because I trust you, Lizzie. You're not going to assume I'm giving you the green light to go out with him?"

"No."

He looked her in the eye as he pulled away. "I was wrong to bring all this up tonight. It could have
and should have waited."

"It's okay. I knew it was on your mind at the hospital. I'm glad we talked about it."

"So am I."

It meant a lot to Jed that Liz had told him the truth about her crush on Doug. That was something he assumed she'd confess to Abbey long before she told him, but he had caught her in a moment of sincerity, when she felt safe enough to be completely candid and put everything out on the table. Those moments were rare, as far as Jed was concerned. Like all teenagers, Liz sometimes hid things from her parents, but unbeknownst to them, she was rapidly approaching the stage in life when she was starting to realize they weren't just her guardians, but also her biggest supporters.

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"Ellie started it!"

"You've worn that line out, Zo."

"But it's true!"

Back in the master bedroom, Zoey and Ellie had crawled into Jed and Abbey's bed and following a disagreement about sleeping arrangements, Ellie had hit Zoey with her pillow. Zoey had hit back, which jump-started an all-out pillow fight and before Abbey could intervene, feathers rained down on all of them, leaving a mess she was trying to clean up when Jed strolled through the door.

"What the hell?"

"Don't ask." Abbey turned a stern eye to her two daughters.

"When you said a pillow fight, I thought you meant a civilized one."

"I did."

"Yeah, well, the girls missed your memo. Looks like someone slaughtered a bird in here." Jed looked over at Zoey, who was still holding the feathers from his pillow. "Did you have to use mine?"

"Sorry," the five-year-old squeaked out.

"Did you smooth things over with Liz?" Abbey asked.

"Yeah."

"Is she going to join us?"

"Maybe."

"What happened?"

Jed intentionally headed to the hall to pick up another pillow from the linen closet, a fair distance away from his wife. "She asked if she could invite Doug over for dinner and I foolishly said she could."

Abbey hollered out the door. "What?"
"Doug's coming for dinner," he hollered back.

"What the hell happened in there?" Abbey approached him in the doorway. "Jed?"

"See, this is the problem with me handling the girls. They manipulate me and before I know it, I'm agreeing to things I don't want to do."

"Bull." She wasn't buying it. Jed could be a big teddy bear when it came to his daughters, but he could also be strict when he had to be.

"Would you be terribly offended if I said this was your fault for making me talk to her in the first place?"

"Jed!"

"It was important to her, okay? For whatever reason, she likes talking to this guy and she wants us to meet him. I made a deal with her - one night, one dinner, that's it."

"It's going to stop there?"

"At least until she's 18. You're the one who said you thought we should help her realize Doug's too old for her. We've got five months and one meal to do it. Let's get him out of her system so we can all move on with our lives."

"This isn't her way of sneaking out for a movie with him afterwards?"

"Absolutely not. It's out of the question, we're already clear on that."

"One meal? What happens if we like him?"

"That's impossible."

"Why?"

"He's 20 years old and he has a thing for my teenage daughter. What are the odds that I'm going to like him? Besides, the little I saw of them today..." He shook his head. "I have a gut instinct about people and let's just say that Doug and Liz - they don't mesh."

"Has this gut instinct been tested before?"

"He's not the one, Abbey, I can tell. There's someone else out there for Lizzie. She just hasn't met him yet."

TBC
Zoey Bartlet was a natural snoop. Whether it was the harmless fun of playing with her friends on Saturday mornings, pretending to be a member of the Shirt Tales crew battling crime in the forest, or sneaking around the Bartlet house on her own and eavesdropping on her family, she enjoyed spying. Jed often teased that she'd grow up to be an international spy or more likely, a private investigator.

Liz and Ellie frequently put Zoey's skills to use for their benefit. It was Zoey they turned to if they were waiting to hear a decision from their parents, like the time Liz wanted a second piercing in her ear or the day Ellie asked to join her school's ski club. Creative and devious, the little girl with strawberry blond pigtails and big green eyes was always willing to do their dirty work, and one Friday afternoon in November - when her sisters had talked her into keeping watch out the window to give them the heads-up when Jed and Abbey returned from parent-teacher conferences at school - was no exception.

"THEY'RE HOOOMMMME!" the kindergartner alerted them, sprinting upstairs and into Liz's room as soon as she saw her parents' car navigating the icy drive. "You're about to get in trouble, Lizzie!"

"I'm not going to get in trouble!" Liz returned, lying on her bed with headphones on her ears.

"Could have fooled us." Ellie followed Zoey into her big sister's room and stood at the doorway, passing a soccer ball from hand to hand. "You've been cranky all afternoon. Come on, what did you do?"

"I didn't do anything!" Liz turned her head as if to hide her guilty expression.

"You can tell us," Zoey pleaded. "We're the three musketeers and if one musketeer is in trouble, all the musketeers should know."

"For the last time, I'm NOT in trouble!" Liz sat up then and ripped the headphones off. "Fine, I'll tell you. I got detention for being late to European History again."

"Mom warned you about that last time."
"Yes, I know, Ellie. I don't need a lecture. Mr. Grayson's so strict about it! If you're not sitting in your chair when the bell rings, that's it, he writes you up."

"When's detention?"

"After school on Monday - for an hour."

"Sucks."

"So you ARE in trouble!"

Liz stared at Zoey. "It's just detention and it's my first one after 12 years of school. They can't be mad about this. Anyway, with any luck, they'll forget all about me when Mrs. Roberts tells them that you still talk during story time."

"I do not!" Zoey protested the allegation, but her denial wasn't very convincing. It was no secret she hated story time. Being read to was one thing, but sounding out words on her own to read to herself was quite another.

"You did last week."

"Mommy already knows about that. Mrs. Wilburforce told her."

"Yeah, but Dad didn't get to weigh in yet."

"You think he'll be mad?"

"I don't know, but he's sure gonna have something to say about it."

The sound of the front door closing downstairs ended that discussion and Zoey and Liz braced themselves to hear who would be called down first. On the sidelines, Ellie continued to toss her soccer ball up in the air, undisturbed by the thought of her parents meeting with her teacher.

And that's when it happened - Jed's voice boomed. "Ellie, can you come down here please?"

The girls all looked at each other.

"Me?" the blond addressed her sisters. "What did I do?"

"Maybe you're not as perfect as we thought you were." Liz laughed as she dodged the ball Ellie threw at her, and with a narrow-eyed glare aimed at the gloating brunette, the sixth grader headed downstairs.

"Hi," she said, greeting her parents.

"Hi." Jed saw Zoey starting down the steps as well. "May I help you?"

"Is Ellie in trouble?"

"No, Miss Busybody. Get back to your room. We'll talk to you in a few minutes."

"I wasn't in my room, I was in Lizzie's room."

"Lizzie's room then. And you can tell her that we know she has detention on Monday and we'll have a thing or two to say about that in a little while."
Ellie watched her little sister stomp her way back to Liz's room before turning her curiosity to Abbey. "What'd I do?"

"Nothing. Come over here and talk to us for a minute." Abbey draped an arm around her and led her to the living room as Jed walked beside them.

"Your teacher had some wonderful things to say about you," he started. "She said you're courteous to your peers, always helpful in class, you do all your homework. She did say that you still forget your assignments at home sometimes."

"Sorry, I'm trying to get better about that."

"That's not what we want to talk to you about, Ellie," Abbey told her. "She says you're bored, that all your time is spent tutoring others on worksheets and assignments that you understood and completed right away."

"I'm not bored. It's fun helping them." Ellie enjoyed teaching her classmates.

"Well, what do you think about challenging yourself a little more?" Jed sat with her on the sofa. "Your teacher says that you're so smart, sixth grade is too easy for you. She asked if we wanted to bump you up to junior high."

"Junior high? When?"

"After Christmas break. Your mom and I can get the books and start teaching you what they've been learning this year. Mrs. Johnston offered to work with you at school, to start you on some handouts. You'll be ready to start seventh grade with a brand new semester in January."

Ellie looked to her mother. "Do I have to?"

"No, sweetheart, you don't have to. But wouldn't it be nice to be in a higher grade? You can get through junior high and high school a year earlier, start college a year earlier." Abbey joined her husband and daughter on the sofa.

"I like my grade and I like my school. I have friends there. If I go to seventh grade without them, I'd have to make all new friends. East Manchester Junior High, right? That's where I'd go? It's a bigger school - A LOT bigger - and they change classes. We have one class for everything. We don't have lockers or stairs or more than one floor in the building."

"You'll have to go to East Manchester at some point anyway," Jed reasoned with her. "Either now or next September. So why not get used to it early?"

"But in September, I'll have my friends with me...and all the other seventh graders. We'll all be new together and we'll all be getting used to it. If I go now, everyone else will know what to do and where to go. And I'll be the new girl, the one who doesn't know anything or anyone."

It was only one grade above her own, but the difference between elementary school and junior high was significant, and for a shy girl like Ellie, transferring to a new school in a new grade in the middle of the academic year was too radical a change. Not only would all her classmates be older, but they would have had six months on her when it came to adjusting to a period-schedule, lockers, gym uniforms, and most importantly, to each other.

"You'll make new friends in no time," Jed assured her. "And the teachers will help you get used to it all."
Once again, Ellie looked to Abbey. "I really don't want to. I like the sixth grade."

It was the second time Ellie had turned to her mother, an unintentional gesture not meant to disrespect Jed. She just didn't feel comfortable saying no to him when he was obviously in favor of her moving ahead in school; at least, not as comfortable as she felt saying it to Abbey.

"Well, it's a big decision," Abbey agreed. "Instead of giving us an answer now, what if you think it over for a while and we can talk about it again in a few days?"

"Are you gonna make me do it?"

"It'll be your choice, Ellie. The only thing I want you to do is think about it. I mean, *really* think about it. And if you have any questions, you can ask me."

Liz poked her head in then, a dash of hesitance in her voice. "Dad? Sorry to interrupt, but it's getting late and we were going to go shopping. Doug's gonna be here in a couple of hours."

"Yeah, before we do that, get in here and bring Zoey with you." Jed used a sterner tone to add, "I know she's hiding behind the corner."

Zoey appeared a second later, guilty grin and all.

"Liz, when were you going to tell us you got detention?" Abbey asked.

"Right now."

"Two days after the fact."

"I would have told you Wednesday, but you were at the hospital really late and I was in bed when you got home. And yesterday, you were on-call."

"I was here," Jed countered. "I've been working in the Manchester office all week and I've been home every night."

"I wanted to tell you together. It's only fair that you both find out at the same time," Liz cracked a mischievous smile when Jed chuckled. She was full of excuses, even when she knew they wouldn't fly.

"What happened?" Abbey went on.

"It was a hectic day all-around. My mime class ran over. I rushed down the hall, but I hadn't cleaned out my locker in a while and when I opened it to get my book, everything fell out so I had to waste two minutes shoving it all back then, then I got stuck in a traffic jam near the cafeteria, and by the time I made it to Mr. Grayson's class clear across the building, I was standing right outside the room when the bell rang."

"And he gave you detention?" Jed questioned.

"Yeah, he's so strict about tardiness! Just because I wasn't in my seat..."

"His class, his rules," Abbey said. "You get six minutes between classes. That's plenty of time to get to where you need to go, yet this is the second time you've been late to Mr. Grayson's class this semester. If this mime teacher runs over a lot, maybe you should change your schedule."

"MOM! I can't! I love it! It's important to me." Mime was Liz's favorite elective.
"Mr. Grayson's class is important too. If there's an overlap, I think European History is going to do you more good than pantomime."

"Amen." Jed had to admit he had fun learning some of Liz's mime techniques, but a choice between that and any history class was no contest as far as he was concerned.

"I'll make sure I'm out of the theater on time from now on!" Liz promised. "No more detentions."

"That's all I ask. And if there are detentions in the future, I want to hear about it from you, not your teacher. Got it?" If there was one thing Abbey couldn't stand, it was being caught by surprise by her daughters' teachers. Ellie had pulled a similar stunt with her book report the year before.

"Yes."

"Now..." Jed handed his eldest daughter an envelope he had brought in with the day's mail. "Would you mind opening this please? It's driving me crazy."

"It came? No way!" Liz held it tight in her hands, her fingers shaking. College decisions weren't due back yet, but she had applied Early Decision to the University of New Hampshire in case she failed to get in to one of the private schools she wanted to attend.

The envelope was thick and Jed had pretty much guessed what it was the second he pulled it out of the mailbox. He tried holding it up to the sunlight to be sure, but Abbey had smacked his arm and dragged him inside and he had been anxiously busting at the seams ever since.

"Open it, Lizzie!" Ellie encouraged her.

"I can't." Liz looked up at her family now standing before her just as nervous as she was. "This piece of paper could change my life. If it says no, I'm gonna be a wreck tonight and with Doug coming over...I can't."

"I can!" Jed grabbed it from her. "Watch me!"

"DAD!"

"It's a thick envelope, Lizzie. They never say no."

"It could be a first." She grabbed it back. "I'll open it after Doug leaves."

That wasn't good enough for Ellie. She snatched the letter. "I say we open it now and TELL YOU after Doug leaves."

"NO!" Liz insisted, taking it back. "I'll open it myself - later."

"It's Lizzie's call, guys. She worked hard for this, she gets to decide when to open it."

"Thanks, Mom."

"You're welcome."

"No fair." Ellie started to mope out of the living room with Zoey on her heels, plotting how to get the envelope away from Liz.

"Funny, I thought it was plenty fair." Liz followed her sisters.

Jed waited until they were gone, then harassed his wife for her intervention. "Spoil sport."
"Like you don't know what it said."

"I want it confirmed."

"It is confirmed." Abbey continued quieter, "When you held it up outside, I saw the 'congratulations.'"

"You're just as big a sneak as I am!"

"And we wonder where Zoey gets it from."

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"UNH has an award-winning gymnastics team. Did you know that?" Liz may not have opened the letter, but she was positively beaming at the possibility of her first college acceptance. Buzzing with facts about the University of New Hampshire, she helped Jed scan the aisles at the grocery store.

"I didn't. What else do they have?"

"Swimming, basketball, volleyball, cross country track, all the regular sports. Oh, and they have a women's ice hockey team too. I don't think I'd be interested in that though. I'm thinking gymnastics definitely, basketball, and maybe lacrosse or crew."

"When will you have time to study?"

"I'll get it done. You wouldn't want me to be strictly about academics, would you - holed up in my dorm room 24/7 with no friends, no sports or clubs, just me and my books, obsessing over grades?"

"There's quite a bit of middle ground between being a recluse and a sports maven-slash-social butterfly. I don't want you to spread yourself too thin and get burned out before the end of your first semester." Satisfied with what they bought, Jed pushed the grocery cart towards the registers.

"I'm skilled at time management."

"Good because college is what you make of it, Lizzie. If you can juggle all your balls, you'll have an amazing experience and memories to last a lifetime."

"I can't wait!" She browsed the newsstand at the front of the store. "Maybe I'll see about joining the student paper, take a journalism class. That might be fun. Listen to me, I don't even know that I've been accepted yet and already..." Her stare fixed on one particular headline on the front page of the Union Leader, she nudged her father. "Dad?"

Jed looked up to see it - 'Congress To Debate Stem Cells.'

---

"Do you think I'm smart enough for the seventh grade?" Ellie was helping Abbey prepare steaks for dinner when she broached the subject again.

"Of course I do."

"Not as my mom, but just...you know."

"Not only have you been blessed with intellect, Ellie, you also have the talent of learning things very quickly. If we brought in a half dozen seventh-grade textbooks right now, I bet you could
teach yourself everything they've learned the past two months."

"If it was just that, I'd do it. But I'm worried about other stuff."

"Starting a new school you mean?" Abbey asked affectionately, not a hint of judgment in her tone. "I know it can be scary."

"I hate the first day of school as it is. If it's my first day and no one else's, it'll be even worse. Plus, it's a big school and I have to get used to finding my way around, using a locker, having a different teacher for every class. And everyone else will already have their cliques. They'll have their seats all picked out in the cafeteria for lunch and they'll have their teams in P.E. I'll be the odd girl out wherever I go."

"It would be easier if you were being bumped from fifth to sixth grade or from seventh to eighth. Or at least if it was at the beginning of the year."

"Couldn't we do that? Couldn't I finish sixth grade with my class and then get bumped next year?"

"It's not entirely up to us, sweetheart. If you stay where you are now and the material still comes easily to you next year, we can see about moving you ahead then. But that's all contingent on a lot of what ifs. The opportunity's at your door right now."

"I don't know."

"Think about it, okay? And remember there's no pressure. There's nothing wrong with staying in your own grade and graduating with your class. Nothing at all."

"Dad'll be disappointed."

"No, he won't."

"Yes, he will. He was disappointed that I didn't jump at the chance, I could tell." Neither Ellie nor Jed were good at reading one another. What Ellie took to be disappointment was Jed's regret at not being the parent she turned to.

"Your father wants you to be happy with your school and comfortable enough in your class to learn as much as you can. That's the most important thing. Besides, something we didn't talk about earlier is that you're already a year ahead in a way. We started you in kindergarten when you were four because your birthday was before the cut-off. Had you been born a week later than you were, you would have had to wait an extra year to start."

"That's true. So that makes up for it if I decide not to skip a grade now?"

"It doesn't mean you should dismiss the chance without careful consideration. I still want you to think about it, but saying no isn't the end of the world, for anyone." Abbey wiped her hands on a towel. "Hand me the peppercorn?"

- - -

"How can they call a special session without telling you?" Liz was fuming about the article in the Union Leader. She'd overheard her parents talking about stem cells and knew it was an important issue for Jed, so for someone to have jumped the gun and leaked it to the press before he was ready, made her angry.

"They didn't call a special session. Congressman Adams just said he wants to." Jed led the way to
the car.

"He's from the second district right here in New Hampshire! Why is he trying to screw you over?"

"He's a Republican."

"So just because his party's against stem cells, does it mean he has to be?" Liz began loading the groceries into the back seat after Jed unlocked the door. "This kind of research has the potential to treat diseases that have been incurable for decades, centuries even. Why is he playing politics with it?"

"You're not considering the possibility that maybe he's actually against it."

"Why would he be?"

"I don't agree with his position, Lizzie, but this is a controversial topic. It's not just about medical science; it's about faith and religion and to many people, it's a very personal subject. It's not black and white."

"But why now? Congress is in recess. Why is he trying to start something?"

"There's been a ban on government funds for embryonic stem cell research since 1973. It expires at the end of this year and Adams wants to reaffirm it as soon as possible because he's apparently heard that I'm interested in resurrecting the debate in January."

"Who could have told him that? Do you have a leak in your office?"

"No." Jed had faith in his staff. "Things get out sometimes. Washington may be a big city, but it's a business town, you know what I'm saying?"

"Do you have to go back?"

"Maybe."

"Will it ruin Thanksgiving?"

"Nothing will keep me away for Thanksgiving. Hey, let's stop worrying about this. There's something else I want to get into."

"What?"

He loaded the last of the groceries, slammed the door, and held out the keys for her. "You're going to drive us home."

"Dad, I don't feel like driving today." She turned from him.

"Elizabeth..." Jed jumped in front of her. "Remember when you were seven years old and you fell off your bike and skinned your knee so badly, you swore you'd never ride again? We're going through the same thing with the car. The accident was two weeks ago and you haven't driven since."

"I don't want to drive." Liz was fine with being driven to school by Jed or Abbey every morning and hitching rides with her friends in the afternoon. She even took the school bus one day - something she hated - to avoid getting behind the wheel.

"Yes, you do."
"No, I don't."

"Well, I'm your father and I say you have to." He suspected that wouldn't work. "Okay, not really, but I'd like you to."

"There's still ice on the roads."

"The roads are clear and we're five minutes from home."

Liz leaned up against the car and said softly, "I'm scared."

"I know you are. That's why I want you to do it. The accident wasn't your fault, Lizzie. You're fine, Zoey and Ellie are fine. No one was seriously hurt."

"But it could happen again. I could hit someone or someone else could run into me."

"Yes, they could. That's why you need to learn to drive more defensively. You need to look out for everyone else, not just yourself, and the only way you're going to get better at doing that is by practice. Starting now."

"What if we crash?"

"Then we die," he said, tugging on her hair when she didn't laugh. "You used to have a sense of humor."

"I don't anymore, not about this. Driving isn't a game."

"Finally, you realize that!"

"And accidents aren't funny."

"You're right. It was a bad joke. I shouldn't have made it." And again, he held the keys out for her. "Come on, take them."

She did as he suggested this time. "Fine, but I'm gonna drive super slow!"

"Drive at whatever pace you're comfortable with," he told her as he walked around to the passenger's side. "All I want is for you to get behind the wheel again, just like you got on your bike."

"I'm stopping at all the yellows!"

"That's a good policy."

"And I'm gonna have my emergency lights on the whole way!" She slid into the driver's seat. "That's fine for now, assuming we don't get pulled over."

"And we should keep the radio off!"

"Always a good idea." Jed pulled his seat belt over his chest. "I hate that garbage you call music anyway."

"Dad?"

"Yeah?"
Her hands gripping the steering wheel tightly, she confessed, "I'm still scared."

"I'm right here with you, Lizzie. I'll get you through it."

Jed's support comforted her, just as it had on her first bike ride after that nasty fall. Liz took a deep breath, then put the key in the ignition, lifted her foot off the brake, and began the journey home. It was a quiet ride for the first minute or two down the two-lane roadway. But as cars started crowding them - a few heading into the on-coming lane just to pass them and others tailgating directly behind - Jed fidgeted in his seat.

"Liz?"

"Yeah?"

"You might want to, you know, put your foot on the gas pedal."

"Why? Can't we just drive like this?"

He turned his head to see the half dozen cars lining up behind them. "Only if you want to lead an angry convoy back to the farm."

Glancing up at her rearview mirror, Liz saw the parade of vehicles. "No one has any patience around here."

Jed noticed the way she gently stepped on the gas, every bit as reluctant as he thought she'd be, and her white-knuckled death grip on the steering wheel didn't inspire much confidence. He took a different approach to ease her anxiety. "Tell me, what do you think I should do about Adams?"

"NOW? You wanna talk about that now?"

"Why not? The roads are clear, you're driving down a straight path - at 15 miles per hour, I might add. I've seen turtles move faster."

"I'm not going any faster!"

"I'm not suggesting you should. Just tell me what you think I should do about Adams."

Liz was still shocked by the question. "You're asking me for advice on a political situation?"

"Yeah. It sounded like you knew what you were talking about back there. How would you handle Adams if you were in my position?"

"Well, first, I'd want to find out if he's testing the waters or if he's serious. If he's trying to extend the ban on stem cell research, I'd do some behind-the-scenes detective work to scope out his allies. If others are backing him, then I'd want to line up support on my end."

"That kid looks like he's about to cross the street up ahead," Jed pointed out.

"I see him."

Satisfied that she was following his advice and looking out for everyone else on the road, he went on, "So if I don't have the votes on my end, what should I do?"

"I'd have your legislative team read over the ban from 1973, find any loophole they can, and put it in your pocket. If he's successful in extending the ban, you have an ace up your sleeve."
He smiled proudly. "Exactly what I was thinking. How'd you get to be so smart?"

"If I said I had a good teacher, you'd never let me live it down, would you?"

"Not on your life!" A quick pause and a look out the window. "That car's rolling into a stop sign."

"I see," Liz replied, fully aware of her surroundings. "Dad, do you find it troubling that there's been a federal ban on funding embryonic stem cells since the year abortion was legalized?"

"I do find it troubling. You know why?"

"Why?"

"There's a correlation. After Roe vs. Wade, congress worried about aborted fetuses being exploited for research so they banned the allocation of federal funds."

"But they left it open for private funding?"

"Yeah, but what's the incentive for biotech companies trying to find a cure for cancer to give that up and work on this for a while? It needs to be regulated through the NIH."

"So make it happen. It's a different environment now than it was in 1973. Maybe there's support out there that there wasn't before."

Impressed that she was parroting the words he spoke to his staff weeks earlier, Jed teased, "Are you sure you're not breaking into my study at night and reading my briefing books?"

Liz laughed. "I just came up with it."

"I'm not buying it. I think you've been prepped for this conversation."

"Yeah right. And maybe I also told Adams to disagree with you so I could plant the story in the paper so we could see it at the grocery store and I could say all the things I've been rehearsing for weeks."

"See? A confession. Remind me to send you to your room when we get home." He paused for a beat until they reached the icy drive leading to the farm. "Speaking of which..."

"That was fast."

"Yeah, you see how time flies when you step on the gas?"

Even on the ice, Liz kept her cool and this time, she was the one smiling, proud of herself and grateful to her father for helping her face her fear. "I guess you were right."

"You bet!" he said. "About what?"

"That wisdom comes from the anticipation of consequences. You used to say that all the time."

"Now you know what it means. Do me a favor and apply that to your friendship with Doug."

"You're not gonna tease him tonight, are you?" She parked in front of the side door they used when it was snowy out.

"I was planning on it."
"I'd rather you didn't."

"You're gonna take away all my fun."

"Dad!"

"Teasing is what I do, Lizzie. How am I supposed to know if I like him if I don't tease him?"

"You know, some girls can bring a guy home without worrying about whether or not his sense of humor will break their father's barometer."

"Lucky for you, you're not one of them." Jed hopped out of the car, then poked his head back in to say, "When Doug gets here, I'll be my normal charming self."

"I was afraid of that," Liz mumbled, sliding out of the driver's seat.

"I heard that!"

"You're gonna scare him."

"I'm not gonna scare him. It's not like I'm gonna give him a pop quiz on 18th Century French Literature for God's sake." He unpacked the groceries and added, "I'll just ask him about African architecture and the religious monuments of ancient Egypt."

"You're trying to get a rise out of me."

He continued, dropping his arm around Liz as they walked in. "And that's over appetizers! Wait till you see what I have planned for the main course!"

TBC
At the Bartlet house that November evening, preparing dinner had become a family affair. Wearing a plum sweater dress with three-quarter sleeves and sporting an apron tied around her neck and waist, Abbey convinced Ellie to join her on steak duty while waiting for Jed and Liz to get back from the store to start the salad. Zoey was at the kitchen table, stirring a bowl sugar and cinnamon to coat apple slices for an apple tart dessert.

Cooking was one of those things that Jed and Abbey had taught the girls when they were little, not just because it was a fun hobby but because it was something they could do together. From the time she was old enough to stand on the step-stool, Lizzie had volunteered to help with meals and Ellie and Zoey followed in her footsteps. Though there wasn't always time for big family dinners with Jed in Washington and Abbey pulling 12-hour days at the hospital - Mrs. Wilburforce usually cooked dinner during the week - there were special weekends now and then, along with the occasional dinner party, and on those nights, everyone pitched in.

"Mom, do you think Lizzie loves Doug or do you think she just likes him?"

"I think she has a crush," Abbey answered her middle daughter, then stared at her suspiciously. "Why? Did she confide in you?"

"She told me she doesn't even like him, but I think she was lying."

"Why does she like him? Boys are dumb!" A five-year-old response from Zoey.

"Boys are not dumb, Zoey," Abbey admonished. "Your father was a little boy once. He's not dumb, is he?"

"Daddy's different. Other boys are dumb."

"They're not dumb and quit saying that. It would have done all three of you some good to grow up with brothers."

"You didn't grow up with brothers," Ellie pointed out.

"No, I didn't."
"My friend Sydney has three brothers and all they do is pick on her."

"You girls pick on each other all the time."

"It's different," Zoey countered.

"Do you ever wish you had boys instead of girls?" With the steak in the oven, Ellie rinsed off the cutting board.

"Not instead of," Abbey replied. "Maybe in addition to. I can't imagine my life without you four in it."

"Four?"

"Your father too."

Jed slipped into the kitchen, unnoticed. "My ears are ringing!"

"I didn't hear you come in." Abbey took the grocery bags.

"I'm stealth like that. What about 'your father too'?"

"I was having a sweet thought."

"And?"

"The moment passed." She smiled at him. "Where's Lizzie?"

"She went upstairs to change for dinner. I got her to drive us home."

"How'd you manage that?" Abbey had been trying for days to get Liz to drive.

"I have a way with teenagers."

"I'll remind you of that in a couple of years when this one starts giving us trouble," she said, gesturing to Ellie.

Jed followed his wife's glance. "Nah, Ellie's my low-maintenance girl."

"Am I your low-maintenance girl too, Daddy?" Zoey piped up. It didn’t matter that she didn’t even know what that meant. If it applied to Ellie, she wanted it to apply to her too.

"You, kitten, are already a handful." Jed tweaked her nose and picked up an apple slice at the same time.

"Stop it!" Whisking her caramel sauce at the stove, Abbey scolded him as she always did when he took a bite of something before it was ready.

"If there's one thing I wish I could do, it's blindfold those eyes in the back of your head!"

Liz sailed in then. "I have the UNH letter in my hand and I'm thinking about opening it. What should I do?"

"Open it!" Jed snuck another apple slice.

"What if it says no?"
"You're a straight-A student with a 1550 SAT. If they say no to you, they're not taking anyone for their freshman class."

"They could have hated my essays."

"Could've, would've, should've. OPEN IT!"

"Okay, I'm gonna do it." She took a deep breath before ripping into the envelope.

"I'm stressed just watching you." Abbey shook her head.

The paper was thick and got caught for a second, but once she pulled it free and unfolded the creases, Liz unclenched one eye to read the first line. She zeroed in on the words 'welcome to the Class of 1990' and shouted to her family, "I'M IN! I'M IN! I'M IN!"

"What'd I tell you?" Jed beamed proudly.

"Oh my God, I got a scholarship! Full ride, including room and board!"

"Now that's cause for celebration!" Abbey threw her arms around her. "I'm so proud of you!"

"Me too, Lizzie!" Ellie joined in the congratulations, followed by Zoey who had a million questions about why Lizzie needed a room and what 'board' meant.

"I'm moving out, Zo. I'm gonna live in the dorms."

"But why? You can live here and still go to college."

"No, I can't. Durham's too far away."

The next few minutes were confusing and chaotic as the conversation ping-ponged from discussion of Liz's living arrangements at UNH's main campus in Durham to talk of waiting for her top-ranked schools to make their decisions before sealing her plans. The University of New Hampshire was a good school, but she dreamed of attending a prestigious liberal arts college, like Amherst, Wellesley, or Middlebury, all of which offered rigorous and well-respected academic programs, giving her an edge when it came time to apply to law school.

Still, her first college acceptance was a big deal and nothing could put a damper on the energy in the room, especially coming from Abbey. "You worked hard for this, baby doll. All your dreams are going to come true, no matter where you end up studying."

"I'm just happy that I got an offer close to home. I have to call Tori!" Liz practically glided out of the kitchen, giddy with enthusiasm.

"You're not gonna cry, are you?" Jed teased his wife.

"No, I'm not going to cry...though I'd be entitled. It feels like just last week I was rocking her in my arms, tucking her into bed, and playing with her hair until she fell asleep."

"It WAS last week. She had the stomach flu and you were up all night."

"Not what I mean, jackass." She flicked water at him. "And stop mocking me."

"You always zap the fun out of my life." Jed joined her at the sink to rinse his hands. He donned a more serious expression now. "So..."
"What is it?"

"There was a story in the Union Leader about Adams calling a special session on the stem cells ban."

"What? How could he have known that you..."

"It's a business town, Abbey. People hear things. It happens."

"What do you think it means?"

"I don't know."

"If he sets himself up for the ban and you set yourself up against it, won't it be messy during the campaign? With New Hampshire having only two congressional districts, if his constituents want one thing and yours want another...or maybe he's not so sure yours will want another."

"You think that's why he's challenging me?" That was something Jed hadn't yet considered.

"I'm saying maybe." Abbey handed him a hand towel as he threw ingredients into the blender for his special cranberry dressing. "What's the political landscape like these days?"

"I haven't heard any whispers. Not yet anyway."

"Will you have a primary opponent?" She raised her voice to be heard over the blender.

"If Adams is doing this to get at me, it's not about the primaries."

"So then he's setting up the general for a Republican to take your seat."

"Possibly."

"Wait, what are you guys talking about?" That was Ellie, sitting at the table with Zoey. "Is Dad running for re-election? When did he decide that?"

Liz breezed back in, hearing the tail end of Ellie's question. "Tor!is not home, but she's calling me back so if it rings, I got it."

"Get it quickly or I'll beat you to the punch and shout it from the rooftops." Jed turned off the machine. "Peel some cucumbers, will you?"

"Why isn't anyone answering my question?"

"Of course Dad's running again, El," Liz told her, fetching a knife and a few cucumbers.

"How do you know?" Ellie looked to Jed. "Dad?"

"You don't think I should run?"

"I thought you didn't like living in Washington."

"I don't like being away from you guys, but what I'm doing is important, don't you think?"

"You can do lots of other things that are important. When you were a professor, that was important. And you didn't have to fight anyone just to do your job. Everyone liked you."

"They still like him," Abbey said firmly. "When they do this, Ellie, it's not personal. It's just
politics."

"But they say mean things about him. They're already starting."

Jed underestimated how much that bothered Ellie. "They're not trying to hurt me, Ellie. We disagree about important issues, and I admit, it gets nasty sometimes, but I believe in what I stand for and I have to defend it. Your mother and I always taught you not to be bullied away from the things you want."

"You also taught me to choose my battles. Not everything is worth a fight, you've said so yourself."

"Doug's here!" Liz set down her knife and rinsed her hands the moment she heard the doorbell. "Dad, can you finish the salad?"

"He's early."

"Better early than late, right?"

As she left the kitchen, Jed nudged his little spy, Zoey, to go after her.

"Jed!" Abbey always objected - unsuccessfully - to using Zoey to keep tabs on the older girls.

"It's just for a few minutes," he assured her. "Until we get out there and interrogate him."

"Are you going to change your shirt?"

He looked down at what he was wearing. "What's wrong with my shirt?"

"I don't like it."

"Tough."

"Jed..." She stuffed a paper towel into his hands and pushed him out of the way so she could make the salad. "Wear the blue one?"

Wiping his hands, he groaned on his way out of the kitchen, "I have about five blues ones."

"The one I like!" Abbey yelled after him.

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The farmhouse's formal dining room had hosted many getting-to-know-you dinners over the years. Jed and Abbey had a rule - if Liz wanted to date a particular young man, they had to meet him before giving permission. Sometimes, it was an informal meet-and-greet, but Jed enjoyed doing it over a meal. It was a good way to check out the prospective boyfriend and give his blessing only when he was certain his daughter would be treated with care and respect when he wasn't around.

This dinner was a bit unusual. Jed had already overruled the possibility of Liz dating Doug, a man three years her senior. But he felt that Abbey was right and that forbidding Liz from having anything to do with Doug would only cause her to rebel in the few months they had before her 18th birthday. So, somewhat reluctantly, he agreed to sit down with the young couple and keep an open mind about their blossoming friendship.

"So I hear you're into sports." Sports seemed to be a safe topic to Jed since Liz had prepped him on Doug's hobbies.
"Yes, sir, I am. All sports. I'm even starting to enjoy cheerleading now that Liz has been on a mission to convince me it's a real sport." Doug answered the question while digging into a heaping plate of salad.

"She's been working on me since she was 14." Jed always loved teasing Liz about cheerleading, mostly because she had a sense of humor and kept a good-natured attitude about it.

"Are you convinced?"

"Every day I'm a little closer."

The two men chuckled.

Liz quickly jumped in to defend her hobby, "Cheerleading takes a great deal of athletic ability and I bet that anyone who says it doesn't, has never actually done it. Right Mom?"

"Absolutely." Abbey transferred her playful eyes across the table at her husband. "I'd challenge your father to do half the dance and gymnastics moves you perform on the field every week."

"Here it comes," Jed groused with a grin. "You just want to see me twist myself into a pretzel."

"Lizzie's gonna teach me gymnastics!" a jubilant Zoey announced.

"Right after I teach you basketball!" Basketball was the sport Jed taught all the girls to play first, but he was having the most trouble teaching Zoey. Hand-eye coordination wasn't her thing. "Doug, do you play basketball?"

"Here or there. My game of choice is baseball."

"Doug got into UNH on an athletic scholarship," Liz informed them.

"God knows my grades wouldn't have gotten me there!" He gave a small, gleeful laugh and Liz nudged him under the table. Grades were important in the Bartlet house and she wanted her parents to like Doug.

Wisely choosing to ignore the remark and steer the conversation in a new direction, Abbey changed the subject. "So you like UNH?"

"It's all right. I like my classes."

Like a proud father, Jed bragged, "Liz just got in, you know. Full academic scholarship."

"Dad!" Liz shot him a disapproving glare. She wasn't ready to tell Doug yet; she didn't want to offend him by admitting that she had higher hopes than her state school.

"Really?" Doug didn't even know she had applied. "Why didn't you say anything?"

"I wanted it to be a surprise for later."

"So you're gonna go to UNH?"

Liz shifted awkwardly in her chair and said uncomfortably, "It looks that way right now."

"That's great!" He sensed her reluctance, but didn't acknowledge it.

Regretting his loose-lipped revelation, Jed moved on to another topic as he helped himself to more
salad before passing the tongs to Ellie. "So Doug, what's your major?"

"I'm undeclared."

Liz added, "He's taking a little bit of everything and plans to make a decision in the spring."

"Yeah. It'll cost me an extra semester...maybe two, but I think it's important to know what you want to do before you settle in, even if it means being on the five-year plan."

"There's nothing wrong with that," Jed replied. "I changed my major in college too. Are you leaning toward any particular area?"

"Naw, I'm not really interested in anything. College is just something you have to do to get a job." Doug was feeling a little out of his element. His parents hadn't put a high premium on education.

"It's a little more than that. There's quite a bit of learning to be done, and I'm not just talking about textbooks either. It's a time to find yourself, to broaden your horizons, your understanding of the world and your place in it. College was an amazing experience for me."

"Not for me. I don't need to sit in a lecture hall to find myself and my horizons are already pretty broad."

Spoken with an air of arrogance that turned Jed off. "So why are you there?"

"Besides sports and joining a fraternity? I'm not an idiot; I know that as meaningless as that piece of paper they call a diploma is in the grand scheme of things, it's something I'm going to need to find a job. I just don't know what that job is gonna be. That's why it's so hard to settle on a major."

"They must have a career counseling center on campus," Abbey offered.

"Eh, I'm not desperate enough to seek help from them yet. I'm just chillin' for now. If I still can't decide by the spring, I might be looking at the six-year plan...or longer. Hey, maybe Liz and I will graduate together and I'll let her support me!" Doug howled once again, but Jed wasn't amused.

The older man made a mental note about his lack of ambition. Strike one.

- - -

The main course was well underway and while the regular Bartlet chatter permeated the room, Jed still hadn't warmed up to Doug. He wasn't a bad guy, Jed thought. He just didn't seem to be a good fit for his eldest daughter. Watching them together, he saw a stark contrast in their attitudes and wondered what it was that drew Elizabeth to him. She was engaged; Doug looked bored. She was energetic and outgoing; Doug was laid back and mellow. She was ambitious; Doug was uninspired. She was focused; Doug was distracted.

Jed tried not to judge the young man - after all, he hardly knew him - but Doug was aware of his hesitation. He felt inferior, being at the dinner table with a United States Congressman, the father of this beautiful girl he thought he might be falling in love with. Liz had been raised differently. She was brought up with lofty aspirations and goals he never dreamed of, in a world where she was led to believe nothing was impossible with a little hard work. That wasn’t Doug’s world. Those weren’t his ideals. He was feeling uncomfortable and instead of confronting it head-on, he took a passive-aggressive approach, focusing his attention on Abbey.

"Mrs. Bartlet, Liz says you're a surgeon."
"That's right, a thoracic surgeon." Abbey sipped her water.

"She says you work on the lungs?"

"Yeah. Well, the chest area to be more accurate. I do some procedures on the heart and heart valves, but yes, the majority of my cases involve the lungs."

"Like what?"

"Emphysema, birth defects and abnormalities in the lungs and chest, tumors of the chest wall, lung and esophageal cancer, those kinds of things."

"You must see a lot of lung cancer."

"I do."

"But your husband smokes." Another nudge from Liz. Jed's smoking wasn't exactly a good conversation starter, especially not the way Doug broached it. "Not that there's anything wrong with smoking. I smoke myself. So, as a doctor, do you think it's safe?"

Abbey navigated this one carefully. Although Jed's smoking drove her crazy, she wasn't about to lecture him about it in front of company. "As a general rule, I don't think it's safe to smoke. Jed's not a heavy smoker and he takes care of himself in other ways."

"So all those doom and gloom scare tactics aren't true then? It's just propaganda."

"No, it's not. The Surgeon General and every doctor I know is clear on this - smoking can lead to a multitude of health problems, not the least of which is lung cancer. Any contradiction to the facts of medical science that comes from the tobacco industry and their lobbyists should be examined with extreme caution."

"But again, your husband smokes," Doug repeated. "So it can't be all bad or you'd be on his case. I smoke about two or three cigs a day. Mr. B., how much do you smoke? During the campaign, I heard a rumor that you were up to a pack a day!"

Astute and crafty, Ellie interjected, "Mom, the steak turned out great!"

"Thanks to my little helpers." Abbey winked at her two younger daughters, then turned an eye to Jed. To her relief, he wasn't clenching his fists - yet. "Who's ready for dessert?"

"I'll help." Jed rose to follow his wife into the kitchen. When they were out of earshot, he grumbled under his breath. "I don't like him."

"He was being inquisitive." Not really, but she had to tell him that in case he was thinking about throwing Doug out.

"Yeah, on the surface. I don't buy that was an innocent line of questioning. He was trying to start something."

"Why would he do that?" She retrieved the dessert dishes while Jed grabbed the forks.

"He's a troublemaker."

"He was prying, I'll give you that."

"And he's nosy." Jed reached for the whipped cream.
"And he's not exactly tactful, is he?"

"AND," he began as if it was the most egregious offense, "he called me Mr. B."

Abbey couldn't help a smile at that one. "Oh, come on. You call me Mrs. B. sometimes."

"That's different."

"You're starting to sound like Zoey."

"I'm not thrilled with this dinner, Abbey. That guy bugs me. He's all wrong for Liz."

"Well, if he is, then she'll realize it and we won't have to worry about not letting her date him. In the meantime, there's nothing we can do about it tonight so let's try to be gracious hosts and hope for the best."

He nodded unconvincingly as he scribbled another note in his mind. Strike two.

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"So, Doug, how come I never met you during the campaign?" Jed had taken Abbey's cue and decided to cast first impressions aside and give Doug another chance over dessert.

"Oh, I was around in the afternoon on most days. You were usually at luncheons or rallies by that time. I canvassed with Liz on election day."

"Thank you for helping us out. I'm always delighted to see young people involved in government."

"I'm usually not into politics," Doug said flatly. "I have to give Liz credit for hyping it up at the political rally at UNH. If she hadn't, I never would have signed up."

"Well, whatever the reason..."

If only he had stopped there, he could have salvaged Jed's praise. But Doug went on, "I grew up believing that most politicians say what they need to to get elected and with the way government is set up, no one can get anything done anyway so it's all a waste of time."

"The way government is set up?" Jed wasn't sure what he meant by that.

"I don't know all the fancy rules on how laws are passed, but aren't there like a thousand things that have to happen before a president signs a bill? They're like speed bumps and every one is larger than the one before. The law either gets changed a few hundred times or it never makes it over the final hump."

"If by speed bumps, you're talking about the division of power among the branches of government and within congress itself, I think it's important to consider why it's set up the way that it is. The mechanism by which laws are passed makes sense when put into proper historical context."

"I'm not a student of history. My theory is it is the way that it is because the Founding Fathers had a wicked sense of humor." The younger man laughed.

Jed chuckled in response to be polite.

"The Founding Fathers wanted a separation of powers. They didn't want one branch to have total control over the whole country and be able to pass laws by themselves without input. Right Dad?" Ellie knew her U.S. history.
"That's right."

"And they were successful in taking power away from everyone," Doug returned, trying to prove that he wasn’t ignorant on the subject. "Government is in gridlock today because we have a Republican president and a Democratic congress. If there have to be three branches, why not make them all one party?"

"Doug, the whole point is that they balance out the power so no one gets carried away," Liz told him.

"Why?"

Was he really interested in political theory, Jed wondered. "No, Doug asked a good question and you know how much I love a good question! You know, some of the Founding Fathers didn't like the idea of political parties. They wanted people to vote their conscience and they were appalled by the thought of organized groups dividing the country by bickering amongst themselves or voting for the party instead of the person representing it. A case could be made for their point of view. I can't tell you how many times I hear people talking about voting a straight party ticket without knowing anything about the candidates on the ballot."

"So you're saying political parties are a bad thing?"

"Not necessarily. I'm saying that a case can be made for what some of our Founding Fathers believed, according to history. But it's an idealistic view of government. People will align themselves with those with whom they agree; it's just human nature. The Framers, as much as they detested them, made political parties possible when they divided the power, and I'm glad that they did. Political parties are important, if for nothing else than to insure the minority opinion has a voice."

"But the minority opinion holds things up," Doug continued. "Since you've been in congress, Mr. B., what have you done?"

"I've done a lot of things."

"Such as?"

Now he was irritating Abbey. "Jed's sponsored a number of bills and he was instrumental in pushing through minimum wage legislation earlier this year."

"I rest my case. Minimum wage might have passed years ago if there wasn't this fight for power in Washington. The system is created to cause conflict."

"What's wrong with conflict?" Liz posed the question to Doug. "If there are genuine disagreements over policy, I think conflict is good. I think it should be embraced, not stifled. How can you believe in and defend your opinion unless you've considered the other side?"

Jed had taught her well.

"Come on, Liz. You don't really believe that." Doug was more skeptical. His level of discomfort was also growing. These weren’t the kinds of things they discussed at his house. The only time politics came up at the Westin dinner table was if someone had a complaint about it.

"Why not?"

"It's all for show. Politicians are good at one thing - grandstanding. Not necessarily you, Mr. B.,
the other guys. Politics, overall, is theater."

"I can't believe you're saying this." Liz had an edge to her voice now.

"You knew how I felt."

"And you know my father's a politician!"

"I wasn't talking about him."

"Why do you have to be so cynical about it all?"

"That's how I am. It's how I was the day you met me. Why are you suddenly so surprised by it?"

"I thought you had changed. You joined the campaign, you heard me out..."

"Just because I opened my ears to your opinion doesn't mean I don't have one of my own."

"What are we doing talking about all this tonight? We're supposed to be enjoying a nice dinner."

Abbey offered up a second helping of dessert in an attempt to lighten things up. "Doug, Liz says you grew up on a farm."

Jed studied his daughter intently. Liz had bowed her head and was sliding her fork across her plate, moving the crumbs from one side to another. He felt bad that she was disappointed, but he was grateful that she learned so soon that she and Doug had little in common. It would save her from heartache later, he thought, and it would allow her to pursue a relationship with boys her own age.

Strike three.

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"I owe you a big 'I told you so' Sweet Knees." Jed was floating around the kitchen on cloud nine. He had been dreading a big fight with Liz about whether or not she could date Doug, but after the dinner they had, his concerns were put to rest.

"Don't gloat." Abbey was at the sink, rinsing off the evening's dishes before stacking them in the dishwasher.

"I hate that Liz is upset, but it's best in the long run. She can move on now."

"I think she really liked him."

"He's not the one. They have nothing in common and any more time spent on him is time she could be spending on other things - like enjoying her senior year with her friends. Let's just thank God this was a little puppy love and nothing more serious."

Carrying the last of the glasses from the dining room, Ellie joined her parents and whispered to her mom, "Zoey's about to sneak out of the house, but I'm not supposed to tell you, so cover me."

And with that, she turned to leave.

"Freeze!" Abbey stopped her in her tracks. "It's dark outside."

"She wants to make a snow angel in the moonlight."

"She can forget it. Tell her to get ready for her bath. I'll be up in a minute."
As Ellie started out, Jed called her back. "Ellie, hang on a sec. What do you think of Doug? He's just a meaningless crush, right?"

"I guess so. Lizzie always denies liking him."

"That's because he's not right for her. He's full of himself and he has no idea what he's talking about half the time."

Ellie admitted timidly, "I liked what he said about politics."

"What?"

"He was right about the struggle for power. That's why I don't like the idea of you running again. All you do in Washington is fight with these people...and what's the use? It's just like I said before, not everything is worth a fight."

"Whoa, back up. The conversation tonight had nothing to do with me running again. And as to what you said before, what I didn't get a chance to say is that some things ARE worth a fight. And before you decide they aren't, I'd suggest you learn a little more about them."

"Jed, don't get upset," Abbey warned. It was clear that Doug had already riled him up. It wasn't the time to get into things with Ellie.

"I'm not upset. I just don't want Ellie closing her mind to something before she learns about it just because some clown put cockamamie ideas into her head."

"He didn't put ideas into my head. I felt this way even before Doug!"

Jed turned his attention from Abbey to Ellie. "Do you know anything about stem cells?"

"No."

"There you go. That's what I'm working on right now and I'd bet you'd think it's as important as I do if you'd let me tell you about it."

"It's all politics."

"Well, yes, it is. Everything runs on politics - the economy, education, science. You've been exposed to the bad side of politics, but there's a good side too, and you've done a heck of a job avoiding it."

"I haven't avoided it."

"When was the last time you and I sat down and talked about what I do in Washington? Liz asks me all the time, but you never seem interested. If you knew some of the things that cross my desk - things that affect you, things like school uniforms, the length of summer vacation, funding art and music classes, vending machines in school buildings - all these laws are written and passed by someone and that someone has your best interest at heart. Part of this is about looking out for you. You haven't thought about it like that, have you?"

"Not really."

"I'd be ecstatic if at some point, you'd ask me about what it is I do, Ellie. It's easy to be intimidated by the newspapers and the TV ads during an election year, but if you really understand what it's all for, if you understand what it means and what it will mean for years to come, you might change"
your mind about it."

From the foyer, Liz shouted into the kitchen. "MOM, ZOEY'S GOING OUTSIDE!"

Zoey's voice came next. "YOU'RE A TATTLETALE, LIZZIE!"

Jed burst out of the kitchen to deal with it. "Zoey, if you set foot outside this house, you're in BIG trouble!"

Once he was gone, Abbey looked to Ellie. "He's not mad at you."

"Yeah, right."

"Sweetheart, I know you didn't mean anything, but it would be nice if you showed a little interest in what he's doing."

"Do you want him to run again?"

"Yes."

"Why? You're always saying how much you hate it when he's in Washington."

"He wasn't lying when he said it was important, Ellie. I agree with him. And as right as you are about how much I hate it when he's away, I'm going support him. When you get older you'll learn that one of the secrets to maintaining a happy marriage is seeing to it that you both achieve your dreams. Your father already did that for me."

"When you were in med school?"

"He supported me in my medical training for over a decade and even though he moaned and grumbled at times, he never told me to give it up because he knew that the compromise and sacrifice we made then would pay off when I established my practice and had a career I enjoyed."

"It's not the same."

"Why is everyone using that phrase tonight?"

"You didn't have to move away to achieve your dreams."

"I might as well have, I was away so much. Look, when we made the decision for him to run the first time, I thought it was great, that there was no one better to represent us in Washington. I still think that. And yeah, the reality is much harder to take. It's been a difficult adjustment with him there and us here, but we can't change our minds about it now, not when he's knee-deep into the work he's doing. He has to finish the job we sent him to do."

"Can't someone else finish it?"

"No one as qualified as your father. He cares about what he's doing. He cares about the people he's speaking out for, the ones who don't have a voice to speak out for themselves. Not every politician is as genuine and dedicated as he is." Abbey lifted Ellie's chin to look her in the eye. "I know politics is a lot of nasty back and forth. But he was right when he said that some things are worth fighting for. Things like stem cells and funding for education and healthcare, all these things that most of us take for granted, THAT'S what he's fighting for every day. A lot of times he wins and a lot of times he doesn't. But if we stand in his way, he's always going to wonder what more he could have done. He has to go back, not just for the voters but for himself as well."
"And I have to pretend I like it?"

"That's not how it works around here and you know it. You're entitled to your opinion and I want you to feel free to air it. We all put our thoughts on the table, we disagree about them, and sometimes we argue over them, but in the end, we support each other. That's how it is. You wouldn't want it any other way, would you?"

Thinking back to the decision she had to make about moving ahead to the 7th grade, a decision she knew Jed wanted to make for her, she answered meekly, "No."

"So try to be a little supportive. Campaigning is stressful enough as it is. Don't make him feel like he's abandoning us or putting his job before his family." Abbey noted that Ellie turned, then paused for a second as if she had more to say before she began to walk forward, heading out of the kitchen. "What?"

The young girl turned back around and gave a pensive shrug. "In some ways, it kinda feels like he is."

TBC
\textbf{Father of Daughters}

Series: Snapshots of the Past

Story: Father of Daughters

Chapter 17

Disclaimer: See Chapter 1

Previously: Doug's dinner with the Bartlets was a disaster; Jed and Ellie clashed on Jed's plans for re-election

Summary: Abbey and Liz take in Wellesley College while Ellie spends the day with Jed at his district office and later, meets someone very special; Jed helps Zoey with her reading

\* \* \*

"The goal was for them to like you! If you weren't going to take it seriously, then why did you even agree to come over?"

"I agreed to come because I WANTED to get to know them and I wanted them to get to know me. But you and I come from two different worlds, Liz."

After the disastrous family dinner a week earlier, Liz and Doug had been on the outs. She had been avoiding his calls and had she not been distracted by her upcoming interview at Wellesley College, she might not have picked up the phone that chilly autumn morning. She was still furious over his attitude with her parents and Doug was angry that she couldn't see his side of things.

"What does background have to do with anything?"

"Everything! Your father was trying to show me up with all the talk about college and how important it is to him. Right after I said I didn't get into UNH on my grades, he bragged about his brilliant daughter getting in on a full academic scholarship!"

"He was proud of me. Is that a crime?"

"He doesn't think I'm good enough for you. It was obvious from the moment he said that!"

"Don't blame him for this, Doug! My dad was fine with you until you got snotty about his smoking. And your line about politicians doing whatever they need to get elected...what were you thinking? Was that supposed to endear you to him?"

"What, I'm not allowed to say what I think?"

It wasn't like Liz to shout on the phone. The racket caught Jed's attention as he passed her room on his way downstairs. He stopped at her door and listened for a few seconds to make sure she was all right.

"When did I tell you not to say what you think?" she continued belligerently into the receiver.

"There's a way to say what you think without being a jerk about it!"

"Fine, Liz, if I was jerk, then I'm sorry. But you're not even trying to understand where I'm coming from. Your father's not the easiest guy to impress, you know."
"My father is the fairest man in the world. All you had to do was be yourself and he would have liked you."

Out in the hall, Jed pumped his fist with a satisfied grin.

"Jed?" Abbey approached. "What do you think you're you doing?"

"Shhhh, she's defending me."

She smacked his arm. "You should be ashamed of yourself!"

"I am," he said, but he wasn't really.

"They've been going at it for 10 minutes." Abbey listened for a second too.

"I was in the shower. Why didn't you get me?"

"So you could eavesdrop?"

Jed was unapologetic this time. "Yeah."

"Get away from there." Abbey pushed him aside so she could knock and open door. "Liz, we have to leave soon. I want you downstairs in five minutes."

Liz nodded dismissively as Abbey shut the door.

"What's she doing arguing with him anyway?" Jed asked. "Don't tell me she's still interested in him."

"You'll have to ask her."

"She won't tell me anything. That's why I'm asking you."

"I don't know. She hasn't talked to me about Doug at all."

Ellie sluggishly wandered out of her room then and grumbled groggily, "Good morning."

"You're up!" Jed glanced at his watch. "You still have a half hour before you have to get ready for school."

"Lizzie woke me." The 11-year-old rubbed her eyes.

"Well, I wanted to talk to you anyway so maybe that's a good thing. Listen, what do you say I ask Mrs. Wilburforce to bring you to my office after school today?"

Jed and Ellie had been on different wavelengths since their disagreement over re-election and it was eating away at him. He hoped that by reaching out to her and involving her in his work, they could come to some sort of compromise. And, prepared for plan B, he had orchestrated a little surprise for her to try to smooth things over.

"Okay."

It delighted him that she agreed right away without having to be coerced. "Okay then. Bring your homework and we'll get it all done."

"I will." Ellie gave him a nod and a conciliatory smile before she started toward the shower.
He didn't know it, but she had been reconsidering her reaction to another congressional run and had decided that maybe he was right, that if she spent some time with him and got to know what it was he was doing in Congress, it might take the sting out of his absence.

"That was easier than I thought." A glance at Abbey fueled Jed's suspicions. "Did you tell her what's happening today...about you know who?"

"Nope, not a word. Ellie's coming around by herself - because of you, no one else." Abbey leaned in to plant a kiss on his lips. "Come on, help me pack her lunch."

"I can pack her lunch," he replied, following her downstairs.

"Yeah, but when you pack lunch for the kids, there's an overabundance of mayo, soda, and candy without a carrot in sight."

"I hate carrots."

"You hate all vegetables."

"Not true. I planned to put a big leaf of lettuce on her sandwich."

When they reached the kitchen, Abbey headed to the fridge. "It's turkey day, right?"

"Ellie prefers ham and swiss."

"That's Friday."

"It's what she likes."

"She never complains when I give her turkey."

"Yeah, well, ham and swiss is what she likes. Oh, and another little factoid - she's outgrown PB and J so Monday is bologna." Although he was gone on the weekdays for half the year, Jed quickly stepped into his parenting role the minute he returned home for the congressional recess, and keeping up with the girls' rapidly changing likes and dislikes was at the top of his priority list.

"Why didn't I know that?"

"Because I've been packing the lunches for the last three Mondays. That's what happens when you have to round at 5 a.m."

"Lizzie doesn't like bologna." Abbey grabbed the ham and a couple of slices of bread.

"Lizzie gets chocolate cake and lollipops." He smiled when she shot him a glare.

"You load them up with sugar."

"You pack boring lunches."

"Another word and I'll send you off with a green-bean casserole. Are you going to work with Zoey on her reading tonight?"

"I'll get to it."

"You've been saying that for days."
"Give me time." He sighed as if she was nagging him.

"Jed..." She looked him in the eye. "No kidding, I need your help. She asks you to read to her at night because she knows that you won't make her try to sound out the words herself. It gives her an excuse to ignore me."

"She was learning over the summer."

"She was, but once she learned how to write her name and read a few words, she gave up. And then you came home and now I can't even get her to crack a book."

"I'll work with her," he said more firmly as he grabbed Ellie's thermos to fill it with juice. "Tonight, I promise."

"Thank you." Abbey dropped a handful of baby carrots into a baggie, added an apple and three chocolate chip cookies to the sandwich, along with the thermos that Jed had filled, and then set the Care Bears lunchbox aside.

"Do you have time for breakfast?" he asked, retrieving some eggs from the fridge.

"Just grapefruit." She took the eggs from him. "I'll get started on this if you do me a favor and light a fire under Liz? If she wants to be at registration at eight, she better get down here and eat something so we can go."

"She's gonna be cranky."

"Why do you think I'm not going up there myself?"

He chuckled as he waltzed out of the kitchen, shouting from the other room, "Include me in the note!"

Abbey set the eggs aside and took out a small notepad and a pen from the drawer. She often slipped notes in her daughters' lunches on special occasions - something short and sweet to give them a boost of confidence in the middle of the day. After jotting down a few sentences to wish Ellie luck on her math test, she signed it "Mom and Dad," folded it, and stashed it in her lunchbox.

* * *

It was a little over an hour from Manchester to Wellesley, Massachusetts, home of Wellesley College. Abbey had taken the day off so she and Elizabeth could visit, tour the campus, and meet with admissions counselors about her application. It was a nice drive, peaceful enough that Abbey shared her memories of college scouting with her own parents when she was 17. Curled up in the passenger's seat, Liz wasn't very responsive. She was cranky after her fight with Doug, just as Jed had predicted, and from the moment they got in the car, she had been staring absently out the window, nodding every once in a while with a few muffled words in between.

With another half hour to go, Abbey broached a subject sure to get her daughter's attention and, she hoped, draw her out of her stupor. "So I wanted to get your opinion about something. I'm thinking about starting a sex ed class at the hospital - for teens."

Liz turned her head to stare at her mother. She took a beat, then asked, "Why?"

"I think it's important for girls your age, don't you?"

"Mom, if you're hinting at what I think you're hinting at, I'm not in that kind of relationship."
"I'm not hinting at anything. It has nothing to do with you. Well, that's not exactly true. I look at you and I wonder what would happen if you ever did want to become intimate with a boy. If you felt you couldn't come to me about it, would you know what precautions to take?"

"Is this about Doug?"

"Not everything is about Doug. This is a decision I made before Doug."

"Then why are you telling me now?"

"Like I said, I want your opinion."

"Why? It's not like you'll give up the idea if I don't like it."

"Is that your way of saying you don't like it?"

"I'm just saying I don't see how my opinion makes any difference."

"It does. I want to know what you think."

Liz shrugged. "It's fine, as long as I don't have to take it."

"You don't have to if you don't want to," Abbey assured her. "But I would like you to help me out by spreading the word around school, maybe talk to your friends..."

"WHAT?" Liz gave her an incredulous look this time. "My friends? Ugh, Mom, why?"

"It's for teenagers, Lizzie. Your friends are teens."

"You want my friends to know that my mother wants to teach them how to have sex?"

"It's not HOW to have sex. It's how to protect themselves if they do have sex. What's the big deal?"

"You're not seriously asking me this!"

"Yeah, I am. Or I was. Obviously, you're not on-board." Abbey was quick to back off.

"Just the thought of it gives me the creeps. I'd rather stab myself in the eye with a pencil, that's how not on-board I am."

"Fine, forget it."

"They'll call us Latex Lizzie and her mom the Condom Queen!" Liz banged her head hard against the passenger's side window. "God, why can't you be like other mothers?"

"Excuse me, other mothers?"

"You know how mortifying it is to have your mom teach your friends how to properly put on a condom? Are you going to teach them how to reach orgasm too?"

On a normal day, Abbey might have dismissed that comment as the rantings of an emotional teen who was having a rough day, but this wasn't a normal day. She swerved out of traffic and pulled over, screeching to a halt on the side of the road and turning to face her now-confused daughter.

"Get out."

"What?"
"Get out of the car."

Surely she wasn't going to leave her there, Liz thought. She opened the door and stepped out, watching as Abbey did the same. The older woman popped the trunk to retrieve Ellie's softball bat. For a moment, Liz got scared. "What are you doing?"

"Take this," Abbey handed her the bat. "Take a swing at the snow bank...as hard as you can."

Liz looked around at the cars passing them. "There are people around."

"They're going 60 miles an hour. They don't know nor do they care what you're doing. Take a swing."

"I'm not doing this."

"Yes, you are." Abbey took back the bat and pounded on the three-foot snow bank herself. "Just like that, as many times as it takes."

"As what takes?"

"To get him out of your system."

"He's not..."

"Save it, Elizabeth. I know you're in an I-hate-the-world mood right now and you're perfectly satisfied taking it out on me. But guess what, it's not just me today. We're on our way to one of the best colleges in the nation and the last thing the people there want to see walking onto their campus is a brooding teenager. So take the bat, beat the crap out of the snow, kick the tires, spin yourself into a tizzy, and scream if you have to - just get him out of your system. When you're through, I want to see a young woman who's ready to wow an admissions committee."

Her posture deflated, Liz's shoulders drooped and she let out a sharp breath. "I can't do this today."

"Yes, you can. It's too important not to."

"Can't we reschedule?"

"No," Abbey answered, concerned. "They're expecting us in 30 minutes. It's too late to call in sick."

Frustrated, Liz kicked at the snow bank with her boot. "Damn it!"

"I paid a hundred dollars for those boots. Use the bat." The bit of levity didn't work. Abbey was sad to see Liz's stoic face show a hint of vulnerability as tears pooled in her eyes. "What happened?"

"I didn't mean to snap at you," she said, her voice cracking."

And I'm sure you didn't mean to curse just now either."

"No, that I meant. But I'm not mad at you."

"I know. The person you're mad at is Doug. So what happened?"

"He thinks Dad looks down on him."

"It isn't true."
"I know, but it's what he thinks! And now he thinks that I do too." The tears in her eyes slowly made their way down her cheeks as she tossed the bat aside and covered her face with her hands. "We agreed it would be best not to talk anymore."

Seeing the pain she was in, Abbey wrapped her arms around her. "It's gonna be okay, Lizzie."

"I liked him so much, Mom."

"I know you did, baby," she said as she dropped a kiss to her head and held her a little tighter when Liz returned the hug.

"I don't want it to end like this."

"Liz, I am so sorry you have to go through this today of all days." Her fingers sliding through Liz's hair, Abbey pulled out of the embrace. "But I'm afraid if we don't get to Wellesley, you're going to regret it and you're going to blame Doug - and yourself - for ruining this opportunity. We'll hash this all out on the drive home, but right now, we need to think about Wellesley. This problem with Doug will be there later. Wellesley won't."

Liz agreed, convinced that Abbey was right. A few minutes later, after a good cry and a couple of rounds of beating on the roadside snow bank, they hopped back in the car and Liz wiped her tears, determined to cast Doug from her mind. The importance of the day wasn't lost on her. She couldn't allow her emotions for him to ruin it.

Of all the schools she had applied to, Wellesely College was at the top of Liz's list. It didn't start that way. She had considered Notre Dame, but backed out of that when she and Jed visited in September, pushing Boston College and Boston University - her mother's alma mater - up another notch. She was still waiting to hear back from them, but they weren't her dream schools. She also applied Harvard and Dartmouth because of the close ties her parents had to both colleges, and while she would have been honored to attend either one, she was really hoping for an acceptance to a smaller school, one that gave her the opportunity to learn in a small-class atmosphere where reading assignments led to stimulating discussions and lessons were taught interactively with student input, something that seemed impossible in the hallowed lecture halls at Harvard where freshman classes held 300 students.

That was why she turned to the liberal arts schools. Middlebury College took her breath away with its small-town Vermont campus and rigorous and widely respected academic curriculum. Amherst was another school she longed to attend. In academic circles, it was the Harvard or Yale of liberal arts colleges, known for its broad spectrum of programs and its commitment to turning out students well-prepared for graduate school.

With those two in the back of her mind, it was when Abbey pulled onto College Road and Liz got her first glimpse at the red brick buildings towering over the shaded sidewalks that led to the Wellesley admissions office that she felt like she had found her school. In addition to its reputation as one of the "Seven Sisters," its sterling history, and its mission of educating strong women to make a difference in the world, it also offered a beautiful campus with a lake and waterfalls and a maze of trees over rolling hills, dusted with a light layer of newly fallen snow. It wasn't just that it was pretty; it's that it reminded her of home. It was perfect.

"This is it! This is where I want to go."

"We haven't even parked the car yet."

"It doesn't matter. I'm positive, this is it!"
As Abbey followed the signs to the parking lot, she pulled over at the top of the hill to let Liz out so she could check in and register for the day. Liz stepped up the curb and took in a deep breath of the fresh air around her. For the first time that morning, Doug was a million miles from her thoughts. She secured her purse strap over her shoulder and hiked up the sidewalk and into admissions.

"Name please?" the receptionist asked, ready to check off the students.

"Elizabeth Bartlet."

And at those words, a voice rang out from the corner chair behind her. "Lizzie Ann Bartlet."

Liz turned to see the young woman who was looking her up and down. "Do I know you?"

"The last time we saw each other, we were both in ballet slippers practicing our pirouette." She stood up. "And your dad was humming 'double, double toil and trouble,' like he always did when we danced together."

"Amy? Amy Gardner?" Her jaw practically dropping to the floor, Liz covered her mouth. She hadn't seen Amy since the Bartlets moved from Hanover to Manchester. The two girls kept in touch for a while, but drifted apart when Amy moved to Connecticut with her mom. "I can't believe it! You're all grown up!"

"Have you looked in the mirror, ace? Wellesley, huh?"

"Yeah. My mom's parking the car. She's gonna die when she sees you! Where's your mom?"

Amy grimaced. "In Connecticut."

"You're kidding! She didn't come with you?"

"I'd be surprised if she knew I was here."

Despite her curiosity, Liz didn't pry. The tone in Amy's voice pretty much confirmed that she and her mother weren't exactly close. Liz had once heard through the grapevine that since the age of 14, Amy had been attending boarding school at Walnut Hill, a performing arts and college preparatory academy in Massachusetts. Phone calls home were scattered and after a series of stressful conversations with her mother, had become rare. It was nothing more than teenage angst, but it wedged a rift between them and unlike Abbey who wasn't afraid to get tough with her daughter when she needed to, Mrs. Gardner's approach was a dose of passive aggressive silence.

"Liz?" Abbey called as she walked in. "Are you all checked in?"

With a flash of remorse for lashing out at her in the car, Liz surprised her mom with a hug, then took her hand and gestured to Amy. "Guess who's here."

* * *

The Bartlet congressional suite in Manchester was bustling with staffers and guests that afternoon. When congress was in recess, this was where Jed worked, where he met with constituents, took conference calls from Washington, headed meetings and planned strategy for his legislative agenda. The daily grind never stopped, even around the holidays, but he didn't mind. This was where he wanted to be because he could distance himself from partisan politics and focus on the issues important to his district.
That day after school, Ellie sat on a leather sofa in her father's office, sifting through a stack of papers he had given her to read. "Dad, I don't know what any of these words mean."

"No one really does." Jed was sitting at his desk. "Look at the part I highlighted on page four. Read it out loud."

Ellie flipped the pages. "...further edit provisions to allocate another million dollars for NASA's teachers-in-space program."

"You know what allocate means?"

"To give money to, right?"

"That's right."

"But...you can do that? You can give NASA another million dollars just like that?"

"No, not just like that. You see the other 25 pages you've got there?"

"Yeah."

"Add that to the 95 pages I have on my desk and that's where the politics comes in. See, in order to get this passed in January, there are all kinds of strings that come with it. So what I'm going to be doing today, tomorrow, and most of the next day is setting up meetings to help me decide which of these strings are worth the extra million and which aren't."

"How do you decide that?"

"It all depends on the best interest of the residents in the district." He grabbed another stack of papers from his desk and walked them over to her. "Here, look at that." After a few minutes, he said, "You know what it means?"

"Not really." Ellie was thoroughly confused by the legal language.

"That's okay, it doesn't make much sense to me either. Essentially, it's asking for money to hire more police officers in big cities."

"That's a good thing, isn't it?"

"It absolutely is, but New Hampshire isn't on that list because our biggest city falls short of the cut-off. Boston's on there though, so what I'm going to do later is call Congresswoman Blanchard from Massachusetts to tell her that I'll support that proposal as long as she supports the economic expansion project, mentioned on page thirteen, that would fund interstate access in rural communities - places like Keene right here in New Hampshire."

"And if she says yes, then you both vote for the bill?"

"For that portion of the bill. There's still some maneuvering we have to do with the rest of it - what to keep, what to take out - but basically, yeah, if she says yes, we both vote for it."

"Hey, that's pretty neat!"

"It is, isn't it? See, politics isn't all bad." Jed was thrilled that he was able to reach her on this level. "Now come on, we've gotta go."

"Where?"
"I have an event I have to get to and I'm taking you with me."

A spring in his step, he led Ellie out of the office and into the car without telling her where they were going. She tried the 20-questions approach, but he wouldn't betray a single hint. It was a surprise, he said. Even when they arrived at the local teachers conference and shuffled their way into the hotel ballroom, Ellie was left in the dark. She followed Jed through a back door and what she saw then provoked a girlish squeal that got everyone's attention.

There she was - Christa McAuliffe, the Concord High teacher chosen to go up on the space shuttle in January. Jed had been tapped to introduce her to an audience of her colleagues who were there to discuss the logistics of showing her shuttle launch on televisions in classrooms across New Hampshire. She was to teach two lessons from space to give students all over the country an intimate look at space travel and illustrate the benefits and technological advances beyond what they read in their textbooks. They would be visual lessons, each one geared toward kids excited and eager to learn more about the space program - kids like Ellie.

Christa approached to shake Jed's hand and then bent down to address Ellie, seeing the awestruck glimmer in the young girl's eyes. "You must be Ellie. Your dad's told me a lot about you."

"He did? What did he say?" It had been Ellie's dream to meet Christa ever since the week she spent at space camp over the summer. She had begged Jed to introduce her and he promised that when he met her, she would too, but she had no idea that day was going to be today.

"He said you built the best science project in your entire school last year - a rocket, right? He also said you won a trip to space camp for it. So how was it?"

"Space camp? AWESOME! I can't wait to go back!"

Christa was touched by her enthusiasm. "I'm sure you will. Maybe we'll even see you up in space someday."

"Just like you!"

"Sort of. I never planned to be an astronaut, you know."

"A teacher's just as cool."

Laughing, Christa put a hand on Ellie's shoulder and led her to a shuttle backdrop they had draped over the wall. "Hey, how about a picture so I can say I knew her when...?"

A wide-eyed Ellie didn't need any prodding. She rushed to stand next to her hero as Jed took Christa's Polaroid to flash a picture. And when he was done, he took out his own camera for another. This was a day neither he nor Ellie would ever forget.

* * *

After an exciting day at Wellesley, Abbey and Elizabeth dined at an off-campus café before their drive home. The tour had solidified Liz's choice that Wellesley was the right school for her. If she was lucky enough to get an acceptance letter, she told Abbey, the decision was made.

"Why didn't you consider Wellesley?" she asked as she picked at the crust on her sandwich.

"Who says I didn't consider it?" Abbey returned. "I thought about Wellesley too, but it wasn't the right fit for me."
"Why not?"

"I was on this independence kick. My parents could afford to send me to college, but I wanted to do it on my own and I knew that after four years of undergrad, I'd still have another four of medical school, so when I got a scholarship to Boston University, I jumped on it."

"I bet you could have gotten a scholarship to a lot of schools. Why BU?"

"Well, it had a strong Biochemistry department and a beautiful campus. I fell in love with it, just as you did with Wellesley today. It was a good choice for me."

"Any regrets?"

"None." She paused and after a few seconds, looked up at Liz. "College is a big deal, Lizzie, but it's not so big a deal that you should be concerned about having regrets. Every one of the schools you applied to will give you a solid education and the skills you need for graduate school."

"I know. It's just...it's the next four years, you know? And that degree will stay with me forever. I want to make sure my decision is right."

"There's nothing wrong with that as long as you don't start second-guessing yourself. There are so many difficult decisions in life; don't make this one harder than it has to be. If it feels right, it is right."

"Wellesley feels right," Liz replied confidently.

"Then there's your answer." Abbey lifted her glass of water as if to make a toast. "To Wellesley."

Liz mimicked her move with a glass of soda, smiling from ear to ear as she clinked the glasses. "To Wellesley."

* * *

With three headstrong daughters who didn't know the meaning of the phrase 'bedtime,' drama was no stranger in the Bartlet house. The dinner plates had been washed and dried and Jed had told Zoey to get ready for her bath. The five-year-old, in all her sass, placed her hands on her hips and boldly refused, insisting that since he hadn't played her a game of Candyland, the bath wasn't going to happen. He tried playful manipulation and when that didn't work, he picked her up and carried her to the bathtub, ignoring her repeated protests.

Afterwards, a grumpy Zoey changed into her PJs while Jed brushed the tangles out of her hair and ran a quick blowdry to get the moisture out. "There we go," he said, combing it straight. "All pretty and ready for bed."

"I'm not tired yet!"

"Then lucky for you..." He tweaked her chin, making her giggle. "it's story time."

Expecting her regular bedtime story, the little girl crawled under her covers and stared up at her father. "Can you read me Snow White again tonight?"

"Snow White again? That's three nights in a row."

"It's my favorite."

"Snow White it is then." Jed reached for Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs on Zoey's bookcase.
beside her bed. The hardcover book was 15 pages and the perfect story to inspire her to read, he thought. Holding it out for her, he sat down in the adjacent rocking chair.

"Aren't you going to read?"

"Nope. You are."

"But..." Zoey flipped open the cover. "I want you to read."

"It's your turn to read to me tonight." Jed rocked back and forth. "And we need to get started. I'm pretty tired."

"But..." Zoey bit her lip, embarrassed by the fact that, unlike her sisters, she hated to read. It was harder for her because she had a tendency to focus on the details and miss the bigger picture. The plot and the substance of a story was lost on her when her eyes glazed over the words.

"Come over here." Jed held his arms out to her and when she got out of bed, he picked her up and placed her in his lap. "Mom says that when she tries to get you to read, you refuse. Are your books too hard for you? Because if they are, we can go to the bookstore and pick out other books, ones you like."

"No, they're not hard. I just like someone else reading to me."

"I know, Zoey, but you have to learn to do it yourself. Once you do, you'll see how much fun reading can be." He turned her around on his lap so that she was facing her bookcase with her back to him. "Look at all those books. Every single one has a very special story just waiting to be read. Think about it - magical potions, princesses and fairies, charming princes, mean old gargoyles threatening the kingdom, crystal balls - you're missing out on all of them."

Zoey twisted her head around. "Not if you read them to me."

"I'm not always going to be there to read to you, Zo. That's why I want to help you now so that in the future, you won't have to rely on me and so that someday, you can read to your own children and teach them how to read to theirs." No response. "What's so scary about reading?"

"It's not scary."

"Then read to me."

"You'll help me?"

Jed took that as his cue and propped the book in her hands. "You bet! Open to page one."

* * *

It was 8 p.m. by the time Abbey and Liz drove up to the farmhouse that evening. What had started out as a rough day for Elizabeth had turned into a day she would treasure for years to come. Not only was it exciting touring Wellesley and catching up with Amy again, but she also had a nice time on the drive back home with Abbey. The duo chatted about Abbey's college days and this time, Liz was much more engaged in the conversation. She learned why Abbey hadn't applied to Boston College - a prominent Catholic school she would have considered had it not been for the fact that, like Notre Dame, it was still an all-male college in the 1960s - and why she had moved back into her parents' home after two years in the dorms. College life would be difficult at times, Abbey warned, but just as Jed had been telling Liz all along, if she played her cards right, she'd have an amazing experience with memories to last a lifetime.
They climbed the steps of the porch and when they walked into the house, Liz gave her mother a kiss goodnight and headed upstairs to finish some homework before bed. Abbey followed her up, wanting to say goodnight to Ellie and Zoey and look for Jed, who didn't appear to be downstairs.

She slipped out of her heels and padded the hardwood floors of the hall barefoot, a soft, childlike voice luring her toward Zoey's room. The door had been left ajar and she peered through the crack to see Jed sitting on the rocking chair with their youngest daughter in his lap. The five-year-old was sounding out words slowly with his help. She waited for Jed to turn the page one last time and when Zoey read the last line of Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs, she clapped from the doorway, commanding the attention of both father and daughter.

"Mommy!" Zoey hopped off Jed's lap and ran to her mother. "I read Snow White!"

"I know, I heard you." Abbey gathered her up into her arms. "Did you enjoy it?"

"It was okay. Daddy kept stopping so we could talk about what was happening."

Knowing she was having comprehension problems, Jed wanted to ward off the temptation to read passively.

"Did that help?"

"I dunno." Zoey shrugged.

"She loved it," Jed said. "Tomorrow, she promised she'd read me Cinderella."

Abbey walked over to Zoey's bed to set her down and tuck her in. "Cinderella, huh? I think I may want to hear that one myself. Mind if I join you?"

"Uh uh." Zoey yanked on her blanket to pull it up just below her chin. "You can invite Ellie and Lizzie too!"

"Okay, we'll see what we can do about getting us all in here." Abbey leaned down to drop a kiss to her forehead. "Goodnight, sweetheart."

"Goodnight. Goodnight, Daddy."

"Night, kitten." Jed gave her a kiss as well, then followed Abbey out of the room.

"You're a miracle worker," she said to him once they were in the hall.

"Miracle shm miracle." He held out his hand to help her with her jacket. "Zoey's just as capable as Ellie and Lizzie. She just learns differently than they do."

That was Jed - the eternal optimist. Zoey's learning disability made things harder for her, but he wasn't going to let it be her excuse. If she required extra attention, he'd see to it that she got it and if her obstacles were larger, her hurdles taller than her sisters', then he'd compensate for that in whatever way she needed so that she could overcome everything in her path and blend in to the world just like her peers. Unlike Abbey who, thanks to her profession, knew the darker side of battles waged against the human spirit, Jed was a consummate idealist, a man who believed in his heart of hearts that if you worked hard for your goals, you'd achieve each and every one, despite the cards you're dealt - a lesson he was determined to teach Zoey.

He noticed her staring. "What?"
"I'm just thinking how right you are."

"Hm, now that's something I like hearing." He gave her a kiss hello and then asked, "How was Wellesley?"

"Unbelievable," Abbey told him. "Lizzie's in heaven. I'll let her elaborate. How'd it go with Ellie? Was she surprised?"

"That's an understatement. She can't wait to tell you all about it."

Both leaning against the wall, they smiled at each other for a minute. It had been a long day and they were too exhausted for a romantic night-cap, but what they wanted now wasn't sex. It was the privacy they craved, some time alone to cuddle up under the covers and share some pillow talk before bed.

"I'll meet you in our room in five minutes?"

"You're on!"

Criss-crossing each other, Abbey headed to Ellie's room while Jed went to Liz's.

TBC
Thanksgiving was a special time in the Bartlet household. In addition to working the local soup kitchen with the girls during the holiday season, Jed and Abbey also sponsored a Thanksgiving meal every year, with all the trimmings, to be delivered through Catholic Charities to a family struggling with tough economic times. Their generosity was a token of thanks for all the blessings they had in their own lives and their way of wishing a year of good fortune for others.

Thanksgiving Day began at the farmhouse with the Macy's parade on television in the morning over a simple breakfast of scrambled eggs and blueberry muffins, followed by an afternoon of cooking in the kitchen and welcoming guests, who Jed would sometimes lure back outside for a round of team sports before dinner.

It was just about noon and the parade was winding down when Liz stumbled over a pail of Legos in the kitchen. "Mom, someone's gonna break their neck on these toys!"

"ZOey!" Abbey hollered for her youngest daughter, having lost track of her after Millie arrived with her two kids. "Ellie, where's Zoey?"

"I dunno, playing outside with Tommy, I guess."

"Go get her and tell her to get her toys out of the kitchen before I put them away myself, some place where she won't see them for a week."

"Okay, but Chloe and I still need to gather pine cones at some point."

Chloe was Millie's daughter. Though she was two years older than Ellie, the two girls had been lifelong friends.

"You have all day to do that. Do this for me now?"

"Pine cones?" Millie questioned when the two girls left.

"Christmas wreaths. Ellie insists we kick off our Christmas decorating on Thanksgiving night."

"She wanted Dad to string up the lights before he carved the turkey last year," Liz added, good-
humored about the whole thing.

"I'm sure he was all too eager for that!" Millie had known Jed Bartlet for nearly 20 years. No one had more holiday spirit than he did.

"Mom was able to talk him out of it because of the snow. But this year, the weather report's clear so she had to turn to plan B."

"Plan B?"

"I hid his ladder," Abbey said, not a hint of remorse in her tone nor in her expression. "He's got 30 days to string up Christmas lights. Tonight is about Thanksgiving."

And that it was, she'd make sure of it.

Amid the Thanksgiving traditions that had slowly grown since the year the Bartlets moved from London back to the States, there were always a few last-minute chores on the checklist. This year, it was hammering out the seating arrangements in the dining room, something that Jed was trying to do while Abbey, Millie, and Liz worked on the feast in the kitchen.

He swaggered in to join the trio with two folding chairs in his arms, out of breath from the back-and-forth up and down the basement stairs. "That's it. Chairs are taken care of."

"And tables?" Abbey asked.

"I borrowed, begged, and stole. We've got enough tables."

"I'm not asking if we have enough. I'm asking if they'll fit."

"I'll make them fit, trust me."

"And after you do, I'd like to hear more about the stealing part."

Never before had they catered Thanksgiving dinner for two dozen guests, but Jed had gone all out this year. Abbey teased that he extended an invitation to any stranger he passed on the street and that she fully expected him to advertise in the classifieds. Her husband was a social butterfly and he loved surrounding himself with people, especially around the holidays.

As Jed started to hustle back to the dining room to sort out the cramped quarters, Ellie rushed back into the kitchen. "Zoey's coming, but she's not happy."

Jed called over his shoulder to his middle daughter and Chloe, "Frick and Frack, come help me with the seats."

"Chloe and I were going to help Lizzie with the mashed potatoes," Ellie told him.

"And gather the pine cones," Chloe reminded her. That's the part she was excited about.

"Go!" Abbey urged the girls. "Both of you, please! He'll never get it done alone."

"I heard that!" Jed bellowed from the hall.

"Fine," Ellie agreed. "Tables now, pine cones later."

The duo followed the path Jed had just taken as Zoey came stomping in, Millie's son Tommy right behind her.
"Mommy, Ellie pushed me off the swing!"

"She pushed you? That doesn't sound like Ellie."

"She did! She grabbed the rope and I fell and it was all her fault! Send her to her room!"

"I will just as soon as she helps your father with the seating arrangements. In the meantime, pick up your toys."

"No, I wanna play later. I'm gonna show Tommy how to build a fire engine."

"Later is later. Pick them up now."

"Then I'll have to start all over."

Abbey was out of patience. "Pick them up or I'm throwing them away."

Zoey huffed and puffed, refusing and leaving Abbey with two choices - follow through with the threat to teach Zoey a lesson or backtrack and risk encouraging her rebellious behavior. Abbey chose the former. With a handful of Legos, she walked over to the trash, gave her daughter one last chance, then dumped them into the can. An outraged Zoey stormed out of the kitchen in tears, calling for her father.

The five-year-old didn't know it, but the trash bag was a new one, unsoiled and still clean.

Abbey lifted it up, tied it, and set it aside. "I warned her."

"How long before you tell her the Legos are safe and sound?" Millie asked.

"Just as soon as she agrees to put them away. Zoey's going through a phase where she likes to challenge me and test the boundaries."

"Does that phase ever end? Chloe's been there since the terrible twos."

"Come on, that's an exaggeration. She's a lovely girl. You just can't appreciate it now because she's 13."

"Please, don't remind me."

"That rough?"

"You don't know the half of it!"

"Millie, you can't be surprised. You know what hormones do at 13."

"Yes, Abbey, I do. I'm a doctor, but no medical book, no clinical rotation, no patient ever prepared me for the possibility of my precious baby turning on me. Those are other people's kids. You don't expect it to happen to you until it does."

"Until what does?"

"She used to like me. And now all of a sudden, I'm the enemy."

"An adolescent girl not getting along with her mother? Quick, call the press!" Abbey prodded her friend.
"You think it's funny, but it's a serious thing." Millie adopted a more serious tone, a cue to Abbey to quit joking.

"I'm sorry." Abbey looked over at Liz. "Lizzie, you know I love you, right?"

"Yeah." Liz shrugged.

She turned to Millie again. "Teenagers are clinically insane."

"Hey!" Liz protested, but it drew a laugh out of Millie.

"I'm serious, this one turned into Jekyll and Hyde a minute past midnight on her 13th birthday. One second, I was her friend and the next, I ruined her life and she wanted nothing more to do with me."

"Lizzie's always been delightful to me." Millie gave Liz her support with a smile.

"Thank you!"

"That's because you don't live with her. Believe me, she has a mouth on her and more sass than I know what to do with sometimes. They're all like that at one time or another. I was like that with my mom, you were like that with yours. And now, this is the Karma our moms warned us about - our daughters are us, more or less. What gets me through is believing, as I do, that one day, they'll be blessed with daughters just like them."

"Gee, I'm glad I'm still in the room for this." Liz was only half kidding.

"I will always love you, baby doll." Abbey wrapped an arm around her eldest daughter's shoulders and gave her a kiss to the temple. "No matter how crazy you make me."

"That's easy to say now. She's almost 18 and out of your hair."

"Yeah, but I've got two more to go."

"ABBEY?" Jed came barging in then. "What do you say this year, we do buffet?"

"Translation - 'I couldn't make the tables fit.'" She could read him like a book.

"They do fit, smartass." He was lying, of course. "I'm just thinking buffet might be nice. Think about it - our guests roaming about the house instead of confined to one room."

"Jed, it's Thanksgiving. It's all about camaraderie and togetherness."

"Who are you, a pilgrim?"

"Jed."

"I'm not saying it's not a turn-on."

"Thumbs down on the buffet." She smiled at him as he sighed for melodramatic affect and went back to the drawing board. When he was gone, Abbey approached Millie again. "So tell me, what's up with Chloe?"

Millie took a seat the table. "I'm pretty sure it's a lot more serious than anything you dealt with with Lizzie."

"Maybe, maybe not." Abbey took the seat beside her. "With Lizzie, it was lots of things, from
serious to frivolous. We even had it out over clothes. She spent her allowance on the most inappropriate skirts and tops I'd ever seen. Finally, I said enough is enough, went into her closet, pulled out everything I didn't approve of, gave what I could to charity and burned the rest. She didn't talk to me for a month."

"But she eventually forgave you."

"Not yet," Liz quipped from the stove. "See what I mean?" Abbey threw an oven mitt at her, prompting a giggle. "Whatever's going on, it'll pass."

"I'm afraid it's going to be a longer road than that," Mille replied sadly. She took a breath, then admitted, "For the past three months, I've been dragging Chloe to the clinic for drug tests."

"Did you catch her...?"

"It started last spring."

"You're kidding."

"Pot mostly, but she tried LSD once...and that's what terrifies me. It's this crowd she's hanging out with. She and her friends were hauled down to the police station for shoplifting - lip gloss or something. Fortunately, the store dropped the charges and I forbid her from ever talking to the girls she was with again. But it doesn't matter. Even if she's grounded and in her room all day, it doesn't change her attitude. I feel like I don't even know her anymore."

Abbey touched her hand supportively as Millie laced her fingers and clinched her palms. "Oh, Millie, I'm so sorry."

"I was hoping that you might talk to her," Millie requested tearfully. "She doesn't listen to anything I say. I don't know how to get through to her."

Abbey knew how that felt. She had never dealt with such a serious issue with her own kids, but there were many times when she just didn't have the answers. At least she had Jed to help her. Ever since Millie's divorce, Chloe's father was a part-time dad at best. "Hey, she's my goddaughter. I'll do whatever I can."

Millie then looked up at Liz, who felt a little awkward having overheard something so personal. "Liz, you too? Chloe looks up to you, she always has. Would you mind...I know you're busy with your own stuff and the last thing you want is a 13-year-old to hang out with, but it would mean so much..."

"I don't mind at all. Chloe's kind of like another sister to me." Liz walked over to the two women. "I'd love to spend some time with her."

"Thank you, both of you."

Unaware of the serious discussion going on, Jed strutted back in. "See, the thing is, we need a larger dining room."

"This can't be that hard!" Ellie stood at the head of the Bartlet dining table. With her father in the kitchen negotiating with her mother, she was trying to think of a solution to the seating problem.
"Face it, there are too many tables and not enough space." Chloe hit her with a dose of reality the blonde wasn't ready to accept.

"There has to be a way."

The large and elegant cherrywood table the family used for dinner parties and special occasions normally sat eight - one chair at the head, one at the foot, and three on each side. There was an extension that, when used, could fit an additional two, for a total of 10. The problem was they were expecting 24 for Thanksgiving, so with 10 at the main table, the other two tables would have to sit seven each and somehow, some way, all three tables had to be wedged into a dining room that never before seemed quite so small.

"What if we move the two smaller tables to each corner and leave the main table in the center?" Chloe suggested.

"Then you'll call one the children's table and I'll get stuck sitting at it!" Zoey pouted.

"I don't like that idea," Tommy agreed.

"Tough! There's not even room for the adults. There's no way we're gonna start negotiating with you two."

"It won't work anyway," Ellie interjected. "My dad wants the tables arranged lengthwise, head to tail. He wants us all at one table."

"Why?"

"It's the way he likes it."

"Then the main table will only seat nine since we're getting rid of one of the end chairs."

"I know. We have to make it work."

Jed strode in, whistling. "All right, team, here we go. We're going to try it diagonally."

"We already did that, Dad, and it still didn't fit. All it did was split the room into two triangles and then you quizzed us on the area."

"One-half base times height. Don't mock the lesson, Ellie."

"Is there any rule that says we can't split up the tables?"

"Yes, the Jed Bartlet rule. The tables stay together."

"So then let's do buffet like you wanted."

"Miss Mullins nixed that idea." He thought for a moment. "But now you've got me thinking. There's no reason we have to have Thanksgiving in the dining room. Come with me."

Curious and eager to help, the kids followed him through the hall that led to a bigger room in the house - the living room. It didn't take long to strip the living room of the sofa, loveseat, and coffee table. The television set stayed in its spot because, as Jed said, turning it off in the middle of a Patriots-Jets game would be unAmerican. He and the four kids pitched in to move the rest of the furniture to the den and transfer the three tables that had been squeezed into the dining room into this spacious alternative.
Head to tail, they fit perfectly.

- - -

With the seating problem taken care of, Jed took Ellie, Chloe, Tommy, and Zoey out back to toss the football around while Liz gave Amy a tour of the farm. During their impromptu run-in at Wellesley, Abbey had invited Amy to join them for Thanksgiving after finding out she planned to spend the day in her boarding school dorm room, alone.

Down at the stables, Amy was instantly taken in, impressed by where Liz had grown up since the Bartlets left Hanover. "I can't believe you have your own horse."

"I don't really. We share them. Zoey's the rider in the family, but she's still on her pony. She can't wait until she's old enough to ride Shadow. Your mom lives on a farm in Connecticut, doesn't she? She doesn't have horses?"

"She does, but I hardly ever visit so..."

"What's the deal with that? You guys were close when we were kids."

"Let's just say my step-father's a pain and she doesn't like the tension. Anyway, Walnut Hill's not so bad. It's my real home."

"Boarding school must be fun." On one hand, Liz couldn't imagine not living at home with her family in high school, but on the other hand, the allure of being on her own, living with other kids her own age, was enticing.

"It's great! I mean, we have rules and all, but it's wonderful not having my mom around breathing down my neck every day. The guys in the adjacent dorm threw this Halloween party this year you wouldn't believe. We stayed all night...well, until three in the morning when the Headmaster got wind of it and sent us all to our own rooms. We all got demerits."

"That sucks."

"Yeah, but it was well worth it." Amy took a beat as the two girls walked out of the stables. "Hey, Lizzie, I hope I'm not being too pushy by asking for a favor."

"What kind of favor?"

"Wellesley's nice and all, but I had my heart set on poli sci at Brown. They rejected me. I want to re-apply next year and transfer my sophomore year if I get in. But the thing is, to make my application stronger, I need some community service or...at least some public service...in government...maybe with a letter of recommendation attached."

"You want me to ask my dad if you can intern in his office next summer?"

"Would he be cool about it?"

"Sure. He took three high school and college interns this past summer. I don't see why this would be different."

"I wouldn't ask if I could do it on my own. It's just...it's hard to get your foot in the door with politicians unless you know someone."

"Well then, lucky for you, you know my dad. He'd be thrilled to help!" Liz looped her arm around
Amy's and led her toward the house. "Now come on, my dad's organizing a football game and I wanna show you my room first. And by the way, it's not Lizzie anymore. It's Elizabeth."

"Elizabeth, huh? You're growing up on me."

"It happens. Tell me more about this rad Halloween party. Did you dress up?"

"Who doesn't dress up for Halloween?"

"I almost didn't this year. I found a wicked witch costume I liked at the last minute - slightly depressing, but it had just the right dose of glitz so it wasn't all bad. It was either that or a black hooded robe and a sickle."

"That's what I wore - the black robe and sickle."

"You went as the grim reaper?"

"No, the United Way budget cutter. Because even Halloween was political in Amy's world."

Jed's football game had drawn a few more players by late afternoon. His brother Jack had arrived, along with Jed's father-in-law, brother-in-law, and a couple of his staffers - and their families - from his district office. The group, which included kids as well as adults, had grown to a decent sized gathering, well suited for two teams and a real game of the sport. But the icy ground presented a problem, one Jack quickly discovered as he tried to throw the ball to Jed.

"That was the lamest throw I've ever seen!"

"I couldn't plant my feet."

"With an equally lame excuse!"

"Ever heard of salt? I could've broken my neck!"

"Salt's for wusses! You wanna play or you wanna bitch about the weather?"

Back at the house, the ladies had gathered in the kitchen to help with the finishing touches for dinner. Abbey's mother, Mary, had baked her special pumpkin pie that Jed always raved about, and her sister-in-law Kellie brought sweet potatoes and corn. With Lizzie's mashed potatoes, Jed's apple stuffing and cranberry sauce, Millie's wild rice and apple orchard coleslaw, and a counter full of other Thanksgiving staples - namely the magnificent turkey that Abbey had just pulled out of the oven - they sliced and diced colorful vegetables for a side salad.

"We're such a cliché," Kate said, looking to her older sister. Abbey waited for her to go on. "We're in the kitchen while the men are outside. So old-fashioned."

"Be glad they're outside," Abbey replied.

"She's right," Kellie chimed in. "I'd rather have Jack out there than in the kitchen. He didn't inherit the Bartlet cooking genes, but he does manage to get in the way quite well."

Abbey chuckled. "Jed loves to cook and he's pretty good at it, though I try not to tell him that too often. His idea and my idea of healthy meals don't exactly mesh, if you know what I'm saying."

She looked over at Millie. "What was it Steve used to say?"
"If it doesn't move, pour gravy on it," Millie laughed. "Steve grew up in one of those southern families where everything had to be fried before it was put on the table."

"I sometimes think Jed was a fried-chicken southerner in a previous life."

"Your Jed? I can't see it."

"Stick around a day or two and watch him try to fry the left over turkey legs."

Gazing out the kitchen window, Mary was concerned about other matters. "Is anyone else bothered by the fact that they've been out there a while without jackets? It's 30 degrees."

"The men? No." Abbey knew there was no point in asking Jed to wear a jacket, especially not while he was playing football. "The children better be bundled up." She walked over to the window to see Zoey running around in her undershirt. "I'm gonna kill that little girl."

"Make sure you kill the big girl next to her first." Mary was talking about Lizzie, standing behind Zoey in a thin layered shirt without her jacket.

"Look at her, she's shivering." Abbey opened the window and leaned out to shout, "Put on your jacket, Elizabeth! Zoey, you too!"

Liz replied loudly enough that everyone heard her grumbling as Abbey lowered the window.

"What was that?" Millie asked as she glanced out the window, somewhat surprised to see her daughter Chloe with her jacket on. Ellie had been a good influence, she thought.

"She's whining about not being a child. Contradiction in and of itself, isn't it? The other day, she marched downstairs and informed us that she's 17 and no longer needs a curfew."

"That must have gone over well."

"Jed took over on that one. I think she's just annoyed with me and instead of saying so, she's going to complain about other things."

"What's she annoyed about?"

"I'm starting a teen program at the hospital after the first of the year and Lizzie is less than pleased that I'm trying to get the word out at her school."

"What problem could she have with a program for teens?"

"It's sex-ed."

Kate added sliced carrots to the salad. "They began teaching high school sex-ed in New York after AIDS got its name, despite the objection of some parents. They don't teach it up here."

"Not in our school district. The only thing they get is a couple of lectures on abstinence sprinkled through their 10th grade health class. The school board rejected a more thorough program and unless there's a national mandate, that's the way it's going to be."

"So that's what Lizzie's angry about," Millie concluded.

"Not angry. Embarrassed. She was angry at first, but after she calmed down, she apologized. She's still embarrassed though, that much is clear."
"That's natural, right? What would you have done if your mom was teaching your friends how to use a condom when we were in high school?"

"My mom wouldn't know about such things. Kate and I were the products of immaculate conceptions." Abbey nudged Mary as the other women laughed and teased her.

"I think it's great that you're doing this, Abbey," Kellie said.

"Me too," Millie agreed, her head spinning with an idea. "Have you thought about broadening the scope to include other things?"

"Like what?"

"Peer pressure? Destructive decisions in general?"

"I hadn't, but now that you mention it..." Staring at her friend, Abbey could see the stress on Millie's face. She was going through a rough time with her daughter, much rougher than Abbey had ever experienced. "You know, that's a good idea. And I could use some help. I've been thinking what a huge task this is and how overwhelmed I'm likely to be. What'd you say we team up and do it together?"

"I live in Boston, in case you've forgotten."

"I haven't forgotten. One night a week, that's all it'll take. You only see morning patients on Wednesdays anyway and it's not like you don't have four other physicians at your practice who can cover for you in case of an emergency." She could tell Millie was considering it. "It's not that far a drive and it's a good cause...you know how good a cause it is."

Millie mulled over the proposal.

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"After dinner, I'm trading you for Brad. Your son's a better quarterback than you are."

"Says the man who couldn't tackle if his life depended on it."

The friendly bickering between the two Bartlet men continued as everyone traipsed in through the back door to dry off and wash up before dinner. They followed the smell of the food to the kitchen when they were through.

"Is Jed being obnoxious?" Abbey asked Jack.

"No more than usual."

"Abigail, your husband is a competitive soul." James gave his daughter a kiss hello. He had been drafted by Jed in the driveway the moment he and Mary arrived and hadn't had a chance to see her until now.

"You don't have to tell me, Dad."

An outnumbered Jed replied to his wife, "I came in here to help, not to be picked on."

"How would you know we love you if we didn't pick on you?" A sentiment he frequently threw at their daughters when he teased them.

"I can live with the doubt," he returned.
"Where are the kids?"

"Washing up."

"You wanna do me a favor and set the table?"

"I'll do you one better. You ladies worked so hard making what looks like a fantastic meal. Why don't you go have a seat and we'll do the serving." Jed included all the husbands in the offer.

"Mmm hmm, are you sure you're not going to pull something tricky?" Abbey arched her brow.

"Like what?"

"Like dump a can of salt on the turkey?"

"You have my word, no salt on the turkey. Now, get out of here, will you?" He swatted her backside with a dish towel and then waited until she and the other wives were out of the kitchen and out of earshot before he gestured to Kate's husband Bob who was standing in front of the pantry.

"You want the salt?"

"You betcha!" After all, his promise only extended to the turkey. "Two doctors cooked this meal. You wanna wage a bet on how much salt they used?"

Coming out of the pantry, he was confronted by a smirking Jack. "Maybe you should sprinkle a handful of that outside to, you know, keep your guests from getting maimed and paralyzed on your property?"

"JJJEEEDDD?" Abbey called from the dining room.

"WHAT?" Jed called back, quickly tossing the salt shaker to Bob to throw back into the pantry. "What is it?"

She burst into the kitchen. "Where's the table?"

TBC
December 1985

The first weekend in December was traditionally when the Bartlets celebrated Zoey's birthday, but a fierce snowstorm in 1985 forced them to postpone for a week and - to the birthday girl's delight - change the theme. What was supposed to be an indoor Candyland party was now slated to become an outdoor winter wonderland party with ice skating, sledding, and sleigh rides.

On the night before the magical day, the family set out to a Christmas Tree farm just outside of town to find the perfect tree - one big enough to host their collection of ornaments and full enough to nestle bulbs of soft light between its branches without exposing the gaudy wire. In the past, picking a tree had been somewhat of an adventure for the Bartlet clan. From Abbey's demanding schedule over the holidays to the girls' starkly different tastes in which gigantic evergreen to take home, it proved to be a challenge. Abbey had once bought a plastic tree to head off the bickering before it began, but her efforts were met with disapproval, not just from her daughters but from her husband as well. An important part of Christmas was the joy of choosing a tree, Jed had told her as he declared that would be the year he and the girls would stalk the forest, cut one down by themselves, and lug it home to trim - a chore that sounded better in theory than it turned out to be in practice.

So with that memory in the backs of their minds, they headed to the tree farm, and when they arrived, they split up to charge the snowy fields in search of the most breathtaking fir, spruce, or pine to serve as the official symbol of the holiday.

"I like all of these!" Ellie told her father, her eyes twinkling with the spirit of the season as the duo trudged a row of towering firs.

"We need just one."

"But why? We have more than one room in the house."
"Does every room need a tree?"

"Why not? Can I have one in my room?"

"You want one of these in your room?"

"SURE!"

"Ellie, they're eight-feet tall," Jed chuckled. Ellie's enthusiasm touched him. "Listen, how about we pick the family tree now and afterwards, we'll pick up a small tree for you to put in your room. Sound fair?"

The two strolled through the field, humming to the tune of Jingle Bells, which was echoing faintly from the barn, and stopping every now and then to admire the trees that caught their attention. It was a cold night and their boots sunk into the blanket of snow, crunching with each step, the hollow little holes slowly filling back up thanks to the light flurries falling from the sky.

After a few minutes, Ellie looked up at Jed. "Dad, can I ask you something?"

"Always."

"At Thanksgiving, Uncle Jack said you told him I might move up to the seventh grade."

"Was there a question in there?" Jed didn't find anything wrong with that. He was proud of Ellie and any chance he had to brag about the accomplishments of one of his girls, he took it. "Does it bother you that I told him?"

"It's just...I might not do it and it's kinda embarrassing."

"It's not embarrassing. I'm not stopping people on the street and telling them that my daughter is a genius. Your uncle asked me, at a family gathering, how you're doing and I said you're doing great, so great in fact, that your teacher wants to bump you up a grade. What about that is embarrassing to you?" When Ellie didn't answer, he stopped in his tracks, stepped in front of her, and turned to face her. "Ellie, you should never be embarrassed by who you are."

"I'm not."

"Then what difference does it make if I tell Uncle Jack how well you're doing school?"

"He came and told me all this stuff and...I dunno, it was weird."

"What kind of stuff?"

"That he always knew I was smart and that there are big things in my future. That kind of stuff. He doesn't say that to Lizzie."

"First of all, I'm sure he's said similar things to Lizzie. But even if he hasn't, that's no reason to feel uncomfortable about it. He's proud of you, just like I am."

"But what if there aren't big things in my future? What if I turn out to be an ordinary person when I grow up, nothing special? I'll feel like I let everyone down."

"Sweetheart, if that's what's bothering you, that's silly."

"Why?"
"Because you're a little girl with big dreams. And even if your dreams change over the years, you're not gonna let anyone down."

"That's what you say now."

"Listen, I'm gonna tell you something that I haven't told many people, something personal." He took a deep breath and went on. "When I was about your age, one of my teachers told my father that I was doing well in class, that I always had my hand up, and that I always volunteered to go to the blackboard because I came to school prepared. My dad sat me down that night and told me that no one likes a show off. That's what he thought I was; that's what he thought any kid who does those things was. He said I'd come off like some kind of know-it-all, never mind I didn't have the right answer half the time. See, I wasn't trying to show off. I was genuinely interested in learning and whether I was right or wrong, it didn't really matter to me as long as I learned how to do it for the next time. But he didn't care about that. All he cared about was whether or not people thought of his son as a know-it-all."

"So what did you do?"

"I spent the next few years just listening in class and not participating. I was a kid, what did I know?"

Ellie couldn't imagine her father so reserved. "That was so mean of Grandpa. Why would he do that?"

Jed had to remind himself that unlike Liz, Ellie didn't know the history between him and his father. And he wasn't about to tell her about it now, at a tree farm a few weeks before Christmas. Instead, he said, "I don't think he was deliberately trying to be mean. I think he really believed what he said. And he made a mistake. Parents sometimes make mistakes. My father made a lot of them. The reason I'm sharing this with you, Ellie, is because I wonder sometimes if you don't hide your intelligence because you're worried about what others think - like last year, with your science report and now with moving up to the seventh grade."

"That's not why..." Her protest strong, Ellie didn't want him to think that her shyness was about anything more than the fact that she didn't like the spotlight. "Dad, how can you think that? That's not why I don't want to go to seventh grade. I don't wanna go because I won't know anyone and I'll be the new girl in the middle of the year."

"Okay."

"I mean it, it's nothing like how you were when you were a kid!" she added to punctuate her statement.

"Okay, fine. You made your point." Just another indication to Jed that he really didn't understand her, no matter how much he tried to. "So I guess your mind's made up then. You're not going to seventh grade."

"You want me to." It wasn't a question.

"If you want to know the truth, yeah, only because I think it'll be a good thing in the long run." He saw her face then and he could tell he upset her. "Look, whatever you choose to do should be your choice. This is the first decision you're going to make on your own. I want you to do what feels right in your heart, whatever that is."

"My heart says no."
Jed nodded evenly. "No it is then." He took a beat, then added, "Let's just let it go, okay? At least for tonight."

"Okay."

He prodded her in the arm with his fist teasingly as they resumed their stroll. "You see any you like? What do you think of that tree right over there?"

Despite the swift change of subject, Ellie still felt she had disappointed him. But there was nothing she could do about it now. There was nothing more to say. "It's okay. Maybe we should try pine this year."

"Pine? We always get a Balsam fir."

"I saw a pine I liked when we first got here. It was unique."

"That's code for ugly, isn't it?"

"Dad, none of these trees are ugly. It's a good one. I think you'll like it."

"Let's have a look. Where is it?"

"Follow me." She led the way to the pine trees.

"I bet it won't be as nice as a Balsam fir..."

"Give it a chance. You might like it even better than Balsam fir."

"Doubtful."

"Are you gonna be Mr. Gloomy about it?"

"I might."

"Dad!"

"Kidding, just kidding."

Ellie grabbed his arm and tugged as hard as she could.

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Oh, come, all ye faithful,
Joyful and triumphant
Oh, come ye, oh, come ye to Bethlehem

The farmhouse was buzzing with Christmas carols as Jed, Abbey, and the girls trimmed the tree that evening. From the upbeat Jingle Bell Rock to the slower tempo of Oh Come All Ye Faithful, Lizzie, Ellie, and Zoey - each donning a Santa hat with her name scribbled in glitter - coiled lights around the tree while Jed searched high and low for the acrylic angel tree topper that had become a family favorite.

"I still say the tree I wanted was better," Liz said, tucking the wire between the branches.

"Tough," Ellie replied, not a hint of sympathy in her voice. "You got to choose last year. Besides, I like this one."
"It looks like it's on its way to tree Heaven."

"It's unique."

"It's dry."

"No it's not."

"Yes, it is." Liz grabbed one of the branches. "Look at it, it's dry. And it's all prickly too."

"So? You're prickly and we keep you."

Liz threw tinsel at her, causing Ellie to duck the throw and grab her own tinsel in retaliation.

"Hey, hey, hey, knock it off!" Dressed in a Santa hat of his own, Jed strode into the room carrying a box. "Bunch of hooligans, you're gonna get coal in your stockings this year!"

"What are hooligans?" Zoey asked.

"Hooligans are children like your sisters - children I might add, who've earned themselves a place on Santa's naughty list this year."

Liz rolled her eyes as she took the box from her father. "Did you find the tree topper?"

"It's gotta be in this one."

"You said that three boxes ago."

"One of these times I'm gonna be right."

Abbey walked in then, carrying a tray of hot cranberry punch for Jed and three steaming mugs of hot chocolate for the girls. "I told you last year to put it in the box with the beaded ornaments."

"Why is it that whenever I can't find something, you think it's because you told me where to put it and I didn't listen?"

"Because that's what usually happens."

"Not this time. I was in Washington when you took the tree down last year." He took his punch. "Thanks."

"Oh well, it must have been one of the kids."

"One of the kids," he scoffed. "You can't admit you lost the tree topper."

"It's not lost. It's in one of these boxes." She squatted down and began rummaging through the one closest to her.

"Dad, another one of the lights went out again," Ellie told Jed.

"Of course. One goes out, they all go out!"

"It's just these two."

"Give it time."

"Do we have more?" Abbey asked.
"None that work." Jed sat down, too, so he could plug in another string of lights.

"That one looks like a winner."

He tapped it a few times as he stood up with it draped over his hand. "Why the hell aren't they blinking?"

"They're old. We need new lights. And if I don't find my tree topper, we'll need a new one of those too."

"Not two seconds ago, you claimed you told me to put it in the box with the beaded ornaments. Now that we know I wasn't even around for that conversation, it begs the question, Abigail, why didn't YOU put it in the box with the beaded ornaments?"

"I know what you're doing." She was looking up at him.

"What?"

"You've been trying to pick a fight ever since I told you I'm going to be on call on Christmas Eve."

Jed dismissed the notion with a wave of his hand. "Hey, if you want to be on call, have at it. The rest of us will enjoy a festive holiday without you."

"He says in the most passive aggressive tone I've ever heard." She went back to sifting through the box, pulling out another string of lights and plugging them in to discover they no longer worked.

"Why do you insist on keeping all these? Are you under the impression they'll suddenly start glowing again?"

"I'll repeat myself just for the sake of clarity - I'm not the one who packed things up last year. And you're changing the subject."

"I wasn't aware there was a subject, aside from your snippy attitude, that is."

"Damn right there's a subject. And I don't have an attitude."

"What's the subject?"

"You. You refuse to admit when you make a mistake."

"Like misplacing the tree topper?"

"Yeah."

"And agreeing to be on call Christmas Eve?"

"Now that you mention it, yes."

"Jed..." She stood up to face him. "If you're gonna be pissed at least say you're gonna be pissed so that I can get pissed too."

"That takes some of the power out of my indignation."

"I know," she acknowledged with her hands on her hips.

"Why can't you cancel your call for that night?"
"It was either Christmas Eve, Christmas Day, or Thanksgiving. What did you want me to do?"

"Quit."

"Jed."

He held up his hands. "Serious, Abbey, you were supposed to be done with this type of thing after residency."

"Just because residency is over doesn't mean that I'm finished with call. You know that." She brushed past him, approaching the tree with her fingers curled around an ornament - their ornament, the one Jed had custom made their first Christmas as husband and wife.

"Yeah, but holidays? When you were a resident, you covered for attendings all the time on the holidays, especially on Christmas Eve. I assumed, foolishly, that meant that when you were an attending, residents would be covering for you."

"You assumed wrong. And even if I could pull rank, I wouldn't and you know why."

"The Zion case."

"Yes, the Zion case. Are you going to tell me you don't understand?"

Libby Zion was an 18-year-old girl who was admitted to a New York City hospital with a fever and died just a few hours later, after her doctor - a sleep-deprived resident - mishandled her case and ordered a fatal dose of medication. Her story shook Abbey to her core. After all, she knew what it was like to be awake and tending to patients for 36 hours straight without so much as a cat nap in the call room. To think that someone that tired and overworked would be making life and death decisions on behalf of vulnerable patients made her head spin, but those brutal shifts were required of a resident and so she did it back then against her better judgment, with the hope that when she could, she'd change things. The death of Libby Zion, a teenager only a year older than Elizabeth was now when she died, reminded her of that. She didn't have a voice as an idealistic med school graduate starting her internship and residency, but she had one now and she intended to use it.

Abbey had a rule - no resident training with her was allowed to assist her in the O.R. if he or she had been on duty for more than 24 consecutive hours and anyone finishing up a night of in-house call was to leave the hospital after morning rounds for some much-needed sleep. Those restrictions made her unpopular with the new crowd of interns who had just shed their med student garb and couldn't wait to handle a scalpel as newly minted doctors, but it earned her the respect of senior level residents, fellows, and colleagues. And, despite his displeasure tonight, it also earned Jed's approval.

"I understand," he said less grudgingly. "I just don't like the idea of you being called away that night."

"I might not."

"When have you been on-call on Christmas Eve and not been called away?" No response. "I rest my case."

Call on days like Christmas Eve wasn't like call the rest of the year. Because of vacation schedules and a depleted surgical team, Abbey knew that more likely than not, she'd eventually be paged.

"There is a difference, you know. When I was a resident, I had to stay at the hospital all night. At
least now, you get me until my pager goes off."
"I don't like spending the holiday without you."
"I don't either." She gave him a warm smile. "On the plus side, if I'm called in early, at least I'll get
to watch you strut the halls in your Santa costume."
"Can I see Daddy dressed as Santa too?" Zoey still believed in Santa Claus, but Jed and Abbey had
explained to her that since Santa only left presents when children were sleeping, Jed would
volunteer each year to dress up as the jolly old man so he could surprise kids in the hospital's
pediatric wing. It was nothing more than a role in a play as far as Zoey was concerned, and it didn't
shake her belief in the 'real' visitor from the North Pole. It was just something her family did to
make the holidays a little brighter for others.
"You wanna be one of my elves this year, Zoey?"
Her green eyes exploded to twice their normal size. "YEAH! Can I? For real?"
"You bet!" Jed pulled her up into his arms. "But before the big day, I'm going to enroll you in
something I call elf training school, see, where you'll learn all about what you can and can't do or
say to the kids."
"Elf training school? Where's that?"
"Right here in the Bartlet living room, starting tonight."
"AFTER we trim the tree," Abbey maintained in a firm tone.
"Of course. That comes first, as it has every year."
And so it went, a night of trimming the tree, going through boxes and showing off ornaments to
one another, singing carols, and in Zoey's case, 'elf training.' Liz and Ellie continued to bicker
about the tree Ellie picked out while Jed continued to complain about Abbey working on
Christmas Eve. But even with the round-robin snarking that went on, there was enough love in that
room that it looked like a picture postcard to anyone gazing in through the frosted windows of the
old farmhouse that night - the five of them gathered around, decorating for Christmas. It was
almost perfect, until...
"FFFFFFFFIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIRRRRRRRRRRREEEEEEEEEEEE!!"
Their unique little tree went up in flames.
Elizabeth frantically pulled her screaming sisters to the corner of the room while her parents
doused the flames with the fire extinguisher, leaving a smoldering puff of smoke that lingered over
the scorched branches of their burnt Christmas tree and the faulty lights that hung off it. The
ornaments, some singed and some melted, lost their balance and began to fall to the ground one by
one while Jed and Abbey watched, startled and shocked.
"Looks like we need another tree," Jed said, his lip quivering in laughter, a clear sign to his
frightened daughters that the fire was out and everything was okay.
Liz heaved a sigh of relief, then replied with a glance over at Ellie, "This time, let's get one that's
not so dry."
"Not exactly Norman Rockwell, was it?" Dressed in her bathrobe, Abbey was towel drying her hair in the master bedroom that night.

"It was better than Norman Rockwell! More lively, more animated!" Jed turned down the covers and fluffed the pillows.

"You can't think it was a good thing that our tree burned down right in front of our eyes." She went into the bathroom to toss her towel in the hamper.

"Hey, it was better than it burning down behind our backs. Imagine if we'd been asleep."

The thought sent a shiver up her spine. "Have we checked the smoke detectors lately?"

"The smoke detector went off."

"I mean the one upstairs, outside the girls' rooms."

He was one step ahead of her. "I checked while you were in the shower. The fire really rattled you, didn't it?"

"No, I'm fine." She tied her robe tighter.

"Come here." Jed held out his arm to her and when she approached, he held her close, stroking her hair. "Honey, I swear, I checked the detectors. The tree is gone. There's nothing to worry about."

"I know. It was just a little scary."

"Yeah, it was. But no one got hurt." He pulled away to see her face. "And think of it this way - now we can get a brand new - decent - tree without hurting Ellie's feelings."

Finally, a laugh out of Abbey. "It was ugly, wasn't it?"

"Gotta hand it to our girl, when she wants a 'unique' tree, she goes all out. Did you see how quickly the guy sold it to us? He was afraid it was scaring the other trees on the farm."

"That's why Ellie chose it. She knew no one else would."

"That's cause they're smart. That tree should have come with a homeowner's insurance policy. Incidentally, Lizzie took a picture of it while it was still smoldering. Imagine how much fun we're going to have sharing that picture and telling this story 10 years from now."

"No one will believe it looked better on fire than it did alive."

"Don't tell Ellie that. Hey, you know what I've got?"

"What?"

He picked up the acrylic angel tree topper from the nightstand. "Turns out it was in the box with the beaded ornaments after all. It was just hidden under some garland."

"Oh thank God! I love this tree topper."

"I know how you do."

"If it had been on the tree..."
"It wasn't. The only thing on that tree were some really old bulbs and some cheap plastic ornaments. All replaceable. Thanks to the girls' tinsel fight, we hadn't gotten to the good stuff yet."

"Except our ornament. The one with our names on it - it was on the tree."

"You mean this?" This time, he held in his hands the ornament Abbey had slipped precariously onto the tree - the one from Christmas 1967. In the chaos of the girls screaming, Liz had accidentally knocked it off the branch before the flames got to it. It had rolled behind the stand, where Jed found it still in one piece.

"Oh Jed!" Abbey admired that ornament so much, not only because it was personalized with their names in beautiful script lettering, but because of the memories that came with it. That ornament had been with them since before they were parents, before she was a doctor, before he was a congressman. It had spent 18 Christmases with them, from their newlywed days until now. She couldn't bear the thought of losing it.

"Am I your hero?"

"Always and forever." She gave him a kiss that turned into another embrace.

"I'm sorry about before," Jed said softly. "About giving you a hard time. I know it's not your choice to work on Christmas Eve."

"Jed, it's okay. You're not apologizing now just because you got called back to Washington early, are you?"

"What?" He pulled out of the hug. "No. And how did you..."

"I heard the phone ring when I was in the shower. I overheard you."

"I was going to bring it up."

"When?"

"Once we were snuggled up in bed."

"No, I mean, when do you have to go? You can stay for Zoey's birthday party, can't you?"

"Yeah. I'll catch a flight tomorrow night after the party." He had been planning to head back for the vote on stem cells anyway, but he didn't expect to be summoned a week early.

"Will you be back before Christmas?"

"Whatever it takes."

"Well then, I guess we have to pack." Abbey headed to the closet to pull out the ironing board.

"I can do that tomorrow."

"There'll be 12 five-year-olds here tomorrow and they'll be expecting sledding and sleigh rides," she reminded him as she grabbed a bunch of his dress shirts and threw them on the bed. "You can't do it tomorrow."

"So this is how we're going to spend our last night together?" He was hoping for a little barbecue between the sheets.
"You're not going to prison, Jed. You're going to Capitol Hill."

"According to some, it's not that different." She took a second to acknowledge that, but he wasn't satisfied. "Come on, Abbey."

"Hon, we have a routine. I always do your ironing before you go."

"I'm capable of doing it myself. They'll just wrinkle in the suitcase anyway."

"Not the way I pack them. And yes, you are capable, but you don't do it. You just hang them up in the bathroom and let the steam work its magic."

"What's wrong with that?"

"You don't get the crisp collars that I do when I iron."

And he did love those crisp collars. "Okay, fine, do your ironing. You're coming up for the congressional Christmas party, right?" She didn't reply. "Abbey, right?"

"I'm working on it."

"Oh come on! You knew it was coming."

"It's a busy time, Jed. Do you have any idea the number of things I have to juggle when you're not here? Now raise that to the power of 20 for the weeks from Thanksgiving to Christmas. Between the kids and work, I don't know how I can get away for a weekend."

"So I have to go to that thing alone?"

"It's a working party, right? You'll be strategizing most of the night."

"Not necessarily."

"On the eve of the stem cell bill? Really?"

"Okay, maybe part of the night, but..." he continued softer, "I hate the thought of going alone."

He collapsed on the edge of the bed then, deflated, and Abbey suddenly felt guilty. This rat race they called life was enough to drain them both when they were together. When they were apart, it was a million times worse. She cherished coming home from the hospital at the end of a long day to find dinner cooked and Jed helping the girls with their homework before bath time. How she loved curling up with him on the sofa to share tidbits about their day after the kids had been tucked in. Doing it on the phone just wasn't the same.

Jed hated it too. Sitting there on the bed that night, he considered not going to Washington. It was just a floor debate on a bill that wouldn't come up for a vote for another week anyway, he told himself. But he knew it was in vain. He wasn't like some of his colleagues, the ones who only showed up when they absolutely had to in order to convince their constituents they were working hard on their behalf. He was different because whatever the bill - big or small, important or insignificant - Jed wanted a voice in it. Not going wasn't an option.

As Abbey joined him on the edge of the bed, Jed loosened up a bit. She looped her arm around his and rested her head on his shoulder. "You know what I can't wait for?"

"What?"
"Another weekend in the Poconos. Remember how much fun we had? Just the two of us, no kids, no work, no political maneuvering. Just us and nature."

"It's gonna be a while before we can do that again."

"I know. But it's what I hold onto when I miss you. And, God Jed, when you're away, I miss you..." She squeezed his hand. "I'm gonna fly down for the Christmas party. I have to leave that night."

"It's okay, Abbey, you don't have to go just to make me feel better. I know those things aren't much fun."

"No, it's important. You need to go and I should be there with you."

"I'll make it up to you. Next hospital benefit, I swear I'll try to act interested when that pulmonologist friend of yours goes on and on about his fascinating research on the properties of phlegm."

Abbey laughed. "I'm gonna hold you to that." She looked into his eyes. "Sorry I made a mess of Christmas."

"It's not a mess. A mess is something so mangled that we can't fix it. We can still have a great Christmas. We'll just celebrate on Christmas Day instead, just like we've done before."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. You want what a REAL mess is? A real mess is us all decked out in holiday attire, singing carols and trimming the tree - as a family - only to have it blow up right in front of our faces and burn to the ground. THAT'S what I call a mess!"

Another laugh. "We never said we were the Waltons."

'Yet,' she wanted to add. She was amused that in repeating the story, he'd already forgotten all about the girls' bickering and the snarking going on between them. It was so Jed to romanticize it in his mind. She wondered if by the time he told others, he'd have them holding hands to a verse of O Little Town of Bethlehem in perfect harmony as they strung up the lights.

"Before we get back to packing, there's something I've wanted to do ever since you waved your damp hair in my face." He kissed her, much more passionately than the kiss she had given him after he saved their ornament.

"Jed..." Abbey's voice was muffled by his mouth as he laid her down on her back. "If you don't stop, we're going to roll around in bed all night and we'll have to pack during Zoey's party tomorrow."

"So what?"

"Chores first, sex later."

"All work and no play..."

"Is what adults do when they have a busy weekend!" With a deep sigh, Jed sat up. But even without him on top of her, Abbey remained put. "I'll iron, you do the wash."

"Okay." He tugged on her belt, causing her robe to fly open.
"JED!"

"This needs to be washed," he said as he yanked it off her shoulders and out from under her body.

"Not funny!"

"No, you're not funny. Not one bit." Lying there naked, she looked irresistible. He tossed the robe across the room. "You're just plain delectable."

Another giggly scream as he crawled on top of her. "JED!"

He kissed her lips and her chin, following it down to her neck. When he reached the smooth valley between her breasts, it felt too good to fight even if she had wanted to. Abbey relaxed and enjoyed it, her arms stretching out over her head and pushing his dress shirts to the floor.

"MMMMOOOOOMMMMMMMMMMMYYYYY!" Zoey burst through the door.

"ZOEY!" Abbey scrambled out of bed, grabbing one of Jed's shirts to cover herself as Jed zipped up his pants. "I told you to always knock!"

"I forgot."

"What is it?"

"It won't stop snowing."

"So?"

"If it's snowing when my friends get here, you said we might not be able to ice skate."

"It'll be fine. Go back to bed."

"But..."

Jed jumped in. "Zoey, you know what happens to little girls who don't go to sleep when their parents tell them to?"

"What?"

"They're not allowed to dress up as elves and hand out presents at the hospital."

"I'll go to bed."

"Good girl."

"Will you tuck me in, Daddy?"

"I already tucked you in once tonight."

"But I got untucked when I got up."

An amused Abbey gave her daughter a kiss to the top of the head.

"All right, Miss Bugaboo, I'll tuck you in again. This time, make you sure you stay tucked for the whole night." Jed followed Zoey out of the room, then ducked his head back in to address Abbey, "And you, get undressed and get on that bed. I want you naked and waiting when I get back."
"Is that an order?" She asked, provoking him with her husky voice while her fingers played with the buttons on his shirt.

"It most certainly is. I'm in charge tonight."

Abbey bit her lip in anticipation. She decided to keep his shirt on, but she undid every button, then crashed back on the bed. It appeared the fire wouldn't be the only thing warming up the Bartlet homestead that night.

TBC
December 23rd, 1985

"LIAR!" Abbey shouted at the television in her office. She was tuned to C-SPAN, watching the debate on stem cell research on the floor of the U.S. House of Representatives while charting on morning patients.

"Stem cells are being touted as the cure-all, the means to curing diabetes, maybe cancer even," Representative Roger Oakley was saying. "But what they fail to tell you, what they fail to tell any of us is that they don't know if it'll help. They have yet to come up with indisputable medical evidence for the use of stem cells. They just want the chance to destroy all these embryos on a hunch - a hunch with minimal scientific data to back it up. And they're asking us, the people sent here by our tax-paying citizens, to say that it's okay, to give them the green light to systematically kill what would otherwise be living, breathing human beings...all on a hunch."

Abbey was furious, so furious that if she was a cartoon character, steam would have been coming out of her ears. She watched in disgust, waiting for Jed to contradict Congressman Oakley. He had to, she thought. He had done his homework, he knew that Oakley's speech was riddled with inaccuracies. Garbage really, all in an attempt to scare the public. Jed couldn't let that kind of misinformation stand without a challenge.

"The Chair recognizes the Gentleman from New Hampshire," the Speaker said.

Jed stood up and just as Abbey hoped, refuted Oakley's statement. He was firm, but diplomatic - one of his many talents. Yes, he had a temper and yes, he could rattle even the calmest person in the room with his bellowing voice when he was angry, but he was no loose canon. He had a natural confidence and the ability to reject emotional arguments with facts. Nowhere was that more evident than on the floor of the House. It was the reason Abbey bought a TV for her office. C-SPAN was hardly riveting television, but whenever she was in her office, she had it on because it gave her access to the political process, airing House and Senate proceedings live, and that meant she could watch Jed in his element - working as the representative from New Hampshire's first congressional district.
He made his point that day without resorting to the kinds of tactics Oakley used. Jed presented information from the medical community - some that Abbey had helped him interpret and others that he and his staff had researched on their own - and concluded his argument with a call to action, urging his colleagues to run out the clock on the moratorium on human embryo research, paving the way for a debate that would explore funding investigative work on stem cells.

With the sound of Speaker O'Neill's gavel, the chamber was excused for lunch. Jed shuffled out, flanked by his aides as they headed back to the congressional suite at the Rayburn House Office Building.

Midway there, Leo joined them, walking alongside Jed. "You're fighting a losing battle."

"Tell me something I don't already know," Jed shot back.

"You're going to get eaten alive if you continue the way you're going."

"I wasn't looking for Little Susie Sunshine, Leo, but a little bit of encouragement might not be out of line, you know what I'm saying?"

"The kind of encouragement you want, I'm not prepared to give."

"Why?"

"Because you're gonna lose and it won't be pretty." It was a brutal dose of honesty, but Leo knew Jed needed to hear it.

"You're allergic to optimism, you know that? What happened to, 'if it was me, I'd get ready for the fight and do it anyway'? Didn't you say that to me just two months ago?"

"You set the stage. That's all you were supposed to do."

"Yeah, well, it took on a life of its own."

As they crossed the threshold to Jed's suite, his Chief of Staff, Michael Glass, was there to greet him. "You have to give up."

"Not you too."

"No one wants you to save face more than I do, but you don't have the support you need. It's going to get worse."

Deputy Chief of Staff, Lindsay, agreed. "It's time to reel it in."

"I don't believe this."

"You weren't supposed to take it so far. The purpose of bringing it up was to soften the ground for next term."

"He was spreading lies! What was I supposed to do, ignore him?"

"Yes!" Michael didn't hold back. "It's a disaster out there. It's like the runaway train with you as the only passenger."

Jed absorbed what they were all saying, but he wasn't ready to throw in the towel yet.

"Congressman, your wife's on line two," his receptionist, Maggie, told him.
"All right, look, all of you, I didn't spend the last two and a half weeks here for nothing. The ban expires at midnight. Let's figure out how to win this."

"They're going to win the floor vote."

"Then let's make sure there's not a vote." Jed looked over at Leo. "Leo, come with me, will you?" He started toward his office and when he got there, he shut the door, then picked up the phone. "Abbey, I tried..."

"You need to bring up the NIH."

"Hang on, Leo's here. I'm going to put you on speaker phone." With a click, he hung up the receiver and talked to her through the speaker. "Can you hear me?"

"Yeah."

"The NIH won't matter."

"Yes, Jed, it will," she insisted. "How can they dispute evidentiary research?"

"Because that's what they do. They twist and manipulate data. Didn't you hear all the crap they threw out this morning?"

"Hi, Abbey." Leo said, his tone reserved. He hadn't spoken to Abbey in over a year and was still hesitant after the way they left things at his intervention.

"Hello, Leo." Abbey felt the same.

"Look, Jed's right. The NIH isn't going to matter." He addressed Jed then. "I don't know what you're planning after lunch, but they're not gonna budge on this. You don't have the support you need to stop the vote. Especially not today. Everyone wants to get out of here and go home, like they were supposed to last week."

"They wanted to vote last week and we stopped it."

"There is no more 'we.'"

"There was when I was summoned here two weeks ago!"

"Not anymore. Now, it's just you."

"If I give up when I'm this close, won't that make me look weak?"

"You're not giving up on stem cells. You're just stepping back to reassess the ban. You'll round up the troops after the holidays and do this thing right."

"It'll be 10 times harder," Abbey countered. "Jed, Adams engineered this whole thing. He called you out with that article in the Union Leader last month because he wanted you to fight the reauthorization. And he wanted you to lose. If you back off, you'll have handed him a victory."

"Which is exactly why he should back off," Leo maintained. "Jed's not going to win, Abbey. In the end, there will be a vote, despite his best efforts to derail it. If he resolves to do this after the holidays, he can shore up support and do it on his own terms instead of being forced into it by Adams." He glanced over at his friend once again. "It's not gonna happen. Don't show all your cards now. Save your fight for after the New Year. Come back on January 4th and hit them where it counts."
"This was supposed to be a temporary moratorium. Did you know that? Congress put a temporary moratorium on federal funding in the ’70s and here it is 1985 and we're still fighting to lift it. What makes you think anything will be different in 1986?" Jed asked.

"You'll have a better chance than you do now."

"Abbey?"

"I don't know." It was times like this that she wished she was there with him. She was new to politics and much less knowledgeable than he was about how the system worked.

"Leo, can I have a moment alone?"

"No problem."

After Leo left, Jed sat down in the chair behind his desk, picking up the phone and taking Abbey off speaker. "Hey."

"You're tired," she said.

"I've been working on this round the clock."

"I know."

"This whole thing was a waste. I never should have come up. I never should have bothered."

"That's not true, Jed. If you hadn't been there, no one would even know or care what happened. At least you gave it some press coverage."

"Press coverage my ass! Maybe at first, but not the past few days. One guy, Abbey. One. From the Associated Press. I swear, I think he was an intern. No one deemed it important enough to cover, not even Roll Call and let's face it, what the hell do THEY have going on?"

"Doesn't Roll Call cover everything on Capitol Hill?"

"Once everyone started backing down, this became a blip on the screen to them. They know nothing's going to come of it so what's the story - the lone dissenter on the House floor, holding things up right before Christmas?"

"It's not like that. A lot of your colleagues agree with you. They just don't have the courage you do to fight an unpopular cause. And a lot of ordinary citizens agree with you too. You're their voice. Isn't that what you went to Washington to do?"

"I wanted to make it happen."

"And you will. You heard Leo, it's not over. You're laying the groundwork for later and thanks to you, later, we'll all be more informed."

"Yeah."

"Jed?"

"Yeah?"

"Come home."
Back at the farmhouse, Zoey and Ellie were home helping Liz wrap presents. Just like every year, each of the three girls had spent a portion of her allowance on one present for a boy or girl her own age who didn't have a mother and father. The trio usually piled into the car with Jed a few days before Christmas to drop the gifts off at Saint Peters Orphanage, but this year, Liz was also in charge of the Key Club's annual toy drive for underprivileged kids, so in addition to the three presents they bought, there were over a hundred other gifts that had been donated, and since her clubmates bailed on her when school let out for the holiday, Liz was left to wrap them all on her own. That's when she recruited her sisters. With her two little helpers, they managed to get it all done in a matter of hours. Abbey had set up a wrapping station with everything they'd need in the family room and Liz had given Zoey the task of taping where she was told while she and Ellie cut the paper and tied the ribbons.

Once they were finished, Liz retrieved a large red 'Santa sack' from upstairs, filled it to the rim with the gift-wrapped presents, and grabbed her jacket and keys to go drop them off - or so she thought. She didn't expect to be stalled by an unexpected visitor, but when she saw him climbing the steps out front, her heart started racing.

"What are you doing here?"

"I would have called, but I was afraid you'd tell me not to come."

Doug. She hadn't spoken to him since the day of her Wellesley interview when they had that big fight. He had explained why he was so rude at the family dinner, had told her that he felt out of place, that he thought Jed looked down on him, but his explanation wasn't good enough for Liz, who was furious with him for his behavior. They decided to end their relationship that day and although she had to admit she missed him and that she thought about calling him a dozen times, she hadn't made the effort. Now that he had, she was tempted to listen to what he had to say.

"I would have. I'm not allowed to have guys over when my parents aren't home."

"Are you allowed to talk to them out here? Where are you going?" he asked, gesturing to the bag she was carrying.

"Oh, uh, I'm dropping off presents. It's kind of a family tradition to take some things to the orphanage and Key Club runs a toy drive for kids every year so most of what's in here is from donations."

"You always do stuff like that, don't you?"

"Like what?" Charity and community service weren't unusual for Liz. Unlike Doug's parents, Jed and Abbey always stressed the importance of giving to those less fortunate, especially during the holidays.

"The sort of thing you're doing now - helping others."

"Key Club's a service club, Doug. It'd be kind of pointless to be a part of it if I wasn't into it."

"I just meant..."

"Sorry, I didn't mean to be so...you know. I'm not trying to be bitchy. I just don't know what to say to you. After the way we left things, I never thought I'd see you again."

"It was my fault. I'm so sorry, Liz. I blew things with your parents and I was a jerk to you. The
thing is, I really like you, and I hope you'll give me another chance to prove it."

"Doug." She took a breath, a shaky one. "I like you too, but..."

"But what?"

"Did you mean what you said? You acted like we could never make this work, like we were two different people from two different worlds. I don't want to get involved in a relationship with you if you're going to convince yourself it's not gonna work."

"I had no idea what I was saying. Yeah, we are different, but Liz, I'd be a fool to quit on a girl like you. I like everything about you - your wit, your sense of humor, your kindness, your looks. I like you, every part of you."

He meant it too. Her intelligence and wit captivated him from the day he met her at Jed's campaign rally at UNH. She was everything he ever wanted in a girlfriend - smart, funny, kind-hearted, and beautiful. Dressed in a tailored black wool coat with a bright red scarf tucked inside and a red beret sitting lopsided on top of her long brown hair, she was more beautiful today than he'd ever seen her.

From Liz's point of view, he looked handsome too. He was tall and athletic, wearing a UNH letterman's jacket. She was taken by him and she couldn't deny it any longer. He wasn't perfect, but she wasn't either. They could navigate the problems between them, she thought, with some hard work and communication, and with any luck, they could steer the way toward a strong relationship. But first, she had to clear the air. "Before we get too carried away..."

"What?"

"The things you said to my parents at dinner that night. I know you already explained why you acted that way, but I'm still having a tough time with it."

"I apologized and I meant it. What more can I do to convince you?"

"We just need to have an understanding. What my parents think matters to me. And what you think about them matters too. You have to get to know them and you have to let them get to know you."

"I will. I'll sit down with them again and this time, I'll treat them with the utmost respect."

"That would mean a lot to me."

"It's kinda cool that you care so much about their opinion."

"Not really, it's just an act, " Liz joked. She reminded Jed and Abbey almost daily that she was about to turn 18, but the truth was their opinion was as important to her now as it was when she was a little girl, though she didn't like to tell them that too often.

"Right." Doug cracked a smile.

"So..."

"Is this the part where I say Merry Christmas?"

They stared at each other for a good minute, grinning.

"Merry Christmas, Doug." Ready to give him another chance, Liz stepped closer, looked up at him,
and then leaned in to kiss him.

- - -

"So what are you doing here?" Jed perused the lunch options at Le Bon Café, a popular Parisian sidewalk café on the Hill.

"You asked me to join you for lunch," Leo replied frankly.


"I'm catching a flight in the morning."

"You should go tonight. Spend all of Christmas Eve with them. Mallory would really like that."

"Are you channeling Jenny now?"

Jed thought it wise not to press further. "How are things going, Leo?"

"Fine."

"Yeah?"

"You wanna ask me? Just ask me." Leo knew what Jed wanted to know and truth be told, he couldn't blame him. "I'll save you the trouble. I haven't had a drink in over a year."

"Good."

"Yeah."

"I know we don't...I mean, we try not to...you know...private things and..." He took a second to get his thoughts together. "I was concerned. That's all I'm trying to say."

"I appreciate it," Leo returned with a sincere half-smile. "There's no reason for concern. I'm okay, really."

"Okay." Turning his glance out the window, Jed took notice of the sleet. "It looks pretty bad out there, doesn't it?"

"If it wasn't for me, we'd be sitting outside like lunatics right now."

"You don't go to a sidewalk café to sit inside."

"You do when it's 20 degrees outside."

"You're a wuss."

"I'm warm-blooded."

"You're a Boston-Irish Catholic living in Chicago. How is it that you can't adapt to the cold?"

"Just because I'm not a maniac with a pneumonia wish doesn't mean I can't adapt to the cold. I adapt to the cold just fine." Leo turned his attention to the menu. "What's good here?"

"Everything. Abbey and I come here all the time when she's in town." He took a sip of his water, then added, "And, we sit outside."
Leo let that go with a shake of his head. "How is Abbey?"

"Good. We should get together sometime. When's Jenny gonna be here?"

"I don't know."

"She comes to visit, right?"

"Yeah, you know, all the time." His sudden shifting betrayed his words. "The smoked turkey club sounds like a winner."

"Good choice." Jed took that as his cue to change the subject. "So, listen, I'm not gonna back down on stem cells, but I could use some advice on how to reach out to Lydia Prescott. She was with me until Monday."

Lydia Prescott was an ally of Jed's. She believed in what he was fighting for, but with little back-up, she hadn't been willing to put her neck on the line for the fiery topic while heading into an election year.

"Why are you doing this?"

"It's important."

"Lots of things are important. Why this, why now?"

"I believe in it."

"I know you, Jed. You don't like to piss people off for no reason. Why are you pushing something this controversial, that you can't win, when you're about to go into your re-election campaign?"

"You don't think the people of New Hampshire will appreciate what I'm doing?"

"Most people know nothing about stem cells."

"Which is why we need to talk about it. My last campaign, it was AIDS and Elliot Roush's bigoted scare tactics to spread his anti-gay agenda. This time, why can't it be this?"

"Because that's not all it's about. You've never been all that fired up about stem cells, certainly nowhere near as fired up as you were about AIDS. What's really going on? Are you doing it for Abbey? Is she egging you on?"

"This wasn't Abbey's idea. I'm the one who brought it up with her."

"Why?"

"Curiosity, at first."

"And now?"

"Let's just say, sometimes, the way to send a message is to piss off the messengers."

"Messengers? Who are the messengers?" The silence from Jed answered Leo's question loud and clear. "The voters? This isn't about stem cells. The message you're sending is to Adams for challenging you the way he did. You're fighting a Republican from your own state."

"I care about stem cells, that's not a lie."
"But you also care about your credibility. Adams is an ignorant windbag. Don't let his attacks get to you. Empty bravado, that's all it is."

"I'm not gonna sit around and be Artie Adams's punching bag. I was considering stem cells, Leo. I wasn't making a lot of noise. I wanted to do it quietly until I learned more about it. He went to the paper to shut me up before I could. He wants me to back down. If I do, that's the precedent."

"I hear what you're saying, but it's not gonna be your choice much longer. Everyone else has abandoned the cause."

"No, they haven't. If they had abandoned the cause, they'd be on their planes headed home for Christmas. They're still with me...silently."

"A lot of good that's gonna do."

"So let's change things around. My staff is setting up meetings. You know Congresswoman Prescott better than I do. What does she want?"

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"Anyone home?" Abbey called out for her daughters as she walked in the door and took off her coat.

"I'm here," Liz answered, approaching her mother. "You're home early."

"I scheduled only morning patients today so I could run last minute Christmas errands. Where is everyone?"

"Grandma drove up to take Zoey and Ellie to that Christmas in the Park festival."

"You didn't want to go?"

"I have presents to wrap."

"I thought you were supposed to get that done this afternoon."

"We did. These are family gifts."

"Speaking of that, I have now been to every toy store between here and Boston and I just can't find one of those Cabbage Patch Kids for Zoey. They're all sold out." Abbey had been kicking herself for not starting the search for the popular dolls around Thanksgiving when, apparently, every other parent in the state had.

"You mean like this one?" Liz lifted one out of her red sack.

"Oh Lizzie! Where did you get that? That wasn't one of the ones for the kids, was it?"

"Nope. An early gift from Santa." She had seen the distribution truck parked outside the toy store downtown when she came out of the community center and rushed over when she realized they were getting a new shipment.

"Santa, huh?"

"It's fun believing in Santa Claus." She handed over the doll. "Complete with adoptions papers, just like she wanted. Zoey'll be thrilled."
And Abbey was too. "However you did it, thank you."

"Thank the jolly old guy from the North Pole. The way people are snatching them up, it's a miracle there was one left in the whole state!"

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"Tell me what I can do to convince you." After his lunch with Leo, Jed headed back to the Capitol, beaming with determination. His staff had set up a meeting between him and Congresswoman Prescott.

"The writing's on the wall, Jed. We're gonna lose. I'd rather bow out than lose."

"That's not what democracy's about! Popular or not, the way the process works ensures that the minority voice is heard. I can't think of anything more fundamentally important than that. You bow out and you surrender your right to speak up for your constituents."

"This isn't something my constituents want to hear."

"How do you know that? Defeating the ban doesn't mean we're suddenly going to allow stem cell research. It just means we're going to talk about it. You ask the average American now and they have no idea what embryonic stem cells are or why they're so important. How do you know your voters aren't open-minded enough to want to learn?"

"And what if they don't? I'm about to run for re-election."

"We all are, every single one of us. Make this part of your platform. Set the bar. Don't let your opponent, whomever he or she is, corner you. You have a megaphone right now. Use it to establish the campaign that you want to run, the issues that you want to expose. Set the tone before your challenger does."

"Stem cells isn't my issue."

"I know. Lend me your support on stem cells and when we get back in January, I'll take up your proposal on family employment."

"I've been trying to get that through the labor committee for months."

"Yeah. It's been stalled thanks to legal mumbo jumbo. Leo McGarry serves as counsel to that committee. He'll review it personally over the holiday and I'll bring it up at our first meeting in January. What do you say?"

An offer Lydia Prescott couldn't refuse.

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"This wouldn't have happened if your boss hadn't been sniffing around stem cells without having the facts!"

Michael's meeting with an aide to Congressman Butterworth wasn't going quite as well. He looked the aide in the eye and asked, "What facts? What facts did he not have?"

"The lack of support for one. He pushed it too hard too soon and now, thanks to his aggressive grandstanding, the ban's going to pass...again...despite the fact that MY boss would have fought it tooth and nail any other time."
"Let's get a few things straight," Michael replied angrily. "First of all, the bill expires at midnight tonight. That's not our timetable or yours, it's just the way it is. Secondly, my boss doesn't answer to your boss and as far as I know, he's not required to muzzle himself just because your boss doesn't have all his ducks in a row!"

"Your boss is a freshman congressman from a small and insignificant state. It's time he remembered that."

"That's the problem right there. If you were more concerned with policy instead of congressional hierarchy, maybe you'd be ready for this fight. Jed Bartlet doesn't stand in line. He shows up prepared to do what he feels is right and he's not going to ask anyone's permission, least of all yours."

"He answers to the Speaker."

"Last I checked, that wasn't you."

"Pressing it before the holiday was a mistake."

"It was necessary to dissolve the ban."

"It was a mistake," the aide repeated. "He made a mistake."

"So what? If the worst thing you can say about Congressman Bartlet is that he's human, feel free. You know what I say in response? What a relief!"

"What do you want from me?"

"I thought you should know that as we speak, other Democrats are lining up behind him. Your boss probably won't want to be the last one on board the train since he 'would have fought it tooth and nail any other time.'"

"Yeah, right."

"You don't believe me, head to the Capitol and see for yourself." Michael began to leave, then turned back to say, "By the way, New Hampshire might not be the Upper West Side of Manhattan, but ask us at the next presidential primary just how insignificant a state it is."

And with that, he left the aide's office and the suite, heading back to Jed's.

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Back in Jed's suite, Leo had been waiting patiently for Jed to return from his meeting with Lydia Prescott. His eyes lit up when he saw him. "How'd it go?"

"We got her," Jed said as he strolled in. He then turned to his Deputy Chief of Staff. "Lindsay?"

"Congressman Reynolds is on board," she answered, turning next to Samantha Lloyd, the communications director.

"Congressmans Taylor and York are with us as long as they get your vote on the standardized testing bill."

"Small price to pay," Jed assured her happily. "So now all we're waiting on is Michael."

"Not anymore." Not a moment too soon, Michael swaggered through the door, gesturing with a
"giant thumbs-up."

"You did it?"

"I'm pretty sure Congressman Butterworth will speak up. I'd expect one hell of a rumble in the House chamber this afternoon, big enough that you'll probably have to change your flight home."

"Abbey will understand. Maggie, can you call the airline and see if they have anything at all departing after midnight? I can fly into Boston if there's nothing for Manchester. Get me anything available. It's important that I be home for Christmas Eve."

"Yes sir, and as soon as I make the arrangements, I'll call your wife and let her know."

The next few minutes were a flurry of activity as Jed's aides traded stories about their meetings and quickly prepped him before he had to start on the short trek back to the Capitol, like the other representatives and staffers who were already crowding the hallway. Jed gave Leo a grateful thank you, picked up his briefing book, and began to head out, Michael at his side.

"Hang on." Struck with an idea that required a call for his press secretary, he stopped suddenly. "Rick, if we're about to see a ruckus on the floor, don't you think we owe it to the press to tip them off?"

Rick smiled keenly at his boss. "Just the congressional press corps?"

"They had the exclusive on this story and they blew it. Call in everyone."

"Yes sir."

"Thanks guys." Jed looked around at his staff and Leo. "Really, thank you."

"Go get 'em!" Leo urged him with a clenched fist. He had been against Jed carrying on the fight at first, but when it became clear he wasn't going to give up, Leo dropped his criticism and helped him make it happen.

With good luck wishes from Samantha and Lindsay on his way out the door, Jed hurried back to the Capitol, arriving just as Speaker O'Neill gavelled the session to order.

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"So ten minutes after Grandma said no more Twinkies, the carolers asked Zoey what she wanted them to sing. Instead of 'Jingle Bells' or 'O Holy Night,' Zoey asked for 'Grandma Got Run Over By a Reindeer.'" Ellie was telling Abbey all about their evening in the park.

"Zoey." Abbey bit back a laugh out of respect for her mom.

"I didn't mean it! And I told her I'm sorry."

"Yes, she did." Mary stood behind the six-year-old and leaned down to place a kiss on top of her head. "Zoey's got an impulsive streak. She didn't even think about it, she just let her temper do the talking. Gee, I wonder where she could have gotten that from?"

"I never had a temper." Abbey stubbornly denied that implication.

"Oh please, Abigail, you might be able to fool the children into believing that, but I raised you from the day you were born. I know better."
"MOM, GET IN HERE!" Liz shouted from the living room. "HURRY!"

Abbey and Mary both rushed in, Ellie and Zoey following curiously.

"What is it?"

"Look!" Liz pointed to the television tuned to C-SPAN. Expecting that Jed was already at the airport for his return flight home, she had been flipping through the channels when she saw the House session still going and representatives arguing so loud that no one could be heard.

"THE HOUSE WILL COME TO ORDER!" the Speaker yelled repeatedly, with several strikes of his gavel.

"What's going on? What are they all fighting about?" A baffled Mary watched as her daughter explained to her what Jed had been trying to do.

"Holy cow! Lizzie, see if anyone else is carrying it," Ellie asked, interested.

Liz changed the channel to CNN's live coverage. Another flip through the lineup proved that the local Boston media market was teasing the story for broadcast on the 6:00 news. All hell had broken loose, which ordinarily wasn't considered a good thing, but in this instance, under the time crunch of a ban that would run out at midnight, Jed had accomplished what he didn't think possible. Not only had he delayed the vote, his greasy wheel strategy also drew nationwide attention.

Back on CNN, the Washington correspondent reported live from the Capitol. "As recently as this morning, one person - Congressman Jed Bartlet, a Democrat from New Hampshire - was the only one advocating dissolving the ban and now, as you can see, it looks like an even fight."

Abbey made herself comfortable on the sofa, sitting between Liz and Mary, with Zoey on her lap and Ellie sitting on the floor right in front of her as they watched the rest of the coverage. They flipped back to C-SPAN to see Jed's remarks unedited by political commentary, then went back to CNN when he was finished for analysis of what was happening; and as she explained to the girls, what was happening was incredible. Their father had done something amazing, she said.

If it went on all night and the clock ran out before a vote, the ban would be lifted, and that meant people were finally going to get to hear both sides of the stem cell issue. All the facts and figures and research studies that had been buried in the volatile collision between science and politics in the 1980s were going to be resurrected, studied, interpreted, and released to the public in a fair and democratic way. The way it was supposed to be. And it was all thanks to a certain gentleman from New Hampshire.

TBC
Father of Daughters

Series: Snapshots of the Past

Story: Father of Daughters

Chapter 21

Disclaimer: See Chapter 1

Previously: Jed delayed a vote on banning embryonic stem cell research; after Liz catches the eye of a Swedish teen named Sven while the family is in Stockholm, Jed invites him to a night at the theater (Chapter 30 of The Nobel Laureate)

Summary: It's Christmas in New Hampshire; Jed has a sentimental surprise for Abbey and later, is impressed by Liz's friend who comes over for Christmas dinner

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Christmas Eve 1985

"You were supposed to be here this afternoon! What the hell happened? No, it has to be here between now and 12:30, otherwise my wife's going to find out. She can't know about it or it'll spoil everything!"

On a snowy Christmas Eve night, Jed stood in the Bartlet kitchen, shouting into the phone. Just around the corner, a nosy Zoey crouched down and listened as her father went on. Hearing him so serious and clearly upset about something, she was reluctant to interrupt. It was only after he finished and she heard him hang up the receiver that she appeared before him.

"What can't Mommy know about?"

Jed was used to his youngest daughter's spying. He even found it charming when she was a toddler and pre-schooler, but now that she was getting older, it was time to pull the plug on that particular habit. "How much of that did you hear?"

Zoey shrugged. "I dunno."

"Come over here and sit down." He held out a seat for her at the kitchen table and then took the chair beside her. "Your eavesdropping isn't all that cute anymore. Mom's told you not to do it, right?"

"Yeah, but you always tell me to spy on Ellie and Lizzie!"

"Only because I like to bother them," Jed said as if that was an excuse Zoey would accept. She had him there and he couldn't deny it. "All right, I was wrong. From now on, no more spying - on anyone."

"Why not?"

"Because conversations that don't include you are private and you're old enough now to respect that. Do you understand?"

"No. Why was it okay when I was five but not now that I'm six?"
"It wasn't okay when you were five either. Giving you the impression that it was, was a mistake on my part. But we're starting over now and from this moment on, I don't want you to do it again." Zoey didn't respond. "I'm serious, Zo. Next time, you'll be grounded."

"I won't do it anymore."

"Good." He stood up. "Now come on, we're going to be late for church."

"I don't wanna go!" The girls enjoyed attending midnight mass much more than the services on Christmas morning, but Zoey's protest was about not being allowed to take communion. Abbey had already explained to her that when she was old enough, she'd get to do it too, but that wasn't good enough for the six-year-old.

"We've been through this. You have to go."

"Why?"

"Because we're all going. I'll tell you what, when I go down the aisle to take communion, you can come with me."

"I always go with Mommy."

"I'm more fun. Come with me this time and you'll see. Okay?"

"Okay."

Jed was quick to change the subject. "You look pretty tonight. Did Lizzie help you with your dress?"

"Uh huh. And she braided my hair too." Zoey followed her father toward the coat closet, accepting the red winter coat that went so well with her brand new Christmas dress.

"LIZ, ELLIE, LET'S GO!" Jed hollered from the bottom of the stairs. "It's late!"

Ellie was the first one down. "Where's Mom?"

"Still at the hospital. She's going to meet us at church."

"Daddy's keeping a secret from her. He told someone they had to come over and Mommy couldn't see." Zoey volunteered that tidbit before catching her father's stern expression. "What?"

"What did I say about eavesdropping?"

"That's not eavesdropping. Lizzie says when you tell what you heard, it's gossiping."

"Whatever it is, cut it out." With a glance at his watch, Jed yelled for his eldest daughter, "ELIZABETH, COME ON ALREADY!"

"What's the secret, Dad?" Ellie asked.

"Mind your own business."

"Why won't you tell us?"

"Because it doesn't concern you." He looked over at Zoey. "And listen here, blabber mouth, don't you dare breathe a word of this to your mom or anyone else. Promise me."
"I promise."

"I bet she has her fingers crossed," Ellie taunted. She knew her little sister well.

"She wouldn't dare, not tonight of all nights," Jed cautioned. "Not when Santa's watching."

Liz cruised down the steps then. "Dad invoking Santa Claus on Christmas Eve. This must be big. What did Zoey do?"

"Nothing!" Zoey insisted.

"Dad's keeping a secret about Mom and he's afraid Zoey's gonna blab," Ellie informed her big sis, then turned her eye to her father to catch him glaring at her. "You said Zoey couldn't tell. You never said anything about me."

"I'm saying it to all of you - if your mom finds out about this, I'm gonna hold the three of you responsible and believe me when I say the consequences won't be pretty. Are we clear?"

Ignoring his hollow threat, as she always did when he was in his kind of mood, Liz persisted. "Yeah, yeah, so what's the secret?"

"You're trying my patience, Elizabeth."

"What else is new? So what's the secret?"

"Get your coat."

"You might as well tell us now," Ellie prodded. "You know Lizzie's gonna wear you down in the car."

"Then Lizzie will be hitchhiking to church." Jed handed Liz her coat.

"That's child abandonment," Liz told him as she opened the door so they could leave.

"Report me to CPS. I'll dial."

"Dad!"

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True to form, the girls ganged up on Jed in the car, begging him to tell them the secret he was keeping from their mother. They knew it had to be big. A new car maybe. Or maybe a cruise somewhere warm and sunny or, knowing their father, a spring cruise up the Alaskan coast. Whatever he was planning was sure to sweep Abbey off her feet, as usual. Their parents liked to surprise each other and at Christmas, they went all out.

No matter how much they badgered him, Jed held back. His lips sealed, he turned the corner and drove into the parking lot of the Sacred Heart Catholic Church and breathed a sigh of relief at seeing Abbey already there waiting for them. Her presence would mean Liz, Ellie, and Zoey would have to zip it or risk his wrath, which he warned them wouldn't be fun.

"Mommy!" Zoey was the first one out. She jumped from the car and ran to her mother.

"Who is that pretty girl in her gorgeous Christmas dress?" Zoey hung off her arms as Abbey tried to lift her. "You are getting so big."
"Daddy can still pick me up."

"Daddy's as strong as a Jedi." She hugged Zoey instead, then turned her attention to Liz and Ellie. "Did you guys have fun tonight?"

Ellie nodded. "Dad took us sledding after we got back from the hospital."

To tire them out, Abbey thought. Zoey was a notoriously bad sleeper on Christmas Eve and passing out presents with Jed at the hospital had amplified her holiday spirit and made her even more hyper than usual.

"And then we baked cookies," Liz added.

"Oh no, not more cookies." With the two batches of Christmas cookies and homemade candies Abbey's mom had baked with the girls a day earlier, the last thing any of them needed was more sugar.

"Just a few to leave out for Santa tonight," Jed explained. He then gestured to Liz. "Why don't you take your sisters in and find our seats?"

"Okay. Come on, guys." Liz ushered the younger girls to the door.

"I still wanna know..." Zoey started.

"SHHHHHHHHHH!" Ellie and Liz snapped as they pushed Zoey into the church before she could mention Abbey's surprise and get them all in trouble.

After their daughters were gone, Abbey arched her brow at her husband. "You spoil them rotten."

"It's a father's job." He stepped closer to her, staring her in the face. "How is it that you can come out of surgery looking so beautiful?"

"You didn't see me an hour ago with my skull cap on, wielding a chest spreader."

"Now you're just trying to turn me on."

Abbey gave him a kiss, then looped her arm around his as they walked into the packed church and squeezed into the already crowded pew where their daughters were sitting.

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Following the mass, the Bartlets returned to the farm house and just as Jed hoped, the day of sledding out back had worn out his two younger daughters. Ellie, who had fallen asleep in the car, was carried up to her room by Jed while Abbey carried a sleepy Zoey into the house. Before she could start up the stairs, the little girl stirred in her arms and rubbed at her eyes.

"Are we home?" she asked groggily.

"Shh, go to sleep." Abbey kissed her face gently.

"But I have to leave milk and cookies for Santa."

"I'll do that for you."

"No, I have to do it myself!" Zoey wriggled until Abbey set her down. "Lizzie can you help me?"
Abbey caught sight of Jed descending the steps. She held her thumb and index fingers up at him and said, "We were this close."

He laughed. "Ellie's up too. She's changing into her PJs."

"It's gonna be a long night."

"We'll give 'em some warm milk. They'll be out before we know it."

The longer the girls were up, the longer Jed and Abbey had to stay up so they could wrap all the Santa presents and tuck them under the tree. So with their fingers crossed, husband and wife wished for an early visit from Mr. Sandman to whisk their daughters off for a good night's sleep.

"I told Sven to be here around three tomorrow," Liz announced as her parents joined her and Zoey in the kitchen.

"That's fine," Abbey assured her. "Dinner's at four."

A confused Jed asked, "Sven?"

"My pen pal, Swedish Sven. I told you, he's gonna be in town and Mom said I could invite him over."

"First, you didn't tell me. That's not something I'd forget. And second, is this the guy you met briefly in Stockholm?"

"Yeah. You liked him, remember?"

"I remember. I just didn't know you still wrote to him."

"Now and then. We're just friends."

Abbey moved to the stove. "Who wants some warm milk?"

"Not me!" Zoey refused. "I want cookies!"

"Please?" Abbey reminded her.

"Sorry. Please, can I have some cookies?"

"May I. And yes, you may have a glass of cold milk with one cookie and then it's off to bed. You too, Lizzie."

Twenty minutes later, the girls finished their snack, a few cookies were set out next to a tall glass of milk for Santa, and Zoey was ready to turn in. Jed hoisted her onto his back for a piggyback ride up to her room. Abbey, meanwhile, noticed Liz taking her time washing a dish, so she hurried her along. Liz finished and left the kitchen, passing her father on the way upstairs and giving her parents the privacy they needed to do their wrapping, stocking-stuffing, and all the other little chores before bed.

"Zoey was sound asleep before I tucked her in," Jed said as he strolled back into the kitchen.

"Good. I've got the scissors and a roll of wrapping paper in the family room. Can you get Zoey's dollhouse?"

"I will, but first, there's something else I want to take care of."
"What?"

"I want to show you something." He led her out of the kitchen with his hands covering her eyes.

"What are you doing?"

"There's no way to hide this from you until morning so I need to give it to you tonight."

He removed his hands then and Abbey opened her eyes to see a beautiful rosewood Steinway Grand piano, with a big red bow, pushed up against a wall in the living room. She thought her eyes were deceiving her at first; this piano looked eerily familiar. It had half-round beading along the bottom rim and carved, fluted legs, just like the one she grew up playing in her grandparents' home.

"Oh Jed, what did you do?" Abbey approached it slowly, stunned.

"Recognize it? It's the one."

"THE one?"

"Well, not the one from your childhood. But it's the other one."

"The other one? You're not serious."

Jed hadn't forgotten her reaction during a Boston Pops concert in 1983. It was when virtuoso pianist and comedienne Victor Borge performed that she nudged him and explained that the piano he was using resembled the one her grandfather had owned, the one she had spent hours at every weekend learning to play. Everything from the color to the design and craftsmanship to the satiny finish reminded her of his. The Barrington piano had been sold when Abbey was a teen and until the concert, Jed didn't realize how much it would mean to her to have one like it in their home. So when the Boston Symphony business manager ordered new pianos and he found out this one was up for bid, he knew he had to have it.

"This must have cost a fortune."

"I got a good deal on it actually."

"Is this what the girls were shushing each other about?"

"Yes, but they didn't know what it was. They just knew there was some surprise coming."

"What a surprise it is! I never expected this."

"That's how surprises traditionally work."

"How did you have this delivered without the girls finding out?"

"It came while we were at church. Jed sat down at the bench and pulled her down beside him. "You played Clementi Sonatinas? That was your favorite, right? Play it for me."

"You've gotta be kidding! That was eons ago!"

"So? It's like riding a bike."

"No, it's not."

He pulled out some sheet music for her. "How about Silent Night then?"
"I haven't read a piece of music in so long."

"You'll do fine."

Abbey still hesitated. "I'll wake the girls."

"They'll wake up anyway. They do every year."

"Yeah, but..."

The girls had a habit of stirring in the middle of the night and tiptoeing back down.

"You won't wake them." Sitting beside her, Jed squinted his eyes at his wife. "Are you trying to get out of this, Dr. B? Don't tell me you were pulling my leg with all that talk of playing the piano."

"Pulling your leg, huh?" She swallowed her nerves and took to the keys, her hands sweeping over each one gracefully, enticing him with a rendition of Silent Night. She made a few mistakes, just as she expected, but overall, her technique hadn't failed her, even after all these years.

"All right, so you're not a complete charlatan," he said when she finished.

"You shouldn't have done this. It's too much."

"Anything that makes you light up like that is worth every penny."

Abbey turned on the bench and placed her hands around his neck as he moved to face her. "You are the sweetest, most amazing man in the whole world. Do I say that enough?"

"How much is enough?" Jed surrendered to her kiss - a hot, passionate one that made his heart race. And when it was over, he replied, "I don't know about the rest, but after that kiss, I'm definitely the randiest man in the world."

Abbey chuckled. "I can take care of that."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah." She kissed him again.

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Christmas Day 1985

The Christmas dinner table at the Bartlet house had evolved over the years. Jed and Abbey's first four Christmases were spent at their flat in London where they had a relatively small table, just big enough to accommodate them, Lizzie's high chair, and a neighbor they sometimes had over. After moving to Boston, they began hosting Abbey's family every Christmas. Soon, Ellie came along and Jed's family was added to the guest list as well. The table grew while living in Hanover, where Zoey was born, and by the time they celebrated the holiday at the farm in Manchester, every chair on the large dinner table in the formal dining room was taken.

This year, they needed one extra chair. In addition to Abbey's parents and Jed's brother, his wife, and their son, they had another guest with them - Liz's friend, Sven. It was a crowded gathering, but not nearly as crowded as Thanksgiving and for that, Abbey was grateful. It was more homely and intimate.

The table was set with red linens and fine china. Snowflake candles floated in wine glasses and two
crisscrossed candy canes were placed on each plate. A centerpiece of small golden gift-wrapped boxes tied in green and silver ribbons on a bed of pine sat in the middle and next to it was the main dish of roast turkey, flanked on each side with chestnut stuffing and all the other Christmas side dishes.

Ellie was sitting between Abbey, who was at the foot of the table, and her Aunt Kellie on the other side. She had been gabbing with Kellie about the day they'd had. "Dad bought me the rollerblades I wanted and he promised to go skating with me in the spring."

"Jed rollerblades?" Kellie looked down the table at her brother-in-law.

"Just once so far. It's not that different from regular skating."

"Famous last words," Jack tweaked his brother.

"It wouldn't hurt you to go out there with us," Jed fired back. "We'll all go."

"Jed's rounding up his Olympic team," Abbey teased.

"Of which you won't be a part."

"Why am I being excluded?"

"You shouldn't have picked on me."

"I'm sure Jed will forgive you, Abigail, if you tickle the ivories after dinner." James had been trying to get his daughter to entertain them with her piano playing all night.

"I'm pretty rusty, Dad."

Jed dismissed the notion. "You were excellent last night!"

"She's a child prodigy." James always beamed proudly when talking about Abbey. "Her grandfather used to say it was in her blood."

"I wanna play the piano," Zoey chimed in.

"As soon as the holidays are over, you and your sisters can start taking lessons." Abbey took a sip of her drink.

"They don't need lessons," Jed countered. "You can teach them."

"Contrary to what you believe, gumdrop, I can't do everything." Abbey smiled at him.

"Nonsense!"

At the same time, Mary was trying to get to know her granddaughter's guest, Sven. "So, Sven, you're from Stockholm?"

"I hesitate to say I'm from any place. I've lived all over," the 19-year-old replied. "My parents are big travelers."

"I wish we traveled more," Ellie interjected.

"Egypt's coming up," Abbey reminded her. "We travel plenty."
Back to the conversation at hand, Mary continued with Sven, "You're catching a flight tomorrow to..."

"Rome. I have a cousin there I want to see."

"We've never been to Rome," Ellie pointed out to her mother.

"Do you have family in America?"

"No, just Elizabeth." Sven flashed his big blue eyes at the brunette to his right and Mary, like Jed, saw a definite spark.

"You and Elizabeth met in Stockholm?"

Liz nodded. "At the ice skating rink at Kungstradgarden Park."

"THIS is the boy you wanted your parents to let you tour the town with!" At the time, Mary didn't know what all the fuss was about, but while they were in Sweden for Jed's Nobel Prize ceremony, she distinctly remembered several conversations between 14-year-old Liz and her parents about a special someone she had met.

"Yup, this is him!" Liz replied. "We've been keeping in touch through letters ever since we left Sweden."

Sven added, "Three years. I've never been in touch with anyone for that long."

"So what brings you here, son?" James asked him. "Are you visiting friends or relatives?"

"I'm not visiting. I'm here on business. Canadian business actually."

Liz went further, explaining, "Sven doesn't like to brag, so I'll do it for him. He was just named a 1986 Rhodes Scholar from Canada and he had to attend a meeting in Montreal on the 22nd."

"Really?"

"Canada? Why Canada?" Mary asked.

"The scholars are selected from 14 countries and Sweden isn't one of them, but my mother is Canadian so I was able to qualify under dual citizenship."

Jed was more interested in the bigger picture. "You've been awarded a Rhodes Scholarship?"

"Yes, sir. I'll be studying at Oxford next autumn."

"I didn't know you graduated college."

Liz piped up, "Sven was home-schooled, remember, Dad? He started his university studies before he turned 17 and he just finished this term."

"Oh." Jed was definitely impressed. He lifted his glass. "Well, congratulations. Well deserved."

"Thank you."

Abbey suspected her husband was already smitten with the young man, but she had no idea what she was about to ask would charm him even more. "Sven, what do you plan to study at Oxford?"
If Jed's face had beamed any brighter, he would have outshone the Christmas lights. Sven was the same person he had been in Sweden - bright, articulate, respectful, polite, someone with energy and enthusiasm, a thirst for learning and for setting goals, and more importantly, someone who was visibly interested in Elizabeth. Finally, someone Jed considered a terrific match for his daughter.

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"All I'm saying is if she asked if she could date him, I'd be totally on-board. 100 percent!" Late that evening, Jed stripped down to his boxers and a T-shirt in the master bedroom, preparing for bed and talking to Abbey as she brushed her hair.

"Don't you think she would have asked if she was interested? She insists they're just friends."

"She insisted she and Doug were just friends too and we know it was more than that. This guy is perfect for her. She'll realize that."

"What makes him so perfect?" Abbey tossed her brush onto her vanity and joined her husband in their bed. "The fact that he's a Rhodes Scholar?"

"No. Well, yeah, okay, that's part of it. He has GOALS, Abbey. He wants to do something with his life and what he wants to do is very similar to what Liz wants, right down to his field of study. She said she was considering majoring in International Relations at Wellesley."

"Just because they share the same interest doesn't mean they're made for each other. If that was the case, I'd be married to a doctor and you'd be married to a politician."

"It's not just that. Remember how he treated her in Stockholm? How he treated her tonight? He held her chair out for her, always addressed her with respect, addressed us with respect. Come on, the kid's polite, considerate, and incredibly smart. You have to see it." Jed turned down the covers and crawled in.

"Okay, I agree, Sven is a wonderful guy and yes, if Elizabeth wanted to date him, I would be thrilled. But one of our objections to Doug was that we wanted Liz to have time to explore life on her own before she got seriously involved with anyone. I still think that's best."

"I don't want her to run her out and get engaged to Sven, for heaven's sake. I'm just saying that this is one guy I'd approve of. Remember that the next time she accuses me of hating all her boyfriends."

Abbey started to remind him that Sven wasn't a boyfriend yet, but she was interrupted by a knock at the door.

"Come in."

Liz poked her head in. "Hi. I know it's late, but can I ask you guys something?"

Jed nudged his wife, convinced Liz was about to ask if she could go out with Sven. "Sure, sweetheart."

"I know you didn't hit it off with him the last time," Liz began, approaching her parents. "But would I be asking too much if I wanted to invite Doug over one more time?"

"What?" That wiped the smile right off Jed's face.
"He came over a couple of days ago and we talked. I want to give him another chance. Please, will you meet him again?"

"When did he come over?"

"He stopped by on his own when Mom was at work. We talked out on the porch and he's really sorry for the way things went down last time."

"So if we do see him again, then what?" Abbey asked her daughter.

"Well, he wants me to meet his parents on New Year's Eve. I was hoping you'd let me go if he comes over for hors d'oeuvres first with you and Dad."

Jed wasn't a big fan of Doug's in the first place and after having dinner with Sven, he was even more perplexed by his daughter's choice. He pressed gently, "Liz, let me ask you something. In all honesty, WHY Doug?"

Abbey stifled a laugh.

"Why not Doug? I like him, Dad. I like being with him."

"You guys have nothing in common."

"We have some things in common. We may not see everything the same way, but that's what I find interesting about him. I think I'd be bored with someone I always agreed with."

"I'll never understand that."

"I'll try to explain it better when I'm not so tired. In the meantime, what do you say? Can he come over?"

When Jed paused, Abbey spoke up. "He wants to take you to his parents' place in Nashua?"

"Yes, they're having a family party. You said I could have a late curfew on New Year's. Can I go?"

"What happened to not dating him?"

"It's not a date. His parents want to meet me, just like you guys wanted to meet him. A little revisionist history there. "Okay, like I asked you to meet him."

"I don't know, Liz."

"Mooommmm, it's just New Year's Eve. Please?"

Abbey thought for a moment and then gave the easy answer that came to mind. "If it's all right with your father, it's all right with me."

Shaking his head, Jed threw his pillow at his wife and muttered under his breath, "You will be punished."

"Please Daddy?" Liz threw him her puppy dog eyes.

"Okay, fine, as long as his family will be there."

"Thank you!"
"And while he's here, I reserve the right to throw him out of the house."

Liz cracked a smile at that as she gave her father a kiss on the cheek. "You'll like him, trust me!"
She went to Abbey next. "Good night."

"Night, baby doll." After she left, Abbey looked to Jed. "I can't believe you gave in."

"ME? You troublemaker, you pawned her off on me!"

"It was your turn to play bad cop!"

"No, it wasn't!"

"Of course it was."

"You lie."

"I try." Abbey winked at him.

"I don't get it. Why oh why does our daughter have such terrible taste in guys? What mutant gene is on your X-chromosome?"

"Excuse me, MY X-chromosome? You gave her an X-chromosome yourself, you know."

"It's a scientific fact that fathers don't pass on the bad-taste gene."

"So says the economist. Anyway, don't look at me. I chose you. No way do I have the 'bad-taste' gene." She kicked the covers off and stood, but Jed yanked her back down.

"Where do you think you're going?"

"I'm going to get a drink of water."

He crawled on top of her. "No water, not until I'm done with you."

"What do you have in mind?"

"A little good cop, bad cop." He kissed her. "A little punishment." Another kiss. "And a little barbecue to finish things up."

"Oh okay, I guess the drink can wait 30 seconds."

Jed's steely stare at that remark made Abbey burst out in laughter. She gripped his shirt and gave him one solid tug until he was lying on top of her, then wrapped her arms and her legs around his frame as they kissed once again.

TBC
New Year's Eve 1985

On the second floor of the Bartlet farmhouse, Abbey was in the master bathroom preparing for an evening on the town. Dressed only in a black satin slip and black hose and heels, she had left the door to the bedroom ajar to let some steam out of the bathroom as she bent over to flip her head and blow-dry her hair upside down.

After getting most of the moisture out, she flipped back and called out for her husband. "Jed, is it supposed to snow tonight?"

"I don't know," Jed answered, his voice strained. Still in his jeans and an old Dartmouth sweatshirt, he was sitting on the bed trying to tear into a pair of scissors, the kind that had the sturdy plastic packaging molded around the instrument.

"Can you check?"

"There's snow on the ground."

"I'm not asking about the ground. I'm asking if there will be snow falling on us from the sky. If there is, I'm not going to bother to straighten my hair."

"I like your hair curly."

"Well that's a non-answer if I ever heard one."

"It's winter in New England. Plan for snow."

Abbey poked her head through the door to see him struggling with the stubborn package of scissors. "What are you doing? Why aren't you getting ready?"

"I was trying to salvage this button on my shirt by cutting this loose thread with scissors."

"And?"

"You wouldn't think I'd need a pair of scissors to open a pair of scissors, would you?"
"Give me your shirt." She held her hand out. "And the scissors."

"Because you're so much stronger than I am?"

"Because I have a pair of scissors in the bathroom." She took the package and ducked back into the bathroom to snip the top with her own scissors.

Ellie knocked on the door then. "Mom? Dad?"

"Come in, Ellie." Jed took off his sneakers. "What's up?"

"I'd like to ask again."

"The answer's still going to be no."

"But I have a bunch of reasons you should say yes." The 11-year-old held up a piece of paper she had in her hands. "Reason one - I'm old enough to know what to do in case of an emergency. Reason two - I'm responsible. Reason three - Zoey listens to me. Reason four - Lizzie will be home at 1:30. Reason five..."

"I'm going to stop you right there." Abbey emerged from the bathroom, handing Jed his scissors and his shirt. "Your father's right, the answer is still going to be no."

"But WHY?" With Liz, Jed, and Abbey all out for the evening, Ellie had been hoping this would be the first time she'd get to stay home alone with Zoey.

"We already told you, you're too young to babysit."

"I'm not a kid anymore!"

"You don't get to use that line until you're at least 16," Jed said, patting a spot on the mattress. "Come over here and have a seat." With a sigh, his middle daughter plopped down beside him. "Don't sound too excited or anything."

"I don't understand why you won't let me."

"Look, aside from us feeling that you're not old enough yet, there's a law in New Hampshire. You're not legally allowed to babysit another child until you're 12 years old. You don't think it's right to break the law, do you?"

Ellie couldn't argue with that. "No."

"Lizzie was 13 the first time she sat with you," Jed went on. "I'm not Lizzie."

"No, you're not. I'll tell you what, you have about eight months to go before you can sit with Zoey. But if you want to prepare now, the Red Cross has a babysitter training course you're eligible to take. I'll make some calls next week and we'll get you enrolled if you want."

"There's a class for it?"

"You bet and it's designed for pre-teens. They teach safety skills, leadership, and first aid. They'll go over everything you need to know to be an A-plus babysitter. You even get a certificate at the end. Does that sound fair?"
Satisfied, Ellie nodded and gave her father a big hug. "Thanks, Dad!"

"What about me?" Abbey raised a brow at the blonde.

"You didn't come up with the Red Cross idea," Jed teased on his way to the closet to retrieve his dress shoes and a pair of black slacks.

"You get a hug too, Mom." Ellie would never leave Abbey out.

"Doug's here!" Liz shouted from down the hall.

"NOW?" Abbey shouted back as she, Ellie, and Jed headed out the bedroom.

"He just pulled up. I told him to be here early, but I didn't think he'd take it so literally." Wearing her bath robe, Liz met her mom in the hall. "I'm not ready yet."

"Neither am I." Abbey looked over to where Jed and Ellie were standing. "Jed?"

"No." Jed couldn't imagine anything more painful than having to endure time alone with Doug.

"You don't want me going down there half-dressed, do you?"

"I can't do it, Abbey. If he starts in like he did last time..."

"He won't, Dad!" Liz's promise, however strong, wasn't enough.

Jed looked at Ellie. "I'll give you five dollars if you go entertain him."

"Okay!" With a spring in her step thanks to the cash, Ellie rushed down.

"Jed!"

"Don't you judge me, Abigail."

"Chicken." Abbey brushed by him on her way back to their room.

---

Changed and ready to greet their guest, Jed and Abbey descended the stairs together a few minutes later. No longer wearing his jeans and sweatshirt, Jed now donned a black suit, a formal white dress shirt, and a red tie with flecks of silver. His 'evening tie,' he called it. Abbey had slipped into a silk black lace tank-top. Over it, she wore a sexy dress of midnight blue velvet with an overlay of black netting and tiny ice-blue stones that shimmered softly under the light. Its criss-cross neckline dipped just low enough to show off the top of the lacy tank-top underneath. A silk cocktail jacket was draped over her arm as she and Jed entered the living room where Doug was teaching Ellie the finer points of magic.

"Do you get a disappearing box and everything?" Ellie asked him, enthusiasm twinkling in her blue-green eyes.

"As far as I know," he said. "You wanna help me try it out, see if I can make you disappear?"

"YEAH!"

Jed cleared his voice. "Where exactly do you want to disappear to, Ellie?"
"Mr. Bartlet." Doug stood to shake Jed's hand, then Abbey's. "Mrs. Bartlet. Thanks for having me over."

"We're glad you could make it," Abbey said.

"Doug's gonna be a magician!" Ellie informed her parents.

"Not a real one." Doug chuckled at how that must have sounded as he went on to explain. "I'm trying to learn a little magic so I can pick up a some extra cash this summer at birthday parties and such."

"I thought you worked at a bakery," Jed replied.

"I do, but Liz said she made a lot as a children's party planner a couple of summers ago. She got me interested in it."

"Yeah, she had a lot of fun. You'll enjoy it."

"I hope so." The younger man picked up one of two bouquets he had set on the coffee table. "Mrs. Bartlet, these are for you."

"Oh, they're gorgeous, thank you! I'll go put them in water. Ellie, sweetie, can you go up and see if Lizzie needs any help?"

Jed waited until both Abbey and Ellie were gone before inviting Doug to take a seat on the sofa. He, meanwhile, chose the love seat across from him. The two men sat quietly for several seconds until Jed broke the silence and, he hoped, the awkwardness between them.

"So tonight..."

"I'd like to thank you for letting Liz come with me," Doug jumped in, cutting Jed off. "I know things didn't go so well the last time I was here."

"Don't worry about it. It's in the past, let's move on. You and Liz are going to your folks'?"

"Yes, sir. The whole family will be there. New Year's Eve party and all."

"Abbey's parents will be sitting with the girls tonight. They're expecting Liz at 1:30. I don't want her to be late."

"We'll leave Nashua no later than one. She'll be here on time."

Overhearing the end of the exchange, Liz sauntered in. "Dad, are you quizzing him about my curfew?"

Both men stood to greet her, Jed less excitedly than Doug. Liz's make-up and her hair - styled in a high pony tail with a lock of chestnut tresses braided over the rubber band to cover it - made her look older than her 17 years, and the knee-length iridescent white and silver chiffon strapless dress with bubble hem that Abbey approved wouldn't have been his choice, even though she had a matching wrap to wear over it.

"You're so beautiful." Doug presented her with the second bouquet of flowers.

"Thank you."

"For the compliment or the flowers?"
"Both."

They gazed at one another in that way that made it seem they were the only two in the room.

Jed rolled his eyes and called into the kitchen. "Abbey?"

"Patience, Jed. I'm coming." Abbey re-entered the living room carrying a platter of cheddar herb rolls and sausage-stuffed mushrooms she and Liz had made that morning. "Here we go."

"Interesting choice." Jed had voted for Swedish meatballs in honor of Sven - and so he could tweak Liz - but he was overruled.

"You'll eat it and you'll like it." Abbey got a glance at her daughter. "Oh Liz, you look lovely. Are you sure you won't be cold?"

"I'll be fine with the wrap."

"And if she does catch a chill, she can always wear this." Doug handed his 'date' a shiny red gift bag.

"What did you do?" Liz peeked inside and gasped as she pulled out a pink hooded UNH sweatshirt. "Oh Doug, I love it!"

"Wellesley may be your top choice, but as far as I know UNH is still in the running so I wanted you to be appropriately dressed in case the underdog won. There's still a chance, right?"

"Thank you!" Feeling the need to say something to ease Doug's insecurities, Liz added, "And yes, there's a chance. Who knows if I'll get into Wellesley or if I'll choose to go even if I do? I might discover that UNH is the best fit for me after all."

"I knew it! I knew you hadn't given up on UNH yet."

"Isn't he thoughtful?" the teenager beamed, addressing her parents.

"Yeah." Jed answered quickly, but his eyes told a different tale. First impressions were hard to change and his first impression of Doug made him suspicious.

He tried to tell himself that Liz was just being polite. After months of talking about nothing but her future at Wellesley, he trusted that she wasn't changing her mind because of Doug. He hoped not anyway. He reminded himself that Liz was too bright to be one of those girls who gives up her dream school to be closer to her boyfriend, but he still wondered what she'd say if Doug pressured her into it.

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When Abbey's parents arrived later that evening, Jed and Abbey said their goodbyes and left the house with two overnight bags. It was the first night they planned to be away from home without the kids since October; and their first time out of the Manchester house or the D.C. apartment since that glorious weekend in the Poconos back in March. A private sleepover for two was just what they needed.

"Tell me the truth, if you had a Rhodes Scholar in one corner and a magician in the other, who would you choose?"

Abbey stared at Jed a minute. "He's not a magician."
"Yet."

"Let it go."

"I think he's trying to talk Liz out of Wellesley. That's what the sweatshirt was all about."

"Hey, what did we say? No talking about the children tonight, remember?"

Abbey's hand was resting palm-up on the armrest. Jed slid his hand into hers and laced their fingers.

"Yeah, you're right."

New Year's Eve was special for Jed and Abbey. After all, it was at a New Year's Eve party at a swanky Boston night club in 1965 when they first met each other. They were both coeds and had gone to the club separately with friends, but ran into one another and ended up spending the entire evening isolated in a booth, talking. When the clock struck midnight and the adrenaline ran wild, Jed was so caught in the moment that he impulsively kissed her, then pulled back, afraid that he might have scared her off. A second later, he was drawn into another liplock. This time, it was Abbey making a move.

Exactly twenty years later, the passion of that night still lived in their hearts. They exchanged a coy stare and a knowing smile as Jed pulled into a parking garage next to that same Boston night club. He drove up the ramp to the roof, parked, and got out first, then walked around to help Abbey out. Arm-in-arm, they walked to the elevator that would lower them to the main floor of the club.

"All these years and it still looks the same," Jed said as they reached the entrance.

Abbey laughed softly. The place looked nothing like it did in 1965, but leave it to Jed to romanticize the moment by suggesting that time had stood still since the day they met. He caught her shaking her head at that remark and called her on it as they neared an empty booth and slid in on opposite sides.

"You're making fun of me."

"What about this place is the same as the night we met?" Abbey questioned him. "The dance floor is different, the lights, the music, even the booths aren't the same."

"Okay, I'll concede all that. But what about the company?"

"You don't think I've changed in the past 20 years?"

"No," he answered, staring at her adoringly. "Have I?"

"A lot."

"If you're about to mention my gray hairs..."

Another laugh from Abbey. "That's last on the list."

"Oh so there's a list?"

"Damn right there's a list!"

"What's at the top?"
"Your heart." When he looked puzzled, she continued, "It's gotten even bigger."

Jed felt a pang in his chest when she said things like that. "You're determined to turn this into a big sentimental mushfest, aren't you?"

"Are you complaining?"

"I am. My plans tonight were simple - I was gonna bring here, dance with you, buy you a few drinks, get you tipsy, take you to the hotel and have my way with you. You had to go and get all..."

"Lovey-dovey?"

"Yeah. Knock it off."

"Takes the edge off the torrid one-night-stand you were picturing, doesn't it?"

"Here's the thing, see, you can't use the word 'torrid' while you look like that."

"Like what?"

"You know like what, with your hair all curly like that. And you're doing that thing you do with your lips."

She licked her lips. "Is it doing wild and crazy things to you?"

"You don't know the half of it."

But she did. Abbey knew exactly how to read her man. He might have been planning to seduce her, but she had plans of her own for that night and all of them included turning Jed on.

"So what are you waiting for?" she asked. "Aren't you gonna ask me to dance?"

Jed happily rose to his feet and with his hand extended, he invited her to join him. The duo took to the dance floor. The music was an upbeat mix of 1980s chart-toppers, too fast for a romantic tango, but that didn't stop them from swinging their hips and swaying toward each other while blending in with a sea of other couples. When they were just about worn out and ready for a breather, Jed left to get them a couple of drinks at the bar. Abbey moved over to the side of the dance floor to wait for him to return.

"Can I buy you a drink?"

"Huh?" Abbey turned around to see another man standing there. "Oh, uh, no, thank you."

"Come on, I won't bite."

"Really, no. I'm mar..."

The mystery man held out his hand to introduce himself. "Tommy Sheffield. Do you go to Boston U?"

She should have known. The club was always a popular among BU students. "No, I don't."

She could have corrected him right then and there, told him she graduated from BU back in 1967, but part of her was delighted at the thought of being mistaken for a coed so, for the moment, she postponed setting him straight.
"Boston College then," he continued guessing.

"No. Actually, I already graduated."

"Oh yeah? That's great. I'm a senior myself. Are you in grad school?"

From across the way, Jed spotted the interaction and made a beeline back to his wife. "Is he bothering you?"

"Hey, man, get your own date!" Tommy wedged himself between husband and wife, his attention on Abbey. "Why don't we go some place a little more private? I'll buy you that drink."

Jed was beside himself. "That drink? Abbey, what the hell?"

Abbey couldn't help but be amused. She reached over Tommy to grab a hold of Jed. "Tommy, this handsome devil is my husband and he tends to get irritated when other men offer to buy me a drink."

Tommy quickly surrendered, turning away as Jed wrapped his arm around Abbey.

"What the hell was that about?"

"He thought I was a college student."

"I notice you weren't quick to correct him."

"I was getting there."

"Not fast enough."

"It felt kinda nice, being mistaken for a 20-year-old again."

"I tell you all the time you look like a 20-year-old."

"Yeah, but you'll still be saying that when we're 90."

"It'll still be true."

She gazed into his eyes. "I love you."

"I love you too. Where's your wedding ring?" Jed lifted her hand.

"It's on my finger, right where it always is." Abbey pulled her hand away after he saw the ring. "He wasn't looking there."

Jed loved that other men found Abbey attractive, so long as they kept a respectable distance. "We need to get you a bigger band, one with engraved lettering that everyone can see."

"Saying what? Hands off Jed Bartlet's wife?"

"That or 'touch and die.'"

Just then, a pretty blond no older than Tommy, squeezed in front of the couple, giving Jed's rear a little pat on the way.

"Speaking of..." Abbey's eyes flashed with anger.
"Hey, hey now." It was Jed's turn to be amused. "She's just a kid."

"Yeah and so was Tommy. If he had grabbed my breasts, you would have decked him."

"Is that what you want to do? Deck her?"

"I can't see why not." He laughed, forcing her to admit she wasn't serious. "Fine, but that kind of behavior would qualify as sexual harassment in a professional setting."

"Lucky for her, we're at a night club. Do you remember this place being such a dive 20 years ago?"

"We were kids back then. It was natural to us. Besides, it's not a dive just because someone tried to pick me up. That's what happens in clubs."

"That's not how you felt a second ago when that girl..."

"You mean the bitch?"

Jed laughed. "You get as protective as I do."

"It's different. Even at 19 at a night club, I never went around smacking men on the tush."

"On behalf of men everywhere, let me say that's a damn shame."

With a romantic glint in her eye, Abbey reached behind him and patted his rear.

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The bustling streets of Boston didn't rest on New Year's Eve. In fact, they were even more congested than usual, and the crowds weren't restricted to the roadways. Thousands took to the slushy sidewalks with goofy hats and noise-makers in-hand, gathering from all around the city for Boston's First Night celebration.

By 8 p.m., Jed and Abbey had left the club and were fast approaching Wigglesworth Street and the two-bedroom brownstone they lived in for four years while Abbey was in med school. Every walking tour of Boston had to include a stroll past their old apartment on the way to their favorite corner café, the one that Jed used to say served the best steaming mugs of hot chocolate in all of Bean Town.

They were taking in the old neighborhood when Abbey, provoked by a nip in the air, looped her arm around Jed's and rested her head on his shoulder. He always loved when she did that. Never did he feel more like a protector than he did when Abbey cuddled up to him. He dropped a kiss to the top of her head and held her a little tighter as they crunched the snow beneath their feet.

"Are you tired?" he asked.

"A little."

"We can skip all this, you know. We could go straight to the hotel for our own private party."

"Don't tempt me."

"Why wouldn't I want to do that?"

Abbey looked up at him. "What was your favorite part of this year?"
"My favorite part? There are so many to choose from. I have a lot of good memories from this year - Yosemite, the Poconos, our Saturday date nights, the girls' birthdays, your birthday, Christmas..."

"If you had to pick one, what would you say was the highlight of 1985?"

"They were all highlights for me."

"But if you were forced to pick just one..."

"I'd try to weasel out of that conversation." He was prolonging the inevitable. "Okay, okay, the highlight for me would have to be our weekend in the Poconos. What about you?"

"The same."

That weekend was a significant part of their year. They had been stumbling ever since Jed went to Washington and, as if they didn't have enough to worry about, the miscarriage had added to their troubles. Their romantic hideaway at a remote cabin in the Poconos had given them a chance to air their feelings and reconnect as husband and wife, as friends, and as lovers. But it was a bittersweet vacation. Thinking about it only unearthed the memories of their personal tragedy, and as he stopped along that Boston sidewalk - just short of the third-floor walk-up they once called home - Jed realized it did the same for Abbey.

They faced each other as they stood grounded to their spot, silently. The thriving city around them was alive with activity, cars honking, pedestrians blowing into their metallic New Year's whistles, crowds of people clogging the block, talking and laughing. All Jed and Abbey saw, though, was each other. All they heard was the sound of light snow as it fell from the sky and tapped their coats, and the wind gusts that kicked up a few flakes from the ground.

"It's been a tough year," he said eventually.

"Yes, it has," Abbey agreed.

"You okay?" Her nod didn't convince him. "You're entitled to say no."

"I'm fine."

"Abbey, we lost a baby this year. We worked through it and made our peace with it, but it's not the kind of thing you forget just because the calendar changes. I understand that."

"Okay, it's on my mind."

"Mine too." Jed allowed a moment to pass between them before he asked, "You have the file in your purse, don't you?"

It was a guilty grin she gave him. He knew her so well. "I picked it up after we talked yesterday. I was going to leave it at home, but I couldn't. I don't really know why."

"You can't say goodbye to 1985 without reading it."

"Are you going to psychoanalyze me?"

"Who better than me? I know everything about you, Abigail Ann."

"You think so?"

"You don't?"
"There's still a little mystery."

"By design." He checked his watch. "We don't have to make our reservations, you know. Let me treat you to a gourmet sandwich and a steaming mug of the best hot chocolate in Bean Town."

"No candlelight?"

"We'll save the romance for later. Let's sift through those files together before midnight."

"You're not afraid it'll ruin tonight? Neither of us knows what it says."

"Sweetheart, it doesn't matter what it says. Nothing could ruin tonight. And anyway, I have more faith in what they saw in us."

"Always the optimist."

"Give me a chance to prove it to you."

Just what she wanted to hear. "You're on."

After Jed held it out for her, Abbey slid her gloved hand into the crook of his arm, their footfalls the only sound between them for the next few minutes as they continued toward the cozy streetside café and bakery. The manila file folder peeking out of Abbey's purse held all the details of the adoption process - their counseling sessions, personality profiles, and home study. It painted a picture of the entire Bartlet family, one that Jed and Abbey were eager to see.

TBC
Previously: Jed and Abbey took off on an overnight trip to Boston to celebrate New Year's Eve together; with adoption proceedings underway, the Bartlets got a visit from a social worker to do a home study (Chapter 8)

Summary: Jed and Abbey read over their home study analysis and adoption counseling papers before celebrating the start of 1986

Author's Note: Just so everyone knows, the NC-17 scene in this chapter might have a slight resemblance to one that Ava wrote recently, but that was strictly coincidental. I talked to Ava about it and she said it was fine. :-)

Also, a few of you wanted a glimpse at the home study we wrote about in Chapter 8, so here it is. For the sake of clarification, there's an official parenting style called "authoritative," not to be confused with "authoritarian" which is another (stricter and more domineering) parenting style. We used a home study template from an adoption agency and researched the various parenting styles and then matched them up with how we see Jed and Abbey.

Authoritative parents are described as parents who are open and loving with their kids, have clear and reasonable expectations and help them follow through on those expectations in a warm and responsive way in order to teach them personal responsibility. They reinforce good behavior, but they also set limits without stifling the rights of the child. This is what we see for Abbey. A subset of the authoritative style is a child-centered and democratic approach to child-rearing, which is how we see Jed.

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Inside that cozy café just minutes from their old Boston neighborhood, Jed and Abbey hung their coats on a rack and, with two steaming mugs of hot chocolate and a couple of gourmet subs, found themselves a large table beside a picture window that opened up to the street and the crowds of people who were heading to Copley Square and Boston Common for New Year's Eve celebrations. It wasn't fine dining at the Plaza, but the Bartlets were as comfortable in casual settings as they were in formal ones and for what they had planned, their favorite café was just the place.

Not quite ready to begin, Abbey placed an accordion file folder on the table. Jed had warned her this would be tough. Those files contained everything about them - information gathered from months of adoption counseling, personality profiles, and a home study, all compiled by strangers observing the family from the outside and analyzing every intimate detail of their lives, from their careers to their marriage to their relationships with their daughters.

With Jed's encouragement, Abbey tugged on the string and opened the top file, handing him the next one.

"Two-story colonial farmhouse..." she skimmed the first paragraph of the home study. "Six
Jed, meanwhile, read the personality profiles. "Aha! I told you there was nothing to worry about. It says here 'Abigail Bartlet - faithful wife, loving mother, and doctor extraordinaire.'"

"That's good. You almost had me there."

"You think I'm lying." He showed her the file.

"Jed, this says 'Abigail Bartlet, wife, mother, and physician.'"

"That's code for all the stuff I said." He took back the folder. "Do you want to know what else is in here about you?"

"I don't know, do I?"

He read, "Dr. Bartlet is a thoracic surgeon in Manchester and on staff at Mary Hitchcock Medical Center. She has been married to Congressman Bartlet for 18 years and together, they have three daughters."

Abbey shrugged. "That's pretty straight-forward."

"Here comes the good stuff." His reading glasses perched on his nose, Jed continued, "Dr. Bartlet exhibits a confident yet warm personality. Her parenting style is self-described as authoritative and responsive, which is supported by documented testimonials and this agency's home study report. She believes both parent and child have rights as well as boundaries within the home, that discipline is necessary for establishing rules and guidelines and instilling the importance of structure, but that acknowledging and praising good behavior is just as important. She maintains an open dialogue with her daughters and during conflict, she uses logic and reason instead of physical force to modify their behavior. She caters to each child's personal qualities and says her goal is to teach them to weigh the consequences of their actions and learn from their mistakes so that they can grow to become responsible, successful adults. See home study analysis for more on inter-family relationships between Dr. Bartlet and her daughters."

"That's just the first paragraph. You want more?"

"I want to hear about you."

"I haven't come across mine yet."

Abbey snatched the file from him and started scanning through the stack of papers. "Here we go! Josiah Bartlet, husband, father, and congressman from New Hampshire's first district. Congressman Bartlet has a child-centered philosophy of parenting. With his daughters, he's established standards that include acknowledgment and compliance to household rules, but he doesn't believe in dictating. He stays true to his belief of democracy within the Bartlet homestead by giving his children a say in family decisions. In his own words, he's there to guide and mentor them so that they can someday become independent and productive members of society. While he admits his wife is the primary disciplinarian in the household, he claims he's comfortable taking on the role when he has to and in doing so, believes explaining the reason behind the rules of the home is imperative to success in correcting problem behavior."

"I don't think I ever used the phrase 'correcting problem behavior.'" Jed watched as Abbey continued to skim. "Quit reading!"

"Why? She says a lot of nice things about you. 'Family man, devoted husband, attentive father, positive and exuberant, full of life...'"
"That's just my Dr. Jekyll side. Anyway, it's giving me the creeps hearing myself described in third person."

Abbey looked up. "But it was fine when you were reading about me?"

"That's different." He grinned. "Come on, get to the references. I wanna see what my brother had to say."

She smacked his hand when he reached for the sealed envelopes that contained the testimonials. "That's private!"

"So those are private, but the rest of this stuff isn't?"

"Precisely. We're well within our rights to read everything else. We promised our family and friends that the testimonials would be for the agency's eyes only."

"Jack will never know."

"Jed."

"What?"

"You told Jack that you wouldn't read it. You're right, he won't know whether or not you broke that promise, but we will." She returned her attention to the papers. "It says here you're an ethical man. You wouldn't want me to call them up and refute that statement, would you?"

"I hate it when you pull the ethics card."

"No you don't," she said, smirking. "Hey, I'm still on the home study. You wanna hear what Evelyn said about the girls?"

Evelyn, the social worker, had visited the farmhouse for several hours back in September and composed an extensive report on every facet of the Bartlet's home life, including descriptions and summaries of Liz, Ellie, and Zoey.

"It better be juicy!"

Abbey began to read, "Elizabeth, the oldest of the Bartlet daughters, is a high school senior. She's involved in class and community activities and according to her mother, helps out a great deal with her sisters when Congressman Bartlet is in Washington. She's enthusiastic, playful, and sassy with a sense of humor not unlike her parents. She appears to get along with both of them. As the youngest child, Zoey Bartlet shows traits that resemble her father's, including his zest for life. She is now a kindergartner, precocious, creative, and happily accepting of her role as the baby in the family. Note to revisit when she's told her parents want to adopt another child. Adjustment could be an issue for Zoey. Eleanor, the middle sister, is in the sixth grade. She prefers to be called Ellie. She was quiet and reserved upon first introduction, but when observed from afar, she opened up in the presence of her family. Helpful, considerate, and shy, Ellie is described by her older sister as a Mama's girl."

Liking what he heard, Jed scooted over to Abbey's side of the table to read along with her. They laughed at the passage about Abbey and Lizzie's exchange outside the study and the one-liners between mother and daughter that were 'telling of a solid relationship with good rapport,' and at Zoey's temper tantrum over being punished for stealing everyone's shoelaces, followed by her quick and friendly turn-around when she noticed a social worker in the house. Ellie's shyness struck a chord. Their middle daughter had to get to know people before she could feel at ease with
them. She had been that way all her life, in stark contrast to her sisters who, to Jed and Abbey's dismay, were known for approaching random strangers on the street and striking up conversations everywhere they went.

Evelyn described a flummoxed Jed when he learned of a problem Elizabeth was having with her girlfriends. She attributed it to the differences between the perspectives of men and women and explained that once the issue was redefined from the point of view of a teenage girl, Jed was better able to deal with it. Later in the report, his response to Ellie regarding the rock concert and Zoey's punishment for stealing shoelaces hogged the spotlight.

'As the only male in a four-woman household,' Evelyn wrote, 'Congressman Bartlet is sometimes puzzled by the shenanigans in the house. But when he's faced with the trials and tribulations of his daughters, he makes every effort to understand and appears to handle situations with remarkable talent, responding with appropriate discipline and/or light-hearted humor to cheer them up and make them laugh.'

"She hit that nail on the head," Abbey said as she flipped the page.

Finishing the three separate narratives that analyzed their girls and the short narratives that followed describing Jed and Abbey's individual relationships with them, their financial situation, and the logistics of placing another child in the home, husband and wife skipped further down to the final few paragraphs.

'Jed Bartlet splits his time between Washington, D.C. and Manchester, leaving his wife to care for their daughters during the weeks congress is in session. He returns home on the weekends and congressional recesses. Abbey Bartlet is a partner in a new surgical practice in Manchester, which requires long work hours and overnight call, from home, once a week. The Bartlets employ Mrs. Wilburforce, a housekeeper and part-time nanny whose job it is to run routine errands, help the children with their homework, and get them to and from after-school activities when Mom and Dad are working.

'Despite the unconventional living arrangements, the Bartlet marriage is strong and stable thanks to extraordinary time-management skills and an emphasis placed on quality time with each other and with their daughters. The sisters exhibit a tight-knit bond and treat one another with respect and care. They appear to be well-adjusted and thriving under parents who are as devoted to them as much as they are to each other. Under these circumstances, there is no doubt that the Bartlets are willing and capable of providing a healthy and loving environment necessary for children to succeed and should, therefore, be granted the agency's highest recommendation for adoption.'

A slight pause followed as Abbey stared down at the page.

"Appear to be well-adjusted," Jed finally said, quoting the report. "Our kids 'appear to be' functional, sweet cakes."

"You're gonna complain about the language?"

"I bet it would have been a stronger declaration had she not been influenced by the Great Shoelace Caper."

"It was a glowing recommendation."

He broke a smile then. "Yes, it was."

She gazed at him for a moment before reaching for his hand. "Thanks."
"For what?"

"You knew just what I needed tonight." She took a beat and then said, "And in case you thought that going through these files was going to change my mind about having another child, you can rest assured, it didn't."

"I did think it might."

"Far from it. Reading the home study, I was reliving the day Evelyn visited - you know, the way I answered the door for her, thinking it was you, the rained-out barbecue that sent everyone scrambling back inside and left your stubborn self with a cold, Liz and the concert tickets, Zoey and the shoelaces, you arriving home with your beer and your cigarettes in front of her, and me trying to hold everything together all the while thinking that this was the worst possible time for a social worker in the house."

"That somehow inspired you?"

With a nod, Abbey went on. "I'm glad she saw us like that, hectic and busy and living our lives like any other day. Reading it reminded me what a wonderful family we have, just the way we are."

"Seeing it in black and white does make me proud," Jed agreed. "Of the girls, of you, of how we're raising them. There are times when we struggle or search for the way to do things, the right answers to some problem we're having. But we must be doing something right - in the long run anyway."

"You took the words right out of my mouth. And I know - as we both said months ago - that our decision not to adopt was the right one, but not because we're not ready or because you're in Washington half the year, but because I finally feel like nothing's missing."

"Me too."

She let go of Jed's hand and gathered the papers to put them away. "I also think we've exhausted this topic. I'm ready to say goodbye to this chapter in our lives and welcome the new year with a clear head. What about you?"

After she shuffled the files back into the folder, tying the string into a knot at the end, Jed replied by raising his mug to clink it with hers.

"To 1986 and all the blessings that have yet to come."

- - -

On ordinary nights, the Boston skyline was breathtaking. On New Year's Eve, it was even more remarkable; and no place offered a better view than the upper deck of an elegant dining ship. Boston's First Night celebration was geared toward families and without the girls with them, Jed and Abbey skipped the parades, art shows, and concerts and instead, boarded a large yacht for a romantic midnight cruise on the harbor.

They headed up to the third-floor deck shortly after leaving dock, opting for the serenity of the night air over the loud, soul-shattering music and the rambunctious crowd that gathered around the bar downstairs. The chill of winter was alive and well, but the privacy was worth it as far as Abbey was concerned. Bundled up in a chestnut faux fur, her face felt the brunt of the cold.

"Here we are," Jed said as he joined her on the deck and handed her a glass of champagne in a long crystal flute. "I like the atmosphere up here much better."
Abbey was carrying a small dish of cheese and crackers she had brought with her from their table downstairs. "It's quieter, isn't it?"

"And private, in case I have the sudden urge to tear off all your clothes." He wiggled his brows.

"Jed!" She shook her head and took a sip of her drink.

"I'm just saying, we've never done it on top of a yacht before."

"You could perform in this cold?"

"When I'm with you sweet knees, I can perform anywhere." He meant it too. He was turned on just watching her. The way she looked at that moment - the wind kicking up her sexy curls as she leaned against the railing - he could have taken her right then and there.

"Lucky for you, I'm too cold to put you to the test."

"You're more inhibited than I am. We need to do something about that."

"We do?"

"Yes, ma'am. It's my New Year's resolution that you and I should be more adventurous with our extracurricular activities." He popped a cube of cheese into his mouth.

"Since when?"

"Since now."

She narrowed her gaze at him, catching that mischievous glint in his eye that hinted at the sinful thoughts of hanky panky playing in his head. "You're imagining me naked on this deck, aren't you?"

"Do you have to ask?"

"You're incorrigible."

"I try." He took a sip of champagne and looked out at the twinkling lights of the city. "What's your resolution?"

"It's not midnight yet. You know the rules."

"You're gonna make me drag it out of you."

"I thought I might. Not that it should bother you. The night I met you, you said you didn't believe in resolutions."

"When did I say that?"

"When we were dancing and I admitted I didn't have one."

"Let's get a couple of things straight. One, what we did that night doesn't qualify as dancing by any reasonable measure of the word. And two, I was trying to impress you."

"You did impress me."

"I know."
Percy Sledge's 'When a Man Loves a Woman' began playing downstairs, prompting a quizzical look from Abbey, as if she was asking Jed if he had conspired with the DJ to play that song. But the truth was, he hadn't. It was just a fluke that out of all the songs in the world, that was the one that came up, bringing back the fondest memories of their courtship. The song was first released just a few months after they met in 1965. Jed had complained that spring that it was the most overplayed song in history, but to his own disappointment, he ended up liking it very much by the start of the summer. Abbey had said it was because he was just that suggestive. He had said it was because of her. As their relationship evolved, it was no coincidence that his appreciation for the song followed the same path. He had fallen in love with Abbey, and while he couldn't pinpoint the exact moment that it happened, he had no doubt that it had.

Twenty years later, he hadn't forgotten that feeling. The same emotions that stirred inside him as a college coed were alive and well in him even now. Abbey could see it as plain as the moon shining above - the way Jed looked at her, the way his handsome face lit up and his starlight eyes engaged her in silent roleplay where, for a moment, they were that fairy tale couple meeting for the very first time.

If she wasn't a doctor, Abbey would swear her heart skipped a beat everytime Jed looked her way. How many women were lucky enough to experience what she had? How many knew they were adored and worshipped just from a single glance? She loved Jed for who he was and what he stood for, but to know that her love was returned with the same intensity it had been all those years ago, only made her treasure him more.

"May I have this dance?" she asked bashfully, as if they were 19 years old again.

"That's supposed to be my line," he returned.

"Then you should have said it first."

If there were other people on deck that night, they went unnoticed, for all Jed and Abbey saw was each other. Her arms wrapped around his neck and his circling her waist, their hips swayed to the song in unison. As Abbey rested her chin on his shoulder, Jed held her closer, warming her instantly with his body heat as the cold breeze passed over them and the lights of the city became more distant.

When a man loves a woman
Can't keep his mind on nothing else
He'll trade the world
For the good thing he's found
If she's bad he can't see it
She can do no wrong
Turn his back on his best friend
If he put her down

When a man loves a woman
Spend his very last dime
Tryin' to hold on to what he needs
He'd give up all his comfort
Sleep out in the rain
If she said that's the way it ought to be

When a man loves a woman
He can do no wrong
He can never own some other girl
Yes when a man loves a woman
I know exactly how he feels
'Cause baby, baby, baby, you're my world

When their song ended, replaced by the traditional New Year's hoopla seconds away from the
countdown, Jed pulled back just enough to see his wife's face. "Happy New Year, babe."

"Happy New Year." Her eyes shining with love, Abbey leaned in to kiss him - a kiss so long that it
lasted through the countdown and the first batch of colorful fireworks that exploded above them.

- - -

It was nearly one a.m. when Jed and Abbey strolled together through Beacon Hill, under the
famous gas lamps on the street, toward the Charles Street Inn. The luxuriously romantic bed and
breakfast just around the corner from the Public Garden was once a 19th Century Victorian
townhouse. Renovations left it with a dozen private guestrooms - each named after a famous
Bostonian - with whirlpool tubs, marble fireplaces, and cherry canopy beds. Its history was
preserved in the antique paintings and decor reminiscent of the late 1800s.

The Isabella Stewart Gardner room, where Jed and Abbey decided to stay, was on the top floor,
overlooking Beacon Hill. It had brass chandeliers with dimmers, walnut furnishings, and a bow-
front window. The bed was covered with a duvet of deep red-wine velvet with gold accents and
matching throw pillows. There was a crackling flame in the fireplace and a mirror above the mantle
had their initials scripted across the glass.

Abbey had sent Jed downstairs for extra blankets. Unaware of what she had planned, he returned to
the room a short while later to find the 'do not disturb' sign dangling off the knob. He eagerly
opened the door and swaggered in to find her. There she was, wearing her stiletto heels and a black
satin robe, short enough that it rode up to reveal the very top of the backs of her thighs as she
leaned over an old record player in the corner.

"Hey."

He thought maybe she didn't hear him. But she heard. She knew he was there; she just liked
making him wait while she prepared the record. After all, a little anticipation never hurt anyone,
least of all her amorous husband, who she knew was admiring her curves from across the room. Jed
was always at his best after a little foreplay. And nothing said foreplay like a strip tease before the
main event. When she was ready, Abbey lowered the arm and the needle caught the vinyl to play
the first chord of the sinuous melody Jed recognized right away.

Dean Martin's 'Sway' had done wild and crazy things to him in the past and tonight, Abbey hoped,
it would again.

She turned to him, charging at him with one foot in front of the other, grabbing the elastic on his
sweat pants and pulling them down to his ankles. His shirt was next and after that was gone, she
pushed him down on the Victorian carved settee by the window, stood in front of him, and fingered
the belt on her robe. How he loved when she took control.

When marimba rhythms start to play
Dance with me, make me sway
Like a lazy ocean hugs the shore
Hold me close, sway me more

Jed's eyes grew to twice their normal size as Abbey turned her back to him and dropped her robe to
reveal her tantalizing black thong underwear. He was speechless. She spun toward him then, giving him a glimpse of the black lacy bra that barely contained her voluptuous mounds as she leaned forward provocatively, her hands caressing her own body from her thighs up her stomach and over her breasts.

Like a flower bending in the breeze
Bend with me, sway with ease
When we dance you have a way with me
Stay with me, sway with me

Jed was glued to his seat. Even if he wanted to participate, he couldn't. He watched Abbey like a hawk, every move she made, every seductive step she took, every fluid sway of her hips and flirtatious flutter of her lashes as her fingers scandalously teased the hem of her underwear to make it look like she was touching herself. The street lamps outside mixed with the fire and chandelier in the room to spotlight every inch of her body in gorgeous hues that brought out the highlights in her hair and the delicate glow of her skin.

Other dancers may be on the floor
Dear, but my eyes will see only you
Only you have the magic technique
When we sway I go weak

She got closer. Lifting one leg and placing it right beside him, she leaned in to give him a kiss, then pulled away just as quickly. A twirl around his chair - with a sensuous rub of his shoulder from behind - and she was back in front of him, this time with her back to him, bending over, and giving him yet another wiggle of her hips. She moved her waist in circles as she lowered her panties down her legs and tossed them across the room with her toes.

I can hear the sounds of violins
Long before it begins
Make me thrill as only you know how
Sway me smooth, sway me now

Jed could barely stand it. Whatever it was that paralyzed his muscles moments earlier now forced him to respond with a fiery hot surge in his groin. There was nothing like watching Abbey work her body the way she was working it tonight. He had to have her and he couldn't wait another second. She was still bent over, now half-naked with her rear in his face. He rid himself of his underwear and without warning, grabbed her hips and pulled her into his lap.

Other dancers may be on the floor
Dear, but my eyes will see only you
Only you have the magic technique
When we sway I go weak

Abbey's back was to Jed's front and when she rubbed her body up and down his legs, grinding himself against his groin, she felt every inch of his bare erection beneath her, that pulsating sensation that made her own heart race. She wanted to see him, to lock eyes with him as they continued their dance, so she spun her legs around to the side, raised one high in the air, and dropped it to Jed's other side. She was facing him now and Jed was so turned on by that bit of flexibility, it took every ounce of mental fortitude to keep from exploding.

He didn't know how much longer he could wait. He lifted her slightly to adjust her position and once he lined himself up with her entrance, he pushed up, piercing her and stretching her wide open until she screamed in pleasure from the sheer length and girth of his shaft. Her back arched and Jed
unclasped her bra to bury his face in her breasts, holding her with such force that he left imprints all over her back. Abbey bore down on his shoulders to aid his shallow thrusts and together, they rocked back and forth as the song neared its finale.

I can hear the sounds of violins
Long before it begins
Make me thrill as only you know how
Sway me smooth, sway me now
You know how
Sway me smooth, sway me now

TBC
January 27, 1986

It had been a long day at the hospital and Abbey was looking forward to a quiet night at home - a light dinner, a relaxing bubble bath, a glass of warm milk and a late-night phone call with Jed before bed. But what she wanted wasn't what she got. After dinner was over and Mrs. Wilburforce left, Liz and Abbey cleared the table, Zoey was told to get ready for bed, and Ellie rushed upstairs to finish her homework.

An hour later, Zoey was still running around bursting with energy, Ellie was in her room, flipping through a Time Magazine article about the Challenger launch the next day, and Abbey was folding laundry in the master bedroom with Liz on her heels, pestering her about the sex education class she was teaching and the flyers she had posted at the high school.

"All I'm saying is it's embarrassing." Liz repeated herself for the tenth time that evening.

"You've made that clear."

"But you don't care."

"If by not caring you mean I'm not going to cancel the class, then I guess you're right. But if you think I'm not sensitive your feelings, you couldn't be more wrong."

"How are you being sensitive to my feelings?"

"By letting you express them without getting angry." Abbey stuffed the folded clothes into the dresser drawer. "Did you clean up the family room?"

"Not yet. I was shoveling the walk."

"I appreciate it. If you could straighten up the family room before bed..."

"You're changing the subject, Mom."

"Yes, I am."
"Why?"

"Lizzie, I love you to the moon and back and I wish I could take away your embarrassment because God knows I'd never intentionally do anything to make you unhappy. But what you're not understanding is that it's not just about you. There are kids your age who've already had unprotected sex, kids who don't know where to get condoms or how to use them..."

Zoey, who had sprinted into the room and jumped on the bed during Abbey's response, interrupted. "Mommy, what's a condom?"

"Never mind. How about you do what I told you to and go change into your PJs? I'll be in soon for a story."

The six-year-old dashed out of the room as Liz looked back at Abbey.

"So your philosophy is that it's okay for teenagers to ask for condoms?"

"It's not only okay, it's necessary."

"And you'd be cool if I asked for one, right?" She chuckled when Abbey gave her a steely glare. "I knew it! I knew you weren't okay with this when it comes to me!"

"I don't think that teens should run out and have sex, no. But if they're going to - and statistics tell us that they are - they should learn about protection."

"They tell us to just say no at school."

"Which is why I'm providing an alternative. I happen to think that abstinence-only programs don't work." Abbey folded a sweatshirt belonging to Ellie and left her room, headed toward her middle daughter's. "ELLIE?"

Liz followed. "No, they don't. Some of my friends have had sex."

Abbey wished she could say she was surprised, but after treating Liz's friend, Courtney, for an AIDS scare back in September, she knew better. "And you?"

"You already know the answer to that."

"Have you thought about it?"

"No."

"Because if you have..."

"I haven't, Mom."

With a sigh of relief, she knocked on Ellie's door, then let herself in to find the blonde lying on her stomach on her bed, reading. "Ellie, what are you doing? You're supposed to be finishing your math homework."

"Did you know that Christa McAuliffe beat out 11,000 other teachers to get to be the first teacher in space?" Ellie's eyes were bright with enthusiasm.

"That's not the response I was waiting for." Abbey took her magazine away. "Do your homework."

"Mom, how can I concentrate on math when the shuttle's going up tomorrow? My teacher will
understand."

"Not if the launch is delayed again," Liz pointed out.

"It won't be. Tomorrow's the day."

"And it's going to be a sight to see, so do your homework so you can enjoy the news coverage tomorrow night." Abbey handed her the sweatshirt. "Put this away and then I want to see you working on some problems. It's almost time for bed."

"Okay," Ellie grumbled reluctantly as she took the sweatshirt. "But first, Lizzie, I bet you don't know who the first woman in space was."

Liz guessed, "Sally Ride?"

"WRONG! Sally Ride was the first American woman in space, but the first woman in space was Valentina Tereshkova. I can't believe you didn't know that."

"Yeah, what are they thinking letting me graduate high school without having that committed to memory?"

"You said it, not me."

Liz plopped down on her sister's bed. "So, Mom, what if I had thought about it? What if I wanted to have sex?"

"WHOA!" Ellie sat up.

"Are we talking hypothetically?" Abbey asked.

"Yes."

Hearing her mom and sisters having a pow-wow in Ellie's room, Zoey burst in. "Why do you wanna have sex, Lizzie?"

"I'm saying IF I wanted to..." Liz stared at Abbey. "Mom?"

"Okay, IF you wanted to..." Zoey went on as she leapt up on the bed and began jumping up and down. "Why?"

"That's enough, Miss Priss," Abbey grabbed her arm and pulled her down. "Go change into your PJs. That's the last time I'll tell you."

"But I'll miss what Lizzie's saying."

"Zoey." Her tone was firmer this time.

"I hate bedtime!" Zoey groaned, stomping out of the room.

"So Mom?" Liz picked up where she left off.

"If you wanted to have sex, I'd want you to come to me."

"And if I did come to you?"

"Are you coming to me now?"
"Say I was. If I told you I wanted to sleep with Doug, what would you say?"

Abbey glanced around the room at her two impressionable daughters. She had to play this one right. Giving them the idea that teenage sex was acceptable was the wrong message, she thought, but on the other hand, she wanted them to feel comfortable opening up to her if they ever considered it and to be knowledgeable about the consequences and able to protect themselves.

"I'd want us to sit down and talk about it," she said. "I mean really talk about it. An honest and frank discussion."

"I'm sitting." Liz patted the seat beside her.

"You want to do this now?"

"Why not? What would you say? Be honest."

"You want honest? I think you're too young."

"See? You tell my friends about safe sex, but when it comes to me, I'm too young."

"What do you expect? Of course I'd rather you not do it." Abbey joined her on the bed. "As a healthcare professional, it's my job to make sure that people are adequately educated and able to protect their health and well-being. As a mother, my job is to protect you, not just from the medical consequences of having sex, but from the emotional ones as well. Having sex for the first time is a beautiful thing and it's not something anyone should rush into before they're mature enough to comprehend what it means. Beyond the physical, it's an expression of love and trust that you can't share with just anyone. It's too special."

"You've told me that before."

"It's true. The first person you make love to will be someone you'll never forget, hopefully someone you'll want to spend the rest of your life with."

"Is that what you're teaching in the sex ed class?"

"Millie brought in a social worker who will get into the psychology behind it all, but my focus is on the medical side of things. My lessons will be on safe sex."

"Condoms."

"Yes. And even though I don't plan to devote a lot of time to abstinence since that's what they get at school, I will tell them - just as I'll emphasize to you - no condom is a 100-percent guarantee. Even if you do everything right, there's still a chance that you can get pregnant or, God forbid, an STD."

"That's a sexu..." Liz began to inform Ellie before the younger girl spoke up.

"I know what it is," she said, inviting a glare from Abbey. "What? I read."

Zoey pranced back in then. "I'm ready for a story!"

"I'll be there in a minute."

"Can I sleep with you tonight?" the little girl asked, climbing up on the bed beside her mother.

"What's wrong with your own bed?"
"I wanna sleep with you! I picked up my toys like you told me to and I brushed my teeth and put on my pajamas. Can I?"

"Yes, you may, as long as you don't hog the covers like last week."

"Can Ellie and Lizzie come too?"

"Not until Ellie finishes her math homework and Lizzie cleans up the family room..." Abbey turned her eye to Liz. "and then tells me every single detail about her relationship with Doug."

Liz giggled. "We didn't do anything. First base, that's it."

"Is first base what it used to be?"

"If it was kissing when you were young, then yes, it's the same. We shared a kiss at New Year's."

"Awwww." To 11-year-old Ellie, everything was romantic.

"I know, isn't it sweet?" Liz beamed, her voice giddy with puppy love.

"Did he close his eyes?"

"Of course. And so did I."

"Then how do you know he did?" Zoey questioned.

"Because I opened mine for a second when his hands..." Liz remembered her mom was in the room. "wandered."

Abbey covered Zoey's ears. "There was groping?"

"I WANNA HEAR!" Sitting on the mattress, Zoey kicked her feet furiously, but Abbey didn't let go.

"He ran his hands up and down my back," Liz answered.

"Above or below the waist?"

"MOM!"

"Can you blame me for asking?" Abbey released her youngest daughter. "Touching is more than first base."

"You went further than you thought!" Ellie high-fived Liz. "Cool!"

"NOT cool!" Abbey countered.

"What happened?" Zoey pouted.

"You had boyfriends when you were my age, Mom. You know the score. We're not doing anything you didn't do."

"What did Mommy do?" Zoey was trying to catch up.

"Mom, did you have a lot of boyfriends?" Abbey had shared stories of her youthful crushes with Liz many times, but this was the first Ellie was hearing about them.
"I had some."

"Does Daddy know?"

"Do you think he assumes there was no one before him?"

"Yeah."

Abbey laughed. "Well, he doesn't. He knows there were others, but he also knows they were just crushes. Your father was my first true love."

"So what kinds of things did you do with them? Did you make out with them?"

Liz picked up on Abbey's silence. "HA! If that isn't a guilty look, I don't know what is!" She stretched out on her belly, her hands propping up her chin. "Come on, dish!"

"What do you want to know?"

"Details! Who, what, when, where, and how?"

"The who isn't important, the what is too sensitive for young ears," Abbey said, with a glance Zoey's way. "The when and where is none of your business, and you're out of your mind if you think I'm going to tell you how!"

"What happened to having an honest and frank discussion?"

"You started asking questions."

As Abbey got up to leave, the girls followed.

"So you're for honest and frank discussions when it's about us, but not about you?" Liz asked as they walked down the hall back to the master bedroom.

"I thought that went without saying."

"Mom, you're no fun," Ellie complained, heading to her parents' large bed. "We wanna hear juicy tales about your teenage days!"

"And you might as well tell us cuz we can always ask Grandma." Liz hoped her little threat would get Abbey talking.

"What makes you think she knows?" Abbey cocked one brow.

"Ooohhh, in that case, it's gotta be hot! Mom, the rebel!"

"I never thought of you as a rebel, Mom." Ellie propped a pillow up on the headboard. "What did you do?"

"Never mind."

"Come on!" Liz pushed. "You can't tell us you did sketchy things and then not tell us what."

"Who said anything about sketchy things? I'm talking regular teenage antics."

"Like what?"

"You wanna satisfy your curiosity? Ask your father about the time he took his parents' car for a
joyride to Vermont when he was in the tenth grade."

Ellie was shocked. "DAD did that?"

Liz wasn't as easily distracted. "That was clever, changing the subject the way you did."

Abbey grinned. "It was worth a shot."

"So tell us."

"Yeah, we wanna know!" Zoey agreed. It didn't matter that she didn't have a full grasp on what they were talking about. Gossiping with her sisters was always fun.

"What is it that YOU want to know, Nosy Nellie?" Abbey tweaked her nose.

"Whatever Ellie and Lizzie wanna know. We all wanna know!"

"You guys are going to be sorely disappointed. I was a good Catholic girl. Anything I did was innocent."

"Right!" Liz threw a pillow at her mom. "Was your wedding night the first time you...you know?"

A little more candor than Abbey expected, but she bit the bullet. "Since you asked, no, it wasn't."

"REALLY?" The second shock of the evening for Ellie.

"What does that mean?" Zoey was even more confused now.

"It means Mom had gone all the way before she married Dad."

"All the way where?"

Abbey interjected before Ellie could corrupt Zoey further, "It was with your father. He's the only man I've ever been with intimately."

"Is that the truth?" Liz probed.

"Yes, it is. I always thought I'd wait until my wedding night. That's what I was raised to believe was the proper thing to do. And truth be told, it probably would have been better if we had waited, but we were in love and that was the most important thing to me. You have to feel that connection with someone, you have to have that trust before you can give them that gift. I loved your father and I knew that he was the one, so when it happened, I didn't feel like I was doing anything wrong, despite what the church said or what my parents would have thought."

"But what if it hadn't worked out?"

"There's always a chance of that in any relationship and I'd be lying if I said the thought didn't occur to me, but this wasn't some summer romance. By the time we...made love, we were deeply in love with each other. If it hadn't worked out, it wouldn't have been because we weren't sure of our feelings."

"What other reason could there be?"

"It's not always as easy as that. We were graduating college and I'd been accepted to Harvard Medical School. Your dad, meanwhile, left for London for a few days to meet with the admissions committee at LSE."
"You missed him, huh?" As much as her parents missed each other now when they were apart, Ellie imagined it being just as bad back then.

"That's an understatement. I knew he wanted to study at LSE and I couldn't bear to say goodbye to him again, so when he returned from the interview, I proposed."

"Wait, you proposed?" That wasn't the story Liz had heard before. "I thought he proposed to you."

"He did, after I proposed to him. The thing was, he had it all planned out where he was going to talk to my parents first to get their blessing, then take me out to a fancy restaurant later that night and ask me to marry him. But I beat him to the punch. I popped the question the second we got back from the airport, only I was a lot more disorganized. I was being impulsive and reacting with my emotions, so the only way he could make his plan work was to say no when I asked."

"He said no to you?" The surprises kept coming for Ellie. She couldn't believe her father would ever reject her mother. "What did you do?"

"I wanted to die. I thought he meant it and I was crushed. Heartbroken really. I was going back and forth between laying into him for stringing me along and breaking down in tears right then and there. But fortunately, before I got carried away, he decided to forego all the frills and instead, he got down on one knee and pulled out an engagement ring. He told me the reason he said no was because he wanted to do it right."

"That's so sweet!"

"It was. He had been thinking about it for a while and had planned it all out, not just the engagement or the wedding, but our lives together as husband and wife. He had considered every detail, right down to our 50th wedding anniversary."

The girls chuckled.

"That's so Dad."

"Yes, it is. And that's why he's my happily ever after."

Abbey didn't like to lead her daughters to believe that her marriage was a fairytale. She wanted them to know that she and Jed had struggles just like every other couple, to understand that it wasn't as easy as glass slippers and diamond rings, that it was love, respect, trust, and fidelity that made them who they were. But she never missed an opportunity to remind them that with all those components firmly in place, marriage was a blessing. She hoped that one day, Liz, Ellie, and Zoey would each experience the kind of bond she shared with Jed and live a lifetime as happy with their families as she was with hers.

The conversation shifted that evening from teen sex to love and romance and the Bartlet girls savored every minute of it.

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January 28, 1986

The next morning in Washington, Jed rose from bed at 5 a.m. He was bright-eyed almost instantly, a significant turn-around from most days. That was because today was special. Just like Ellie, Jed was excited about the launch of the Challenger. As New Hampshire's representative in congress, he had been invited to fly down to Cape Canaveral so he could witness the launch in person at the Kennedy Space Center, but his busy legislative schedule prevented him from being there. He had
given Christa McAuliffe his warmest wishes at a White House reception a few weeks earlier and promised to greet her when she returned. In the meantime, like most Americans that day, he was preparing to watch the shuttle soar into space on television.

He padded the floor on the way to the kitchen to turn on the TV and start a pot coffee while he waited for Abbey's phone call. The girls had slept in the master bedroom the night before, so husband and wife didn't get their usual private time on the phone, something he grumbled about before bed and was hoping to make up for that morning.

When the phone rang, he snatched it off the base. "Beautiful day for a shuttle launch, isn't it?"

"What happened to the groggy morning voice I love so much?" Abbey returned.

"I've been up for two hours."

"Liar."

"Okay, five minutes," Jed conceded. "But I'm up and ready to face the day."

"If you were here, I'd make you banana pancakes."

"Is that what you made for the girls?"

"And Mrs. Wilburforce. She should be here any minute."

"Doesn't she usually cook breakfast?"

"I felt like doing it today."

"How was the slumber party last night?"

"I didn't think Ellie would ever get to sleep. She's so excited about the launch." Abbey picked up the paper, her eyes scanning the headline - 'New Hampshire's Own Set to Launch Into Space.'

"She's not the only one."

Abbey smiled, imagining Jed as fired up as their middle daughter. "You're grinning from ear to ear, aren't you?"

"I always grin from ear to ear I when I'm talking to you."

"I wish I could see your face."

"I wish I could see every inch of you."

"We need one of those TV phones."

"Next on the list." Jed took a seat on a stool at the kitchen counter, his eye on the television. "So are you going to get to watch the launch?"

"I scheduled only one procedure before noon so barring any emergencies, yeah, I'll get to watch."

"CNN has team coverage this morning."

"It was on last night too. I made the mistake of turning on the television before bed to check the weather and the girls wouldn't let me turn it off once they showed shots of Cape Canaveral. You'd
think we never launched a shuttle before."

"Never as big as this one, never with a civilian on board. And a teacher no less."

"Every classroom in New Hampshire will be tuned in."

"Not just New Hampshire. There's such a buzz around Capitol Hill. Everyone's been working for months to arrange the NASA feed for school districts in other states. I think they finally got it."

"Never underestimate the power of Congress."

"It's gonna be a monumental day for education, babe."

And it was supposed to be. From coast to coast, adults and children were paying attention. The launch of the Challenger on that cold winter day was the maiden voyage of the Teacher In Space program and its success was supposed to open the door to other space adventures.

- - -

"Get out your Social Studies books and turn to Chapter 12."

At Manchester Elementary later that morning, Mrs. Gordon was hoping to sneak in a sixth-grade Social Studies lesson before the fanfare of the shuttle launch began.

"Do we have to?" one of the kids whined. "Can't we talk about the shuttle some more?"

"Yeah!" others agreed. "Today should be just about the shuttle!"

In the first row, the third seat from the back, Ellie looked around at her classmates, happy that they had asked the very question she wanted to. As hyper as she was that day, there was no way she could concentrate on class.

"We can't blow off the whole day!" Mrs. Gordon insisted.

"Why not? We'll learn a lot by watching the astronauts get ready."

"We won't even get the feed until 11:00."

"Ellie can tell us about it!" Wendy volunteered her best friend without a second thought, adding, "She went to space camp at Kennedy Space Center last summer, right where the shuttle's going up, AND she got to meet Christa McAuliffe!"

All eyes turned to the 11-year-old blonde as she sat back in her chair, bashful about the sudden attention.

- - -

Meanwhile, in the school gymnasium, Zoey's kindergarten class had moved recess indoors, thanks to the nasty snow storm outside. The children had split up into two groups and formed lines facing each other for a game of Red Rover. Zoey was part of the blue team and she stood in her line, hands linked with classmates on either side.

"RED ROVER, RED ROVER, SEND ZOEY RIGHT OVER!" the green team sang.

Zoey let go of her classmates' hands and charged toward the other line. The object was to plow through the chain and break the link while the other team tried to stop her. As she approached at
warp speed, the kids tightened their bond and unintentionally caused Zoey to stumble, slipping on the floor and falling backwards with a scream.

"OWWWWWWW!"

The two lines broke apart and children and teachers ran toward her.

"Ow! Ow! Ow!"

"Let me see." Mrs. Roberts pried the little girl's hand from her ankle. "It's okay, Zoey. You're gonna be okay."

"It hurts," the youngest Bartlet cried.

Mrs. Roberts looked up at her aide. "Can you handle things? I'm going to take her to the nurse."

"Yeah, I've got it."

"C'mon, Zoey." Mrs. Roberts picked her up in her arms. "We're gonna make you feel better in no time."

- - -

At the hospital, Abbey had just come out of her one and only surgery for that morning. She was dressed in a fresh pair of scrubs, sipping a cup of coffee as she stared at the surgical board and all the procedures she had lined up after noon. Suddenly, the code light flashed and her beeper went wild. She left her mug at the nurse's station and raced down the hall to room 421.

"What's happening?"

"It's Mr. Lyle," a resident answered as another resident reached for the paddles. "He was complaining about upper abdominal pain."

"Again!" the second resident called repeatedly until the team of nurses confirmed there was a pulse.

"We're not taking any more chances," Abbey said firmly, turning to her two residents. "Order X-rays and a CT-scan STAT and be prepared to scrub in. We're taking him back to the O.R."

- - -

On Capitol Hill, Jed had been working at his computer when he ran into a problem.

"Maggie?" he called as he left his office and approached his receptionist out in the lobby. "I can't use 'and."

"I'm sorry?"

"The word 'and.' Whenever I type it in, it messes up the computer program."

"Oh yeah, Lindsay said something about that. You can't use the word 'and,'" Maggie confirmed.

"No kidding. What am I supposed to do?"

"Lindsay said to use a semicolon instead."
"A semicolon is not a suitable replacement for the word 'and'!"

"They're trying to fix it."

"This is memo is going to the Speaker of the House and I'm supposed to use a semicolon whenever I want to type 'and'? 'Yes, Mr. Speaker, Abbey-semicolon-I would be honored to attend the winter ball.' Someone tell me again why we don't use typewriters anymore."

Maggie shrugged, saved by the sound of the ringing phone. "Congressman Bartlet's office."

With a frustrated sigh, Jed turned toward the office of his communications director. "Samantha, how am I supposed to get anything done when I can't type the word 'and'?"

"They're working on it..."

Samantha's response was cut short by Maggie.

"Congressman, it's your daughter's school on the phone."

Crowds of students filled the hallways of Manchester High in between classes. Liz headed to her locker, ducking as she walked past the flyers about Abbey's sex education program. The school had been buzzing about it for days and while some students were genuinely interested in it, others took every opportunity to make immature sex jokes to win favor with their adolescent peers.

Liz was doing a good job of ignoring it, but it was nagging at her. What her mother was doing was courageous, she kept reminding her. It was something she should have been proud of, but every time she tried to summon that pride, another wisecrack made her want to bury her head in the sand and avoid it altogether.

Without turning a glance, she sailed past a group of jocks standing in front of one of the posters and opened her locker to trade her European History textbook for her brown-bagged lunch. She was still within earshot when one of the football players used a lewd hand gesture to go with his distasteful quip about Abbey giving him sex lessons and 'private tutoring on the side.'

Her locker still wide open, Liz stormed over. "Hey Bryce, you wanna say that to my face?"

Bryce was taken aback. He had known Liz since freshman year and she had never been the slightest bit aggressive. "I was just messing around."

"Her class isn't about sex lessons; it's about SAFE SEX! She's trying to get people to use common sense and she's not gonna be the punchline of your perverted jokes as long as I'm around so stop being a pig about it!"

"Liz?"

"What?" A flustered Liz turned to find Courtney Johnson standing behind her.

"What's going on?"

"Nothing!" Liz made a beeline back to her locker.
Courtney followed. "What were they saying?"

"I don't wanna talk about it!"

"All right."

"What's up?"

"I hate to pile on, but SGA's been blowing off the prom committee."

"No, we haven't." Liz had been a member of the Student Government Association for four years and she took her role seriously. She never blew off any club or organization that asked her for help.

"You haven't. Ricky has. Just ask the juniors who are complaining about him."

Ricky was the guy who beat Liz for student body president, something she would have accepted a lot easier if he had actually been interested in doing the job. "What's the problem?"

"Prom Promise. The junior class is broke. They need a bigger budget."

"Sit with me at lunch and we'll figure it out."

Liz slammed her locker shut and took off with Courtney to the cafeteria.

- - -

"It really hurts, Daddy!" Back at the nurse's office at the elementary school, Zoey was talking to Jed on the phone.

"It's gonna hurt, sweetheart, it's a sprain. But you know what that means, don't you?"

"What?"

"Brownie nut fudge ice cream cones this weekend, just you and me." Whenever the girls were upset or injured, Jed gave them a special treat to help them feel better.

"With sprinkles?"

"You bet with sprinkles!"

Momentarily distracted by the thought of her favorite dessert, Zoey looked up to see Mrs. Wilburforce rushing in.

"Zoey!" She leaned over the bed Zoey was reclining on to examine the bruised ankle. "What happened?"

"I fell down."

"Zo, let me talk to her," Jed said into the phone. He waited a beat until he heard the older woman take the receiver. "Hi, Mrs. Wilburforce. Abbey's in surgery. I already gave permission for you to take Zoey out of school. I called her pediatrician and he can fit her in, if you wouldn't mind stopping by his office just to make sure it's nothing more serious?"

"Of course. We'll give you a call when we get back home."

"I'd appreciate it. Thanks."
Mrs. Wilburforce handed the nurse the receiver, then reached down to scoop Zoey up into her arms. "All right, sweet pea, you're not afraid of your doctor, are you?"

"Nope. He always gives me a lollipop."

- - -

"How could there not be enough money? You were supposed to budget prom at the beginning of the year."

At the high school, Liz was in the cafeteria, sitting across from Courtney and two 11th graders. It was tradition that the junior class sponsored and hosted prom festivities every year as a farewell to the seniors, but the 1986 junior class had gone bankrupt and barely had the money to cover the formal dance, let alone all the events that led up to it.

"We thought we had it. It takes a lot of work to plan everything," one of the juniors said.

"I was on prom committee last year," Liz reminded them. "I know how much work it takes. The SGA can't cover this. What can we cut?"

"We can change the venue to a less ritzy hotel."

"Fine, let's change it." Liz sighed.

"Also, Prom Promise."

"No way!"

The Prom Promise program was designed to keep teens from drinking and driving on prom night, the night that DUIs and drunk driving accidents doubled and even tripled in some towns. As far as Liz was concerned, it was too important to cut. Scaling back on the dance itself was a better option.

"I agree with Liz," Courtney spoke up. "No way. Prom Promise is necessary."

The juniors went on, "That's where a lot of the money is going. The pep rally is expensive and all the speakers have to be paid. Plus, we have another problem. We were planning a simulated drunk driving crash on the football field the day before, just like last year, with a medevac chopper and all. But County Hospital said they won't sponsor the chopper this year. It's too much money and they won't get reimbursed by the state." With some prodding from the other girl, the first girl continued, "Liz, your mom's a doctor. Can she work out a deal with her hospital to use their helicopter?"

"How'd you know she was a doctor?"

"The sex-ed posters all over school. They say Dr. Bartlet on them."

Courtney gave a frown at that, but the two girls didn't see anything wrong with it.

"My mom's not in charge of the hospital's helicopter."

"Yeah, but maybe she could talk the hospital into sponsoring it."

"I'd rather not get my mom involved in this. We'll have to figure something else out. I'll talk to County myself. And as for the other stuff, change the venue and whatever else we need, we'll fundraise. We'll do a car wash or bake sale or something."
"Aren't you up to your ears in fundraising for cheerleading and yearbook?"

"This is for drunk driving," Liz replied. "I'll make the time."

"But your mom..."

"My mom has nothing to do with this."

Courtney gestured to the two other girls. "Guys, can we catch up with you later? Liz and I want to brainstorm."

As they left, Liz turned her attention to her friend. "Why'd you do that?"

"Because I know you're pissed at your mom." When Liz looked away, Courtney continued. "Those guys by the lockers...they were making jokes about the sex ed class, weren't they?"

"What else is new?"

"Liz, I think there's something you should know."

"It's embarrassing, Courtney. I'm not pissed, I'm embarrassed. Wouldn't you be if your mom wanted to teach your friends how to put on a condom?"

"I would have been...last year."

---

After Mrs. Gordon led her reluctant students through a Social Studies lesson, she closed the book and erased the black board. The class was rumbling behind her, students leaning into the aisle to take advantage of the few minutes they had to chat. Ellie was fielding questions about space camp and Christa McAuliffe from the kids directly around her when Mrs. Gordon wheeled the giant television to the front of the class and turned on the NASA feed.

"What was she really like, Ellie?" Brittany asked.

"She was...nice. Just like you'd expect."

"Did you meet her at space camp?"

"No, after. But we talked about her at space camp. All the kids there wanted to meet her too."

---

Back on the Hill, Jed had given up on the computer and was now standing in the lobby of his congressional suite, flanked by his staff as they tuned in to the pre-launch news reports and a visual of the astronauts waving to the crowd as they boarded the shuttle. A broad smile dominated his features and his eyes twinkled with pride. He had witnessed other shuttle launches, but like he told Abbey earlier that morning, this was different. The Challenger marked the birth of a new era in space exploration, one that had Jed as excited as the tens of thousands of school children who were anticipating the historic lift-off.

"It's not a walk on the moon, but I feel like I did back in '69" he said, taking notice of the timebox that appeared in the upper left-hand corner of the screen, showing a minute left to go. "Look what we can do."

---
"Why didn't you tell me what you were going through?" In the cafeteria at Manchester High, Courtney had just told Liz what prompted Abbey's sex ed course. Liz was stunned by the news of her friend's HIV scare earlier in the year.

"I was a mess. I needed to get to a doctor and I chose your mom. She was great, Liz. She didn't just keep my secret, she comforted me, took away my fears, told me that it was gonna be okay. She helped me a lot. And after I came back negative, she sat down and talked to me about condoms and stuff - not as a mom to a child, but like a friend to a friend. She didn't judge me; she just wanted to make sure I was informed."

"And that's why she's doing this now? The sex-ed class, it's because of that?"

'I think so."

Liz had been so wrapped up in how Abbey's class was affecting her that she had neglected to see the bigger picture. She could now put a face with Abbey's lectures about unprotected sex. Courtney's face. She was so grateful that Courtney was healthy, so relieved that her blood test was negative. She leaned in to give her friend a hug as a cafeteria aide turned up the volume on the NASA feed on the big-screen television at the front of cafeteria.

"We'll talk some more after the shuttle goes up."

"Yeah," Courtney agreed. "My little brother'll kill me if I miss it. He's off the charts about it."

"Sounds like my sister Ellie. She's been looking forward to it for months." Liz had to admit it was thrilling for her too. "Ellie wants to be an astronaut when she grows up. Who knows, maybe someday, they'll let more civilians fly and she can get us on."

---

At the same time, the kids in Mrs. Gordon's class were practically jumping out of their seats. Touched by their enthusiasm, Mrs. Gordon stood in the back of the room and watched the youngsters begin the countdown.

"10, 9, 8, 7..."

TBC
"I told you he gives me lollipops!" Zoey gleefully licked her cherry lollipop as Mrs. Wilburforce carried her from the doctor's office to the car.

"What does your mom say about that?"

"She says it's okay if it's from the doctor, but she gets mad when Daddy gives me one."

Mrs. Wilburforce smiled. It was just like Jed to sneak lollipops to the girls behind Abbey's back. "So that's how she gets you to go to the doctor without a fight? Your sisters too?"

"Only Ellie. Not Lizzie. Mommy has to fight with her whenever she has to take her." In the front passenger's seat, Zoey pulled her seatbelt over her chest. "Can we make a snowman when we get home?"

"If it ever stops snowing."

Mrs. Wilburforce looked up at the gray skies that were responsible for that morning's fierce snowstorm. She then slid into the driver's seat, turned on the car, and reached for the radio dial. Because Zoey had been getting X-rays on her ankle, neither of them had seen or heard anything about the shuttle launch.

"...the explosion happened 22 minutes ago at 11:39 a.m. off the coast of Florida. No word from NASA officials on the cause of the malfunction..."

With a sharp gasp, she stabbed the dial shut, turning it off before Zoey could hear another word.
"Why'd you do that?" the six-year-old asked. Her voice so innocent, she was unprepared for what she was about to find out.

"Hang on tight, okay?"

Mrs. Wilburforce sped out of the parking lot, headed to Manchester Elementary to get to Ellie.

---

At the hospital, Abbey had just finished an emergency surgery on her patient, Mr. Lyle, and was on her way to the lockerroom to change into a fresh pair of scrubs. She was moving so fast, she didn't even notice the doctors and nurses who had crammed into an empty room to watch the shuttle coverage. As she whizzed past the nurse's station, Nurse Olivia stopped her.

"Dr. Bartlet, you have a lot of messages here. Your family couldn't reach you."

"What's going on?"

Olivia flipped through the messages. "The school nurse called a little while ago to say that Zoey sprained her ankle, then your husband called to say Mrs. Wilburforce would be picking her up. And about twenty minutes ago, your daughter Ellie called, your husband called again, your daughter Liz called, and your husband called one last time to say that he gave permission for Liz to leave school early and pick up Ellie on the way home."

"Why?"

"The space shuttle. They were watching it."

"And?" Abbey regretted missing the launch, but she had been in an operating room and had no idea what was awaiting her beyond the walls of the hospital.

"You haven't heard?"

"I've been in surgery for the past hour. What on earth has happened?"

"It exploded after lift-off," Olivia told her and then added, "The astronauts were killed."

---

A half hour earlier

January 28, 1986. It began as such an exciting day. Seven astronauts waved to the cameras on the way to the launch pad. They had been praised and celebrated for months, nowhere more so than in the state of New Hampshire, the home to the woman who was supposed to be the first U.S. civilian in space - Christa McAuliffe, a teacher from Concord. A teacher. A regular human being that kids could relate to. Their mission held promise for space exploration and for education. The idea of tuning in to watch the science lessons and experiments from on-board the Challenger as it orbited Earth, inspired tens of thousands of schoolchildren who were counting down the days until the launch. On that fateful morning, NASA set up a closed-circuit feed in classrooms around the country, giving students an eye-witness glimpse into the nation's space program.

In New Hampshire, the fanfare was bigger than anywhere else. The students from Concord High School, where Christa McAuliffe taught, had been taken to an auditorium to watch the lift-off together on a giant television screen. Wearing party hats and throwing confetti, they clapped and blew into their noisemakers before an audience of cameras and national press as the shuttle left the
launch pad. But seconds later, it was the eerie sound of silence that permeated the room as an
ominous puff of smoke filled the screen.

Only 15 miles away in Manchester, Ellie Bartlet, who had been persuaded to share her memories of
space camp with her classmates, was watching the launch too, along with the rest of her sixth-
grade class. Their cheers drowned out the voiceover from NASA's Mission Control, but a little
over a minute into the flight, Ellie sensed something wasn't right. She saw the explosion. She
flinched. And then, the disintegration. She looked at her teacher in horror and as other students
shushed their peers, they all learned something had gone terribly wrong.

The NASA voice said flatly, without emotion, "Flight controllers looking very carefully at the
situation. Obviously, a major malfunction." And then moments later from Mission Control, "We
have a report from the flight dynamics officer that the vehicle has exploded."

Mrs. Gordon shut off the television as quickly as she could and her class began to bombard her
with questions. Moans and grumbles came from their mouths and several distraught students were
taken to the front office so they could call their parents. Among them, the shy blonde in the first
row, third seat from the back, the one who had charmed her classmates with stories of space camp
just minutes earlier and who knew, before it became clear to the rest of her class, that the shuttle
was in trouble.

A few blocks away at Manchester High School, Liz had seen the explosion on a television set in
the cafeteria. The words of Mission Control silenced the room and she bolted from her seat and ran
to the office to call her mother. When she learned that Abbey was in surgery, she called Jed, then
hurriedly left school to pick up Ellie.

On Capitol Hill, Jed was numb from the shock. He had held it together for his girls, comforting a
shaken Ellie over the phone and promising that he'd be home soon. When he talked to Liz, he used
the same approach and asked her to take care of Ellie until he could make it back, knowing the
disaster would hit his middle daughter the hardest. After saying his goodbyes to Liz, he curled the
receiver in his hand, took a deep breath, and swallowed past the giant lump that had formed in his
throat.

"Maggie?" he called as he entered the lobby of his congressional suite. "I need the next flight back
to New Hampshire."

"You can't go home now," Chief of Staff, Michael, told his boss.

"Did you not just see what happened? Seven people DIED right before our eyes! I'm going home.
My family needs me."

"Sir, you can't go. There's a rescue mission underway. NASA sent out a search team."

"Is there a chance...?" He let the thought trail off, hoping there was a chance, but knowing there
most likely wasn't.

"I don't know. But either way, you can't leave. You've been summoned to the White House and so
has the rest of the New Hampshire delegation."

"My little girl watched this happen, live." It pained Jed to think of Ellie's childlike enthusiasm
-crushed to pieces by such a traumatic incident.

"So did thousands of other little girls, and little boys too. We messed up. The feed should have been
on tape-delay. NASA, the White House, the government, we screwed up and any minute now,
we're going to be inundated with phone calls from people wanting answers. The President needs your input."

"Look me in the eye and tell me this isn't politics."

"It's not. It's not about poll numbers; it's about the fact that you're a leader and even more importantly today, you're a leader from New Hampshire. Christa McAuliffe was the star of this mission, a civilian from your own state, a teacher in your own backyard. There are going to be meetings all day today about why this happened and what to do now. Your constituents need you here, on their behalf. You have to meet with the President."

Michael was right, Jed had to admit. The people of New Hampshire sent him to Washington to represent them and today of all days, he had to represent them to the hilt. They needed him as their ambassador, standing beside the president and getting a first-hand account of what went wrong, what caused the devastating tragedy that took the lives of these men and women and ripped out the hearts of all the kids who had witnessed it.

He had been serving in congress for a year and this was the first time he had to choose between what was best for his district and what was best for his family. It would have been an easy question, he once thought. But confronting it now, he realized it was anything but easy. He was torn between his duty and his heart. His heart belonged to Abbey and his girls, the people he wanted to run to, gather up in his arms, and hug and kiss and cry with, but his duty beckoned just a little bit louder. It had to. He had a responsibility he couldn't reject. As he slouched down on one of the leather chairs in front of the 'breaking news' banner on the TV, he regretted the choice he had to make.

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Abbey left the hospital and drove home in a frenzy, passing crowds of pedestrians on Elm Street who had stopped to watch media reports on television sets in storefronts. CNN had been carrying it all along, but immediately after the lift-off, all the broadcast stations cut regular programming for wall-to-wall coverage. The most recognizable face of the launch was Christa McAuliffe's. She had gained such notoriety for being chosen the first civilian to fly on the shuttle that even without her name on the graphics, everyone knew who she was.

Seeing it over and over while at a stoplight at a busy intersection, all Abbey could think about was her middle daughter. She remembered the way Ellie's eyes lit up the night she was told that NASA wanted to send a teacher to space. She remembered the way Ellie skipped out of the airport terminal when she and Jed returned from space camp, giddy with the news they had learned of plans for the Challenger. She remembered the night she and Ellie hung the poster of Christa McAuliffe on her bedroom wall, and the excitement in her 11-year-old voice after Jed introduced her to her hero. Seeing the explosion on TV would have been difficult regardless, but Ellie had come to idolize the Challenger crew. She knew everything about them and one day hoped that she might follow in their footsteps. Her enthusiasm and admiration made the accident a billion times worse - for her and for her family.

As Abbey walked into the house, she shouted upstairs for her daughters. "GIRLS?"

Liz had just come out of the kitchen and was on heading toward the foyer. "Mom!"

Abbey saw her oldest daughter standing just a few feet away, grief-stricken with an unmistakable look of sadness on her face. She rushed toward Liz, her arms wide open. "Were you watching?"

"They had it on during lunch."
"Oh God."

Liz held her mom tight, her fingers curling around the fabric of Abbey's coat and her eyes shut, allowing tears to trail from under her lashes. She took a few seconds to hug her, then pulled out of the embrace, telling her, "Ellie needs you."

Abbey lovingly wiped Liz's face and pressed her palm to the teenager's cheek to stroke it when she was finished. "Where is she?"

"Upstairs with Mrs. Wilburforce." Liz gestured with the ice pack in her hand. "Zoey sprained her ankle."

"Did Zoey see it?"

"No. They were at the doctor's. Mrs. Wilburforce turned off the radio in the car. We had to tell her what happened when she saw how upset Ellie was, but she hasn't watched any television."

Their arms wrapped around each other, the two women started up the steps.

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"I understand what you're going through. I have three girls, two of whom were also watching."

Back in Washington, Jed was fielding calls from constituents, many of them parents dealing with grieving children. He personally talked to as many as he could, trying to offer some kind of comfort while his staff coordinated with several New Hampshire school districts to set up an emergency hotline for other resources. Michael was sifting through the faxes and memos that were pouring into the office by the second as he waited for Jed to finish up one of the phone calls.

"We need to get to the White House," he said after Jed hung up.

"Let me get my jacket," Jed replied, standing up to put on his suit jacket and retrieve his winter coat from the rack in the corner. "You know Michael Smith had been with NASA for six years? He was a graduate of the Naval Academy. He had three kids and a wife. This was his first space flight."

"Which one was he?"

"The pilot. The commander, Francis Scobee, went by the name 'Dick.' He flew on the Challenger in '84 to repair a satellite in orbit, which he did. He had a wife and two kids. Judith Resnik had flown on the Discovery as the second American woman in space. She was also a classical pianist. Did you know that?"

"I can't say I did." This was what Michael liked most about Jed. The man who had so much trouble remembering names, remembered these names today because it was important to him to humanize them, to recognize them as people who had lives and families outside of the space program - all of them, not just Christa McAuliffe, the one everyone knew.

"Ellison Onizuka was one of the specialists. He had logged 74 hours in space before this mission. He was on active duty with the Air Force until he joined NASA as an astronaut in 1978. He was also a husband and he had two daughters..." Jed stopped suddenly and looked up at Michael. "I have to call my girls again before we go."

Michael nodded. "I'll wait in the hall."
"Remind me to tell you about Ronald McNair and Gregory Jarvis when I'm done."

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After Mrs. Wilburforce left, Abbey tended to Zoey with an ice pack to her sprained ankle, then slipped into Ellie's room, mentally prepared she thought, to hear her middle daughter's account of what she had been through. But no matter how ready she was, it couldn't stop the ache in her heart when she heard the anguish in Ellie's voice.

"As soon as it left the ground, everyone was clapping and yelling and jumping up and down. It was so great...and then it was like a burst of fire and smoke...more than before. The whole thing separated. It was like two balls of smoke flying through the sky in opposite directions. I thought it was the rocket boosters...it didn't look right. And they said something I couldn't hear...on TV, I mean. They said something at first and I couldn't hear what. The kids all thought it was still okay so they were hollering, but it wasn't okay. That wasn't how they showed it to us at space camp...that wasn't supposed to happen."

'That wasn't supposed to happen,' Ellie said repeatedly. She struggled with her words as she cried in her mother's arms. Never had she seen something so horrific unfold the way it had that morning. Ever since her week at space camp, she had been looking forward to watching the shuttle soar into the sky and in less than a two-minute span that day, all the hopes and dreams she'd had for months had been shattered.

Abbey sat on her daughter's bed, right under that famed poster of Christa McAuliffe, clinging to the young girl as she trembled while telling the story of the joy that instantly turned to chaos in the classroom. "Did you know what was going on?"

"Not for sure. But then the NASA guy said there was a problem and then he said it exploded and Mrs. Gordon turned off the TV really fast. She said we couldn't watch anymore."

Ellie's sobs grew louder, which made Abbey cry as she held her.

"Did she talk to you about it?"

"She tried. I asked her if they could still be alive, but she didn't say anything. You could tell she wanted to cry too."

"I'm so sorry, sweetheart."

"Why did it happen?" Ellie pulled away slightly to look up at her mother. "Was it NASA's fault? Did they do something wrong?"

"We don't know yet."

"But they're supposed to check everything. So many people work on the space shuttle. They're not supposed to launch unless everything's the way it's supposed to be. Why did they launch? Why?"

"I don't know, baby." It was tearing Abbey apart, hearing Ellie so heartbroken.

"Mom?" Liz, who was across the hall with Zoey to give Ellie a chance to talk to Abbey alone, poked her head in. "Dad's on the phone."

"Tell him I'll be right there." Abbey grabbed a tissue off Ellie's nightstand, dabbed at her daughter's tears, then dried her own before getting up to take the call.
Wanting to calm her sister, Liz made her way to Ellie's bed. "Do you want some gummy bears? Zoey and I found a whole bag in the kitchen."

Ellie shook her head, wiping her tears. "No thanks."

"What can I do, El?"

"Nothing."

Out in the hall, Abbey picked up the receiver. "Jed?"

"Hey."

"How are you?" She could hear the tension in his voice.

"Hanging in there. You?"

"Ellie's confused and upset and Liz...I barely had a chance to talk to Liz. When are you coming home?"

"I don't know." He hated telling her that.

"What do you mean?"

"I have meetings at the White House well into the evening. The President's canceling the State of the Union tonight. He's going live with this. I have to be here for the speech after all is said and done."

"Of course. It should have occurred to me. Of course you'd need to stay."

The disappointment in her voice only made him feel more guilty. "I'm sorry, Abbey. I wish I could be there."

"I understand why you can't."

"Explain it to the girls? I didn't have the heart to tell Liz."

"I'll take care of it. Jed?"

"Yeah?"

"How could this have happened? How could they not have prepared for it?" After consoling Ellie, Abbey wasn't thinking reasonably. She was a Mama Bear, upset that she couldn't protect her cub.

"It was an accident, honey," Jed said.

"Why didn't NASA feed it to the schools on tape delay? How could they have let children be watching live, in real-time? Didn't they consider the possibility that something might go wrong?"

"No one could have predicted..."

"It's happened before. This wasn't the first shuttle explosion. Didn't they learn anything from Apollo 1?" Though she didn't see the Challenger explode, Abbey was sick with sorrow in the aftermath and her concern for her daughters was her primary focus.

"Abbey, neither you nor I saw this coming either. No one did."
"I've got two traumatized kids here, Jed, and I don't know what to do. I don't know how to help them, I don't know how to take away their pain. What am I supposed to do?"

Jed took a beat and reluctantly gave the only answer he could. "Sweetheart, I wish I could go back in time and stop this from ever happening...or at least, keep them from watching."

"But you can't and neither can I. I'm their mother and I've never felt so useless."

"You have no idea how much I'd give to be with you right now."

She did know. If there was any way, Jed would have been on the next flight to Manchester. "You have no idea how much I'd give to have you with me right now. I just want to put my arms around you. I need you."

"We'll get through this, just like we do everything else."

"When can you come home?"

"Before morning, I hope. I'm going to try to head to the airport after the speech. And speaking of that, my staff's waiting. I have to get to the White House. Tell the girls I love them?"

"I will."

"Abbey?"

"Yeah?"

"I love you."

"I love you too. Take care of yourself and call me when you book a flight."

Jed nodded. "Bye."

"Bye." Abbey hung up the phone and turned to see Zoey standing there on her bad ankle, holding her ice pack.

"I want Daddy."

"So do I, sunshine." She scooped Zoey up in her arms and carried her to Ellie's room.

"When's he coming home?" Liz asked when she saw her mom.

"Not for a while," Abbey answered. "He's meeting with the President."

Ordinarily, Liz would have been proud of her father for meeting with the President of the United States, but today, she was disappointed. "For how long?"

"I don't know."

"What about us?"

"He'll be home as soon as he can."

'As soon as he can?' The words echoed silently in Liz's mind. Like Ellie, she was feeling the affects of the explosion - the helpless agony of watching people die - and what she wanted most in the world was to throw her arms around her father and cry on his shoulder. He would have helped her...
through it. He always did. Liz had such a strong bond with Jed that just seeing his face during a crisis would have put her at ease. But she wasn't going to get that opportunity, at least not for a while.

Crushed, she spat out, "Sometimes, I really hate politics!"

And with that, she ran out of the room.

"LIZ!" Abbey started to go after her.

"Mom?" Ellie called out.

"Yeah?"

"I don't want Dad to fly."

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"Is Abbey pissed that you're not coming home?" Michael asked Jed as the two men left the Rayburn House Office Building.

"She understands," Jed said. "At some point, we're going to talk about damage control, right? I don't mean political damage control, I mean real damage control."

"I don't follow."

"This was a public relations disaster to the 10th degree, I recognize that. But more importantly, we've traumatized God only knows how many children all around the country. These kids are going to fear the space program and space shuttles until the end of time, not to mention aviation in general. For many of them, this is their first experience with death. Now we can have these meetings and, what I'm sure will be, congressional hearings in the future, but we owe it to these kids and to their families to talk with them directly. We have to tell them what happened, how it happened, why it happened, and how we're going to prevent it from happening again. We have to take an active role in helping them heal. It's our responsibility."

Michael had never been more pleased to serve Jed Bartlet. In the midst of such a catastrophe, not only had he managed to keep a cool head when talking with distressed constituents, but he had also started thinking about the future and just like always, his focus was on the people and not on the politics.

"We'll talk about how to do that," Michael promised, walking fast to keep up with his boss.

"Good. I want to set up townhall forums in New Hampshire when I get back. I want Q&A's with students from all over the state."

"That sounds like a good plan."

"And I'd appreciate it if we could reiterate the names of the men and women who perished this morning in our press releases. Or hell, even when talking to irate parents on the phone. Those astronauts are heroes, just like they were yesterday. They didn't die in vain."

"I'll talk to Samantha. We'll take care of it."

- - -

Elizabeth Bartlet sank face-first into the pillows on her bed, her emotions tumbling around
violently inside her. She didn't understand why she was feeling the way she was - Ellie was the one so invested in the shuttle launch - but she was grieving too. With all the news reports that had flooded the airwaves in the past year, she couldn't escape the publicity of this launch, not in New Hampshire. She had seen the footage countless times, the pictures, the posters all leading up to this day. To see it end so tragically before her eyes was like a punch to the gut that took her breath away and stung her to her core.

She laid quietly on her belly as Abbey invited herself into her room.

"Your dad IS trying to come home to us," Abbey started, sitting on her bed and stroking her hair. "Don't be angry at him, not now."

"Tell me I'm being selfish."

"I wasn't going to say that."

"Why not? It's true." Liz knew that so many others were depending on Jed. She acknowledged it and was proud of it, but it didn't take away the little girl inside of her who just wanted her daddy to make her feel safe again.

"It's not true."

"His job is helping people and I just said I hate his job."

"But I know you didn't mean it. You don't hate his job, you hate that it's keeping him away from us." Abbey grabbed her shoulder and rolled her onto her back. "Right?"

Liz averted her eyes in silent agreement. "I want him to come home. I want us all to be together."

"We will be - soon. For the time being, I'm here, and there's one of me and three of you so come with me back to Ellie's room, huh?"

"Maybe later."

"Lizzie," Abbey nudged. "You don't have to be by yourself tonight. Ellie was the one excited about it, but that doesn't mean you weren't affected too. I'm here for both of you." She took Liz's hand and looked her in the eye. "And I need you as much as you need me."

Liz sat up then. Their hands clasped, mother and daughter stood up to leave Liz's room.

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"Today is a day for mourning and remembering. Nancy and I are pained to the core by the tragedy of the shuttle Challenger. We know we share this pain with all of the people of our country. This is truly a national loss."

Gathered around the television that evening, Abbey, Liz, Ellie, and Zoey watched President Ronald Reagan address a nation still reeling from the events of the morning. It was only 24 hours earlier that the four of them were chatting away before bed, about boys and first loves, cheery and carefree, as if life was splendid. But there was nothing carefree about them now. The stress of the day had worn them down. Emotionally drained, the girls held onto their mother - tight. They were safe in the cocoon of Abbey's embrace and yet, there was still a void in the room and everyone felt it. It was a hole left by Jed. The Bartlets had faced troubled times before, but never with Jed so far away.
"We've never had a tragedy like this. And perhaps we've forgotten the courage it took for the crew of the shuttle. But they, the Challenger Seven, were aware of the dangers, but overcame them and did their jobs brilliantly. We mourn seven heroes: Michael Smith, Dick Scobee, Judith Resnik, Ronald McNair, Ellison Onizuka, Gregory Jarvis, and Christa McAuliffe. We mourn their loss as a nation together."

In Washington, Jed was at the White House in an adjacent room to the Oval Office. His thoughts began with the astronauts and their devastated relatives. Christa McAuliffe's husband, parents, and children had traveled to the Kennedy Space Center to see the launch in person. He could only imagine the pride they felt at lift-off, pride that soon turned to terror. Whatever the rest of the country was feeling was nothing compared to the nightmare the families of the Challenger Seven were now confronting, especially the children. That thought only reminded Jed of his own kids. What were they doing? What were they feeling? Was Ellie still sobbing? Were Liz and Zoey crying? And what about Abbey? Was she overwhelmed without him there to help? Was she feeling alone and powerless, at a loss for words, struggling with an explanation to numb their daughters' heartache? He would have given anything to be with her, to hold her, and tell her how much he loved her. His focus shifted back to the speech then, a silent prayer on his lips for the seven heroes and the loved ones who would never see them again.

"For the families of the seven," President Reagan continued, "we cannot bear, as you do, the full impact of this tragedy. But we feel the loss, and we're thinking about you so very much. Your loved ones were daring and brave, and they had that special grace, that special spirit that says, 'Give me a challenge, and I'll meet it with joy.' They had a hunger to explore the universe and discover its truths. They wished to serve, and they did. They served all of us."

At the farmhouse, Abbey watched the faces of her three daughters as they listened carefully to the President transitioning to address them specifically.

"And I want to say something to the schoolchildren of America who were watching the live coverage of the shuttle's take-off," Reagan said. "I know it's hard to understand, but sometimes painful things like this happen. It's all part of the process of exploration and discovery. It's all part of taking a chance and expanding man's horizons. The future doesn't belong to the fainthearted; it belongs to the brave. The Challenger crew was pulling us into the future, and we'll continue to follow them."

Liz, Ellie, and Zoey seemed mesmerized. Stray tears rolled down their cheeks unchecked. Their features crinkled and there were mournful sighs, but they continued to listen. Abbey, sandwiched between the two older girls, held Ellie's hand, stroked Liz's back, and kept Zoey glued to her lap as they all stared at the television, absorbing the rest of the President's speech.

"I've always had great faith in and respect for our space program. And what happened today does nothing to diminish it. We don't hide our space program. We don't keep secrets and cover things up. We do it all up front and in public. That's the way freedom is, and we wouldn't change it for a minute. We'll continue our quest in space. There will be more shuttle flights and more shuttle crews and, yes, more volunteers, more civilians, more teachers in space. Nothing ends here; our hopes and our journeys continue."

Ellie wept as Abbey dropped a kiss to the top of her head and wrapped an arm around her to hold her close for the final remarks.

"The crew of the space shuttle Challenger honored us by the manner in which they lived their lives. We will never forget them, nor the last time we saw them - this morning, as they prepared for their journey and waved goodbye and 'slipped the surly bonds of earth' to 'touch the face of God.'"
TBC
Father of Daughters

Series: Snapshots of the Past

Story: Father of Daughters

Chapter 26

Disclaimer: See Chapter 1

Previously: Jed, Liz, and Ellie all watched as the Challenger exploded on live television, killing all the astronauts on-board; Abbey rushed home to the girls, but Jed was stuck in Washington due to the Challenger disaster; Abbey and the girls gathered around the television to watch President Reagan address a grieving nation while Jed watched Reagan's speech from the White House.

Summary: Jed makes it home to his family; a grief-stricken Ellie questions her faith.

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The clock was approaching midnight when Jed excused himself from the Capitol Hill and White House meetings that had been going on since the Challenger explosion. He explained that he had to get back to his district to answer to his constituents in the aftermath - it was personal in New Hampshire, the state that had chronicled Christa McAuliffe's journey from the moment she was selected to ride on the shuttle - and, he had to help his family cope with the tragedy. He asked to be kept in the loop via fax and phone calls to his district office in Manchester, went to Capitol Hill to pick up his briefing books, then hailed a cab to take him to the airport.

There were no overnight flights to New Hampshire, so he caught one to Boston instead, planning to drive to Manchester in a rental car. It was the longest flight of his life. He imagined what he'd say to Abbey and the girls when he got there, how he'd console them and soothe their fears, how he'd explain the accident to Ellie, the one who was most looking forward to watching the shuttle lift-off and witnessing the beginnings of the historic flight. There was nothing he could say, he thought, that would be good enough to mend her broken heart after such a traumatic event, the most traumatic she had experienced in her 11 years.

When his plane landed, it was the drive from Logan International that seemed to go on forever. It was much longer than usual and it had nothing to do with the icy roads or the snow that pelted the windshield so fast, the wipers barely kept up. It seemed longer because Jed's impatience was at the boiling point. Every second was like a minute, every minute like an hour. He had stayed in Washington because he had a responsibility, but what he wanted now was to gather Abbey and the girls up in his arms and comfort them the way he hadn't been able to earlier.

At 4 a.m., he finally approached the winding gravel road that would lead him to the farmhouse and saw the porch light flickering in the distance. He pulled up and parked in front of the house, then made his way up the steps. Carrying only his briefcase, he was stunned when Abbey opened the door before he had a chance to reach for his key.

She threw her arms around him and called out his name. "Jed, thank God!"

"What are you doing up?" He stroked her hair as he held her.

"I couldn't sleep," She pulled out of the embrace then and they walked into the house. "I was coming downstairs to get a glass of water and I heard a car pulling up. You said you were going to
"I didn't get a chance to. It was last minute."

"Too last minute for a quick phone call?"

He should have known she was too smart for that. "Okay. The truth is, I decided to skip calling you."

"Why?"

"Because you would have tossed and turned the entire time I was in the air."

"That's no excuse."

"Well, it's the only one I've got," Jed replied, unremorseful. "You mad at me?"

"It would serve you right if I was. Anyway, not telling me didn't keep me from tossing and turning. I hadn't heard from you in several hours."

"I assumed you'd think I was in meetings."

"Why do you think I wasn't stalking you with phone calls every five minutes?" She took his coat to hang in the coat closet. "What happened at those meetings?"

"I'll tell you all about it, but can we leave it until morning? I just want to go to bed."

"You didn't bring your bags."

"I left in kind of a hurry, so as long as you haven't sold all my stuff, I'll have to dress in what I have here."

"Lucky for you, the garage sale was scheduled for tomorrow."

They shared a smile as they took the stairs together, stopping at the doorway to the master bedroom where Jed saw Liz, Ellie, and Zoey sprawled out on the bed.

"Goldilocks and her two little bears asleep in my bed. I should have guessed."

"Sorry," Abbey said. "The girls wanted to sleep with me tonight."

"I'm glad they did. The floor's fine."

"The floor will hurt your back. How about Liz's room?"

"No. I want to be in here with you and our girls tonight."

He grabbed a T-shirt and a pair of sweatpants from the dresser and went into the bathroom to brush his teeth and get ready for bed while Abbey retrieved two blankets from the closet - one for the floor and one to use as covers. When Jed returned from the bathroom, he found her fluffing up a couple of pillows and tossing them to the ground.

"They didn't take your favorite pillow. Give me credit for that," she told him.

"And only that?" He sat down to get comfortable, tucking his feet under the blanket.

"Scoot over." Abbey joined him on the floor.
"You don't want the bed?"

"I want to be close to you."

Jed pulled down the covers so she could slip in under them. "Thank you."

"For what?"

"For understanding and not making me feel guilty for not being here to help you with the girls."

"We know you would have been if you could have."

Abbey was lying on her back, and with his arm sliding in under her, Jed pulled her even closer to give her a kiss goodnight.

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As the sun rose over the snowy fields of the farm a couple of hours later, Zoey began to stir. Within minutes, she was sitting up on the bed. It didn't matter how late she had been up the night before, if the morning sun was casting its light, it was a sure bet Zoey would be awake. After her mother, she was earliest riser in the family, a habit that earned her the nickname Morning Glory when she was still a toddler.

She climbed off the mattress, putting all her weight on one ankle, the other still wrapped to keep it immobilized. Her eyes grew wide at the sight of Jed sleeping on the floor. She shouted, "DADDY!"

The sound jolted Jed. He sat up with a start, breathing hard. "WHAT?"

Abbey got up too, still groggy, as Liz and Ellie looked over to see their father.

"Dad?" Ellie muttered, wiping at her eyes.

"Hey."

"When did you get here?"

"The middle of the night. We didn't want to wake you." Jed rubbed his forehead until Zoey plopped herself down beside him.

"Are you mad that I woke you up?"

"Along with the rest of the house? Next time, how about you do it with a kiss instead of a scream?" He tenderly ran his hand over Zoey's sprain. "How does it feel?"

"Mommy put ice on it."

"Are you staying?" Liz wanted to know.

"Yeah, at least through the weekend." Jed held out his hand to his older daughters. "Why don't you guys come down here so we can talk."

"I have to get ready for school."

"Liz, I told you, you don't have to go to school today." Concerned that she was too shaken to go back to the classroom, Abbey had agreed to let Ellie stay home, an offer that extended to Zoey and
"Yes, I do. I have a test on Friday." Liz stood up and slid her feet into her slippers.

"I'm sure your teacher is going to reschedule under the circumstances." Jed knew his daughter. Much like himself, Liz had a tendency to protect herself from painful emotions. "There are grief counselors at school today. I guarantee you this is all you'll be talking about in your classes."

"Then I'll study in the library."

"Elizabeth." He was about to call her on what she was doing and Liz knew it. She walked out of the room before he could, but Jed rose to his feet and followed closely behind. "Hey, slow down."

"I have to get there early if I want a good parking space." Liz stopped at the linen closet to grab her bathrobe and a towel for her hair.

"You really think that many people are going to be at school today?" Jed blocked her path to the bathroom. "I let you down yesterday, didn't I?"

"No. Why are you in my way?"

"You can tell me if I did. You usually call me on it when you're pissed at me. The only time you don't is when you're being passive aggressive, so let's skip that part and get to the real issue."

"I'm not pissed."

"You're upset then. You wanted to talk to me and I wasn't here. I was in Washington, and to make matters worse, I was in meetings most of the day so you couldn't even reach me on the phone for more than five minutes."

"What kind of person would I be to complain about that when so many people were counting on you?"

"A normal one. Something awful happened. It's natural for you to want to turn to your parents, the people who are supposed to keep you safe and comfort you when you're afraid."

"This is lame, Dad. Just get out of my way."

"Not until you talk to me." Jed was confident that his pushiness would work with Liz. And he was right.

"What do you want me to say? I get it, okay? I get why you couldn't be here. It's just...Ellie was a wreck and she needed Mom more and you weren't here...and...I don't know." Her eyes blurry with tears, Liz curled her lips and lowered her head.

Jed opened his arms, stepped forward, and closed them around her. "It's okay, you don't have to explain. I'm sorry I couldn't be here. I know how awful it was. It scared me too, if you want to know the truth."

"They were fine one minute. They were waving to us on the way to the shuttle and then..."

"It happened so fast. Too fast."

"I didn't even know what it was at first. But then it separated the way it did and the voiceover called it a malfunction. That's what he said - a malfunction. And then he said..." She had her fingers curled around the fabric of Jed's shirt, burying her head into his shoulder.
"He said it exploded." Jed held her tighter. "It was like a punch to the gut. That was the last thing I ever expected. And when it happened, the only thing I wanted to do was come home to you guys. I needed to be around you just as much as you needed to be around me."

"But you couldn't."

"No, I couldn't, and I really am sorry about that."

Liz pulled out of his arms to wipe her tears. "You don't have to apologize. I understand."

"Do you? Really?"

"Yeah. You're a congressman. That's part of the deal."

"It is, Lizzie. I needed to be at those meetings, not for political gain. You know that, right?" He was relieved when she nodded. "I had to be there because no one else from this district was. I had to help plan what comes next, what people need, how to handle the grief, how to reach out to all the schoolchildren - just like you and Ellie - who were watching. I had to see with my own eyes and hear with my own ears how the President, NASA, and congress was going to find out what happened and move forward so that it never happens again. It was so important."

"I know."

"I hope you do."

"I don't like it, but I can respect it. That's the job, right? You can't always be here."

"Do you wish I didn't do what I do? Do you wish I was still a professor somewhere?"

For a moment, Liz struggled with being honest or telling him what he wanted to hear. "Yes." She chose honesty. "As your daughter, I wish you were a professor. But as a normal person...like if you weren't my dad...I'd say I'm glad you're our congressman."

Despite the qualification, Jed was touched to hear that.

"That's as close to an endorsement as I'm gonna get this morning, isn't it?" He drew a smile out of her. Mission accomplished.

"I guess so."

"It's good enough...for now."

"You're gonna ask for more later?"

"I think I just might."

Liz jabbed him playfully. "I'm glad you're home."

"So am I," Jed said with a jab back before draping his arm around her and leading her back to the master bedroom.

As father and daughter returned, they saw Abbey sitting on the floor and comforting an emotional Ellie.

"Don't you think I'd object if I thought he was in danger?" Abbey was saying. She turned her eye to her husband when she saw him. "Ellie doesn't like the idea of you flying back and forth so much."
Jed tilted his head sympathetically. "Princess, there's nothing to worry about. It was a smooth flight, no complications." He kneeled down and tucked a finger under Ellie's chin when she tried to look away. "Planes are no more dangerous today than they were last week."

"Planes are just like space shuttles and you can't say that about space shuttles anymore."

"They're not the same."

"The same rules of physics that lets shuttles fly, lets planes fly too."

"You're right, but what happened yesterday with the shuttle was a freak accident. It doesn't mean it's going to happen again and it sure doesn't mean it's going to happen to planes."

"It doesn't mean it's not."

"No, but..."

"So why shouldn't I be worried?"

"Because that's no way to live life, always worried that something could go wrong." He re-thought that answer as Ellie's eyes fell to the ground. "You know what, I take that back. It was terrible, what happened. And it's been less than 24 hours. Of course you'd be afraid right now. It makes sense."

"It does?"

"Yeah. Everything you're feeling, everything we're all feeling is perfectly normal. Once we start to work through it, we'll feel differently, but for now, you're entitled to be scared."

Jed's words gave everyone a measure of relief, but they were especially helpful to Ellie.

"Are you scared?" she asked.

"I'm sad," he replied. "Are you sad?" Ellie shrugged. "Come on, tell me about it."

"I don't know."

"Yeah, you do. You're feeling scared, that's obvious. What else?"

"I don't really wanna talk about it."

"It might help."

"No, it won't."

Jed then turned his attention to his youngest daughter. "What about you, Zoey?"

Like her big sis, Zoey shrugged. "I feel sad, but I wasn't watching it. I was at the doctor's."

"That doesn't mean you can't still feel sad about what happened," Abbey assured her. "I wasn't watching either. I was in surgery. But I feel just as sad as the rest of you. And you know what else? Besides being sad, I was also angry."

"Angry?" Liz asked curiously.

"Yeah. I was angry that such a tragic thing could happen, that you and Ellie and all the other kids
were watching. I was angry at NASA for airing the launch and with myself because I knew they were going to and I never objected to it.

"None of us objected to it," Jed reminded his wife. "And I still don't."

"You don't think it was a mistake to let us watch?"

"I don't think anyone could have predicted what would happen. It was supposed to be an extraordinary thing. It didn't turn out that way, but we didn't know that at the time. If we ban launches from the classroom on the chance that something like this could happen, you guys would miss out on seeing a miraculous moment in history. Sending someone to outer space is...well, it's a phenomenal event and I want you to experience it."

"Even if it happens again some day?"

"You have to measure the good against the bad, the risk of which is extremely minimal."

"What do you think, Mom?" Liz prodded. "Do you think shuttle launches should be banned from school?"

Abbey paused for a beat to think about her response. "I don't know. I'd reconsider doing it in real-time, that's for sure. Tape delay might be a better alternative in the future. That's what should have been done this time."

"You still sound angry."

"I'm not, not really. If that's what you're hearing, it's because it's early and I'm still feeling a bit helpless."

"Is that what led you to be angry?"

"Yeah, it is. Yesterday, when I came home and I didn't know how to take away your tears, Ellie, or yours, Lizzie, I was overwhelmed. It turned into anger toward NASA, myself..."

"And God?"

The room fell silent to Ellie's question.

"God didn't make it happen, sweetheart," Jed jumped in.

"He didn't stop it. Why wouldn't He have stopped it?"

"Sometimes, bad things happen and we don't know why."

With her arm still wrapped around Ellie, Abbey admitted, "I did feel a little anger toward God." She looked up at Jed, then back to Ellie. "And you know what, that's okay. The more we heal, the more that'll fade. But right now, it's okay to wonder what was God doing? How could He have let this happen?"

Jed picked up where Abbey left off. "As normal as it is to wonder and to question, as we all do at times, we have to also remember that we only have a corner of the puzzle. We don't see the bigger picture, the plan. There are questions we're not meant to have the answers to and that's why it's so crucial that we hold onto our faith. Sometimes, when you don't understand, as hard as it is, you still have to believe. You get that, right Ellie?"

Another shrug.
Of all the girls, Ellie was the most spiritual. Jed hoped her trust in God would help her through this, but he was concerned that it could do the opposite, that the horror of seeing someone she knew and admired killed in such a way could shake her up and damage her faith altogether, and if that happened, he feared the impact of the explosion would be much greater than he first imagined.

- - -

"I don't think now's the time to blame God." Preparing breakfast alone with Abbey in the kitchen later that morning, Jed broached the subject.

"I'm not."

"She is. Ellie. She's angry."

"It's a natural reaction, Jed. I've had it before myself."

"No, you..."

"When Zoey was born. How can you not remember the day I lashed out at God?"

"That was nothing."

She glared at him. "I'll assume you're dismissing my rant and not my feelings."

"I'm not dismissing either one," he replied. "I'm just saying that you lashing out that day was understandable. You were exhausted, you were under a load of stress. In the end, you made your peace with God."

"In the end I did, but put down your Jed filter a moment and try to remember what it was like at the time."

"My Jed filter?"

"Where everything looks better in retrospect than it actually was." She continued as Jed turned toward the stove, "My point is that my reaction then is similar to what Ellie's going through now. Can you honestly say you've never been angry at God?"

"I've never turned my back on my faith," he replied, melting a tablespoon of butter into the skillet.

"And neither has Ellie."

"I just don't want her headed in that direction."

"Give her time."

"How much time?"

"Don't push, Jed. You know Ellie. She has to do this on her own."

"I'm not pushing. Did you see me push her once when we were up there?"

"I know that you like to fix things, especially when it comes to our daughters. But Ellie's not like Liz. She's not going to respond to that. You can't make her talk, and if you try, she'll just close herself off more."

"I want to help her, however I can."
"That's all I want too." From behind him, Abbey gave him the bowl that held the eggs, then rested her chin on his right shoulder. "And when you're ready, I think we should talk...about you. Just us. In private."

"What about me?"

"You knew her too. You were just as excited about the shuttle as Ellie. You're not feeling any affects?"

"I'm fine."

"Okay. I'm just saying when you're ready..."

"There's nothing to be ready for. If there was, you'd be the first to know about it."

They were interrupted by Liz then. "Can I help?"

"I'm making bacon and cheese omelets," Jed told her. "You wanna fold?"

Liz joined him at the stove. She always liked folding the omelet. "I thought Mom outlawed bacon until your cholesterol comes down."

"She's not the boss of me." He glanced at his wife, who was now moving to the kitchen table.

"I'll pretend I didn't hear that," Abbey said.

"Wait til lunch," Jed poked further. "Fluffernutter sandwiches all around!"

"Where are your sisters, Liz?"

"Zoey's in her room and Ellie doesn't feel like eating."

"They're both going to eat. Ellie skipped dinner last night." Abbey left the kitchen, headed upstairs.

"Dad, what are we doing today?"

"I have to stop by the office for an hour or two and tonight, there's going to be a candlelight vigil at Veterans Park. I thought we could all go."

"That was fast."

"The mayor and city council are working on it." He gave her the spatula to poke at the edge of the omelet. "Over the next several days, I'm going to put together some events...town hall type things, give parents and kids a chance to come out and talk about what happened. You want to help?"

"Yeah. Just tell me what to do."

"Thanks. Listen Liz, tell me the truth, how do you think Ellie's handling this?"

"She's upset."

"I know she's upset. I'm asking how you think she's dealing with it."

"She'll be okay."

"Spend some time with her. Get her to open up, find out what she's thinking."
"And then come back and tell you? I don't feel right doing that."

"I'm not asking you to betray her. Don't tell me anything if you don't want. I just want you to make sure she doesn't hold it all in and isolate herself. She doesn't have much experience with death."

"When your father died..."

"Grandpa Bartlet," Jed corrected her. After all this time, Liz still refused to call him her grandfather. As far as she was concerned, John Bartlet lost that title the night she overheard him belittling Jed.

"Anyway, after that, she was depressed for a while, but then she dealt with it and moved on. Why do you think this will be different?"

"It feels different."

"How so?"

"It just does."

Jed wasn't forgetting how John Bartlet's death affected Ellie. Liz had retreated inside herself, refusing to shed tears for the man who treated Jed so poorly. But Ellie knew nothing of the troubled father-son relationship. She only saw one side of her grandfather. He was kind to her. He was loving. She had never seen nor heard about his abusive personality or how much he had hurt Jed. When he passed away, Ellie cried. A lot. The only thing that cheered her up was hearing the happy memories that Jed shared about him. Some were real, but most of them he made up to make his little girl smile. He did it because he knew how to heal her heart. This time, he didn't know.

He wished he could turn back the clock and keep Ellie from becoming so emotionally invested in the Challenger's launch. He relived the day he introduced her to Christa McAuliffe and the week he and Ellie spent at space camp last summer, attending workshops, playing in the shuttle simulator and floating around one another, dressed in space suits as if they were real astronauts walking on the moon. At the time, it was a memory he thought he'd treasure forever - just him and Ellie, having a good time and sharing something so special between them. But now, he was afraid all of that would be tainted in Ellie's mind, that she'd not only lose her love of space exploration, but she'd also lose the spirit and curiosity that led her to it.

"Do me a favor and talk to her about it? She'll open up to you more than she will me."

"I will, but I still say you're over-reacting," Liz told him as she took over to fold the omelet.

"I hope you're right."

TBC
On the front lawn of Manchester Elementary just days after the Challenger explosion, the students in Mrs. Gordon's sixth grade class bowed their heads in a moment of silence for the shuttle crew. The shock of the accident had dimmed, but now heartache had set in and the kids were learning about the grief process first-hand.

Ellie stood among her classmates, fresh tears blurring her vision. They were holding balloons on that chilly morning - red, white, and blue balloons with long white strings coiled around their hands. When it was time, they released the balloons as a group to honor the memory of the astronauts, and the 11-year-old blond wiped her eyes and her cheeks as she looked up at the sky.

No words needed to be spoken. The harsh reality of death had quieted the students and the whistle of the wind blowing through the trees was the only sound they heard as the balloons raced toward the clouds until they got smaller and smaller and disappeared entirely from view. Then, without being told, they began the walk back to the classroom, crunching the snow beneath their feet.

"I've got a conference call with Washington at 12:30, so let's make this quick." It was lunchtime at Jed's district office and he had gathered his staff for a noon meeting over deli sandwiches he had ordered in.

"Call sheets, list of secretary candidates, campaign staff resumes, and faxes," one of his staffers told him, handing him four manilla file folders.

"It's already time to hire campaign staff?"

"It's past time, actually," another staffer said. "We need to get going."

"We're fine. I don't have a primary opponent. What's going on with the Challenger aftermath? Are we all set?"

"Town hall forum in Concord tomorrow and one on Sunday here in Manchester. You also have the memorial at Concord High tonight. When are you returning to DC?"

"Tuesday. I have a hole in my schedule on Monday night. I'd like to spend it with my family."
"That's doable. So, campaign staff..."

"I've already got someone in mind to the run the office."

"Who's that?"

"A woman I know," Jed said. "She just moved back to the Granite State and rumor has it she hasn't been snatched up yet."

"What's her name?"

"Delores LANDINGHAM."

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That afternoon, Mrs. Wilburforce picked Ellie up at school, then swung by to pick up Girl Scouts cookies from her troop leader's house. She had already collected the 200 boxes of cookies that Zoey had sold for her troop and dropped them off at the farm. Zoey had piled them one on top of the other in the hall, but adding Ellie's 500 boxes made it impossible to store them there, so with the help of the two girls, Mrs. Wilburforce moved the cookies to the living room and separated the boxes by color.

"How many of these boxes belong to your parents?" she asked the girls.

"Daddy ordered five boxes from me and five boxes from Ellie," Zoey told her.

"And how much allowance money did you spend on cookies, Ellie?" Mrs. Wilburforce had been warned that Ellie was the junk food addict in the family.

"She bought two boxes from herself," Zoey answered for her sister. "Mommy wouldn't let her order more."

"Why doesn't that surprise me?" Mrs. Wilburforce smiled. "Thin Mints, right?"

Ellie gave her a weak smile in return. Thin Mints were her favorite. "Yeah."

"You want me to open them so you can have one now?"

"No, thank you. I'm going to go upstairs. I'm tired."

"Ellie, hang on." The older woman approached, her voice full of compassion. "I know I'm not your mom, but if you ever want to talk about things, I'm a good listener. I'm here if you need me. You know that, don't you?"

Ellie nodded. "Thanks, but I'm okay."

Without another word, the young girl rushed upstairs. She appreciated Mrs. Wilburforce's offer and wished she could open up to her as much as she wished she could open up to Abbey, but she couldn't. Not yet. Her emotions were still bubbling, making her numb. She didn't know how to describe or explain it. All she knew was that she was sad and nothing seemed to cheer her up, not cookies, not her family, not her friends, and definitely not the newest edition of the Weekly Reader they had passed out at school. She pulled it out of her backpack up in her bedroom and stared at the headline.

The national current events kids' magazine had reported on the plans for the Challenger ever since NASA put out the word that they were accepting applications from teachers. When Christa
McAuliffe was chosen, she posed for the cover. Ellie read that installment over and over again. She kept it in a drawer in her homework desk, flipping through it periodically, and she couldn't wait to pair it up with the one that came next, the one that would report on the launch and the journey into space. But her hopes crumbled when the shuttle blew up and instead of the cover she had been imagining for so long, the new Weekly Reader showcased the horror of the explosion and the death of the crew, something Ellie wasn't ready to relive.

She took out the old magazine from the drawer and, together with the new one, tossed them both in the trash can.

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It was after 5 p.m. when Abbey finally came racing home. She ran upstairs to change her clothes.

"Jed?" she called as she turned the corner to the master bedroom. "I know, I know, I'm late."

His shirt unbuttoned, Jed glanced at his watch. "By a half hour."

"I almost lost a patient on the table." She ripped off her blouse and unzipped her pants.

"Were you able to save him?" Jed handed her the dress she'd planned to wear for the memorial.

"He pulled through, but I didn't want to leave the hospital until his vitals improved," Abbey slipped the dress over her head, then searched her drawer for a pair of pantyhose.

"How is he now?"

"Better."

"Good."

"How are the kids?" She sat on the bed to pull up her hose.

"Liz is going nuts waiting for her letter from Wellesley and Zoey wants to get Ginger a mate."

"A mate?"

"Cats get lonely, she says."

"What did you tell her?"

"To ask you."

"Thanks a mil, babe."

"Look, Ellie's been in her room since school. She's not doing much better."

"We can't rush it. She'll be fine, she just needs time."

"So you've said."

"You have doubts?"

Jed looked over at her. "Yes, I do. I tried to tell you the other day..."

"Tell me what?" Abbey stood to straighten out her dress. "That she shouldn't be questioning her faith?"
"Among other things. I think you need to talk to her. I'd do it myself, but you have a way with her. She opens up to you much more than she does me."

"Can we get into it later? I don't want to start a discussion we don't have time to finish."

"All right, later then."

"Thank you."

"Meanwhile, we've got Girl Scout cookies up the wazoo."

"The girls and I will sort them out and deliver them tomorrow." She went to the closet to pick out a pair of shoes. "How was work?"

"We're talking campaign staff." Jed joined her at the closet to pick out a tie.

"Already?"

"What do you think of Delores Landingham running the place?"

"You're kidding. I thought she was in Baltimore." Abbey slipped into her shoes and then reached for Jed's blue and silver tie.

"She just got back according to my brother. You think she'd be up to the job?"

"Why wouldn't she?"

"I don't know. It's kind of odd. I mean, she worked for my father for so long." He took the tie from her.

"And she was invaluable, you said so yourself."

"She was, but what if she doesn't want to work for me?"

"You won't know until you ask." Abbey moved to the bathroom to run a brush through her hair.

"Dad?" Liz knocked on the door and opened it when Jed asked her in. "When should I tell Doug to be here?"

"How about never?" Jed replied, putting on his tie.

"Jed!" Abbey yelled from the bathroom.

"Hey Mom, I didn't hear you come home."

"I was late."

"So, when should I tell Doug..."

"It's a family thing, Liz," Jed told her.

"Mom already said he could go."

Abbey shouted from the bathroom to explain to her husband, "She caught me in a moment of weakness."

"It's a memorial service. You told her she could bring a date?" Jed shouted back.
"It's not like that, Dad. Doug's upset about the Challenger too. What's the big deal if he goes with us?"

"The big deal is, I don't have room in my car."

Liz shrugged. "Then I'll sit on his lap."

Jed's stern glare met Liz's smirk. Sometimes, her jokes didn't amuse him. "You're treading a thin line, young lady."

"Where's your sense of humor?"

"It disappeared at the mention of Doug."

"What's your problem with him anyway?"

"Besides the fact that he behaves like a know-it-all snot?"

"He was obnoxious one time!"

"Out of the two times I've met him. That's a 50% obnoxious rate."

"Three times. You met him at the hospital after the accident."

"I sat down with him twice. The second time, he wasn't as bad, but the first time left a lot to be desired."

"It's time to move on and give him another chance."

"I'll decide when it's time."

Abbey interrupted then. "Liz, tell him to come over now. You and Doug can ride with me and Zoey and Ellie can ride with Dad."

"Cool." Liz waltzed out of the bedroom then.

"You're taking your own car?" Jed asked.

"I have to stop by the hospital afterwards to check on that patient."

"So I've gotta drive Bullwinkle home?"

"It wouldn't kill you to be nice to him, for Liz's sake."

"Nice how?"

"Not calling him Bullwinkle for starters."

Abbey grabbed her pearls and handed Jed his jacket as they left the bedroom.

---

The gymnasium at Concord High School was filled to capacity that night with students, teachers, and members of the community all gathered to celebrate the life of Christa McAuliffe. As a New Hampshire congressman, Jed had been invited to attend, along with the rest of the Bartlet family. They arrived in two cars, parked side by side, and, dodging swarms of press who were prohibited from the memorial, walked in together, Jed holding Zoey's hand and Abbey comforting Ellie with
Liz and Doug a step behind.

The program began with faculty remarks and then students spoke about Ms. McAuliffe, sharing anecdotes about her history, social studies, and civics classes. In such a small school, even the kids who never had the opportunity to sit in Christa's classroom were familiar with her. She was a popular teacher at CHS and her popularity only grew when she was selected to ride aboard the Challenger. There wasn't one student who wasn't touched by her death nor one who didn't tear up when talking about her.

The teachers took the floor next, describing the colleague they had admired long before NASA - or the nation - knew who she was. Her commitment to academics was an inspiration to all of them, they said. Outside of school, she was a Girl Scout troop leader, a fundraiser for the YMCA, a member of the Junior Service League, and a mentor at her church. They spoke of a teacher dedicated to helping her students succeed and a humanitarian dedicated to making her community a better place to live.

She also had two other roles in life, that of wife and mother. Her husband, Steven, and her children, Scott and Caroline, watched the fateful launch that day from the Kennedy Space Center. What was supposed to be their proudest moment turned into their greatest heartbreak and being reminded of them, silenced the entire gym. Mourners said prayers for the loving husband and his two motherless kids, then dabbed at their tears as they listened for what came next.

Jed stood up, somewhat hesitantly at first, feeling out of place in a room full of people mourning the loss of someone they knew so well.

"I'm Jed Bartlet," he started after several seconds. "I represent District One in the United States House of Representatives. As most of you know, Congress has been working tirelessly with NASA to determine the cause of the..." 'Explosion' sounded like such a cold word to use. "...accident. But something that you may not know is that since Tuesday, my colleagues and I have been inundated with faxes and phone calls, people from all over the country wanting to express their condolences for all seven of the men and women aboard the shuttle, and especially for Christa McAuliffe, who the world came to know over the past year. The spotlight was on her in this mission and it wasn't just because she was a civilian. It was also because she had a way of connecting with people. She genuinely liked to serve others, that's obvious by everything we've heard here today. I suspect that's why she was chosen by NASA. They say that being an astronaut, like being a schoolteacher, is among the most noble of professions. Astronauts risk their lives so that we can reap the benefits of their discoveries. It's clear, even to those of us who didn't know her that well, that Christa was no stranger to that kind of selflessness. Her dedication to her fellow Americans, to her students, and to everyone else who cared about space exploration came shining through in every interview she gave, every newsmagazine, every television program, every time she spoke out about what she was doing. That's one of the reasons I wanted to be here tonight. I wanted you to know how the person you called a friend was seen by the rest of us. I had the privilege of meeting her a couple of times and what I learned about her impressed me greatly. I only wish that I had known her as well as all of you did. She was a very special person indeed, someone who will always be remembered, not just by the people in this room, but by the millions around the world who've been touched by her story. I want to assure you that while the next few weeks, the next few months, will be difficult, the hearts of the entire nation are with you. I promise you, I'll personally do whatever I can to preserve Christa's memory and her legacy in the space program. She's a hero, an explorer, and a pioneer, and she will never be forgotten."

As he sat back down, Abbey took his hand and squeezed it, mouthing the words 'I love you.' Husband and wife exchanged an affectionate glance between them before turning their attention to the other speakers.
"Zoey, I'm not going to tell you again. Get upstairs and get ready for bed."

Jed was flying solo at bedtime that night. His youngest daughter was parked in front of the Atari console in the family room, trying to master Pac-Man once and for all. Zoey enjoyed playing the game with her older sisters, but since she didn't have the kind of hand-eye coordination they did, she practiced by herself every night so she could beat them.

"One more minute!" the six-year-old pleaded.

"That's what you said a half hour ago." Jed stood between her and the television. "Time's up."

"DADDY! You made me LOSE!"

"Unless you want me to say no Atari for the whole weekend, get upstairs and get ready for bed." She didn't move. "Zo?"

"I'm not tired!"

"Your eyes are red and watery."

"I wanna wait up for Mommy."

"If you're up by the time she gets home, she's not going to be too happy about it."

"Why do I have to go to bed so early? Lizzie and Ellie get to stay up." Pouting, Zoey crossed her arms over her chest.

"Lizzie and Ellie had to go to bed the same time as you when they were your age."

"Can't I go to bed later? Pleeeasssee?"

Kneeling so that he was facing her on her level, Jed used a more diplomatic tone and replied. "Tell you what, you go to bed tonight and tomorrow, you, Mom, and I will sit down and talk about your bedtime on the weekends."

"You'll let me sleep when I want?"

"We'll talk about it. That's the best I can do right now. Okay?"

"Okay."

"Piggy-back ride?"

"Yeah!" Zoey beamed at that.

Jed turned his back to her so she could grab on. When her arms were securely wrapped around his neck, he stood and began to trot out of the room. Zoey dangled off his back, giggling the whole way up the stairs and down the hall to her bedroom.

"Here we are!" He backed up against her bed, about to drop her onto the mattress. "If you break your neck, Mom's gonna kill me."

"I won't, I promise."
And down she went.

"Ready to say your prayers?"

Zoey nodded. "Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep. Guide me safely through the night, and wake me with the morning light. Forgive the wrong that I have done and make me good, and wise, and strong."

She slid in under the covers then as Jed tucked them up around her.

"So you wanna read to me tonight or do you want me to read to you?"

"I don't wanna read at all. I want you to tell me a story."

Jed suspiciously narrowed his stare. "I'm not falling for that old trick."

"What trick?"

"It's a ploy so you can stay up later. You always interrupt my stories with a thousand questions."

Unlike his other two daughters, Zoey wasn't one to sit quietly and listen, so Jed's stories took much longer with her.

"I won't do it this time. I want you to tell me a story about astronauts."

"A story about astronauts?"

"Uh huh. Can't you tell me about astronauts?"

"Sure I can." He pulled up a chair and sat beside her bed, stroking her hair as he began to lull her to sleep. "Astronauts are pioneers in space. Remember we talked about the early pioneers who traveled across America in covered wagons looking for new land and opportunities they didn't have at home?"

"Mmm hmm."

"Well, it's similar. Astronauts fly into outer space so they can explore the unknown parts of the universe."

"I already know that!"

"What are you looking for then?"

"A story, like with characters."

"But I don't know any stories about astronauts."

"You know everything!"

Jed chuckled. "Promise me you'll always believe that."

"Daddy!"

"You're a pretty demanding little girl."

"Mommy says I'm just like you," Zoey said proudly.
"Mommy's mistaken."

"Tell me a story about astronauts please?"

"Okay, okay. How about I make one up?"

"I like make-believe!"

"Well then, you're gonna love this! I bet no one's ever told you the story of Alex the astronaut, have they?" Zoey shook her head. "All right then, get comfortable for the king of all stories." He waited until Zoey squirmed herself to comfort. "Ready?"

"Ready."

"Okay. Far, far away in a magical land of perfection known to all as New Hampshire, lived Alex. Alex was just a kid when..."

"Why can't it be a girl astronaut?" Zoey asked, sitting up.

"How do you know it's not? Alex can be a girl's name too." Jed tweaked her nose and laid her back down. "Anyway, Alex was just a kid when she realized what she wanted to do more than anything else in the whole wide world was walk on the moon..."

"I don't like the name Alex if it's a girl."

Jed took a breath. "Is Alice more to your liking?" Zoey crinkled her up face at that suggestion.

"What do you like?"

"Ashley."

"Okay, Ashley it is. Ashley..."

"Who lived in New Hampshire."

"Ashley, who lived in New Hampshire, was just a kid on her parents' farm when she realized what she wanted to do more than anything else in the whole wide world was walk on the moon. She made up her mind right then that she was going to study hard in school, get good grades, and go to college to study all about space travel and one day, be accepted to NASA."

"Did she wanna go to Wellesley like Lizzie?"

"No, she dreamed of going to MIT."

"Where's that?"

"It's in Massachusetts. Anyway, when Ashley was 12 years old..."

"Why can't she want to go to Wellesley?"

"Hey, who's telling this story?"

"No one now."

Father and daughter locked eyes as they heard the front door open and close downstairs.

"Tell her I'm asleep!" Zoey pulled the blanket up over her head.

"But you're not asleep. Surely you're not asking me to lie." Jed liked to tease her.

"Please?" Zoey peeked out to give him a sad face.

"Nope. You're in trouble, sporty."

When Abbey knocked on her door, Zoey scrambled back under the covers.

"Jed?" she whispered softly as she opened the door. "Lizzie said you were in here. What are you doing?"

His finger to his lips, Jed tiptoed toward his wife. "I'm checking to make sure Zoey's asleep."

"Is she?"

"Yeah." He waited to leave the room and close the door to tell her the truth. When they were out in the hall, he admitted, "She's still awake."

"Why?"

"She doesn't want to sleep."

"Why not?"

"Because she's six." Jed never understood the horror of bedtime, but having dealt with two of these girls already, he knew that at this age, sleep was treated with the utmost contempt.

"Do I need to go in?"

"Nah, let her be for a few minutes. She's utterly exhausted. If we leave her alone, she'll fall asleep. In the meantime, there's news on the Ellie front."

"Yeah?"

"She threw her Weekly Readers in the trash and she took down the poster of Christa McAuliffe in her room. I asked her why and she said she was sick of staring at it."

"That makes sense, doesn't it? If it's going to remind her of the explosion..."

"Abbey."

"What?"

"You're justifying everything. This isn't normal behavior for Ellie. She's moody and depressed."

"It's only been three days, Jed."

"Look, I don't always understand Ellie as well as you do, but I'm telling you, this time, I think I have a reason to be concerned. I don't like the way this is affecting her and I'm afraid that if we don't do something to help her make sense of it now, it's just going to get worse."

"What are you basing this on?"

"I've been there...when my grandfather died."
Abbey remembered the loss that Jed had shared with her in the early days of their marriage. He had been only 13 when his grandpa died and he'd withdrawn just like Ellie. He closed himself off from the rest of the family, wanting to grieve alone for the man he had loved and admired from the day he was born, the man who often treated him more like a son than his own father had. It took years for Jed to be able to look at pictures of him or talk about him and even when he was able to, the most painful of memories stayed buried in his mind.

"What do you think we should do?"

"We have to get through to her. We can't let her isolate herself."

Abbey took a beat, then said, "You're right. Let me try to get her to open up tomorrow."

"If she doesn't..."

"If she doesn't, we'll talk. We'll figure out something."

"Okay."

Unprompted, Abbey took him in her arms and kissed him on the mouth.

"What was that for?" Jed asked as they broke apart.

"For being you. Have I told you lately how blessed I am that you're the father of my children?"

"Not lately, no." He smiled.

"There must be something wrong with me then."

Their arms around each other, they headed toward the master bedroom.

"I've been saying that for years," Jed teased as Abbey nudge him in the ribs. "How's your patient?"

"He's good. I think he's going to make a full recovery."

"Excellent."

"I take it Liz didn't hear from Wellesley?"

"Nope. We might have sedate her if it takes much longer."

"If only she had let you talk to the admissions committee, right?"

"That's what I keep saying." Jed would have done anything for his children if asked, including pleading their case to the college of their choice. "There are worse things in the world than a proud father."

Abbey laughed. "Any news you want to share about Doug?"

"Like what?"

"Oh I don't know. I didn't miss a rumble in the driveway, did I?"

"You think Lizzie would still be speaking to me if you had?"

"Good point." She took off her earrings and tossed them into her jewelry box. "So was he
obnoxious tonight?"

"Tonight, no. I'm convinced he put on an act just to make me look bad in front of Liz."

Abbey egged him on. "Really? He must be quite the manipulator. Pretending to be normal just to make you look bad? That's one for the psych books."

"You're making fun of me now."

With a grin and an arch in her brow, she changed the subject. "So Delores LANDINGHAM, huh?"

"I thought she'd be good." Jed kicked off his shoes.

"How's she doing?"

"I haven't talked to her in a while. It's going to be strange calling her up out of the blue."

"It won't be that strange. You guys reconnected after your dad died."

"I know, but since then, I've spoken to her a handful of times."

"All the more reason to give her a call. And you should do it quickly before she commits to something else. Once we get through the Challenger aftermath, I think you should concentrate fully on campaign staff."

"Yeah."

"There's talk at the hospital about a fundraiser for Christa McAuliffe's kids. I'll tell you, my heart breaks for those children. They still have their father, but going through life without their mother...and that she died in such a horrific and public way. They saw it, you know. They saw it happen, live. I can't imagine what they're going through right now. I think we should do whatever we can to help them." She slid her pantyhose down her legs. "Don't you?"

"Yeah."

"Is Liz helping you with the forums this weekend?" Jed didn't answer. "Jed?" No response. "Jed?"

Abbey looked over to see her husband sitting on the bed, deep in thought. She approached him and straddled his legs, sitting on his lap and staring him right in the eye.

"Sorry."

"What are you thinking?"

"They all had families," he said. "Husbands and wives. Kids. Parents. That's what I've been thinking about all week - their families. What's going to happen to them?"

Abbey wrapped her arms around him. She knew Jed would need to talk about the shuttle disaster eventually, but he was so good at taking care of everyone else - her, the girls, his constituents - and he had been so busy planning forums and working with his DC office, that he hadn't taken the time to tell her his thoughts. That night, it was her turn to take care of him. It was her turn to listen and offer comfort. And she did it, with love.

TBC
"I like that one."

"The profile isn't too harsh?"

"No, you have a perfect nose."

"You said that about my forehead too."

"I can't help it if I think all your features are beautiful. It's a mother's right."

It was just another Saturday at the Bartlets. While Jed took Zoey sledding down the steepest hill on the farm and Ellie set out on a self-imposed quarantine in the girls' winter treehouse for some time alone, Abbey and Elizabeth sat in the kitchen with a dozen proofs of the teen's senior pictures sprawled across the table. Abbey had collected every single school photo since kindergarten and there was never this much fuss over which one to submit for the yearbook. But this year, Liz was a senior and, traditionally, seniors had private portraits done, so there was more pickiness involved in selecting just the right one than there had been in the past.

"I still like the over-the-shoulder look." Liz wanted a more unique pose.

"That's nice too," Abbey agreed.

"Dad liked this one, but I'm looking right into the camera."

"So?"

"I'll be looking at the camera in the class photo. I want a different look for the individual one. Zoey liked the leather jacket with the spikes."

"Forget it."
"I'm just saying..."

"Really, Liz, they're all lovely. Pick the one you like best...except for the one with the leather and spikes."

Liz chuckled. "I think I'll go with over-the-shoulder."

"Great choice."

She gathered her proofs and slid them into an envelope. "Thanks for helping me."

"That's what I'm here for." Abbey stood up to pour herself a cup of coffee. She had just returned from hospital rounds and hadn't yet changed out of her work clothes.

"Mom?" Liz was standing now too. She had been on her way out, but hesitated. "There's something I've been meaning to ask, but with everything going on with the shuttle, I kept putting it off."

"What is it?"

More hesitation at first and then, "Why didn't you tell me about Courtney?"

"Tell you what about Courtney?"

"That she needed an AIDS test? She told me at lunch the other day."

Abbey took a breath. She knew Liz would find out eventually. She just didn't know that she already had. "Courtney was a patient. There's a level of discretion."

"But I'm her friend. I could have helped her through it."

"She needed a doctor more than a friend."

"How can you say that? She was going through the scariest thing that ever happened to her. She needed a friend too."

"You're right, having a friend to lean on would have done her a world of good, but her immediate needs required the attention of a physician. That's why she came to me. It was her choice who else to tell."

"She's the reason you're doing the sex-ed class, isn't she?"

Abbey sighed uncomfortably. "Liz, I can't get into this again. We've gone over it a thousand times."

"Just tell me if she's the reason."

"She was the inspiration, yes. There are a lot of girls just like Courtney. And boys too. I see them at the hospital all the time."

Liz was more understanding now. "If you had told me she was the reason..."

"If I had 'told' you? What did I say when you asked why I was starting a sex-ed class?"

"That it was because kids were especially vulnerable to AIDS."

"What kids?"
"Teenagers...people my age."

"Why?"

"Because they're having unprotected sex."

"And what did you tell me about that?" Abbey prodded further.

"That even some of the people I go to school with have done it without using a condom."

"And didn't I say that's why I'm doing what I'm doing?"

"Yeah."

"So...did you need a billboard?"

Liz smiled at that. "I just mean that I didn't know it was so close to home. Thinking about it in the abstract didn't hit me like it did when I found out about Courtney. I didn't put a face on it before. I didn't know it was one of my friends."

"That was Courtney's decision. But even if it wasn't Courtney, does it make it any less relevant? You know what one of the complications of AIDS is? Pneumocystis carinii pneumonia. PCP. It's an infection of the lungs that's diagnosed through biopsies. I do so many of those biopsies on boys and girls who are 17, 18, and 19 years old. They're just starting their lives and they end up on my operating table, waiting for me to confirm their worst fears."

"I know. You told me when you had that AIDS patient a couple of years ago, the one who was 18."

"Then why won't you support what I'm doing?"

"It's not that I don't want to support you. It's just, you're my mom. You want to open a dialogue with my friends about the most intimate thing in life. It gave me the heebie jeebies."

"Liz..."

"They make jokes, Mom."

"Who?"

"The kids at school. They see the posters about the class and they make disgusting, perverted jokes."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"I didn't think it would matter."

"It always matters when it comes to you. What kinds of jokes are they making?"

"Stupid juvenile stuff. It's like they never progressed past junior high and just the word sex makes them laugh. That's why I was against it. Put yourself in my shoes. Can't you see how hard it would be to deal with?"

"I'm sure it is. I never wanted this to affect you in this way. I wish that you, and they, knew what I know. I wish you could see the patients I treat because I think you'd all tell me this class was worth it."
"Do all the AIDS patients you see get it through unprotected sex?"

"Not all, but many. The first PCP patient I ever had was a 10-year-old little girl. She was infected through a blood transfusion she received after an appendectomy. That was back in 1981, before anyone knew what HIV or AIDS really was."

"I remember you talking to me about."

"I do too," Abbey replied. "But what I told you then, it's even more important now."

"To stop the spread."

"Yeah. With your age group, that includes learning about and practicing safe sex. A minute ago, you told me to put myself in your shoes. Try to do that with me."

"What do you mean?"

"You know how I feel about kids playing musical chairs with sexual partners. I can get up and preach about abstinence and about the importance of waiting for your one true love until my head explodes. You know what I believe, you know that's what I think is right, but the truth is, no matter what I think, it won't stop the teenager who ends up in my office needing to be tested for AIDS. So I have a choice - I can throw up my hands and judge those kids for not adhering to the abstinence-only rules of the school and the community or, as a doctor, I can open my eyes to the reality and take a pro-active approach to keep them safe. Do you blame me for choosing the latter?"

"No, I guess I don't," Liz explained. "Maybe I overreacted. I won't say any more about it."

"You don't have to go that far. You don't have to censor yourself. That's not how we do things in this family. I want to know what you think, just like I always have."

"You seem exasperated with me when I bring it up."

"Only because I don't want to argue with you the way we did when I first told you, and sometimes I'm just too tired to curtail an argument so it's safer to avoid the conversation altogether. Maybe that's wrong, but I hate fighting with you."

"I didn't want to fight either. I heard sex ed and how you wanted me to spread the word around school and I thought about everything my friends and I talk about. To think that you'd be talking to them about those things..."

"I know, it's gross." Amused, Abbey joked, "Parents aren't supposed to know about sex."

Liz let out a soft laugh in response. "Yeah."

"You and your friends talk a lot about it?"

"I dunno, I guess. With the ones I'm close to, I talk about it. That doesn't mean I'm doing it, so don't worry."

"But they are." It wasn't a question. Liz had told her before that they were.

"Not all of them. Some of them, sure."

"Peer pressure is tough."

"They're not pressuring me. I decided a long time ago that it wasn't the right thing for me until I
was in love and with the person I was going to marry."

"Just like me with your father. I can tell you, Lizzie, that if you hold onto that, it'll be the best
decision you'll ever make. I'm so grateful that I waited for your dad, that I could share something
so special with him and only him."

"That's what I want. I want it to be special."

"It will be, someday."

"Remember the day you found me here alone with Scott? You thought we were sleeping
together?"

"I remember." Abbey would never forget that day. She had been concerned and furious all at once
and when Liz told her that nothing happened, that she had stopped Scott before it went too far, she
felt a sense of relief like never before.

"When he tried to make a move, he didn't even have a condom. He thought nothing of it. That's
how a lot of guys are. All they care about is that moment and nothing else."

"Guys like Scott are the kind you're better off without. They want to do the deed and to hell with
the consequences. But to be fair, it's not just up to the man to have the condom. It's just as much
the woman's responsibility."

"True, but I always thought they'd be equally worried."

"If they had to carry the babies, they would be, trust me."

"With something like AIDS out there, why wouldn't they be scared of getting it?"

"The reality of AIDS hasn't set in for a lot of people."

Liz nodded. "I read that even if you test negative at first, you should be re-tested."

"That's right."

"So Courtney..."

"I'll stop you right there. In Courtney's case, she was exposed two years ago. She's fine. But she
was a little anxious about the results so to help her feel better about it, I told her to come back for
another test in six months to confirm."

"But you don't think she has it?"

"Not from the boyfriend she was with two years ago, no. If she's been exposed since, I don't know."
Abbey wanted so badly to put her daughter's mind at ease. "My gut tells me she's healthy, but it's
risky making predictions about any girl who's sexually active. You can think your partner doesn't
have it, but unless they get tested, you have no way of knowing for sure."

"If she did have it, that would have been it. She would have died?"

"It takes years for HIV to develop into AIDS and they're working on drugs to extend the lives of
AIDS patients everyday."

"But people still die."
"Lizzie, if Courtney had AIDS, I would have done whatever I could to take care of her."

"She still could have died. She was so lucky," Liz said, thinking about the bullet her friend had dodged. She then got up and approached her mother. "I thought I understood before, when you first told me about the class and then again when we talked about it, but I didn't. I really do get it now. I know why it's so important to you. I'm sorry it took me a while."

"It's okay. I'm sorry that it's caused you such grief at school." Abbey wrapped her arms around her.

"I'll deal with it."

"I'm proud of you by the way."

"For what?"

"Standing by your morals and not giving in to the peer pressure. It's not easy."

"You did it."

"The world is a different place than it was when I was your age and the pressures are more intense."

"Wow." Liz broke the embrace.

"What?"

"I thought that 'things are different now' was supposed to be my line."

"I told you I tried to put myself in your shoes." Abbey pulled out her chair and took a seat at the table. "When I was 17, that was my line to my parents."

"It's hard to picture you at 17."

"Why?"

"You're my mom. I always see you as an adult. Even when I look through your baby pictures with Grandma, it's hard to imagine. I could close my eyes right now and try to picture one of them, but I'd still see you at 40." Liz's statement was met with a glare from Abbey.

"39."

Liz conceded with another laugh, "39, only for another month!"

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That afternoon, Ellie and Zoey joined Abbey to sort through the 700 boxes of Girl Scout cookies that had taken over the living room, before they ventured out to make the deliveries. Because it was a blisteringly cold day in New Hampshire, the girls wore khaki pants and their troop sweatshirt instead of the full uniform. They also sported the traditional Girl Scout sash or vest, each decorated with merit badges, patches, and pins reflective of their individual personalities.

Ellie's was the emerald green sash that all the Juniors wore, which had her troop number, her Brownie wings, and Bridge to Juniors badge. Among the collage of community service and 4-H badges she was awarded at the December badge ceremony, she also had the Sporting Adventures badge for the day she spent rock climbing with her troop in the White Mountains, the First Aid badge she earned when Abbey volunteered to show all the girls how to make their very own first
aid kits before the national Scout Jamboree camping trip, and prominently featured toward the top of her sash, the Aerospace badge she earned for spending a week at space camp last summer.

Having been a Girl Scout for only five months, Zoey wasn't nearly as experienced as her big sister and her Daisy uniform was still a little bare. She had managed to earn a few patches though. She wore her sky blue Daisy vest with canary yellow insignia, daisy flower membership pin, her troop number, and her Girl Scout petals. Sewn to the vest, she had a nature patch for taking off on an autumn bird-watching hike with Jed and then introducing her troop to the different species of birds, the Horse Rider patch for taking riding lessons and helping the farmhands around the stables at the farm, and a special friendship patch for inviting the other girls in her troop over to teach them about horses and introduce them to the sport of riding.

Abbey helped her with the teaching that day, but she didn't mind giving Zoey all the credit. She and Jed had always been supportive of the girls' activities, especially their involvement with the Girl Scouts because of the emphasis on leadership, citizenship, character, service, and responsibility, the same values the Bartlets had always stressed. Their faith in the Scouts was so strong that Jed, a former Eagle Scout himself, stepped in as co-leader of Ellie's troop when she was a Brownie. Although he eventually resigned that post, neither he nor Abbey waned in their support. In fact, they encouraged their girls even more and by the time Liz retired her uniform for good, she had gained so much from her experience that she volunteered to mentor younger girls in other troops as a way of giving back to the organization. They hoped that Ellie and Zoey would someday do the same.

In the Girl Scout world, the biggest time of the year was the cookie sale and because the farm was isolated from more bustling neighborhoods, Jed volunteered to drive the girls and their friends into town every year so they could sell their tails off. Once the cookies were in, it was Abbey's responsibility to help sort them out and take the girls to deliver them.

The boxes were lined up in the living room according to street address and order and as she read off the order form, Zoey and Ellie scrambled to organize them.

"The Wilkensons on Park ordered two boxes of Thin Mints, one box of Samoas, and one box of Tagalongs."

Zoey grabbed the cookies her mother called out, tagged them with a card for the Wilkensons and stacked them in a pile, ready to be tied with ribbon. "Check!"

"That's it for yours, Zoey. Ellie, we need three boxes of Samoas for the Paulsons on West Brook."

It was Ellie's turn now. She repeated Zoey's steps with the Paulsons' order. "Check."

"Grandma and Grandpa ordered 10 boxes of Thin Mints."

"I already put those aside."

"A box of Samoas for the Hendersons on Pine."

Jed breezed in then. "And a box of Dos-si-dos for Dad standing right here," he said as he grabbed the cookies he had ordered.

"Jed, you already had several Tagalongs this morning," Abbey reminded him.

"What's your point?" He tore open the package and took out a cookie.

"Can I have one, Daddy?" Zoey asked.
"THAT'S my point," Abbey went on. "What kind of example are you setting?"

"I set my examples in other ways." He handed Zoey a cookie. "Where's Liz?"

"They're taking the senior class picture in the school gym. She said she'd be back in plenty of time to go to Concord."

Jed was happy to have Liz's help with the townhall forums he had set up after the shuttle explosion. He hoped that Ellie would change her mind and go too, thinking that it might help her to see that she wasn't alone in her feelings, that others from all over the state were dealing with the same kind of grief she was.

He looked over at her and asked, "Are you sure you don't want to come with us, Ellie?"

"No."

"If you give it a chance, it might make you feel better."

"It won't. I don't wanna go. Please don't make me."

"I won't. But will you tell me why?"

Ellie curled her lips, then said, "It's all I ever hear about. It's the only thing on TV, it's all that's in magazines and in the newspaper. I don't wanna be reminded of it all the time."

"The coverage has been over-the-top, hasn't it? It'll simmer down next week."

"Then until then, I don't wanna go to any more memorials or forums or even to church."

Jed could accept the first two, but it was the last one that had him concerned. "We always go to church on Sunday."

"I don't wanna go tomorrow. The whole thing will be about the Challenger. I don't wanna think about it anymore. I just wanna forget."

"I don't think it's that easy to forget."

"Well, going to church won't make it any easier." Ellie bowed her head and muttered, "You don't understand."

"I do," Jed insisted. "I felt what you're feeling. We all did."

"It's not the same."

"Okay, the magnitude might not be exactly the same, but Ellie, I met her too. I followed the plans for the Challenger just like you did. Why won't you consider the possibility that I might know what you're going through? Why won't you let me try to help?"

"It's not the same," she repeated. She didn't go on to tell him that what made it different was her powerlessness. Jed was taking initiative by working in congress and setting up the townhall forums. She wished she had that kind of spirit, that she could jump in passionately and speak out at the forums, just like Liz. But that wasn't Ellie. While the trauma of the accident spurred Jed to action, it made Ellie want to close herself off and deal with her emotions in private.

When Ellie buttoned up, Abbey took that as her cue. She had said she'd talk to her about the shuttle and there was no time like now. "Jed, why don't we table this for now and you take Zoey to deliver
her cookies? I'll take Ellie. It'll be quicker that way."

Picking up on what she was doing, Jed agreed. "Yeah, okay. Is everything ready?"

"Those over there are Zoey's. Here's her order form. Try to get through half if you can and we'll deliver the rest tomorrow."

"All right, Zoey, let's load them in the car."

It took a while for father and daughter to pack the car and be on their way, but as soon as they pulled out of the drive, Abbey returned to the living room, where she found Ellie slouching her shoulders on the sofa. She knew what she was thinking. Christa McAuliffe had been a Girl Scout leader so even sorting through the cookies reminded Ellie of the Challenger disaster.

"Do you want a snack before we get back to it?"

Ellie shook her head. "No thanks."

"We brought home the boxes yesterday and you haven't even asked for one cookie. Usually, by this time, I have to snatch the boxes out of your hands."

"I guess I've outgrown that."

"No, I don't think you have. You know, Ellie, I haven't pushed you to talk to me about what you're feeling because I thought that you'd do it on your own when you were ready, but now I'm starting to worry."

"Don't worry."

"Easier said than done. I love you and when you're sad, I'm sad."

"I'm not trying to make you sad."

"I know you're not. I just want to help you smile again. You know how I love that smile of yours."

"I can't. Every time I think about it..." Ellie clenched her eyes shut.

"What do you think about?"

"The moment it happened. The explosion. The smoke. The fire. It was awful."

Abbey joined her on the sofa. "Yes, it was. There's no sugar-coating it, sweetheart, it was awful. Are you re-playing it in your mind a lot?"

"Whenever it happens, I force myself to think about something else."

"Are you having nightmares?"

"Once. I dreamed I was there in person, watching. And it happened right in front of me and there was all this screaming and chaos and people running. I froze. There was nothing I could do but watch."

"Why didn't you wake me?"

"Because I didn't want to talk about it. I just wanted to forget."
"I don't think you're going to forget just like that. I don't think any of us will. But we'll cope and we'll learn to move on. The sting you feel now, it won't feel like that forever. It'll get better."

"How?"

"Talking about it might be a start. When I lose a patient at the hospital, I need to talk about it."

Ellie looked at her mother. "Do you cry?"

"Yeah, I do. Most doctors cry. A lot of them may not admit it, but they do."

"Why wouldn't they admit it?"

"There's this stupid macho perception in the hospital that if you're a doctor, and especially a surgeon, you're not supposed to cry, that somehow after losing so many patients, you're supposed to become immune to the loss of life."

"That's not true, is it?"

"No, it's not. It's far from true. Whenever I lose a patient, I cry. Usually it's in the elevator between floors after having told the family. It may only be 10 seconds or so, but it gives me a chance to let it out and then pull myself together before I go into the next exam room or the next OR."

"And then you hide it?"

"Not exactly. I don't hide it, I just focus on what I'm doing. If I'm seeing patients, then I need to focus on the case in front of me. That's what they deserve. I can't be hysterical about the one I just lost, not then. But when I'm done, I come home and I cry in your father's arms and I vent and I say that I never want to do it again, that I never want to have someone else's life in my hands, that I never want to see a person breathe their last breath before my eyes."

"Why do you go back?"

"Because I think about the people I can save and then I realize that it's the circle of life. Some will live, some won't, and it's not always predictable, it's not always fair. No one lives forever, but some people die in a more terrible way than others and that's when it hurts the most. The Challenger crew was doing such a brave thing and what happened...it was nothing short of a tragedy."

"Do you think they knew what was happening?"

Abbey's heart warred with her brain. She could have said 'no' and made Ellie feel better instantly, but she had always promised her daughters that she wouldn't lie to them about such important things. "I really don't know. I wish I did, but it's just too soon for that kind of speculation. I can tell you that based on what I've read and what your dad's told me, they would have only had a few seconds to react."

"They must have been so scared. They knew their families were watching. How awful is it to think you're going die and your family is watching?"

"Let's not think about that, sweetheart."

"Do you think it hurt?" Ellie's eyes began to tear as Abbey wrapped her arms around her. "Could they feel it? Were they in pain?"

"Oh sweetie, you have such a big heart. That's what I love the most about you, you know that? I
love how much you care about other people and how compassionate you are to their needs, to their pain. I don't think there was enough time for them to feel it. I think it happened too quickly."

"Really?"

"Yeah."

It was what she wanted to hear, what she needed to help soothe the helplessness she felt when she saw the explosion. That helplessness was still weighing her down and she was searching desperately for a way to regain some semblance of power in her mind. Ellie's greatest quality was the deep level of empathy she carried in her heart. It was sweet and endearing, but in times like this, it made her miserable with grief.

Not every tragedy in life would leave her as shell-shocked and vulnerable as this one did, Abbey told her, giving her a measure of comfort she hadn't had in days. That afternoon, the duo opened up to one another, had a long talk, and even shared a few tears. By the end of their conversation, Abbey was certain that all Ellie needed to heal was a little more time.

Now, she had to tell Jed.

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As the sun went down and evening rolled in, Abbey stepped outside to check the mail. She grabbed a bundle of envelopes and headed back inside, scanning them on the way to the living room, where Zoey and Ellie had stacked 400 boxes of cookies against the back wall. They belonged to all the customers they hadn't gotten to yet or the ones who weren't home, so Abbey had asked the girls to keep them organized so they could try again on Sunday.

She approached her younger daughters, her eyes on a letter in her hand.

"Mom?" Ellie called her. "What is it?"

"It's for Lizzie, from Wellesley College," Abbey answered, holding up a remarkably thin envelope.

"Don't college acceptances usually come with all kinds of forms and brochures?"

"Usually."

"She's gonna be crushed."

"She didn't get in?" Zoey was shocked by the possibility. To her, Liz was the smartest high school senior in the country. What college wouldn't take her?

"Maybe she did," Abbey said, trying to be optimistic. "Maybe they just send thin envelopes to everybody."

Ellie agreed, "Maybe they're trying to psych her out!"

"Let's put it away until Liz gets home." Abbey tossed the letters onto the coffee table. "You guys want to help me with dinner?"

As she and Ellie followed their mother to the kitchen, Zoey asked, "What are we making?"

"I say a baked pasta casserole, Lizzie's favorite," Ellie suggested.

"Me too!"
Abbey smiled at her girls. "Me three."

---

After their midday cookie delivery, Jed had dropped Zoey back off at the farm and picked up Elizabeth so the two could head over to Concord for his townhall forum. It wasn't just the politicking that turned the teenager's interest in what her father was doing; it was reaching out to people and offering them the reassurance they were looking for in the days following the explosion. Liz had taken such an interest in the role Jed was playing in helping the community come together, that on the way home, he told her she'd make an excellent public servant someday.

Liz didn't shy away from that endorsement. It meant a lot to her that Jed believed in her. She wanted to make her way in the world without hanging on his coattails, despite their common interests, but his faith in her potential inspired her even more. Every door was open to her, he said. She was about to graduate high school at the top of her class and she had it in her to set her sights on anything her heart desired.

As Jed parked the car in the front the farmhouse, they both took note of the empty mailbox with the open flap.

"Mom must have checked it," Jed remarked.

Eagerly awaiting her Wellesley letter, Liz flung open the car door and sprinted inside. "We're home! Who checked the mail?"

In the kitchen, Abbey was preparing the salad to go with the baked pasta casserole in the oven. She wiped her hands on a towel and headed out to greet Liz. "Hi."

"Hi. Did you check the mail?"

"I did. It's in the living room."

"Did it come?"

"Yes."

Liz didn't wait another second. She bolted to the living room to get her letter as Jed roamed into the house.

"Why so glum?" he asked his wife.

"It's a thin envelope."

Liz returned, her stride slower and her face not nearly as bright. "So I guess we all know what it says."

"No we don't," Jed countered. "So they chose to send a thin envelope. That means nothing."

"How big was your Notre Dame envelope?" When he didn't answer, Liz looked at Abbey. "And your Boston University one? Or Harvard? Everyone knows a thick envelope means an acceptance, a thin envelope means forget it."

"That's not always the case. When I was at Dartmouth, we sent thin envelopes one year. The matriculation packets weren't ready to go out with the acceptances so we sent them bare."

"Your father's right," Abbey replied. "It's possible that's an acceptance. You won't know for sure
until you open it."

"Will you open it for me?" Liz handed the envelope to Abbey.

"You don't want to do it yourself?"

"No. I don't want to see it in black and white if it's a rejection." Wellesley had been her top choice since visiting the campus and while she knew that competition for a seat in the Class of 1990 was stiff, she had hoped and wished with all her might that she would be accepted. Reading a rejection letter from her number-one school would have stung too badly and she needed a filter to help with the disappointment.

Jed cautiously took it from her and tore the seal as Abbey pulled out the single piece of paper inside. It took seconds for husband and wife to read the first few lines, then look up at their daughter, grinning from ear to ear.

"You got in," Jed said.

"You're joking." Liz grabbed the paper from them. "Oh my God! I got in?" She said it louder this time, "I GOT IN!"

Ellie and Zoey, who were setting the kitchen table, abandoned the dishes and ran out to where their parents were.

"What happened?"

"Your sister got into Wellesley," Jed told them.

"You got in?" The younger girls were giddy with excitement.

"I'm in!"

"I knew you could do it, Lizzie!" For the first time in days, Ellie was cheerful and happy as she and Zoey ambushed Liz with a hug and the trio screamed a girlish scream of delight.

Jed threw a glance Abbey's way, thankful for whatever she had said to Ellie. It was already making a difference, he thought.

"Now that we can all breathe a huge sigh of relief," Abbey began, draping an arm around Elizabeth and giving her a kiss to the cheek, "let's go to the kitchen. We made a celebratory dinner."

"Celebratory?" Liz questioned. "You had no idea that was an acceptance."

"I was hoping. And if it wasn't, the dinner would have been consolatory. We prepared for both."

"Thanks!" Liz gave her an appreciative smile, then led the way to the kitchen, flanked by Jed and Abbey. "I have so many calls to make after dinner!"

"Give me the letter, Lizzie." Jed held out his hand. "We're going to tape this baby to the fridge!"

- - -

Winter in New Hampshire meant an early nightfall and at the farm, the further away from the glow of the house and the porch lights outside, the darker it was. In search of privacy, Liz and Doug took advantage of the darkness and walked the grounds together, holding hands as they cruunched their way through the snow-covered fields. Liz had invited him over so she could tell him about her
Wellesley acceptance in person, but she also had another question for him, one she was afraid he wasn't going to like.

"Can I ask you something without freaking you out on me?" She looked at him to gauge his reaction. "It's personal. Very personal."

"What is it?"

"You've been with other girls." She wasn't asking. Doug had already told her about his past.

"Yeah."

"Only those two you told me about?"

"Yeah, why?"

"Doug, have you ever been tested?"

Doug wasn't expecting that question. "Tested? Like for herpes?"

"For everything. For STDs." She said quieter, "For HIV."

"Liz, I haven't been with anyone in over a year. I'd know if I had HIV."

"No, you wouldn't. My mom says a lot of the patients she treats are our age and it is possible to not show symptoms but still test positive."

"What is this all about? You and I aren't...we haven't..."

"I know."

"Are you trying to tell me that you think we should take our relationship to the next level? Do you want to..."

"No! I mean, I don't think so. I don't think I'm ready for that yet. But it's not about me. I think you should know if you have it, for your own health and well-being. It's important. And I'll be honest, as your girlfriend, I'd like to know too."

"It's that important to you?" Liz nodded. "Okay, I'll get tested."

"Just like that?"

"Yeah. I'm sure I'm clean, but if it'll make you feel better, I'll do it."

"Thanks, Doug."

"Is this why your folks were cool with us hanging out tonight? Did they know you were going to ask me this?"

"Yeah, because my dad wouldn't flip his lid or anything if I mentioned you and STDs in the same sentence. Are you serious? He'd be convinced we were doing it and forbid me from ever seeing you again."

"It wouldn't surprise me if he did."

Their hands still joined, Liz swung their arms playfully. "I'm kidding. No, my folks don't know, but
relax. They're coming around about you."

"You can't even say that with a straight face."

"I'm serious. They're getting used to us, especially my mom."

"All the same, I can't wait until you're 18." He stopped his stride and turned to kiss her.

"Neither can I," she said when they broke apart. "That isn't the only reason I wanted to see you tonight."

"No?"

"I have something to tell you." She bit on her bottom lip before happily breaking the news. "I heard from Wellesley. I got in!"

"You did?" He paused for a moment. "Why didn't you say anything until now?"

Hardly the response Liz expected. She assumed his first word would be 'congratulations.' "I wanted to do it at the right time. So what do you think?"

"I think it's great, obviously!" Doug took her in his arms and twirled her around. "I told you, they'd be crazy to say no to you."

"I'm so happy to hear you say that!" she replied, giggling as he set her back down. "I was afraid you'd be upset that I won't be going to UNH."

"Naw, you're a Wellesley girl. UNH isn't your scene."

There was something about the way he said it that made Liz feel guilty. "UNH is a terrific school. It just wasn't my top choice."

"I know. You worked really hard to get into Wellesley. I'm glad it paid off."

"You mean it? You're not upset?"

"No, no," he was quick to tell her. "I'd be lying if I said I wasn't disappointed I won't be seeing you on campus next year, but that's my problem. I'm overjoyed that you got what you wanted. And now, I get to brag even more about my girlfriend." He coiled his arm around her shoulders. "Gorgeous AND brilliant!"

Liz rested her head against his chest as they continued their stroll. Doug didn't admit what he was really thinking, that it wasn't just disappointment at not attending the same school that produced that awkward reaction from him. He really was happy for her, but he felt inferior to her. Liz was friendly and outgoing, the kind of girl people gravitated toward. She was also exceedingly smart with a quick wit and a solid academic work ethic. He thought often that she was out of his league. Her acceptance to one of the most prestigious schools in the nation only confirmed that theory in his mind.

TBC
February 1986

On a cold and dreary February afternoon, Jed paced the sidewalk outside the Holiday Inn in downtown Washington, D.C. After several hours of freezing rain and snowfall, the roads were slick, tying up traffic from the Jersey Turnpike down through Maryland and causing fender benders all over DC. The weather conditions were particularly nerve-racking for Jed since Elizabeth and her cheer/dance squad were driving down from New Hampshire to compete at the national dance championships in the nation's capital. They had taken off from Manchester early that morning, planning a 5 p.m. arrival in Washington, but by 5:15, there was still no sign of them, and Jed, always the protective father, was furiously checking his watch. He was contemplating asking his staff to call highway patrol agencies up and down the East Coast when the van driving the teens finally pulled into the hotel drive.

Liz noticed her father out the window and gave him a shake of her head. He was carrying a dozen umbrellas from the hotel lobby for all the girls, and in his hands, he had what looked like those cheesy miniature American flags they gave out on Capitol Hill. She had to admit it was nice to see him, even if it did make her feel like she five years old again, riding on the school bus and excited to spot her dad waiting for her at the bus stop. Although, she mused, if he thought she was going to run into his arms as she did back then, he was about to be disappointed.

As the van stopped near the awning, the girls grabbed their luggage and headed out.

"Dad, what are you doing here?" Liz asked, stepping down onto the pavement and hurrying under the awning like her teammates as hotel bellhops ushered out rolling carts to help with the luggage.

"I'm not Dad right now. I'm here in an official capacity this evening, as a congressman - their congressman. I want to welcome all of you to Washington, DC." He looked at Liz. "You thought I was here to embarrass you, didn't you?"

"The thought occurred to me."
"As much fun as that normally is, today I'm just doing my duty as an elected official." He scanned the faces of the girls as he handed out umbrellas and flags. "Most of you I know. Who haven't I met before?"

Liz glanced over at their coach and faculty sponsor. "Have you met Coach Jones?"

"No, I haven't." Jed greeted her with an outstretched hand. "Jed Bartlet, it's a pleasure."

"The pleasure's all mine, Congressman."

"I'm Melanie," one of the teens said as she shook Jed's hand next.

"Niffer," another added.

"It's nice to meet you both. Elizabeth tells me you girls have plans for dinner and sight-seeing tonight so I won't keep you. What time is practice tomorrow?"

"We warm up at noon," Coach Jones informed him.

"Okay then, how about a tour of the Capitol building at 9 a.m.?"

"Dad, you don't have to."

"Nonsense, I want to. We'll check out the Rotunda, visit the House and Senate galleries, maybe even see a real floor debate. It'll be fun! And before all that, there's this terrific little cafe just down the street. Breakfast is on me."

Coach Jones was impressed with his generosity. "I'd be a fool to say no to the tour, but breakfast is on us. The girls fundraised like crazy for this trip and there's more than enough in the pot."

Jed had to respect that. All those weekends of car washes and bake sales brought in more cash than any of them expected, paying for the entire trip with money left over. "Okay, breakfast at eight then."

The girls all thanked him, then scampered out of the cold and into the hotel to check in.

"If you're trying to win them over, they already think you're cool," Liz told Jed when the others were out of sight.

"Teenagers thinking any parent is cool?" Jed feigned shock with a hand to his heart.

"Just by virtue of being a congressman."

"Ah, I didn't know I got brownie points for that. Make sure it rubs off on you, huh?"

"No promises. See ya later."

"Uh, Liz?" He called after her. "Niffer?"

"It's short for Jennifer." Liz knew he wouldn't let go of that one. "You're going to make jokes now, aren't you?"

"I won't say a word."

"Really?"
"Really, as long as you don't start going by Izabeth."

She chuckled and rolled her eyes. "You're a goofball, Dad!"

"Must be where you get it from. Go call Mom and let her know you got in safely."

Jed watched as Liz jogged off, practically skipping into the lobby, a duffel bag over her shoulder and a carefree spring in her step.

---

Back in New Hampshire, Mrs. Wilburforce was in the kitchen of the farmhouse preparing a delicious dinner for Abbey, Ellie, and Zoey on their last night in town. The weekend marked the beginning of February break for the kids, so the plan was for Abbey to pick up the girls after school the next day and head directly to the airport for two days in Washington followed by the start of their Egyptian vacation.

Ellie and Zoey were upstairs packing their suitcases when a sudden burst of conflict incited a round of yelling that echoed throughout the house.

"GET OUT OF MY ROOM, ZOEY!"

"I'M GONNA TELL MOMMY!"

"GET OUT!"

"What in heavens name is going on up there?" Mrs. Wilburforce shouted from the foot of the stairs just before she charged up.

"Zoey's being a BRAT!"

"I am not!" Hurt, Zoey looked at Mrs. Wilburforce, who was fast approaching them on the top landing. "Ellie took stuff out of Mommy's room!" She zeroed in on her sister next. "I SAW YOU!"

"So? That doesn't give you the right to go through my things!"

"It does so!"

"It does not!"

Mrs. Wilburforce could see where this was going. "Stop it, both of you! Neither of you should be riffling through things that don't belong to you!"

"Yeah, Ellie!"

"Shut up, Zoey!"

"That's ENOUGH!" Mrs. Wilburforce had never heard them bicker so strongly. "Ellie, what did you take out of your mother's room?"

Unwilling to share the truth, Ellie's defenses kicked in. "You're gonna take her side?"

"I'm not taking sides, but whatever you took, you need to put back."

"No."
"What do you mean no?" That response caught Mrs. Wilburforce by surprise. Ellie always did what she was told to do.

"I'm not gonna put it back until I talk to my mom."

"Your mom's working late tonight."

"Then I'll wait up for her."

"I don't think so. I want you to put it back right now."

"No." Ellie stormed into her room and shut the door, leaving Mrs. Wilburforce out in the hall, concerned about her unusual behavior.

It had been a rough few weeks for Ellie, but everyone thought she was bouncing back. In true Bartlet fashion, she was discovering her strength and resiliency after the shuttle explosion that traumatized her and she was well on her way to acceptance, the final stage in the grief process. But there was one obstacle that threatened the closure she was seeking - fear. She was afraid of horrible things happening. Another tragedy, another death. A fire. A plane crash. A car accident. She had been a nervous wreck all day until Lizzie called to say that she and her squad had arrived safely in Washington and now, she was brimming with anxiety over the plane trip she, Zoey, and Abbey were going to take to DC and the even longer one they would all take to Egypt.

She didn't want to go.

- - -

"We're being invaded by cheerleaders!"

In no time, news had spread around Jed's congressional suite that he had offered to give Liz and her friends the grand tour. His aides cracked jokes, just as they did whenever a particular group was visiting Capitol Hill. It was a bit of good-natured fun with no malice or ill intent, but that didn't stop Jed from defending the girls.

"Cheerleaders are athletes," he said, crossing the room to retrieve his briefing book from his secretary. "We're being invaded by athletes."

Jed had fought Liz on that distinction for four years, but he was finally ready to recognize the sport for what it was, at least to his staff. He still enjoyed teasing Lizzie about it in private.

"You're a man of football and basketball," Michael replied. "How can you say that with a straight face?"

"I'm telling you, this squad is good. You won't see pom-poms in their hands. These young ladies are dancers and acrobats. They're up for the national championships, you know."

"I was a cheerleader back in the day when we were expected to stand on the sidelines and chant with metallic pom-poms and a megaphone," Samantha remarked as she threw Michael a glare. "I'd have called it a sport even back then."

"You're dreaming," Michael fired back.

"What determines what is and isn't a sport?"

"If your hair doesn't get messed up, it's not a real sport."
Jed laughed. "I've seen my daughter tossed into the air so high that she does a dozen flips on the way back down and miraculously, not one hair is out of place. It's called industrial-strength hairspray. The stuff should be banned."

Passing by the suite and catching the end of the exchange, Leo popped his head in. "It's nice to see the legislative process in full swing."

"Hey Leo!" Jed approached him. "Where've you been? I stopped by to talk to you the other day."

"I was in Chicago. What's going on?"

"Have you seen that 300-page memorandum Ways and Means hammered out last week?"

"I haven't read it yet." As special counsel to the Labor Committee, the memorandum was on Leo's priority list.

"We're going to need your input."

"I'll get to it tonight."

"Listen, um..." Jed gestured to his office where they could have some privacy. Leo followed him in. "Are you staying in town this weekend or are you going home?"

"I'm staying. Mallory's school is out for February break, so she and Jenny are flying in tomorrow. Unlike New England, the public schools in Chicago didn't have a weeklong vacation in February, but Mallory attended a private school, one that observed its own academic calendar.

"Perfect! Abbey and the girls will be here too. Bring Mallory over, we'll hire a sitter and you, Jenny, Abbey and I will double."

"Double? Are we in high school?" Leo grinned.

"Smartass, we talked about the four of us getting together. Let's make it tomorrow!"

"I don't think that's a good idea."

"Hogwash! Ellie and Mallory haven't seen each other in a while. They'll be thrilled!"

"And what about the rest of us? As I recall, our last outing wasn't a hit."

Jed didn't need to be reminded of the last time the foursome was together - that disaster of an intervention at Jenny's mother's place in Chicago. "That's all water under the bridge."

"I'm not so sure."

"Leo, I told you last year, Abbey's over it."

"Yeah." Leo took an uncomfortable breath. "I was talking about me."

"You?" The sudden change in his demeanor worried Jed. It occurred to him that he and Leo had never talked about the intervention, had never apologized for the things they'd said to one another. The subject had only been hinted at once before and both men had done their best to ignore it.

"I respect what Abbey was trying to do. Her heart was in the right place, but she set up that intervention and I'd be lying if I told you that it doesn't make me nervous seeing her again."
"Jenny set up the intervention. All Abbey did was invite an old med school classmate to help out."

"Abbey convinced you and Jenny that I needed his help."

"She was right, wasn't she?"

"I used to drink...a lot. I'll cop to that. But Abbey's interference didn't help matters."

"Don't blame Abbey. That was me. I'm the one who thought we should do something. I'm the one who convinced Jenny." A bit of a lie, but Jed always defended Abbey.

"Please."

"I guess we're not exactly past it, are we? It's been over a year. I thought...stupidly, I thought it was done. I didn't know you were still holding a grudge."

"A lot was said..."

"By ALL of us!"

Leo was humiliated that day. His wife, sisters, and dearest friends in the whole world had gathered around to open his eyes and make him see how destructive his drinking had become. His defense mechanisms got the better of him and he lashed out at them instead of admitting how embarrassed he was that things had spiraled so far out of control that his own wife felt he needed professional help.

He took a beat before going on. "Whoever was at fault, I think dinner might be a little too tense for comfort."

He held firm in his opinion, ignoring the point Jed had just made - things had been said by everyone involved. Harsh things. Things that hadn't been forgotten. Jed was right, the spitfire exchange at the intervention had burned both men and neither was entirely innocent. Leo had stubbornly defended his drinking, attacking everyone there, ridiculing them, mocking them. He wasn't himself that day. He'd morphed into someone barely recognizable, thanks to the guilt and humiliation of the confrontation. And Jed had eventually lost his temper, telling him he'd never trust him again after he fell asleep in a drunken stupor while he was supposed to be chaperoning Ellie and Mallory at Acadia National Park. One word led to the next and before he knew it, Jed had suggested that Leo's alcoholism made him incapable of parenting Mallory. It didn't matter that he wanted to take it back the moment it left his lips or that he regretted it every day since. Leo felt betrayed, both by the ambush and the insinuation that he was an unfit father to the daughter he loved more than life itself, and it was a feeling that still stung all this time later.

Although he was annoyed that it was being brought up, guilt also gnawed at Jed. He stopped Leo just as he started to leave. "I think you're wrong. About dinner. Yeah, it might be tense at first, but it's not like we're strangers to tension. I think having dinner together is a good idea."

Leo turned to face him. "I don't see how it could be."

"Tempers flare sometimes, Leo. You were pissed at me for being there that day and I was just as pissed at you for not understanding why I had to be. It wasn't because of Abbey. I showed up because of you."

"To convince me I had a problem."

"Yes. Forgive me, but I finally came to the conclusion that you did have a problem." Jed walked
out from behind his desk, standing just inches from Leo. "Jenny talked to me about your drinking before Mallory was born. I brushed her off. Abbey tried to talk to me about it several times over the years, but I wouldn't hear it. It wasn't until the trip to Acadia that I realized that Jenny and Abbey were right and that I'd been wrong to make so many excuses for you this whole time."

Leo lost eye contact then. He was so deeply remorseful about what happened with the girls in Acadia. Mallory nearly drowned and it was all because of his lack of supervision. "Acadia was not my finest moment."

"No, it wasn't. But I know how much you love Mallory and I trusted that what happened at the park would be your wake-up call. I just didn't think you could do it alone. I thought that you needed the help of professionals. I thought you needed us to bring someone to you, to help you stay sober. Maybe that was the wrong decision."

"I haven't had a drop of alcohol since Acadia and I've done it on my own."

"I know. You told me last month and I'm so happy to hear that," Jed said sincerely. "I was harsh at the intervention. I was trying to make you see how important it was for you to stop drinking and I lost my cool. I'm not proud of what I said." He held out his hand. "I'm sorry."

Leo was too important to Jed to let these feelings fester. He'd been a great friend over the years and as a man who valued friendship, there was no way Jed was going to give up on him. He recognized alcoholism for what it was - a disease, and Leo's defensiveness now was a symptom of that disease. Unlike cancer or diabetes, seeking medical care for an alcoholic required the patient to come to grips with the psychological barriers that kept him drinking - as well as the physical ones - a far more difficult task for a guarded man like Leo. So he pushed people away, refused their assistance. He was often belligerent when it came to his drinking, but Jed was forgiving. He was ecstatic that Leo had given up the bottle and although he believed that professional intervention was necessary for long-term success at sobriety, giving Leo his support was what mattered now, for one day when Leo was ready to delve deeper into his addiction and rid himself of his demons for good, Jed wanted to be there to offer him a helping hand and a soft landing should he fall. That's just the kind of person he was.

Recognizing the compassion in his friend's voice, Leo took his hand and conceded with a shake, "I'm not proud of how I behaved either."

"We've been friends too long to let that one night come between us...all of us. Abbey was just as concerned about you as I was. That's why she called Dr. Glass to help."

"I get that. It's just...it felt like an ambush."

"Yeah, I wish it hadn't been like that. The shrink said it was the only way and I still think he was right, but I regret it came to that."

"I do too."

"Is there anything else you regret?"

"Like what?"

Jed refused to prompt him. "I don't know. Anything."

Leo knew what Jed was really asking. He answered cautiously, "Yeah. I regret everything. If I hadn't been so irresponsible at Acadia, things wouldn't have gotten so bad. For a moment, he was no longer justifying his actions or placing the blame on the shoulders of those who intervened.
"Abbey's over it? She was as pissed at me as Jenny."

"That wasn't you. The sober you is a different man. Abbey sees that difference, trust me. Better yet, join us for dinner and you'll see for yourself." Now on a friendlier wave, Jed knew he had a chance of talking him into it.

"I don't know. I still think it has the potential to be extremely awkward."

"So what? The awkwardness will fade after a few minutes."

"If it doesn't?"

"It will. Come on, we'll go to that Belgian place you're always raving about."

Leo smiled. It was just like Jed to entice him with his favorite restaurant. "You're such a politician."

"I'll make the reservations!"

- - -

If there was one thing that Abbey thought she could count on, it was that her girls had manners and the utmost respect for Mrs. Wilburforce's authority, so she was surprised to learn about Ellie's bad attitude when she came home from work that night. Mrs. Wilburforce never found out what Ellie had taken from the master bedroom and as far as Abbey was concerned, what she took didn't matter as much how she reacted when she was caught. Her refusal to return the item wasn't like Ellie.

"Ellie?" she called out as she knocked on her middle daughter's bedroom door. "Why's your door locked?"

Ellie let her in. "Zoey's been bugging me."

"I heard you two had a fight tonight."

"She knows she's not supposed to be in my room without permission and she comes in anyway! She's always in my business!"

"I seem to remember you had this same fight with Lizzie not too long ago, except you were in Zoey's shoes."

"What's your point?"

"Maybe you could show a little more understanding; and a little less attitude while you're at it."

"Attitude?"

"You know Mrs. Wilburforce is in charge when I'm away, right? Whatever she says is what you do and if you don't, she has my permission to send you to your room or take away privileges for the night. I don't want to hear about you ignoring her direction again."

"I'm sorry," she said as she laid back on her bed.

"I'll accept that as soon as you tell me what's going on." Abbey sat down beside her. "Did something happen at school today?"
"No."

"Then what's gotten into you? What did you take from my room?"

There was no point in hiding it any longer. With Zoey's squealing, Ellie knew she had to come clean. She took out a big Manila envelope from under her pillow and handed it to Abbey. "These."

Abbey pulled out four passports - hers, Ellie's, Zoey's, and Liz's. Jed kept his in the Washington apartment. "Why?"

"If you couldn't find them, we wouldn't be able to go to Egypt."

"You don't want to go to Egypt? Since when?"

"I don't even want to go to Washington!"

"Why not?" It took Abbey a second, but the answer soon came to her. "Oh. You don't want to fly."

"You're gonna tell me I'm being silly and that nothing will happen because flying is safe. I don't care. I don't wanna go."

"Do you want to spend February vacation at Grandma's?"

"All of us or just me?" Her mother's silence answered the question. "No, I don't think any of us should go to Egypt."

"This trip was part of your dad's birthday present. He's been looking forward to it since last summer. We all have been."

"See? This is why I took the passports. I knew that if I told you, you wouldn't call it off." Annoyed, Ellie circled the room toward her window.

"Ellie, look at me." Abbey moved beside her. "Deep down in your heart, do you think that if we thought it was dangerous, Dad and I would take you girls?"

That was rhetorical. Ellie knew that both of her parents would give their lives for her and her sisters. "You don't always know what's dangerous until after something happens."

"You're right. And bad things happen sometimes. I guess we shouldn't drive either, huh? Accidents and all. We probably shouldn't ice skate, we shouldn't ski, we shouldn't even cross the roadway."

"You're making fun of me."

"No, sweetheart, I'm not." Abbey wrapped her finger around one of her blond curls. "I would never make fun of you. I'm just trying to make you see that everything in life can be dangerous, but we can't cower in fear because of what might happen."

Ellie pulled away. "We don't have to take chances all the time. So what if we never see Egypt? Who cares? It's just a bunch of old crummy pyramids anyway."

"You don't mean that."

"Yes, I do. I don't wanna go."

Her stubbornness proved just how serious she was. None of the girls knew better than Ellie that Egypt was anything but 'old crummy pyramids.' Just like her father, Ellie was a student of history.
She was the first to suggest surprising Jed with an Egyptian holiday and after Abbey bought the tickets, she read 'Inside the Valley of the Kings' several times to map out the tombs and burial grounds she most wanted to visit. She flipped through tour guides, begging her parents to book a cruise down the Nile to explore the riverside temples and the rural villages on the banks. And the pyramids she was so casually dismissing now, she couldn't wait to visit on camelback then. She had wanted to see everything - every monument, every symbol of ancient civilization. She even wanted to learn Arabic and go snorkeling in the Red Sea.

But fear now dampened her enthusiasm, yet another symptom of the stress of the shuttle explosion. She wasn't depressed or gloomy as she had been in the days after the accident, but she hadn't quite healed yet either. As she neared the final stage of the grief process, Ellie's mind was caught in a philosophical war and questions about life, death, fate, Heaven, Hell, and the afterlife were swirling around inside her. Until she sorted it all out, she wasn't prepared to accept what happened. And until she did, feeling safe in the world was just a fantasy to her.

TBC
As the bell rang at 3:30, kids flocked into the snowy schoolyard at Manchester Elementary. Abbey sat in her car at the curb, waiting for Ellie. It took the sixth grader several minutes to wander out of the building - friends in tow - and spot her mother. She ran over, threw her backpack and lunchbox into the back seat beside Zoey, and hopped into the front passenger side.

"Hey!" she said cheerfully.

"Hey yourself. How was school?" Abbey asked, pleased to see her so upbeat.

"Good." Taking the brown paper bag Abbey handed her, Ellie peeked inside to find a baggie with her favorite after-school snack - purple grapes and cubed cheddar cheese. "Thanks! Hey, Zo."

"Hi!"

"What'd you get?"

"Apples and peanut butter." Zoey and Jed shared a love of that magical combo. "Want some?"

"No, thanks. Want some grapes?"

"Yeah!"

Listening to her girls as she drove out of the parking lot warmed Abbey's heart. Their tiff from the night before had been forgiven and they were back to their old selves again once Ellie had gotten a handle on her moodiness. Abbey had spent the whole night with her, calming her fears and eventually convincing her that the hour and a half flight to DC was going to be no different than all the others they had taken over the years. They had shuttled by plane back and forth to Washington many weekends since Jed was elected to Congress and before that, there was the international voyage to Sweden for Jed's Nobel Prize and their annual summer trips to the country's lush national parks. Like her sisters, Ellie was always a good traveler and she usually preferred flying to driving.

But getting her excited about this trip was more difficult. Abbey had managed to quell her anxiety - or so she thought. Ellie dutifully boarded the plane in Manchester with her mom and sister for the
last flight to Dulles that evening, pretending she was no longer scared. Although it took a lot of effort to feign her cooperation, she did it to make her mother proud. And a proud mom she was. Abbey admired the way Ellie cast her fears aside and made peace with the situation, at least for the short flight to DC. Getting her to Egypt was a problem for another day, she noted as they took their seats in an aisle toward the front of the plane.

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Washington, D.C.

"DADDY! DADDY!" Zoey dodged the other passengers getting off the plane and ran through the jetway toward Jed, who was waiting just outside the gate.

"Zoey, quit running!" Abbey chided her.

A huge grin on his face and his arms wide open, Jed bent his knees to pick up his youngest daughter and smother her with hugs and kisses. Zoey dropped her 'Winnie the Pooh' rolling backpack to leap into his arms. A few steps behind, Abbey and Ellie approached and Jed put Zoey down to embrace Ellie next, knowing how hesitant she had been the night before.

"How are you, princess?"

"Okay." Ellie fumbled with the handle on her bag when she broke away to avoid looking him in the eye.

"Smooth flight?"

"Most of the way."

Jed looked over at Abbey then and moved in to give her a big kiss. Unlike the girls, she didn't have a carry-on. "What's wrong with this picture? Where's your bag?"

"I decided to pack light."

"Yeah, right! Just wait til we get to the carousel," Ellie warned her father, speaking up a little more eagerly than before. "Half the luggage stuffed into the belly of the plane was hers."

Abbey defended herself to her husband. "I have my bags and Lizzie's bags, which she asked us to bring since she couldn't do it herself."

That's all Jed needed to believe Ellie's exaggerated claim. Abbey and Liz were notorious for over-packing. He teased his wife, "Do I need a bigger car?"

Abbey turned an eye to their middle daughter. "No, we'll just strap Ellie to the hood of the one we have."

Ellie chuckled as the foursome took off for the luggage carousel, the two younger Bartlets walking in front of their parents to give Jed and Abbey a moment to catch up.

"Did you talk to Liz today?" Abbey asked.

"Better than that, I gave her squad a tour of the Capitol."

"Must have been a thrill."

Jed furrowed his brows at her sarcasm. "I'll have you know, it was terrific! I gave them a history
lesson; and they get to go back home and tell their friends they did more than compete at the championships. They had a great time, believe me."

"I'm sure they did." Abbey found him staring at her. "What?"

"I'm debating a good time to tell you something."

"That sounds ominous. What should I know?"

"I made plans for us tonight."

"What plans?"

"Leo and Jenny are in town."

- - -

Along the shaded streets near the Eastern Market, a taxicab carrying Jenny and Mallory pulled up to the McGarry's Capitol Hill townhouse. It was a brick two-story home with a paved patio out back, large bay windows, French doors, and an old-fashioned staircase with cherry wood banister. Leo's pride and joy, to Jenny's dismay. It was a nice house, but Jenny didn't like Washington. She never cared for the stench of Beltway politics and had unsuccessfully tried to talk Leo out of taking a position as counsel to the House of Representatives' Labor Committee. Since he did it anyway, she made as few trips to the District as possible, never feeling quite comfortable when she did. Had it not been for Mallory's insistence that they spend her school's February vacation in DC, mother and daughter would have stayed put in Chicago and Leo would have had to rearrange his schedule to meet them there. In fact, Jenny had been looking forward to planning family activities back home, as she always did, but because Mallory had her heart set on DC, she agreed to nix the plans and make the trip.

Jenny was digging through her purse to find the keys to the front door when the cab stopped at the curb and she looked up to see Leo standing before them with a bouquet of flowers in his hand.

"I thought you were working," she said, stepping out of the car.

"I'm not."

"Daddy!" Mallory ran to her father, her face beaming with a smile as she took the box of candy he had bought her.

Leo turned to his wife next, handing her the flowers with a kiss. "How was the flight?"

"It was good."

"I tried to get out of my meeting in time to meet you at the airport."

"Don't worry about it." Jenny usually took a cab when she flew into DC. Leo's busy schedule didn't allow much flexibility for him to pick her up. "It's good to see you. The flowers are beautiful, thank you."

"I'm glad you like them," he said as he went over to pay the driver.

"What's going on?" she asked suspiciously.

"What do you mean?" Leo took her bags and the trio made their way to the house.
"You have a guilty grin on your face."
"I do not."
"Leo."
"Mal, guess who's in town today."
"Who?"
"The Bartlets."
"Really? Ellie too?" Mallory and Ellie had known each other since they were babies. Born less than a year apart, the two had practically grown up together, although they were separated by the thousand miles between Chicago and Manchester. They exchanged letters and photos throughout the year and occasionally, they got to visit when their parents got together over the summer.
"Yup! We thought you guys might like to see each other tonight."
"YEAH!"
That raised Jenny's suspicion. "Did you make plans for all of us?"
"You could say that."
"Dinner with Jed and Abbey?"
"At Angelique's. I made the reservations this morning. Say you're okay with it."
"Would it matter if I wasn't? I'd love to see Abbey again, you know that, but the way Jed and I left things..." Jenny had only spoken to Jed a couple of times - briefly - since the intervention they had planned for Leo. Jed had been upset with her for backing down and defending Leo and she couldn't hold it against him, not when she knew that he had been right. She shouldn't have backed down, she should have stood firm and insisted that Leo get professional help for his drinking, but in that moment of weakness, she did what her heart told her to do, to hell with her brain - and Jed - in the process.
"I wasn't excited about it either. I'm not exactly Abbey's favorite person." As tense as things were between Jenny and Jed, they were even worse between Leo and Abbey.
"Then why?"
"Jed. He thinks it's a good idea, that the only way to move past all this is to get together the way we used to and have a nice dinner. I couldn't find fault with his theory."
"Then you're not trying hard enough."
"I think he's right in the long run, Jenn. The four of us have been friends too long not to fix this."

The Bartlets' Porter Street apartment was in Cleveland Park, not far from Embassy Row. While Leo chose a townhouse steps from the Capitol, Jed wanted something a little further away so that he didn't feel like he was living at work. The charming 15-story high-rise he and Abbey found next to Rock Creek Park was perfect and the apartment they initially picked was nice. It was a one-bedroom unit on the seventh floor with all the amenities Jed could ever want, but when a two-
bedroom opened up down the hall, he snagged it so that the girls would have their own room when they came to visit. It was bigger, roomier, and had a private balcony overlooking the winding biking, hiking, equestrian trails in the park, giving him a small daily reminder of life back in New Hampshire.

He moved a set of bunk beds into the second room for Ellie and Zoey and a single bed for Liz. At the farm, the girls had their own rooms, but they didn't complain about having to share at the apartment. Zoey, in particular, was thrilled with the arrangement. Often feeling left out of her sisters' slumber parties at home, she liked to keep them up all night and try to make them laugh with her silly jokes when they were in DC.

After the family returned from the airport that night, Jed sent Ellie and Zoey to their room to unpack while he and Abbey headed to the kitchen to cook a meal of spaghetti and meatballs for them. As he grabbed the utensils and dishes they'd need, Abbey scanned the fridge for the ingredients.

"How can you not want to see Jenny?" he asked as he broke up the noodles and dumped them into a pot of boiling water.

"Did you buy garlic?" Abbey retrieved a couple of tomatoes and closed the door to the fridge.

"We don't have time for homemade sauce. Break open the jar of Prego over there." He waited a minute, then prodded, "And I wouldn't mind an answer at some point."

"When did I say I didn't want to see her?"

"You sound less than happy about this dinner."

"Maybe it's because I wasn't asked beforehand."

"I was going to tell you last night, but we ended up talking about the thing with Ellie and the plane most of the night."

"You were going to 'tell' me, Jed, not ask me."

"You know what I mean. Why is this not a good thing? For the past year, I've been talking to Leo, you've been talking to Jenny..."

Abbey began sprinkling some cheese over the ground beef. "I'm comfortable with that."

"No, you're not."

"Jed, I don't even know what to say to him."

"Say whatever you'd say if we hadn't gone through with that ill-fated intervention." Abbey glared at him. "What?"

"Tell me that isn't how you worded it to him. You didn't express regrets about the intervention, did you?" He turned his attention to the spaghetti. "Jed?"

"What? I do regret the intervention, Abbey."

"It was the right thing to do."

"Maybe it was. I told Leo that it was the only way, but that doesn't mean I was proud of it. I know we had no other choice, I know he needed help and we did what we did because we had to. I just
don't like that it came to that. I don't like that we had words, I don't like that Jenny backed down, hanging us out to dry, and I don't like how I reacted when she did. He stopped drinking...on his own. When he told us at Acadia that he was done, I didn't believe him, but he did it."

"Honey, he has..."

"He has a disease. I know."

"He might have given up the bottle for now, but I don't think he can do it by himself...not permanently."

"So what do you suggest we do in the meantime? Do you want us to cut him out of our lives until he checks into rehab or gives us a daily update with photos to prove he's attending every AA meeting?"

"No," Abbey said grudgingly. She didn't want to cut Leo off, but she was no stranger to the hold alcoholism had on its victims. She had seen the effects of the disease in a family friend when she was growing up and later, as a medical student doing an elective rotation in a rehab hospital.

"Then what?"

"I just want you to tread carefully. Leo wasn't the only one who got hurt last time."

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"Looks nice," Jenny said to Leo as they walked into the lobby of Jed and Abbey's apartment building a short time later. "Didn't you tell me you looked into renting a place here?"

"Yeah."

"What happened?"

"The commute's too long."

"Too long?"

"Yeah."

Leo always liked to be close enough to work that he could come and go at all hours. He had scouted properties on his own when he took the job with the Labor Committee and told Jenny about the townhouse once he had already decided to purchase it. Jenny didn't have much of an objection since he was the one living there a great majority of the time, but she wasn't sold on the idea of him being so close to the political epicenter of DC.

"How can you say it's too long a commute? It's less than 20 minutes."

"Jenn, when I'm needed at the office, I need to get there a lot sooner."

Jenny bit her tongue at that and husband and wife rode up the elevator, with their daughter, and exited on the seventh floor.

In the master bedroom of their apartment, Jed and Abbey had finished cooking and were getting ready for their evening out when they heard the bell. The sitter Jed had hired was already there, playing a game of Tic-Tac-Toe with Zoey in the kitchen while Ellie lounged on the sofa, reading. The 11-year-old closed her book and ran to answer the door at the sound of Mallory's voice on the other side.
It had been over a year since Ellie and Mallory had last seen each other. The big blow-up over Leo's drinking at Acadia had affected them both and even though neither had mentioned it specifically in the subsequent letters they shared when the McGarry's returned to Chicago, there were many times that Ellie could detect Mallory's sadness at her family situation. There was a period when it seemed divorce was inevitable between Leo and Jenny. And then came the intervention. Mallory had overheard bits and pieces about it afterwards and what she learned was enough to upset her at the way her father had been treated. No matter what Leo had done, Mallory was still daddy's little girl and there was nothing in the world that could make her turn against him.

'I know I'm supposed to be mad at him like my mom is, but he doesn't mean what he does,' she once wrote Ellie.

Ellie was notoriously bad at dealing with conflict, but when it came to Mallory, she went above and beyond to comfort her friend, sharing what little she could to relate. She didn't have much experience in dealing with the kind of chaos that ran rampant at the McGarry house since Jed and Abbey had a stable marriage that wasn't affected by outside influences like drugs or alcohol, but the Bartlets had their fights, too, and there were rough waters to navigate every now and then.

Sometimes it helped Mallory to hear Ellie complaining about Jed living so far away. After all, Mallory was going through the same thing with Leo. Jed's weekend trips to New Hampshire were much more frequent than Leo's to Chicago and Ellie was thankful for that, but she conveniently left it out of her letters to Mal and instead drew from Jed and Abbey's imperfections when she wanted to convince Mallory that the grass is always greener in someone else's yard.

She hesitated for a minute as she reached for the knob to open the door for the McGarry's that evening. She wasn't sure who she would find - would it be the happy family she remembered from her younger years or the family in turmoil she last saw? Taking a breath, she swung the door open and embraced her friend.

Mallory hugged her back, followed by Leo and Jenny, who fawned over how tall she had gotten since their last visit. The foursome was in the middle of their hellos when Jed burst into the room, having just fixed his cufflinks with Abbey's help. His enthusiasm more than made up for Leo's composed demeanor and as he approached Jenny, there was no doubt that Jed, like Jenny, bore no grudge.

"Jenny, it's good to see you," he said with a kiss to her cheek. He went to Mallory next. "Ah ha, you must be the 16-year-old babysitter I hired!"

Mallory giggled, recognizing that tone of voice Jed always used when he teased his own children. "No, I'm not."

"You're not? Then who are you?"

"You know who I am!"

"Hmm, let's see. Mallory?" Jed narrowed his eyes. "Not Mallory McGarry. Not the little girl in pigtails last time I saw her." He looked over at Leo. "Leo, she's nearly a woman!"

Leo admitted reluctantly, "Tell me about it."

"How are ya, kiddo?" Jed gave Mallory a big bear hug.

"Fine."

"A little birdie told me that you haven't yet outgrown your favorite meal of spaghetti and meatballs.
True or false?"
"True."
"Good, because I made you a whole pot of it in the kitchen."
"Thanks!"
"And there are chocolate chips cookies in the cookie jar I hide in cupboard." He lowered his voice.
"Don't tell Aunt Abbey."
"Jed, are you filling them up with junk food?"

All eyes turned to the entryway of the hall that connected the bedrooms and the living room. Abbey stood there, wearing a gold velvet dress and carrying a matching clutch purse. She had a brow raised at her husband and she was using an inflection that was part playful and part serious as she took Mallory into her arms. When she pulled back, she glanced over at Jenny, giving her a hug before moving on to Leo.

"Leo." It was a strained greeting.

"You look great, Abbey." Leo leaned in to give her a kiss on the cheek.

"So do you." Abbey had to admit it was nice seeing him again, especially like this - sober. Leo was important to Jed, but Abbey cared about him too. She wanted him to be happy, wanted him and Jenny to be as fortunate in their marriage as she and Jed were in theirs, and above all else, she wanted him to be healthy.

Still, Jed could feel the uneasiness between them. He had moved past the confrontation with Leo, but Abbey wasn't quite ready to start anew. It wasn't that she was angry at Leo; she was confused by him. Distrusting of him. She didn't know what to think about his sobriety. She wanted badly to believe in him just as much as Jed did, but her instincts waved a flag of suspicion. Jed hoped by the end of the night, she'd come around and realize, as he had, that Leo was a changed man.

- - -

With their parents off to dinner and the sitter giving Zoey her bath, Ellie and Mallory made themselves a giant bowl of popcorn and retired to the sofa for their favorite program - Punky Brewster. The sitcom about the eclectic pre-teen and her zany friends usually brought smiles to their faces, but this time, smiles were the furthest things on their minds.

The nation was still caught up in the aftermath of the Challenger explosion and the writers of the show decided to create a special episode with Punky and her fourth-grade class watching the shuttle on live television, just like Ellie and Mallory had. The two girls watched stoically as a distraught Punky began to question her dreams of becoming an astronaut, a plot that hit home with Ellie. She had always liked and admired her TV heroine, but she never had much in common with her - until now. Like Punky, Ellie had also been scarred by that fateful day and now, she too was questioning her dreams.

As the credits rolled, Mallory shut off the television and turned to her friend. "You okay?"
"Yeah."

Ellie nodded. "Yeah."

Mal didn't need prompting. She knew that Ellie was upset, so she just began talking. "We had just gotten back from lunch when it happened. It was 4th period. We were so excited about seeing it go
up. That's all everyone talked about all day."

"Us too," Ellie replied. "I had a Christa McAuliffe poster in my room. Did I tell you that?"

Mallory's turn for a nod. "I had one too. I still do. Don't you?"

"No, I took it down."

"Why?"

"Just cuz."

A brief pause and then, "My dad said you met her."

"Yeah. My dad took me to one of his meetings and she was there. He introduced us."

"That's so cool."

"I thought it was, until..." Ellie pulled her knees up under her chin. "Do you think about it? The explosion?"

"All the time. You too, huh?"

Another nod. "I keep wondering if...well, if I hadn't met her, maybe I wouldn't be imagining how she reacted when...you know, when it happened."

"You do that? Think about how she reacted?"

"Sometimes."

"Ellie, you can't do that to yourself."

"Maybe I wouldn't care as much if I hadn't met her."

"Yes you would."

"How do you know?"

"Because you're you. You always care about people, even strangers."

"If I tell you something, promise not to laugh?"

"Cross my heart."

"I'm afraid."

"Of what?"

"Everything."

"Another shuttle's not going up, is it?"

"No, but other things could happen." Ellie took a beat and then admitted, "I'm scared of flying."

"Why? The shuttle wasn't a plane."

"It doesn't matter. Nothing flies on its own. There's science involved and if science can fail the
shuttle, it can fail a plane just as easily."

Mallory registered the information. "I never thought about it that way."

"That's the only way I CAN think about it!"

"But you flew to DC, right? If you were afraid, why'd you do that?"

"For my mom. She wanted me to and so I did."

"Does she know how you feel?"

"Sort of, but she doesn't understand."

"What about your dad?"

"My dad won't understand either. No one gets it."

"That's not true." Mallory moved closer to her friend. "I do."

"You don't think I'm a wimp?"

"No, you can't help how you feel."

"So what do I do about it?"

"I dunno. I wish I did."

"Me too," Ellie said, bowing her head so her forehead rested on her knees. 

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Last minute reservations to Angelique's, the upscale French-Belgian restaurant on the Washington Harbor, were hard to come by, but Leo McGarry had his contacts. He was a regular at this place. He even had his own table - a table for one. Although the restaurant's soft mood lighting, cozy atmosphere, and intimate tables overlooking the Potomac River screamed romance, Jenny had only dined there with him once and he had no problem going alone.

Neither Jed nor Abbey had ever been to Angelique's. The cuisine was top-notch, but they were even more impressed by the main dining room's inviting decor and by the floor-to-ceiling windows that gave them a grand view of the river and the twinkling lights of the yachts departing port for an elegant dinner cruise.

Toward the end of a four-course meal, Jenny excused herself to grab her wrap from the car and Jed was called away by a phone call - from a colleague - that he had to take in the restaurant's back foyer, leaving Abbey and Leo alone at the table, uncomfortable and quiet. Abbey stared up at Leo through her lashes as she ran her fingers up the stem of her wine glass. Out of respect for him, she and Jed had ordered sparkling cider instead of alcohol.

Leo returned the stare, feeling the air of tension between them. "So who's going to be the first to say it?"

"I don't know," she returned. She wasn't even sure what he was referring to. Was he expecting an apology?

"I've been sober since Acadia, Abbey."
"Good." Abbey's eyes hit the floor.

"You don't believe me." He was offended.

"I do, Leo. I don't think you're lying. My hesitation is because I'm not convinced you can do it alone, even if you have so far."

"I'm taking it one day at a time. I made a promise to Jenny I'm not going to break."

"I hope you mean that, for your sake as well as hers."

"Jed forgave me for what happened - both at Acadia and at the..."

"Intervention," Abbey finished for him when he trailed off. "I know."

'Have you?"

"Forgiven you? You never asked for my forgiveness."

"I thought it was a given."

"The last time we spoke, you were the one angry."

"And now it's you."

"I'm not angry at you, Leo. To be perfectly honest, I'm still worried about you." He gave her a roll of the eye. "Come on, don't do that. Can you blame me? About five or six years ago, you were up in New England. Jed had promised to take Ellie's Girl Scout troop camping and Lizzie and I both had the chicken pox, so you stayed with us. You drank yourself to sleep, remember? And the next day when I asked you what was going on, if you had a problem, you reassured me and told me there was nothing to worry about. How can I not be skeptical when you say it now?"

"I don't have to convince you, Abbey. Jenny and Jed have faith in me."

"I'm not Jenny or Jed. I have faith in your intent. I'm just not as sure that you can stay sober alone. If you had someone to help..."

"I don't need a shrink to cry my eyes out to. I know myself better than anyone else. I know my limit."

"Do you?"

"Yes. And I'd ask you to give me a chance to prove it, but it seems you've already made up your mind about me." He was getting defensive now. "I used to think you were the most nonjudgmental person I knew."

Abbey heard the sharpness of his tone. "Let's not do this."

"No, we won't."

Before another strained word was exchanged between them, Jenny interrupted. "It's freezing outside! I thought DC was supposed to be warmer than Chicago this time of year." After seeing the look on her husband's face, Jenny glanced over at Abbey as she reclaimed her seat. "What's going on?"

"Nothing," Leo answered right away. "Just idle chit-chat."
"Where's Jed?"

"He had to take a call. You want some more dessert?"

"I'm stuffed. What about you, Abbey? Still want to try those chocolate truffles?"

"No, I think I'm going to call it an early night. When Jed gets back, we really need to go." Abbey gave Leo a stilted glare as she took a sip of her drink.

TBC
"Jed Bartlet, you look me in the eye and tell me the Appalachians have better hiking paths than the Rockies!" Jenny gave an incredulous snicker at the claim.

"If I'm lying, may God strike me down." Jed held up his hand as he made that statement, leading the way out of the elevator and to the Bartlets' apartment on the 7th floor.

"You can't believe that."

"I do. You know why? Because it's true. You can't even compare the two. Think about it..." He had a wistful look on his face and a passionate tone in his voice. "The White Mountains of New Hampshire, strong and majestic, breathtaking views as far as the eye can see. Spectacular fall foliage, a white-capped winter wonderland, and vast green pastures of summer with rolling hills guarding narrow valleys down below. The most rugged stretch of land in the Northeast, by the way, and it doesn't end there. The Green Mountains of Vermont, right next door, the Adirondacks, the Catskills, all the way down to the Blue Ridge in Virginia. North Carolina and Tennessee, Shenandoah and the Smokey Mountains, steeped in history, tradition, and unrivaled in natural beauty. There's something to be said for reputation."

"That's very good. You belong on the tourism board. None of it contradicts what I said about the Rockies."

"What's with the love for the Rockies all of a sudden? Our mountains were towering giants when there were no Rockies," Jed quipped. "The West was a plain of nothingness.

"Forgive him, he's an East Coast snob." Abbey was accustomed to Jed's pride in all things New England and especially, all things New Hampshire.

"You used to find that attractive," he said as he jigged the key in the lock and opened the door.

"I still do," Abbey returned with a smile.

There was a hint of flirtatiousness with her response that Jenny saw right away. It was nothing new - the Bartlets were known for their playful repertoire - but it never ceased to amaze Jenny that their love burst out with every word they spoke to one another, even when they teased. And sometimes,
words weren't even necessary. It was the glances they exchanged, the way their eyes lit up when the other entered the room. It was plain to see that Jed and Abbey were as in love now as they had been on their wedding day. They had their moments, of course. Like all couples, they had rough patches to navigate and sometimes, when their passionate and fiery personalities got the better of them, they clashed. But they always loved as hard as they fought and there was no doubt that there was nothing they couldn't get through.

Jenny wished she had that guarantee with Leo. She loved him with everything she had and she knew that he loved her back, but their marriage had nearly fallen apart thanks to his drinking, and although they clawed their way back to each other, their foundation was shaky. If Leo hit the bottle again, Jenny suspected it would collapse entirely.

Thinking the kids might be sleeping, the two couples lowered their voices when they walked into the apartment. Abbey and Jenny approached the sitter as Leo followed Jed to the kitchen for a glass of water.

"I hope they weren't too much trouble." Abbey pulled out her wallet to pay Melissa.

"They were angels," Melissa assured her. "Mallory and Ellie spent most of the night in the bedroom and Zoey and I played board games."

Ellie and Mallory came racing out to greet their parents and to say goodbye to Melissa.

"Mom," Ellie began once Melissa left. "Can Mallory spend the night? She wants to go to Lizzie's competition with us tomorrow."

"It's fine with me if it's okay with Jenny." Abbey turned to her friend.

"I guess that would be all right." Jenny looked back at Abbey. "You're sure you don't mind?"

"Not at all. Liz isn't here so Mallory can take her bed."

"Mallory can take whose bed?" Leo asked, having heard the end of Abbey's sentence as he and Jed came out of the kitchen.

"Mallory wants to stay here tonight," Jenny told him. "She wants to go to Lizzie's show tomorrow."

Leo looked over at his daughter. "You don't want to come home?" Mallory shrugged. "Mal, I was counting on spending time together this weekend."

"We can spend time together after," Mallory reasoned. "We have the whole week."

"I made plans for tomorrow."

"Leo, the girls never get to see each other anymore." Jenny was sincere in taking up for Mallory, but truth be told, she was also looking forward to having some private time with Leo.

"All the same, I don't think it's a good idea."

"But Mom already said yes."

"And I'm saying no. Come on, get your things."

Upset, Mallory pleaded with Jenny, "Mom?"

"Mallory, I said no!" Leo replied more firmly. "Now get your stuff so we can go."
As the two girls went back to Ellie's room so Mallory to grab her purse, an annoyed Jenny stared at her husband.

"What's the big deal, Leo?" she asked him.

"I'd prefer if she came home with us. Is there something wrong with that?"

"We were having a lovely evening. Why did you have to get testy with her?"

"Excuse me for wanting to spend time with my daughter. I haven't seen her since Christmas."

"Whose fault is that?"

Jenny's question silenced everyone in the room. Jed and Abbey felt uncomfortable intruding on such a private moment and Leo was angry, partly because she said it and partly because it was true. He could have flown back to Chicago for more than just Christmas, but instead of doing that, he let his work steal his attention. It wasn't surprising that now, Mallory wasn't itching at the chance to make up for lost time. He understood where she was coming from, but it stung nonetheless.

Husband and wife glared at each other until Jed finally spoke up, "The worst part of serving others is that it takes you away from your own family. I know I've spent many nights lamenting the fact that I can't be with Abbey and the kids."

"And I've spent many nights lamenting it too," Abbey added. "But it's not forever, right?"

With another pause in the conversation, Jed stepped in again, "Jenny's right that the girls never get to see each other anymore. How about you let Mallory spend a few weeks at the farm this summer? Maybe in June. Leo and I will be in Washington, closing up the session. We can catch the shuttle out of Dulles on the weekends."

"It's fine with me," Jenny said. "Leo?"

"I don't know, we'll see." Part of Leo's hesitation was Abbey. After the way they had left things at the restaurant, he was reluctant to agree to summer plans.

"Think it over," Abbey encouraged him. "It might be fun."

She was sending him a signal and he got it loud and clear. No matter what was said at dinner, Abbey was handing him an olive branch. The problem was that Leo wasn't ready to take it and he didn't know if he ever would be. He thought he had his drinking beat, but something about it made him defensive, especially with Abbey, someone who saw right through him, who knew he was still struggling and was certain that he needed help. It was the old cliché - the truth hurt - and the solution was easy for Leo. Avoid Abbey, avoid the truth.

He was grateful for Jed's loyalty, but he had built a wall around himself and his troubles. Tearing it down and baring his insecurities to even his closest friends was too much to ask, and although he knew he was being unfair to Abbey, staying away from her kept him, and his problems, safe from a reveal that had the potential to threaten everything he cared about - his career, as well as his family.

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Later that evening, Jed and Abbey kissed Ellie goodnight, checked on Zoey to make sure she was sleeping soundly, and retired to their own room to call Liz before getting ready for bed. Liz and her cheer squad were staying at the Holiday Inn not far from the Porter Street apartment, but Abbey
couldn't turn in for the night without checking in with her first.  
"We'll see you tomorrow, baby doll. Good luck," she said after hearing about Liz's day, packed with practice drills and run-throughs. "I love you too. Yeah, I'll tell him." Abbey lowered the receiver. "She says she loves you."

"Love you too, angel face!" Jed shouted loud enough for Liz to hear. 
"Get some sleep, okay?" Abbey continued into the phone. "Night." She hung up the phone and looked up at Jed. "Did she sound nervous to you?"

"You know Lizzie. She doesn't get nervous." Or so he thought.  
"I think it's more that she puts on a good show." Wearing only her slip after taking off her dress, Abbey headed to the bathroom to wash her face.

"Well, whatever it is, she'll be fine." Jed unbuttoned his shirt and exchanged his trousers for a pair of sweatpants. "I promised Ellie and Zoey banana pancakes in the morning. It's a shame Mallory couldn't stay. I know how she loves them."

"Yeah." Abbey didn't say much. Her hair pulled back, she began brushing her teeth.  
"I can't blame Leo for wanting her home with him and Jenny though. It's so hard, seeing your child as infrequently as he does. He sees Mallory less than I see the girls."

"It's his choice. There's no reason he can't get back to Chicago on the weekends. It's not like money's an issue."

"The commute's too long. It's longer than it is to New Hampshire. And he's been stressed about work."

"How long are you going to make excuses for him?" she asked after rinsing her mouth.  
"What?" Jed was taken aback by the question.  
Abbey framed herself in the doorway to the bathroom and repeated, "I said, how long are you going to make excuses for him?" There was an unmistakable edge to the question and it was intentional. "You've been doing it for years."  
"Where did that come from?"

"You've been in denial about Leo's drinking since Jenny was pregnant with Mallory. You've been defending him all along and even now, you're excusing him. Tonight, it's about his visits home. Earlier today, it was about the intervention."

Suddenly, Jed felt a chill in the room. "Did I do something wrong? Are you mad at me?"
Abbey sighed, then shook her head. She wasn't in the mood for this conversation tonight. "No, forget it."

"I won't forget it." Jed grabbed her hand as she tried to veer around him toward the dresser. "What's going on? Talk to me."

"Okay, fine. I'm not pleased about tonight. I didn't want to go because I knew it would be a disaster...and it was."
"How was it a disaster?"

She hadn't yet told him about her confrontation with Leo when Jed left the table. "Didn't you see the tension between us?"

"All I saw was four old friends having a good time."

"Then it's a shame you didn't have a spy at the table when you went to take that phone call."

"What happened?" Abbey looked away as she turned to the dresser drawer to pull out a pair of pajamas. "Abbey, tell me what happened."

"He's still angry, Jed. He made that crystal clear. He's angry about the intervention and he thinks I'm judging him."

"He said that?"

"In so many words. I don't think he ever stopped blaming me."

"No, I talked to him yesterday. I told him the intervention wasn't your doing."

"Yesterday? You knew he was harboring a grudge and you still thought we could sit down to a nice dinner without it coming up? Why didn't you at least warn me?"

"I thought I convinced him."

"You were wrong."

"Then why did he agree to it? I can't believe he wanted to fight with you. You don't believe that, do you?"

"No, he's not malicious."

No, he's not, Jed thought to himself. "Maybe he thought that if he saw you, you guys could work it out."

"Or maybe he just wanted to placate you." Jed immediately dismissed that notion with a shake of his head as Abbey turned down the covers. "It's not impossible, Jed. You talked him into dinner, didn't you?"

"Yeah, I guess I did."

"There you go."

"So this is all about dinner? That's why you're mad at me?"

"No, it's not just dinner. I'm tired of always feeling like the bad guy."

"The bad guy? What are you talking about?"

"You know what I think about his drinking and his recovery. But it's like I have to explain myself all the time and watch what I say."

"Are you kidding? You know you never have to watch your words with me."

"I did earlier today."
"Not because you had to. We've never been that kind of couple, Abbey. Anything that's on your mind, you can tell me."

"So that you can scoff at me and tell me I'm wrong?"

"When have I ever scoffed at you?"

She had to admit, Jed never did that. "Maybe that's too strong a word."

"I don't scoff at you. Sometimes I agree with you and sometimes I don't. That's never been a problem before."

"It still isn't. I don't mind that you disagree; I mind how dismissive you are about my opinion. Like when I told you that dinner was a bad idea." Abbey got into bed. "You ignore me when I say something you don't want to hear."

"Did I step into the Twilight Zone?"

"That's not funny."

"I'm not trying to be funny. What you're saying tonight is news to me. I don't even know where it's all coming from. Where have I been this whole time?"

"You just see it differently. It's all in the interpretation."

"Regardless, I don't ignore you. I always listen to every word you say. That's not interpretation, that's fact." He slipped in beside her. "You're laying this out on me all of a sudden. What happened to dealing with things as they come up?"

"That's what I'm doing."

"How long have you felt this way?" No response, which more than answered Jed's question. "Look, I consider your point of view. I may not always show it, but I do. And I wouldn't dismiss your opinion. You're flat-out wrong about that."

"I'm just telling you how it comes across to me when we talk about Leo." She turned off her light and turned away from Jed.

"So it's just Leo? That's what you're upset about?"

"Yes."

Jed reached across her and turned on the light. "All right, then let's work it out."

"It's late, Jed."

"I don't care. I don't want to go to bed with this hanging over us."

"It's not hanging over us. It's not that big a deal. I'm a little irritated, but I'll get over it. And if I'm not over it by the morning, we can talk then."

"You rarely get over your anger that quickly."

"I told you, I'm not angry. I'm irritated."

"What's the difference?"
"Semantics," she admitted honestly, turning out the light yet again.

"I don't want to fight."

"Neither do I."

"Then let's not." Jed turned the light back on.

"Jed, I'm trying..." Abbey stopped when there was a knock on the door. "Come in."

Ellie peeked in. "Hi."

"Why aren't you in bed?"

"I was thinking, there are so many fun things to do in Washington. Do we really have to go to Egypt?"

Abbey rolled her eyes. Irritated with the Leo situation, she didn't have much patience left. "We're not having this conversation again."

"But..."

"We bought the tickets, we booked the hotel, we've been looking forward to it for months. We're not going to cancel all our plans."

"Fine. Then I'll stay and you guys can go." Ellie didn't really want them to go without her, but she hoped that saying it would convince Abbey that what she was going through was serious.

"You can forget about that," Abbey sputtered. "You had a chance to stay with Grandma and you didn't so now, we're ALL going to Egypt."

"I don't want to..."

"I don't want to hear another word about it, Ellie." It wasn't like Abbey to be short with her girls.

"How about three words - I'm NOT going!" Ellie growled back. She never raised her voice to her mother, so when she did it that night, it got both Jed and Abbey's attention.

Stunned, Abbey replied impulsively, "Oh, yes you are."

"You can't make me go!"

As Ellie turned to storm out, Jed followed her. "Ellie!" he called out. "Hang on. We need to talk about this."

"What's the point?" She whirled around. "You're just going to side with Mom!"

Zoey sleepily stumbled out of her room and into the hall. "What happened?"

"Nothing, Zoey. Go to bed," Abbey told her.

"Why's Ellie upset?"

"Zoey..." Taking a deep breath, Abbey used a less edgy tone and took her younger daughter's hand. "Come on, I'm going to tuck you back in."

As mother and daughter left the room, Jed tried to make strides with Ellie. "I'm not going to blindly
side with Mom, but if siding with Mom means saying that you're not going to stay in Washington by yourself while the rest of us go to Egypt, then yeah, I guess I am going to side with Mom."

"I don't have to stay by myself. Mallory said I could spend the week with her and her parents if I wanted to."

Jed didn't even need to think about it. The last time he left Ellie in Leo's care, Leo passed out drunk and Ellie and Mallory snuck off for a swim in the beaches at Acadia where Mallory nearly drowned in the rough surf. Rebuilding his friendship with Leo was one thing, but trusting him with his girls again was quite another.

"That's out of the question," he said.

"Why?"

"Remember what happened at Acadia? We're not leaving you and Mallory alone again."

"You left us alone tonight. What's the difference?"

"We gave you permission to stay with a sitter tonight. We're not giving you permission to spend the whole week with the McGarrys." The last thing Jed wanted to do was tell Ellie that he and Abbey didn't trust Leo.

"Why?"

"What do you mean why? Because we're not." It was the end of the day and like Abbey, Jed was also out of patience. "You don't need to question every move we make. When we say something, that's the way it is, end of story."

Ellie huffed, "Just like I thought - 'do what I say because I say so.'"

Abbey made her way out of Zoey's room just in time to hear Ellie still upset. "Let's all take five before things get out of hand." She allowed a minute or two to pass before adding, "It's been a long week. It's late and we're tired. Maybe that's why we're so short-tempered." She looked at her daughter. "All of us."

A look of remorse touched Ellie's features. She lowered her head and said quietly, "I'm sorry I yelled."

"And I apologize for snapping at you when you came to talk to us. Your dad and I were in the middle of a serious discussion. You caught us both off-guard."

"I didn't know."

"I know you didn't. But now you do, so if we're willing to forgive and forget, I think we should start over."

"Best idea of the night," Jed agreed. "I, for one, would love to know what brought all this on, Ellie."

"I'm just not looking forward to going."

"Because you're afraid. That's why you're backing out of the trip." He didn't need her to admit it to know it was true. "This whole thing should have been nipped in the bud from day one."

"What do you mean?"
"You've been struggling since the shuttle explosion. It's time we did something about it."

"It's not that easy! I can't help how I feel."

"No one is suggesting that you can," Abbey was quick to offer. "What we're saying is that we've discussed it and we're worried about you, even more than we were before. We just want to help."

"You can't. You don't understand. Neither of you," Ellie cried, tears in her eyes.

"Maybe we don't. Explain it to us. We want to hear what you have to say."

"And then you'll still make me go."

"Egypt is supposed to be a fun thing, not a punishment. Believe me when I say we don't want to force you to go anymore than you want us to."

Jed gestured to her. "Come on, Ellie. Give us a chance, huh? Let's go back to the room and figure this out - together."

Ellie wiped away her tears with a tissue Abbey handed her, then followed her parents back to the master bedroom.

"I don't wanna go. I don't want any of us to go."

"Because of the plane?" Jed asked her, taking a seat on a chair in front of Abbey's vanity.

Ellie nodded subtly as she climbed up on the mattress and settled in with her back against the headboard.

"You were fine on the plane from Manchester," Abbey said, sitting down beside her on the bed. "What happened since then?"

"I wasn't fine. I wanted you to think I was, but I wasn't. You kept talking about having courage and being brave enough to face your fears. I wanted to show you that I could do it."

"For my sake?" It broke Abbey's heart to hear that Ellie was putting up a front for her. She wrapped her arm around her daughter. "Ellie, you don't have to pretend with me. If you're afraid of something, I want to know about it."

"We both do," Jed started. "But, listen, Mom was right. Facing your fears is the only way to overcome them."

"I don't wanna overcome them."

"No, you don't and we usually don't make you. You say you don't want to speak in public, we say okay, you don't have to. You say you don't want to skip a grade because you're nervous about leaving behind what's familiar and we say that's fine."

For a minute, Abbey felt a twinge of defensiveness, knowing that she had been the one to excuse Ellie from confronting the things Jed spoke of, but she quickly realized that his point was valid. Of course Ellie wanted to run away now. Abbey had supported her running away from uncomfortable situations all her life. While Jed had wanted Ellie to explore things outside her comfort zone, Abbey had always sheltered her.

"You turn down opportunities far more important than a trip to Egypt because you're afraid or you're worried or you're anxious," Jed went on, "and we don't push you to test your real limits. We
don't make you do anything you don't want to do. We're not doing you any favors."

"You made me participate in the science fair last year."

"After how many arguments?" It was a rhetorical question. "And how did that turn out when you finally did it? Aren't you glad you did?" Ellie shrugged. "You need to learn not to avoid things you're scared of, Ellie, and we need to help you do that."

"You're gonna make me go, just like I said."

Her eyes shined with tears for the second time that night at the thought of losing this fight. But despite what she was thinking, that wasn't Jed's goal. He, like Abbey, now realized that pushing Ellie into this trip before she was ready to face her fears might psychologically scar her. Abbey was about to offer to stay with her in Washington while Jed took Liz and Zoey on the trip, but putting all her faith in her husband to do what was best for their daughter, she waited for him to answer Ellie.

"No, you don't have to go if you don't want to," he replied, to Abbey's relief. They were on the same page. "You can stay here."

"You'll cancel my ticket?"

"I'll get credit for a future trip...for both of us. I'll stay here in Washington with you."

"You will?" Ellie didn't see that coming.

"Jed, you should go. I'll stay," Abbey volunteered.

"No, it's okay."

"It was your birthday present. You have to go."

"Abbey, really, I'd like to stay." Helping Ellie was more important to him. "I want to do this."

Ellie glanced over at Abbey, then looked back at Jed. "You could both say."

"I know you're not crazy about anyone going, but Lizzie and Zoey have been looking forward to this since last summer. It wouldn't be fair to them to cancel. Mom will go with them to Egypt and they'll call us as soon as they get there and then every single day after that."

"But what if..."

"Put it out of your mind," Jed interrupted before she could go on. "They'll be fine, I promise."

"How can you promise?"

"I just can. Sweetheart, I'm trying to compromise with you here. If you don't want to go, you don't have to, but don't ask me to cancel the trip for your mom and your sisters."

"I won't."

"Good. Then it's settled, you and I will stay in Washington - under one condition."

"What?"

"If you don't feel like talking to me, I'd like to set up an appointment with someone else who will
listen to you and help you with what you're going through."

"Someone else?"

"He's right, Ellie," Abbey jumped in. "Your dad and I talked about this on the phone last night. We can get you the best child psychologist there is - someone you like, someone you can open up to and be yourself with. You'll have a say in who we choose."

Jed nodded in agreement. "What do you think?"

"What do I have to talk to them about?"

"Let's start with your fear of planes, maybe what happened with the space shuttle and anything else you want. Mom and I don't even have to know what it is. It'll be confidential between you and whoever we all pick."

"We want you to be able to talk about anything that's on your mind, no matter what it is." Abbey tenderly pushed back a strand of Ellie's hair and tucked it behind her ear. "What do you say?"

"I dunno."

"You wanna think about it overnight?"

"Yeah," Ellie replied, her mind racing with thoughts she couldn't yet express.

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The next morning dawned cloudy and cold over Washington, D.C. Abbey had looked forward to jogging the trails of Rock Creek Park, just as she always did when she was in town, but the temperature had dipped to negative numbers overnight and had barely climbed out of single digits by morning. While Jed wouldn't have had a problem enjoying the beautiful scenery of the park in sub-zero temperatures, Abbey couldn't stand the thought of it. So instead of venturing out into the cold, she changed into a pair of sweats and headed to the fitness room in the basement of their building.

The treadmill was first on the work-out agenda. She hit the belt running. No stretches. No warm-up. Pure energy drove her, energy bubbling from her annoyance the night before. Ellie had stayed in their bedroom so late that she and Jed hadn't had a chance to revisit their argument and just like he predicted, she wasn't over it yet. She was still upset with him and what was worse, she couldn't even explain why.

Jed's loyalty was one of his most laudable traits. His big heart and deep well of compassion were two of the qualities she loved most about him. So why was she mad at him for sticking by a friend in need? Was she feeling betrayed by Jed for supporting a man who had been blaming her for an intervention that wasn't her fault? No, it wasn't betrayal she was feeling. Was she mad that he was welcoming and solicitous of Leo after he'd been rude to her at dinner? No, that wasn't it either, she thought. Jed didn't even know. He had been surprised when she told him about Leo's behavior and she knew that if he had been at the table, he wouldn't have stood by and allowed anyone - not even Leo - to confront her so sharply.

She punched the incline button and ran even faster as she considered the possibility that it wasn't Jed she was mad at at all, that maybe she was simply taking out the anger she had for Leo on her husband.

Upstairs at the apartment, Jed began to toss and turn when he realized he was alone in bed. He
opened his eyes and sat up to see the other side of the sheet in a crumpled mess and Abbey already
gone. He suspected she had gone to work out. But she hadn't waken him. She always woke him
when she was in town. Whether it was an exhilarating jog in the park, a walk around the
neighborhood, or sipping a mug of steamy coffee out on the balcony just after dawn, they always
started their mornings in Washington together. On this morning, Abbey was still angry, Jed
deduced. Why else wouldn't she have waken him?

He stood up rigidly, his limbs stiff with hostility that lasted about a minute before it occurred to
him that Abbey had a reason to be angry. He had roped her into dinner, even after she said she
didn't want to go. And it wasn't just dinner. Just like Abbey said, he had been making excuses on
Leo's behalf for twelve years, even accusing both Jenny and Abbey of over-reacting when they
first shared their concerns about his drinking. Of course it all built up. Of course Abbey was now
angry. He should have been more receptive to her in the past and last night, he should have heard
her out and canceled dinner at the first sign of her hesitation. She deserved more from him, he
thought, and he was determined to make things right when she got back.

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Abbey returned to the apartment tired and sweaty. She made a beeline for the master bedroom,
hearing the shower running as soon as she walked in. Jed. She wanted to settle things with him and
there was no time like now, she thought as she opened the bathroom door.

"Jed?"

"Yeah. You probably want to get in here. I'm almost done."

"Do you mind if I join you?"

He never minded. He loved showering with her. "No."

Abbey lifted her sweatshirt and sports bra over her head, then lowered her sweatpants and panties
down her legs before tugging on the back of the curtain to step into the tub. "Did you just wake
up?"

"Yeah, I forgot to start the coffee."

"That's okay."

"How was the work-out?"

"Good. It gave me time to think about some things." She waited until he faced her, then said, "Jed,
about last night, I'm sor..."

Jed cut her off with a finger to her lips. "Don't say it."

"But..."

"If you say it, it'll sound a lot less sincere when I say it." That drew a smile. "You were right...about
Leo," he went on. "You've been right for years - he is an alcoholic."

"You already acknowledged that."

"I'm acknowledging it again because you had a point about what happened at dinner. I knew the
day before yesterday that he was still angry about the intervention and I didn't tell you. It wasn't
because I was trying to blindside you, I swear. I just assumed that it would be fine, that we'd all get
together and let bygones be bygones. That's all I wanted."

"That would have been nice. I wish it could be so easy, but it's too soon for that. At least where Leo
and I are concerned."

"Maybe it is."

"You and Leo have managed to put it behind you and I'm happy about that. But he and I aren't
following the same path. It's going to take longer for us to forgive each other and trust each other
again. That's okay with you, isn't it?"

"Yeah. I just thought dinner might speed things along."

"I know." Abbey took his hand. "You know something, I admire your loyalty. The way you stood
by Leo for years, the way you love him, the way you forgave him for Acadia. Your loyalty and
your resistance to passing judgment on others are two of the reasons I fell in love with you. My
anger last night kept me from saying that."

"Ah ha, an admission! You told me you were irritated."

She playfully slapped his chest. "Jackass."

"Hey, no hitting! Seriously, though, you had a right to be angry. I didn't know how you were
feeling. If I had, I would have done whatever it took to convince you that you're not the bad guy. I
would have apologized for not being more receptive to your suspicions and for giving you the idea
that somehow your opinion wasn't important to me. You have no idea how important it is."

"Deep down, I do."

Jed circled his arms around her. "Still, I should have made it clear. I'm sorry."

"I'm sorry too."

They stared at each other for a few seconds before sharing a kiss under the spray of the shower.

TBC
"I have a question." Zoey sat on a stool at the counter of the Bartlet apartment, flipping through a travel magazine about Egypt and chatting with her parents while they cooked breakfast.

"I may have answer," Abbey told her as she prepared a bowl of fresh fruit salad.

"Are camels like horses?"

"They're similar."

"They're not at all similar," Jed countered from the stove where he was making banana pancakes. "They're quite different in fact."

"Different how, Daddy?"

"Yeah, Jed, different how?" Abbey suspected camels were a subject Jed didn't know much about - yet.

"For one, they have a hump."

"That's an anatomical difference," she grinned. "With your vast knowledge of exotic animals, surely you can do better than that."

A friendly challenge. He was up for it. "Horses are faster, Zoey. They're sure-footed, but they need nutrients to keep going. Camels, on the other hand, have a hump..." he threw his stare to Abbey. "and despite popular misconceptions, that's not just an anatomical difference." He returned to Zoey. "That hump stores their body fat, which gives them enough energy and nutrients to spend days in the desert without water."

"You actually know about camels?" Abbey challenged again.
"I know all, sweet knees."

So she was wrong. She accepted it gracefully and set the bowl on the counter.

"I have another question," Zoey went on.

"Shoot."

"Can I have a camel?"

Jed had a sly glint in his eye. "Ask Mom."

Abbey could have killed him. "Oh no you don't. You're the one who knows so much about them, you explain to Zoey how we'd care for one in New Hampshire."

"I love how you play the ignorance card when it suits you, Abigail."

"Yeah, I'm good at that." Wiping her hands on a towel, she left the kitchen and turned in the direction of the girls’ room.

Ellie was always the late sleeper in the family. She didn't like mornings and frequently needed someone to drag her out of bed. On this morning, Abbey suspected she'd be even harder to wake, given how late they had all gone to sleep after the three-way argument about the trip to Egypt, so she opened the door slowly and tip-toed in. Liz's bed was first in her line of sight. Empty. When she turned her attention to the bunk beds, she saw Zoey's mess of twisted sheets and blankets on the bottom and looking up toward the top bunk, she whispered softly for her middle daughter.

"Hey sleepyhead, ready to get up? It's getting late." No answer. "Come on, Goldilocks. Dad made banana pancakes." Still nothing. "Ellie?" Abbey climbed the steps of the ladder to find Ellie's bed empty. She hurried down and rushed out of the room. "JED!"

"What?" he hollered from the kitchen.

"Where's Ellie?"

"What do you mean? Isn't she in bed?"

"If she was in bed, I wouldn't ask. Zoey, was she in bed when you got up?"

"I didn't check."

"Maybe she's in the shower?" Jed clipped the corner of the hall to check the bathroom. "ELLIE?"

"ELLIE?" Abbey joined him, knocking then opening the bathroom door. "ELLIE?"

"What?" the blonde asked curiously as she stepped inside from the balcony.

"HERE SHE IS!" Zoey called to her parents.

"Where were you?" Jed asked as he and Abbey raced back into the living room.

"I couldn't sleep so I went out on the balcony."

"How long were you out there?"

"Since dawn," she shrugged like it was no big deal. "I didn't mean to worry you."
"I guess I over-reacted," Abbey admitted. "I panicked when I didn't see you in bed."

"Did you think I ran away or something?"

"I had no idea what you were up to." Abbey followed her back outside while Jed went back to his pancakes. "You've been surprising me a lot lately."

"Not on purpose."

Ellie took a seat on one of the patio chairs. Abbey sat on the one beside her.

"What are you doing out here? It's freezing."

"Just sitting. The trails in the park are really pretty at sunrise."

"I know. If it wasn't so frigid, I'd enjoy it too."

"It's not that bad."

When Ellie handed her the throw blanket she had taken with her, Abbey moved her chair closer so mother and daughter could cuddle up under the warmth of the fleece fabric together. "So, do you want to talk about it?"

"About Egypt?"

"Yeah."

"Are you mad at me?"

"For not wanting to go?"

"And for keeping Dad from going so he can stay with me."

"No, I'm not mad at you. I just don't know how to help you."

"No one does."

Not having the answers was hard for Abbey. She was the parent. She was supposed to know what to do. "Have you thought any more about sitting down and talking to a therapist about what you're feeling?"

"I'd rather talk to you."

"I'd rather you talk to me too," she said with the kind of loving inflection only a mother could give.

"Then why'd you bring up a child psychologist?" Ellie didn't liked opening up, especially to strangers.

"Because you're not talking to me, Ellie. You're keeping it all inside. We thought that you didn't want to come to us and we wondered if you'd be more comfortable with a psychologist."

"I won't be."

"All your dad and I want is what's best for you. We don't want to force you to do anything you don't want to do, but we need you to help us out here. Give us something to work with."

"I know. I want to talk to you about it, I really do. It's just hard is all."
"You've done hard things before. You can do it again."

A moment of silence lingered in the air and then, "If I go on the trip, will you sit by me on the plane?"

"You want to go?" Abbey couldn't hide the hopeful tone of her voice.

"Will you sit by me?"

"Of course I will. I'll hold your hand the whole time."

"Then yeah, I'll go. If you and Lizzie and Zoey are going, then Dad and I should go too."

"Because you're worried something's going to happen to us?"

"No," Ellie answered immediately. She took a breath and explained, "Well, yeah, but that's not why. Not completely anyway. I wanna do what you said. I wanna face my fear. I don't like being afraid."

She had that Bartlet spirit inside of her. Jed and Abbey's courage and tenacity was surging through her veins and although she found it easy to run away from her troubles, Ellie knew that it was the wrong thing to do. This wasn't a book a report she had to give or a chance to skip a grade in school. This was more important to her. Her sense of safety and security in the world had been ripped out from under her and she had to reclaim it. With her family's help, she was going to do just that.

- - -

After breakfast, the Bartlets took off for the 1986 National Cheer and Dance Championships at the Templeton Convention Center in downtown Washington, D.C. An afternoon of watching high schoolers tumble their way to an all-star awards ceremony packed with trophies and medals at the end might have sounded boring to some parents, but it was Lizzie who was competing and when she looked out into the crowd, Jed and Abbey wanted her to see that they were all there, applauding louder than anyone else.

It had been a long journey for the eldest Bartlet daughter. Elizabeth was 14 when she joined the junior varsity cheerleading squad, giving up her place on the basketball team to participate in cheering year-round. Jed didn't understand and he scoffed when she dared to call it a sport, like basketball. He was critical of the time commitment - practices five or six days a week during competition season, time spent on dance moves and gymnastics stunts to work on her endurance and flexibility and hours at the gym, weight-lifting to help with her upper and lower body strength. Although he was supportive around her, he privately groaned that it was a big waste of time. But Liz hung in there and the next year, her dance and gymnastics skills earned her a slot on the varsity squad. She worked her way up to captain her senior year and her choreography took her school from Manchester to the state qualifier in Derry to regionals in New York City and, finally, to the nation's capital, where they'd compete not only for the national title and the prizes that went with it, but for college scholarships from representatives there to recruit girls for competitive college cheering.

For Liz, the recruiters were moot. She was Wellesley-bound, after all. But some of the other girls weren't so lucky. Coming from families that weren't as financially secure as the Bartlets, it was academic scholarships that would pay their way through college and if they didn't qualify for those, then sports scholarships were what they counted on. That's what motivated them to work hard for a chance at nationals, and with Liz choreographing and leading them, they felt confident that they'd make a splash in D.C. And they were right. The girls had been there only days, but after their
public practice sessions, the buzz around the convention center was the squad from Manchester High. They were described as disciplined and talented athletes with extraordinary spirit and dynamic chemistry. They were a crowd favorite before they were even called to perform.

"Welcome to the floor the Manchester Crusaders from Manchester, New Hampshire, under the direction of Coach Allison Jones and led by Squad Captain Elizabeth Bartlet."

The announcement was heard throughout the arena as Liz and her teammates emerged from the contestant entrance and took to the floor for the opening. Liz was in the back and as the first beat of their 80s techno mix rang from the speakers, she was catapulted into the sky in a basket toss.

As always, Abbey clenched her eyes when Liz flew 20-feet up into the air, praying she wouldn't fall or get hurt. Like Jed, she had her reservations about cheering, but for her, it was a safety issue. She had seen enough cheerleaders paraded into the hospital with broken limbs to give her pause. She learned to cope by turning away every time Liz's feet left the floor, prepared to bolt from her seat - with her medical bag in-hand - if she heard a scream.

But there were no screams that afternoon. The routine was flawless. Liz and the other girls had never performed better. Their tumbling sequences were perfect, their dance steps skillfully synchronized. All those hours spent in the gym paid off as their jumps and stunts went off without a hitch, and just when the music died down and the crowd thought it was over, each girl took a spot on the sideline, where they began a series of backflips, criss-crossing each other all the way down the floor until their final flip landed them in place for their closing formation. There, they picked up their metallic pom-poms for one last hurrah.

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"LIZ!" Spotting her daughter from the back, Abbey pushed her way through the mob at the concession stands during the intermission between rounds. Liz didn't turn around at first, but Abbey would have recognized that ponytail anywhere. She grabbed a hold of her arm to get her attention.

"Mom!" Liz's face lit up when she saw her. "How was it? Really?"

"It was amazing!"

"Like you're-my-mom-so-you-have-to-say-so amazing or was it *really* amazing?"

"It was *really* amazing. I think you guys have a good shot at the top prize." Abbey gave her a giant hug. "What a way to end your senior year, baby doll!"

"Where's Dad?"

"Getting snacks for Zoey and Ellie. We had no idea you'd be roaming around or he would have come to look for you."

"That's okay, I'll see him after. I should get back. Fingers crossed?"

"Toes too."

Liz gave her the 'I love you' sign, then scampered off to catch up to her squad. Abbey, meanwhile, returned to the stands to wait for Jed, Ellie, and Zoey. She knew it was a bad idea to let the girls troll for snacks with Jed, remembering all those times he took them to the ballpark only to return with stomach aches and indigestion. If ever there was a doting father who loved to spoil his children by buying them any sugary treat they wanted, it was Jed.
Not surprisingly, Zoey appeared within a few minutes, a fluffy wand of pink cotton candy in one hand and a king-sized bag of peanut M&M's in the other.

"Zoey." Abbey shook her head. "What did I tell you about loading up on sugar?"

"Daddy said I could have it," Zoey told her as she took a seat. "Want some?"

"No, thank you. Did Ellie get what you got?"

"I dunno. I got mine and came back."

"Oh, good lord," Abbey said, looking up to see her middle daughter striding in with cotton candy and popcorn. Jed was right behind her, his arms full of chili dogs and nachos.

"Dad went all out!"

"I see that." She took the popcorn bucket to help Ellie up to her seat, then looked over at Jed. "Jed, remember what we talked about?"

"You said not to go overboard. I didn't."

"They're both going to have stomach aches and Zoey's going to be a hyper pill on the plane. Do I have to remind you of the flight to Stockholm?"

"It'll be fine."

"You're underestimating the effect this junk has on children." When he took a bite of his chili dog, she added, "or adults for that matter."

"I take it you don't want yours?" He held the other chili dog just out of her reach, then teased her with a plastic container of nachos and cheese sauce he had set down beside him. "Or these?"

Abbey couldn't resist. It took her only seconds to disregard her lecture and dip her fingers into the container, startled when Jed slapped the back of her hand. "Hey!"

"Hop down off your soapbox on the virtues of healthy eating and they're all yours."

He gave her that sideways grin of his, unapologetic. Although they'd had a big breakfast, Abbey loved nachos and any willpower she might have had vanished as soon as Jed dunked one into the cheesy sauce. It was time for the big guns. She cocked her head and looked at him under her lashes, the way she always did when she wanted to remind him how much he loved her. As usual, Jed caved. With a huff to let it be known he was well aware that he was being manipulated, he handed over the nachos.

"Thank you." It was Abbey's turn to grin now.

"That flirty thing you pull will only work for so long."

"I don't know, it's been about 20 years and it still works like a charm."

"A mischievous little vamp is what you are."

"I wear the moniker proudly."

Zoey nudged her mother then. "Mommy, where's the bathroom?"
"Probably out by the concession stands. I'll take you."

"I can take her," Ellie offered. "My fingers are sticky from the cotton candy anyway. I wanna wash them. Come on, Zo."

"I'm old enough to go by myself!" Zoey hated being treated like a baby.

"Not here you're not," Abbey informed her. "Go with Ellie."

As they descended the risers, Jed addressed his wife. "So, how did you convince her?"

"Zoey?"

"Ellie. How'd you convince her about Egypt?"

"I didn't do a thing. It was her idea to go."

"Come on."

"Really, Jed. She has a good head on her shoulders. She realizes that she has a problem and she wants to overcome it."

"It's not like her. I mean, yeah, she's sensible and all, but she's gotten awfully good at shying away from uncomfortable situations."

"This is different. Her shyness is something she still struggles with, but this fear she's had since the shuttle explosion has consumed her. She's afraid and she doesn't want to be, so she's taking back some control. And I think knowing that we're all going to be right there with her helps. She knows she has our support." Abbey reached over to take his hand. "Especially yours."

"Mine?"

"The way you volunteered to stay behind with her. She might not have said it, but I know it meant the world to her."

That was nothing extraordinary to Jed - he did what felt was good for his little girl. "You think?"

"I do."

"I just wanted to help her. For once, it seemed like I knew how."

"What do you mean 'for once'?"

"You know our track record. Lizzie and Zoey, they're easy, but when it comes to Ellie...she confuses me. When she has a problem, I do exactly what I'd do with the other girls and for some reason, it never quite works with her. In fact, it makes her problem worse."

"I wouldn't say that."

"I'm saying it."

"Jed, kids are different. You're right, Ellie isn't like Liz and Zoey. She doesn't react to things the way that they do."

"You mean she doesn't react to me the way that they do."
"That's not what I meant at all. And even if she doesn't relate to you like her sisters, so what?" Abbey said gently. "Lizzie doesn't relate to me the way she does to you."

"Since when?" he asked as if genuinely shocked by such a statement.

"Since always. Be serious, Jed. She lights up when you walk into the room. As far as she's concerned, you hung the moon. She adores you. She's always been daddy's little girl, since the day she was born. And that's okay. I was closer to my dad when I was growing up too. It didn't mean I loved my mom any less. I know how much Lizzie loves me just like I know how much Ellie loves you."

"Yeah, I get your point."

"About Ellie - have I been excluding you? We sometimes have a different opinion of what's best for her, but I hope I haven't made you feel like I'm making those decisions unilaterally."

"No, I've just learned to back off."

"I don't like the sound of that."

"It's not because I want to, Abbey. I don't do it deliberately. It's just that you know Ellie's heart better than I do. I trust you to do the right thing by her and most of the time, I agree with you. The times I haven't, I've said so."

"Okay." Abbey let go of his hand and stole another nacho as she saw him turn his glance toward the competition floor and smile. "What are you smiling about?"

"Nothing." He was looking at her now. "We're just here, together. We're going to Egypt, together. We're healthy, we're happy, and we've got three great kids. It occurred to me that all and all, we're pretty lucky."

She coiled her fingers around the crook of his arm. "We are, aren't we?"

Jed planted a kiss on the top of her head when she rested it on his shoulder.

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The awards ceremony was well underway when the announcer paused. The division he was about to recognize was Liz's and the nervous teen stood among her teammates, all holding hands and crossing their fingers while waiting anxiously for the names to be called. They had been working toward this for so long and had made it further than any other squad from their school, but in those final moments, that achievement wasn't enough. As happy as they would have been a few months ago with the opportunity to just compete at nationals, the adrenaline was now shooting through them and they were looking forward to a win.

"In third place..." the announcer began. "the Manchester Crusaders."

And just like that, it was over. They didn't win. They didn't even finish second and the fact that they beat other teams in their division wasn't enough to curb the instant disappointment. From the stands, Jed and Abbey watched as Liz dashed over to accept the trophy on behalf of the team, proud of her regardless of the outcome.

After the rest of the winners were announced and the teams filed out, Abbey took Ellie and Zoey to the car while Jed pushed through the crowd to catch up to Liz, but a traffic jam leading to the room down the hall that had served as the locker room held him back. When the hallway emptied out, he
was able to get closer to the door that was left half-way open and though he didn't go in, he could hear Liz lecturing her squad.

"Guys, stop it," she was saying. "I know you're upset that we came in third, but we won some scholarships and we got our names and faces out there for the recruiters. It's not as awesome as it would have been to win, no, but we did a great thing today. We're the first squad from our school to make it this far and I think we should all be proud of what we got. Next year, maybe it'll be even better."

"How can you say that?" one of the girls grumbled. "You won't even be here next year."

"Then you'll do it without me," Liz replied. "You guys are awesome. I know you can pull it off. And just because I'm graduating doesn't mean I won't be sitting in those stands cheering for you when you do. But right now, we have to think about what happened today."

"We lost, that's what happened. What's there to think about?"

"How we're going to march out of here, that's what. There are so many people out there and when we walk out, they're going to be watching us. What do you want them to see?"

"What difference does it make?" another girl wondered.

"It makes a big difference," Liz argued. "It's easy to be gracious when you win. It's what you do when you lose that people are going to remember. I want them to remember us as the squad that was about more than just winning. I want them to know that we're good sports and that we're grateful for having the opportunity to compete. It's about character."

Jed's heart filled with pride for the second time that day. Liz was echoing the words he and Abbey had said to her at the beginning of the year after she expressed her bitterness at losing the student body presidential election. It was a relief to know that she had been listening and even more important, that she had taken the lesson seriously and was using it to bounce back from losing such an important event.

It was her last show, her final competition, the ultimate pep rally four years in the making, and she was leaving without the grand prize. After 10 years of dance and gymnastics lessons, it was time for Liz to hang up her leotard for good. Jed was thrilled that she was doing it with style.

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It took longer than expected to leave the arena and what was supposed to be a quick trip to the deli down the street for a bite to eat turned into a nightmare as hundreds of families left the championships with the same idea. The Bartlets scarfed down turkey and ham sandwiches, then piled into the car for the drive back to the apartment to gather their belongings.

When they arrived, Jed opened the door for the girls to run in and grab their suitcases. "All right, FIVE minutes and I mean it. We're gonna miss our flight."

"Mom, where did you put my bags?" Liz asked, rushing into the bedroom. Abbey had packed her things since Liz had to leave New Hampshire days earlier to travel with her squad.

"In the closet. I packed everything on your list." Abbey followed to help Zoey. "Ellie, you didn't unpack your things, did you?"

"No, I'm good."
"My Walkman doesn't have batteries." Zoey looked up at her mother with sad eyes.

"Well then, you'll have to do without. We don't have time to stop for batteries."

"Lizzie, can I borrow your Walkman?"

"And what am I supposed to do? Sing to the vibrations coming out of the headphones?"

"GIRLS, LET'S GO!" Jed shouted.

"WE NEED A MINUTE!" Liz yelled back, opening her suitcase and searching inside.

"Abbey." He was standing in the doorway of the girls' room now. "We're going to miss the flight."

"We'll get there, don't worry. In the meantime, will you get our bags? They're in our room."

"I already got them. They're by the front door."

Abbey handed him a small suitcase. "Take this for Zoey then?" She went to Liz next. "What are you doing?"

"I just want to make sure you brought everything."

"I already said I did."

"You might have forgotten something. Oh, and then I need to call Doug to tell him we're leaving."

"Forget it!" Jed snapped at her.

"DAD! I told him I would. If I don't, he's going to be worried."

"He'll get over it."

"Mom?"

"We'll get a phone card from the airport and you'll call him from the gate."

"Will we have time?"

"If we leave now."

"Okay, let's go."

"Oh, so now you're in a hurry," Jed teased.

"Dad."

"Why can't you just send him a postcard?"

"He won't get it for a week."

"Think that'll be his first clue that Egypt's on a different continent?"

Abbey turned her attention to Ellie. "Why are you unzipping your suitcase?"

"I wanna make sure I didn't forget anything, like Lizzie."
"I wanna check mine too!" Zoey added.

"Enough! Everyone's going to zip up her suitcase right this second or else..." Jed warned.

"Empty threats don't work on us," Liz told him as she led the way out of the bedroom.

"Keep testing me, young lady, and you'll see just how 'empty' they are."

She ignored him. "And for your 411, Doug knows perfectly well where Egypt is."

"Right," Jed sputtered.

As the duo left the room with Zoey in tow, Abbey noticed Ellie stalling. "Something wrong?"

"No."

"You're sure about this? It's not too late to back out."

"You're still going to sit beside me, right?"

"The whole way."

"Then I wanna do it." Despite her statement, there was more stalling. Ellie stood still, even when Abbey began to walk out of the room.

"Let's go then." Abbey turned back to see her standing there. "Ellie?" She approached her and got close enough to look her directly in the eye. "When you were about three or four, you were terrified of monsters in the closet. I mean, more than most kids are. I'd have to come in every single night and go through your closet, through all your clothes, through your boxes, and everything else cluttered in there just to show you that it was safe before you could go to sleep. And when I was on-call at the hospital, your dad and Lizzie would try to reassure you, but somehow, you never quite bought it coming from them. You'd stay up and refuse to close your eyes. Weeks later, we sat down and traced the root of the problem back to some horror movie you had seen while eavesdropping on one of Lizzie's slumber parties. Remember?"

"A little."

"You thought we were going to be mad at you. That's why it took you so long to tell us what you had seen. But when you finally did, we weren't mad. We were relieved because now we knew what was wrong and we could fix it."

"Are you saying this is the same?"

"Sort of. Going back to our conversation this morning, we're going to help you with this, just like we helped you with the monsters in the closet. But you need to be more forthcoming. That's the only way we can get through this. I know you're scared and I don't blame you. I also know you're miserable because being scared takes a lot of energy and you're probably thinking that you have to mask it, like you did on the plane from Manchester. I don't want you to pretend to be brave, Ellie. I already think you're brave and I'm already proud of you for wanting to face this head-on. Nothing's going to change that."

It was just what Ellie needed to hear. Her stomach doing flip-flops and her eyes blurry with unshed tears, she nodded her agreement. Abbey took her suitcase from her, holding it in one hand as she wrapped the other around her in an embrace that not only demonstrated her love for her middle daughter, but also served to prove to Ellie that she was safe in her mother's arms. The two headed
out of the bedroom to join the rest of the family so they could leave for the airport.

TBC
The internationally bound United Airlines plane that carried the Bartlets to their layover in Frankfurt, Germany pierced the night sky, carrying over 200 people, most of whom were sound asleep in the dark cabin. The Bartlet daughters were no exception. Zoey was curled up against the window while Ellie, covered under a blanket, slept in the aisle seat. Abbey sat between them. Just across the aisle was Jed. Next to him, in the middle seat, Liz had fallen asleep with her headphones still glued to her ears. The seating arrangement was intentional. Jed and Abbey wanted Ellie to have a parent on either side of her to keep her calm in-flight, and after a brief moment of anxiety during take-off, their plan worked like a charm. The 11-year-old relaxed and gave in to the distractions her family offered - a game of Hangman with Zoey, Uno with Abbey, and a couple of rounds of Travel Scrabble with her, Abbey, and Zoey against Jed and Lizzie. After that, the in-flight movie put her out, along with most of the other passengers on the plane.

Jed, however, wasn't so lucky.

It was now 2 a.m., Washington time, and although the cabin was dimmed, Jed couldn't get comfortable enough to enjoy a restful slumber. He was squirming in his chair, his brain working overtime thinking about how often he'd been enchanted with the romance of flight. Never more so than now. He and Abbey had been apart for a week before she and the girls arrived in Washington. During their two-day reunion in DC, they hadn't had time to reconnect physically and with the whole family sharing a suite in Egypt, he had little hope of that changing.

As Abbey accidentally brushed against him when she squeezed through the aisle on her way to the restroom, he realized what he wanted was romance, but what he needed was something far more tawdry. He unbuckled his seatbelt and rose from his chair to see his wife standing outside the lavatory, waiting. He approached her casually.

"Hey," he said as he pinched her sweater.

"I thought you were asleep," Abbey replied.

"I tried. It didn't work out." Jed grinned at her.
"What are you smiling about?"

"Just got a flash of something in my mind."

"What's that?"

"We'd create one hell of a memory if we..." he gestured to the lavatory. "...you know."

"What is it about planes that always makes you so randy?" Abbey chuckled, remembering his fantasy of the x-rated quickie on the flight to Stockholm.

"It's not the plane, sweet knees."

"We can't."

"I think we can."

"Jed!"

Jed looked around. "Everyone's asleep."

"You want to push me into this dingy bathroom for a cheap and vulgar tryst and you don't think I'm going to say 'no way'?"

"I was hoping you wouldn't."

"Not exactly a classy thing to do, is it?"

"Who cares?"

"I thought you liked my class?"

"Sweetheart, when we're in public, I LOVE your class. When we're alone, I want the wild woman I married."

"We are in public."

"We won't be behind that door."

Abbey had a twinkle in her eye, but before she could be convinced, the passenger in the lavatory came out and she went in, closing the door on Jed before he could wiggle in to continue the conversation.

"Chicken," he called out to her, crossing his arms in a huff.

She cracked the door a couple of seconds later, her index finger curled and inviting him in. Jed didn't need to be asked twice. He looked down the aisle to make certain the girls were still in their seats, then pushed a giggling Abbey further into the cramped space to make room for himself.

"We have to be quick," she said, rolling down her hose and hiking up her long skirt.

"Not a problem for me," he replied, unbuckling his belt and pushing down his pants. "Get your clothes off and bend over."

"Not that quick! Let's at least try to pretend we're not bunnies on sex steroids. Besides, I want to see your face..." she wrapped her hand around his partially clothed penis, squeezing gently, "when I
do this."

"You do that again and we'll be out of here faster than you ever imagined." He dropped his boxers around his ankles and sat down on the closed lid to the toilet seat.

"Jed!" Abbey handed him a seat cover.

"Right."

"Is this even legal?" she asked, mounting him.

"We're married."

"That's not what I asked."

Jed looked into her eyes before kissing her. Even with all the lewd, animalistic thoughts running through his mind, he couldn't stand to just take her. His hands slid down her back to her hips, where they stayed to help her move. Abbey used his broad shoulders as an anchor and before long, they were rocking back and forth, so lost in the ecstasy of it all that when the plane hit a patch of air turbulence, each assumed the other had kicked it up a notch. It didn't take long after that. Once Jed hit Abbey in her most sensitive spot a few times, it easily sent her over the edge and as she climaxed and tightened around him, he dug his heels into the ground and pushed up, penetrating her even deeper until he lost any control he had left.

They continued to move in a rhythm, her mouth on his shoulder and his arms around her waist, slowing their pace bit by bit, both trying to catch their breath as they stumbled back to reality.

Abbey moved back slightly so she could see him. Sweeping a damp lock of hair off his forehead, she whispered, "We should fly together more often."

Jed laughed. "What have I been saying?"

"So, how are we going to get out of here without raising suspicion?"

"Well, first thing's first," he smiled. "You wanna dismount?"

With his help, Abbey got up, pulled her skirt back down, and picked her pantyhose off the floor. "These are filthy now."

"Why'd you throw them on the floor?" Jed stood up next.

"I had them in my hand until I couldn't hold them anymore."

"So trash them and we'll get you a new pair when we land in Germany."

"And if the girls notice, I'll just tell them I got a run in them."

"Whatever works."

"Okay," she agreed. "I have to get myself together, so you should go out first. I'll wait a few minutes and then follow."

"Sounds like a plan."

"Wait." She brushed his hair back with her fingers so it didn't look quite so tousled. "What if there's someone waiting outside the door?"
"I'll tell them you got airsick and I was checking on you."

"That's good. If I didn't know any better, I'd swear you had done this before."

"Just fantasies, hot pants...until now."

"For future reference, are there any other fantasies I should be aware of?"

"Are you kidding? In my mind, we've done a lot more than this. One day I'll fill you in on all of 'fantasy Jed and Abbey's' sexcapades."

He winked at her, then opened the door carefully in case there were any prying eyes on the other side. When he saw that the coast was clear, he ducked out and headed back to his seat in the middle of the cabin. He looked to his left to see Zoey and Ellie still asleep, but when he turned to his right, he found Liz wide awake and waiting for him.

"Where did you go?" she asked.

"Restroom."

She looked across the aisle. "Where's Mom?"

"Same place. She went in when I came out. Why are you up?"

"The turbulence woke me. Didn't it bother you?"

"What turbulence?"

"Is Germany where they make German chocolate cake?" It was only 9 a.m. when the Bartlets landed in Frankfurt, but Zoey's sweet tooth was oblivious to the time.

"Actually, Zoey," Jed began as they deplaned, "German chocolate cake wasn't named for the country. It was named for a baker who happened to have the last name 'German.' You know where he was from?"

"New Hampshire!" Even Zoey knew her father's affection and pride for their home state, so when he asked such a question, she guessed he had to be hinting at another New Hampshire jewel.

"Wouldn't it be great if he was? But no, I just meant that he was an American."

"He was an Englishman," Abbey corrected.


"Englishman," she went on, leading the pack out of the jetway.

"Does it matter?" Liz was cranky after the eight-hour flight, knowing there was another four to go after the layover.


"Is there a pay phone close by? I wanna call Doug."

"Okay, let's nip this in the bud right here and now. We're on vacation, Lizzie. We're not going to
stop every five minutes so that you can check in with Doug."

"I told him I'd call."

"Tough."

"Mom?"

"Your father's right," Abbey told her. "I warned you when you bought all those international phone cards at the airport that you wouldn't have time to talk to him day and night."

"I'm not asking for day and night. I'm just asking for now."

Abbey took a look around. "There's a pay phone over there, if you can figure out how to use it."

Liz gave her a grateful smile and went on her way.

"Why do you encourage her?" Jed addressed his wife.

"We have four hours until we board. It's not like we're going anywhere."

"Still. It's Doug."

"It's day one, Jed. Let's pick our battles, huh?" Abbey draped her arm around Ellie. "How are you doing, sweetheart?"

"I'm okay. Will we get to explore Frankfurt?"

"I'm afraid not. We'd have to go through customs if we left the airport and we don't have that kind of time, but if you ask your dad nicely, maybe he'll bring you along during his CODEL to East Germany in a few months."

"What's a CODEL?"

"It means congressional delegation. It's for work," Jed answered. "And thank you, Abigail, for bringing that up."

"Sure thing, babe." Abbey then spotted a restaurant in the terminal, right next to a clothing shop. "Who's up for breakfast?"

Zoey spoke up first with a raised hand. "ME!"

"Me too!" Ellie added.

"You all go ahead. I'll join you in a bit."

Confused by Abbey's response when she was the one who posed the question in the first place, Jed prodded, "Where are you off to?"

"To find a pair pantyhose." She gave him a lop-sided grin.

---

A short time later, Zoey and Ellie were discussing their itinerary with Jed over a basket of warm German bread rolls and orange juice. The girls had put an end to months of bickering over their plans for sight-seeing in Egypt and compromised on the plane to come up with a list they both
liked, and with enthusiasm in their voices, they rattled off the items, having only highlighted their first day when Abbey walked over, carrying four shopping bags.

"Whoa, you didn't say you were going on a spree," Jed objected.

"I hit the duty-free shop," Abbey explained. "You know I can't resist."

"Did you get anything for me?" Zoey's eyes lit up at the possibility that she'd be getting presents.

"Maybe."

"What?"

"You'll find out later." Abbey knew just how to tease her youngest daughter. She stored the bags under her feet.

"Why can't I find out now?" the six-year-old pouted.

Liz came moping in then. "Doug says hi. He wishes he was with us."

"According to my watch, it's 3 a.m. in New Hampshire," Jed informed everyone. "He's up?"

"He hasn't gone to bed yet."

"Frat party?"

"Why do you assume that Doug's a frat boy?"

"He is, isn't he?"

"Yeah, but why do you assume it?"

Abbey saw where this was going. "Before we detour into another round of 'Doug The Wonderboy: yay or nay,' can we order our meal please?"

"We ordered these, Mom." Ellie passed her the bread basket. "Brötchen. Much better than we have in New Hampshire!"

"Ahem..." Jed cleared his throat disapprovingly. Every year, he boasted Manchester's Oktoberfest celebration and in his opinion, the menu back home was every bit as delicious as genuine German cuisine.

"As delicious as they are," Abbey started, amused yet dismissive of Jed's interruption, "I was thinking about something a little more nutritious than just bread for breakfast."

"Mom's right, girls," Jed agreed. "What's a German breakfast without sausage?"

"That's not exactly what I meant."

"And the beer, of course."

"Jed," As he got up to approach the counter, Abbey followed. "What are you doing?"

"Trying to get you away from the girls. I knew that would do it."

"What's going on?"
He looked past her to see their daughters chatting it up at the table, far out of earshot. "While you were maxing out our credit cards, I talked to the ticket agent about our layover."

"And?"

"The plane we were originally going to take is having mechanical problems. They've been working on it since last night. The ticket agent said to be prepared for a delay."

"Mechanical problems? Great."

"Of course, we don't want Ellie to hear about this - it'll just confirm all her fears if she did - so I went ahead and changed our tickets for a later flight. Now we have time to do exactly what she wanted - explore Frankfurt."

"And she'll never suspect what happened with the first flight."

"Nope. We'll just tell her that we changed the tickets so we could see Germany."

Abbey was grateful that Jed was such a quick thinker. "Good plan. How long do we have?"

"About seven hours."

"Let's go."

- - -

The Bartlets made the most of their layover in Frankfurt. With only seven hours to begin with, a wait to get through customs, and an even longer line awaiting them at security when it was time to go back to the terminal, Abbey stuffed her shopping bags and everyone's carry-on items into a locker and they hurried to the train station at the airport and hopped on-board for the 15-minute ride to the city center, where they got off and stretched their legs near the old opera house.

A student of history, Ellie loved hearing the story of the building, the damage it suffered during World War II and its historic reconstruction in the 1970s. For a minute, it seemed the old Ellie was back, her spirit and sparkle visible in her eyes. Jed first noticed it when Ellie rummaged through her backpack for her camera, reclaiming her title as the family photographer. He nudged Abbey at that moment, looking on, delighted at what he saw as Ellie excitedly asked her sisters to pose in front of the opera house.

The next stop was a gourmet deli that served a traditional German feast of breakfast rolls and pastries with jam, delicious meats and cheeses, ham, sausage, granola, yogurt, soft-boiled eggs, and steaming hot apple cider. To work off their huge meal, Jed, Abbey, and the girls then strolled a local park toward Kleinmarkthalle, an indoor farmers market offering more than just produce. Abbey tagged along with Zoey and everyone else split up and met each other 45 minutes later, goodies in-hand - a German cookbook and coffee table books depicting European art and architecture for Liz, a similar book with German photographs, a bag of German chocolates, and a box of fine cheeses for Ellie, big, swirly lollipops and a basket of fruit for Zoey, and a bottle of fine wine for Abbey, who questioned her husband when he showed up at the check-out having already paid for his purchase.

"What'd you get?" she asked.

"Just, you know, stuff."

"What stuff? More sausage?"
"All right, if you must know..." he pulled out a box of cigars.

"Jed!"

"I don't want to hear a word about it, Abbey."

"Okay, fine. Poison your lungs if that's what you want."

"That's exactly what I want, thank you. Oh, and..." he reached back into the bag and pulled out a single red rose. "I also bought this."

"You're about to sweet-talk me now."

"Yup! Is it gonna work?"

"Nope." She took the rose and turned toward the check-out.

Their hands were full when they left Kleinmarkthalle, but there was still more to see and they were running out of time, so they took a quick jaunt through a side street that distracted both Abbey and Liz with posh galleries and clothing boutiques and a power-walk through one of the historic museums on the banks of the Main River before returning to the airport and sprinting to the gate just in time to jump aboard the flight to Cairo.

TBC
The city around him still asleep, Jed gazed out at the dark water lit by the spotlight of the moon. Soon, the surrounding buildings and towers would come alive, streets would be loud with traffic, the sidewalks bustling with tourists, and the waterway that mesmerized him would be dotted with boats, but for a few precious moments that early morning in February, it was all so peaceful. There were no crowds, no noise. The banks of the River Nile guarded a tranquil inlet that hugged the Egyptian shore and the only sound in the air was the melody of small waves lapping against the rocks.

Cairo was the first stop for the Bartlets. Their plane landed in the middle of the night and Abbey and the girls succumbed to the fatigue from the long trip from Washington and their day-long whirlwind tour of Frankfurt. Jet lag forced them immediately to bed, but Jed had been unable to sleep. His mind racing with things to do, trying to shut it off proved to be hopeless, so he snuck out of bed and headed down the corniche of the Nile.

The weather was perfect. He had worried it might be hot and muggy, but in the winter, the cool desert wind kept things tolerable. It also produced ripples in the river, those gentle waves that held his attention. As nice as it was in the dark, Jed could hardly wait to see them shimmer under the full glow of the Mediterranean sun at noon or hear them bubble under the ships during those famous Nile cruises. A single body of water and so many possibilities, he thought. Elizabeth would want to sunbathe on the riverside chairs while Ellie would want to take a billion pictures. He could see them now, excited and giddy. Of course, he chuckled, they were likely to squabble when Ellie inevitably snapped a photo of Liz that she didn't care for. As for Zoey, she would be in her own little world, heartbroken when she'd learn she wasn't allowed to swim in the water. He'd have to distract her somehow before it turned into a tantrum. Finally, he smiled, he would have to set up an intimate picnic-for-two for himself and Abbey on the riverbank at dusk and a romantic moonlit walk spanning the water's edge at midnight.

It was going to a marvelous week, indeed.

The walk back to the hotel was a short one. Abbey had gone all out when she booked the trip and surprised him for his birthday last summer. They were staying at a five-star luxury resort on the river, a spacious suite on the 19th floor with sweeping views of the Nile, a private balcony with a table for five, a sitting room, and most importantly to Jed, two bedrooms - one for the girls and a larger one for him and Abbey.
"Jed?" Abbey stirred as he opened the door to the master bedroom. "What are you doing?" She sat up to see him fully dressed. "Did you go out?"

"I took a walk by the river."

"In the middle of the night?"

"It's not the middle of the night. In less than an hour, it'll be dawn." He stripped out of his clothes.

"You're like a little boy at Christmas," she said. "Come to bed, huh?"

"Are you going back to sleep?"

"I don't know, but I want to lie here a little longer and I'd like to cuddle while I do."

"How could I say no to that?" He pulled the covers back and slipped in, his arm jutting out to the side so he could tuck it under Abbey. "Better?"

"Much better." Abbey snuggled up against his chest.

They curled up together for a little while, planning out their day until they were silenced by the call to prayer. It startled them for a second, but it wasn't unexpected. They knew this was would happen five times a day, every day, and although they told the girls about it as well, they weren't at all surprised that Zoey forgot. Roused by the noise coming from a dozen minarets outside the local mosques, the six-year-old climbed out of her own bed and ran to her parents' bedroom. The voices were unsynchronized and because they were in Arabic, she couldn't decipher what they were chanting.

Rattled, she burst through the door without knocking. "Daddy, WHAT is that?"

"It's okay, sweetheart." Jed held out his hand to her, inviting her in. "Remember we talked about how Muslims pray five times a day? This is their first prayer."

"Why don't they pray quietly?"

"They do. What you're hearing is the call the prayer. It's just to remind everyone that it's dawn and it's time to pray."

"Come here, Zoey." Abbey got out of bed to pull the drapes back and allow Zoey the room to stand in front of her, facing the window. "Look right out there. You see that speaker on the building way back there? That's a mosque. That's where it's coming from."

"A mosque is like a...church?" she asked, recalling what her parents had told her before they left for Egypt.

"Exactly. It's a place where Muslims go to worship God."

"Is that where they all are now?"

"No," Jed answered. "Most of them are home now. They were sleeping, just like we were. When they hear the call to prayer, they get up and get themselves ready to pray."

"What is their prayer like? Is it like ours?"

"It's a little different. They always start with 'Allah Akbar.' 'Allah' is who they consider to be God, so 'Allah Akbar' means 'God is great.' They have to orient themselves so that they're facing Mecca
when they begin."

"Do you remember what Daddy taught you about Mecca, Zoey?"

"No." Zoey shook her head.

"Sure you do!" Jed insisted.

"I don't." The truth was, she did remember some of it, but she loved hearing her father tell her stories and she was positive that the lesson on Mecca was one he would gladly repeat.

"Well then, hop on up on the bed and listen carefully!"

Zoey did as she was told, grinning from ear to ear as her mother crawled up on one side of her and her father on the other.

---

Jed and Abbey spent some quality time with Zoey that morning and after an hour, it was time to shower and wake their older daughters so they could start their Egyptian adventure. But when Liz and Ellie were too sleepy to respond, they gave up and ordered breakfast to be served in their room, hoping the smell of the food would lure the girls from their slumber. Abbey placed an order of chilled seasonal fruit on the side of scrambled eggs wedged in pita bread pockets for her, Liz, and Ellie, milk and cereal for Zoey, and for Jed, an Egyptian favorite - t'aamiyya, fava beans wrapped with onions, parsley, and cumin, deep fried and stuffed in pita bread.

As predicted, when room service rang, it tempted Ellie. She climbed out of bed, tired and groggy, but every bit as hungry as her parents and baby sister. Liz stayed put, comfortably hiding under her blanket, unamused when Jed appeared above her bed with a dish of t'aamiyya.

"You have no idea what you're missing, Lizzie," he told her.

"Not now, Dad. Work on Ellie."

"Ellie is up. Everyone is up and showered...except you."

"That's how it's going to be for a little while longer then."

"Elizabeth, it's 7 a.m. Are you really going to sleep the day away?"

"I'm on New Hampshire time."

"Well, I'm on Egypt time and you're wasting it." He set the plate aside and walked over to the window to pull the drapes aside. "Look at that skyline! Amazing!" No response. "There's a whole host of things to do out there! Get up and eat so you can get ready to go."

Still nothing. He finally grabbed her arm to pull her up.

"SSSSTTTTOOOOPPPP, DAD! I'm not ready to get up!"

"Should we leave without you?"

"Yes."

"Okay, but that means you'll miss out on all the shopping."
"Shopping?" she mumbled, her eyes still closed.

"We're going to the Egyptian Museum and on the way back, we're stopping by Khan Ali-Kalili. It's an open market, bazaar-type place. Egyptian jewelry, perfumes..." Not much of a response. Time for the magic words. "Souvenirs for...Doug."

Liz peeked out from under the blanket. "Like what?"

He rolled his eyes. Of course Doug would get her attention. "I don't know. I haven't been there yet, but I'm sure you can find something for him to gnaw on. Maybe a book with pop-ups."

"Your little jokes about him aren't funny, you know."

"I think they're hilarious." Jed grinned on his way out of the bedroom. "Get up. Breakfast is getting cold."

---

The plan after breakfast was to hit the Egyptian Museum in Tahrir Square, followed by the Khan Ali-Kalili market, just like Jed had told Liz. When they finished eating, he, Ellie, and Zoey boarded the elevator for the hotel lobby. Being a U.S. congressman, Jed had the option of an escort around the city, but he turned it down and also rejected the hotel's offer of a tour guide, knowing that he and Abbey would want to explore Cairo on their own during the day. Plans were in the works to meet a Bedouin guide later and for him, that was sufficient.

Meanwhile, up in the room, Abbey and Liz changed into conservative ensembles out of respect for Muslim and Egyptian culture. Abbey wore a pair of navy slacks and a lighter blue blouse and Liz sported a pair of black jeans and a long-sleeved shirt. The two women jumped on the next elevator down, the tote bags over their shoulders full of knick-knacks they'd need for a day of sight-seeing.

It was still morning in Egypt and as the Bartlets caught a ride with the hotel driver and took to the congested streets of Cairo, they got a shocking glimpse at the hectic traffic around the city. They had seen the chaos the night before on the ride from the airport to the hotel, but watching it in broad daylight was something else entirely. It was noisy, which they expected, and a thin layer of haze hung in the air.

"Look! Look! Look! He's cutting right in front of that guy!" Ellie's mouth was hanging open at the sight of cars squeezing in wherever they could while ignoring basic rules of the road.

"He's not supposed to do that!" Zoey admonished as she stared out the window to see what Ellie was pointing at. "You're supposed to stay inside the lines, right Daddy?"

"There are no lines, Zo," Liz informed her. "They don't acknowledge lanes. It's like a free-for-all."

A wicked glint in his eye, Jed replied, "What'd ya know, Lizzie? Finally, a place where you'd be considered a good driver!"

"Lame, Dad, very lame."

"I thought it was funny." Ellie laughed at her sister's expense.

"Me too," Zoey piled on.

"You would," Liz sneered.
Zoey furrowed her brows at that. "Mommy, Lizzie's picking on me!"

"Liz, be nice," Abbey replied, not looking up from the brochure she was thumbing through.

"Why? They weren't."

"Don't drag me into it," Ellie protested.

"You laughed."

"It was funny."

"Not to me."

"That's because you lost your sense of humor."

Before Liz could snipe back, Jed interjected. "Cool it, girls."

Ellie reached for her camera as the car pulled around to drop them off at the museum entrance.

"Turn off your flash," Abbey told her, stuffing her brochure into her tote.

"Why?"

"Museum rules."

The pre-teen grumbled about it, then followed her mother out of the car.

Once inside, Jed led the way to the Tutankhamun galleries on the second floor. The main room displayed statues, chairs, and other furniture, but it was the next room that drew immediate gasps from the girls. The gold, the masks, the ornaments, the jewelry, and all the other ancient artifacts. It was surreal. Everything was housed in glass cases around the exhibit, the mask the grand centerpiece. There were beds, the funerary bed among them, and the Pharaoh's throne beautifully carved and decorated with colored glass and semi-precious stones. The treasures of his tomb, they were called, thousands of pieces in a stunning presentation of history that textbooks could never capture.

Jed, Abbey, Liz, and Zoey were drawn first to the life-sized mask, made of solid gold and also decorated with stones and colored glass. It was crafted and placed upon his mummy after his death, Jed explained to his daughters as they walked all around it. Ellie, meanwhile, couldn't take her eyes off the coffin. It was the innermost coffin, one of three that had held King Tut's mummified remains when his tomb was discovered in the 1920s. It, too, was made of solid gold and it was carved with an image of the Pharaoh.

Abbey looked over to see Ellie struck by the find. She draped an arm around her middle daughter and said, "It's something, isn't it? I bet it's like nothing you studied in school."

Ellie shook her head, her eyes still fixated on the coffin. "It's so different being here."

Jed watched the exchange between mother and daughter, but unlike Abbey, he realized that it wasn't that Ellie was hypnotized by the grandeur of the coffin. It was the coffin itself. It symbolized death, a subject Ellie had become intimately familiar with in the past month. He stayed back, not wanting to interrupt as Abbey shared stories of Howard Carter, the man who discovered the tomb.

When she was done, he grappled with his conscience. The next stop was supposed to be the Royal
Mummy Room and part of Jed wanted to give Ellie an out, maybe distract her with a stroll through the room they passed on the first floor with a collection of ancient coins and papyrus on display. The other part of him wanted Ellie to confront that which made her uncomfortable. He wanted her to open up, to share her thoughts and stop avoiding her feelings. He knew she was capable of conquering her fears. She boarded the plane to Egypt, after all, even after she was told she didn't have to.

He didn't know how to handle it, but he had only a few minutes to wrestle with his approach before everyone shuffled out of the King Tut galleries. In that last second, he swallowed his objection and decided instead to keep an eye on Ellie as only a concerned father could. He protectively wrapped his arm around her as they started toward the Royal Mummy Room.

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It took a few hours for the Bartlets to explore the museum to everyone's satisfaction. To Jed's relief, Ellie's discomfort in the Mummy Room faded after a while, and as soon as they left that room, she was back to her old self again. They toured most of the other exhibits and although there was still more to see, they were a bit tired and welcomed a break at the museum's coffee shop by mid-afternoon. After a round of coffee for Jed and Abbey, soft drinks for the girls, and conversation about all the treasures they had seen, they were all ready for a run through the gift shop to fill their bags with trinkets to remember their visit.

"One souvenir each," Abbey directed the girls. "And don't forget, we're not going back to the hotel, so make it something you can carry with you the rest of the day."

As Ellie and Zoey scampered off down the aisles, Jed teased his wife. "So when you're the one with half a dozen bags overflowing with stuff, are they allowed to make fun of you?"

Liz interrupted then. "Mom, I was kinda hoping I could go out on my own after we leave here."

Abbey laughed off that request. "Good one."

"I'm serious."

"So am I. Absolutely not."

"I'll be careful and I'll check in at the hotel before dinner. Please?"

"No."

"I'm 17. Why do I have to tag along with you guys all day?"

"Because you're 17. You're not going to walk around Cairo by yourself. End of story."

It was clear to Liz that Abbey wasn't going to budge. Instead of starting an argument she was sure to lose, she gave up and went off to roam one of the aisles, too busy sulking to notice the young man who had been eyeing her from a distance and followed her toward the back of the shop.

"That was weird," Jed said to Abbey.

"What?"

"When one of us says no to her, she usually asks the other. She didn't even try to get me on her side. It would have been a lost cause, of course, but she didn't know that."
"She's mad at you."

He was taken aback by that newsflash. "What? Why's she mad at me?"

"She's been mad ever since your crack in the car."

"She's mad about that?"

"You haven't noticed?"

"Not really, no. How'd you pick up on it?"

"Mother's intuition. I know her better than she knows herself sometimes. Incidentally, do you think it was a good idea to tease her about her driving four months after her accident?"

"Hmm, good point." Jed chewed on that for a moment, then admitted, "That might not be the only thing that pissed her off. If she's cranky, it probably has something to do with Doug as well."

"Have you been on his case again?"

"I made a joke this morning. She didn't find it very funny."

"Can't imagine why." Abbey shook her head at him with the slightest hint of a grin as she scanned the paintings of the pyramids. "This would be perfect for my parents."

"You're going to carry that around all day?"

"We can pick it up at the end of the day. I bet your brother would like one too."

This time, it was Zoey who interrupted. "Mommy, Ellie's buying two things. Can I?"

"I said one item each. You can tell Ellie that too."

"Eeeellllllliiiiiieeeee, Mommy said you can get only one thing!"

Jed waited until Zoey was gone to say, "I told my brother we'd send them one of those antique rugs Kellie wanted."

"We can get them one of those too."

"Hon, we can't buy out the store everywhere we go."

Abbey smirked, then continued browsing until she and Jed were jolted by Ellie calling out for them.

"MOM! DAD!"

The elder Bartlets rushed toward their middle daughter's voice. When they got to her, Ellie was standing beside Liz, who stood with her arms crossed over her chest next to a man who couldn't have been more than 20 or 21 years old. He had a hand on his cheek and he was quite obviously steaming mad. He yelled something in Arabic and Abbey reached for the Arabic-English dictionary in her tote.

"Don't bother," Liz said plainly. "He speaks English just fine. At least he did when he propositioned me and tried to grope me."
"Excuse me?" Jed turned on the man, his eyes flaming with anger at the mere accusation.

"I demand the police," the man replied. Pointing to Liz, he went on, "This woman hit me."

TBC
Jed had been warned about some of what goes on in Egypt. He had been told that while the great majority of Egyptians were extremely kind and respectful to tourists, there was a subset of the male population who were known to sometimes harass women. Western women were most susceptible to the harassment, he had told Abbey, concerned that she would be the target of unwelcomed advances if he wasn't around. Perhaps it was the father in him - the person who still saw Lizzie as a little girl - but whatever it was, he never imagined his daughter would be the one he'd have to worry about.

Liz was embarrassed about what happened. She didn't provoke the young man who tried to grope her, but she felt ashamed about it nonetheless. Her face was red and her arms were crossed over her chest. The man standing beside her had his hand to his cheek, visibly fuming about being hit. Abbey grabbed Liz to shield her in case the man wanted to settle the score, although, she thought, if he even tried, Jed would charge him in a heartbeat. The thought of that troubled her. Her husband wasn't a violent man, but the rules were different when it came to his family. Although she adored that protective nature of his, in a foreign country, under these circumstances, she feared it would only escalate matters. Abbey kept her eyes on him, prepared to jump in if Jed took a swing.

And there was yet another problem.

"I demand the police," the man had said.

Egyptian law didn't recognize sexual harassment, but it did recognize assault and there was question about Elizabeth's rights in this situation. Stored away in Jed's large bank of knowledge, he knew that while Egypt was an Islamic country, it applied the principles of Sharia law only to personal issues like marriage, divorce, and child custody. Everything else was governed by a Napoleonic-style legal system. That brought him some comfort as the shop clerk called the police.

"What should we do?" Abbey asked him when the Egyptian man was out of earshot.

"We'll tell the officers the truth. They'll believe us."

"We should notify the tourist police as well, just in case."
"Yeah, good idea." Jed looked over at Liz. "What happened exactly?"

"He offered me ten pounds for a kiss and then he tried to..." she trailed off and continued softly, "grab me, so I smacked him."

"What do you mean grab you?"

Abbey comfortingly stroked her hair. "Where did he grab you, sweetheart?"

"My breast." She lowered her head when she said it. "He tried to, but then I smacked him."

"If I get my hands on him..." Jed lurched forward, but Abbey let go of Liz and latched onto him tightly. "Abbey!"

"Don't you dare! You're going to scare the girls."

"The girls will thank me."

"You think they want to see their father in an Egyptian jail? Let the police handle it."

Abbey kept her grip on him as he stared at the creep.

"The guy deserved it!" Ellie added in support of her sister. "He was following Lizzie!"

"You saw him following her?" Abbey questioned.

"Zoey and I both did. We thought he just wanted to talk to her."

Jed made one more attempt to free himself of Abbey, but she squeezed his arm with all her might.

"If you don't let go of my arm..."

"You'll what? At least I know you won't hit me. I'm not so sure about him."

"Would it be the worst thing in the world?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact. When the cops get here, they're going to want to know what happened. They'll be much more sympathetic to Liz's story if her father hasn't beaten the man to a pulp."

She had a point, Jed had to admit. He did his best to calm himself down and by the time the police arrived, he was ready to explain the story with the help of an English-Arabic dictionary. The language barrier proved to be a problem and the officers were more attentive to the Egyptian man than to the Bartlets. They scribbled something down, then one of them approached Liz. They'd have to take her to the police station to sort it all out, he said with a deep accent and broken English.

Abbey grabbed hold of their frightened eldest daughter as a panicked Jed tried to intervene.

"We're not leaving until the tourist police get here," he insisted.

The tourist police were their advocates. They were the ones who would help them navigate the law and act as interpreters between Liz and the officers.

"They meet us at the station," one of the officers said, reaching out to grab Liz's arm.

Abbey refused to let go. Joined by Ellie and Zoey, she held on stubbornly to Liz when the officer tried to separate them.
"My daughter's not going anywhere without me!" Jed told them, his voice rising to match his irritation. He wedged his way between the officer and Elizabeth, looping his own arm around his daughter's.

The officer acquiesced with a nod. He could see they were scared and although all he wanted was to question the teenager at the station, his English wasn't good enough to communicate that to Jed and Abbey in a way that would ease their fears, so he released Liz and allowed Jed to accompany her instead. Walking alongside them, he directed them toward the police car outside.

"Jed?"

Jed turned back to see Abbey. She needed his reassurance. If they were back in the States, she would have been the one jumping in to defend Liz, but they weren't. She knew that in Egypt, chances were that Jed would get more respect in the eyes of the officers, and she realized that if that was the case, Liz was better off letting her father fight this battle.

"It'll be okay," he said, looking her in the eye. "I'll straighten it out. Take the girls back to the hotel and Lizzie and I will be back before you know it."

"Promise me you won't lose your temper. I don't want to have to worry about you too."

"I promise." He kissed her goodbye before tightening his grip on Liz's hand and following the officer out.

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At the police station, Liz and a member of the tourist police were taken into a room where an officer took her statement. Jed stayed with her the whole time, thinking of ways to get them out of this mess. He could call the American Embassy if he had to and he also toyed with the idea of putting in a call to Washington. He didn't like to flaunt his position as a United States Congressman, but he wasn't above doing it if they insisted on badgering Liz for defending herself against that lecherous scoundrel.

Fortunately, it never came to that. Elizabeth was free to go after giving her statement and Jed's faith in the Cairo police force was restored. He heaved a sigh of relief as they were told she wouldn't be facing any charges and he graciously thanked the tourist police for their assistance. Once the ordeal was over, he and Liz climbed into a cab to be driven back to the hotel.

"Are you mad at me, Dad?" she asked him.

"Mad at you?"

"For ruining the day."

"First of all, the day is not ruined. It took a few hours, but so what? Second, none of this was your fault. Your mom and I have always told you that no one has the right to put their hands on you and that if they do, if you ever feel physically threatened, you have the right to do whatever you need to do to get out of that situation. I'm not mad at you, Lizzie, I'm proud of you."

Liz felt incredibly lucky at that moment. From the very start, her parents had been on her side and they never backed down. She had always known in her heart that they would stand up for her, but to see them fight for her without ever doubting her or blaming her reinforced their love for her and as she sat in the back of that cab, she felt blessed to be part of such a supportive family.

"Just do me a favor," Jed went on. "If anything like that happens again, try to get my attention
before you go off and hit someone else?"

She smiled. "I will."

"Thank you." He took a beat, then asked, "Are you mad at me?"

"For what?"

He shrugged. "I thought maybe my jokes today upset you. You know, the one I made about your driving and the other one about Doug."

"The driving thing was kinda funny," Liz confessed, somewhat reluctantly after she had made such a fuss about it when Ellie and Zoey laughed in the car.

"I knew it! I knew you didn't take that seriously! Your mom thought you were pissed."

"I wasn't pissed about that. I was pissed about the Doug one."

"Why? I was just teasing."

"I know, but you always make fun of him."

"That's what we do, Lizzie. You and I have always teased each other. When did you become so sensitive?"

"I didn't. I mean, not about other things. It's just, you don't like Doug so when you make fun of him, it doesn't feel like you're teasing."

"Sometimes I'm not."

"I know."

"But most of the time - like today - I am. It's a father's prerogative. If you're going to insist on dating boys, you've gotta let me have some fun with them. If that upsets you, might I suggest you become a nun and we'll forget the whole thing."

She rolled her eyes at that. "Dad."

Jed elbowed her. "It really bothers you?"

"Sometimes, especially since it seems you're harder on Doug than other guys."

"Now that's not true."

"Sure it is. Sven wasn't even my boyfriend and you rolled out the red carpet for him."

"Sven is a national treasure." It was no secret that Jed would have been thrilled if Liz had picked Sven, the young man she met in Stockholm and continued a pen-pal relationship with. Not only was he a kind, intelligent, and charming guy, but Sven had been awarded a Rhodes Scholarship and it was obvious that he was smitten with Liz. If Doug wasn't in the picture, Jed believed that Liz and Sven would have been a perfect couple.

"That's what I'm talking about. You like Sven and you hate Doug."

"So I liked one guy. That doesn't prove that I'm unfairly hard on Doug. I didn't have a kind word to say about that loser you were dating last year. What was his name?"
"Scott," Liz said, remembering with no small amount of derision the guy who had dumped her for her best friend. "Don't remind me."

"See? I was hard on him too and I'd like it noted that I'm not always wrong about these things."

"Well, you're wrong about Doug."

"Tell me again how you're so sure."

"I just am. Doug is someone I can have fun with."

"Is that all you're looking for in a relationship? Someone you can have fun with?"

"He makes me laugh, Dad, the way you and Mom make each other laugh." Jed stifled a moan at that comparison. "When I'm with Doug, the time flies because I enjoy his company so much. He makes me feel good when I'm sad, he cheers me up when I'm disappointed, and when I'm happy, all I want to do is share it with him. I like being with him. When we say goodbye, I wish we didn't have to. I wish I could stay with him all the time. I don't know how to explain it any better than that."

"Elizabeth..." Jed took a breath as he prepared for this. "Are you in love with him?"

"I think maybe I am," she admitted, watching as Jed looked away. "What's wrong with that?"

"Nothing."

"Really? I thought you were going to say something different."

Jed was dealing with the most vulnerable of feelings. He remembered those early days with him and Abbey, remembered how he was a ball of raw emotion when he first realized he was falling in love with her. He imagined that's how Liz was feeling right now. No, he wasn't impressed with Doug, but the last thing he wanted was to hurt Liz when she was being so honest with him. She let him into her world and in unusual teenage fashion, she opened up to him. He wasn't about to throw that in her face.

He buried his feelings about Doug and said, "Nothing is wrong with loving another human being. Do I wish it was Sven instead of Doug? Yeah, I do. I won't lie to you about that. But it's not and as long as you're happy, I guess I can live with whatever weirdo you find attractive."

"You're doing it again." That was more of a lighthearted warning from Liz. "Doug's not a weirdo."

"I can't stop picking on him overnight. You've gotta give me some time." He drew a laugh out of her. "Okay, I'll make you a deal. I'll try my damnedest to keep my jokes about Doug to myself. I can't promise I won't slip up now and then, but when I do, you can remind me I'm being a jerk."

"Permission to call you a jerk? Cool!"

"Yeah, I thought you'd like that."

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"What if they arrest Lizzie?"

"They won't." Abbey was pacing the carpet at the hotel pretending not to be as concerned as Ellie was about what was happening.
"But what if they do?"

"Ellie, please give it a rest."

"I'm just asking." Ellie wasn't used to seeing Abbey so worried.

They heard a sound then, a key jiggling the lock on the door. Abbey ran toward it, but as she reached for the knob, Jed swung the door open and he and Liz walked in, safe and sound.

Relieved, Abbey let out a breath she felt like she had been holding for hours. "What happened?"

"All they wanted was to question her," Jed replied. "They let us go as soon as they got her statement."

Abbey pulled Liz into a hug so fierce, it was as if she was squeezing the life out of her. "You can whine and moan all you want, but you're not leaving my sight for the rest of this trip."

"Okay."

That was a little too easy. This was Liz, after all. "Okay? That's it?"

"Yeah." Liz looked her squarely in the eye to assure her she wasn't pulling her leg. No rebellion this time. No back-talk. Just plain cooperation from a girl who realized just how much she needed her parents, at least in Egypt.

"Okay then."

As Liz moved into the girls' bedroom with Ellie and Zoey, Abbey turned to Jed. She swung her arms around his neck and kissed his cheek, noticing the stiffness in his embrace. Something was wrong, she deduced, and she pulled away to look at him.

"It's nothing," he said. Knowing his wife as he did, he knew she'd sense when something was upsetting him. "I was just thinking there should be penalties against what happened today. The guy who went after Liz got away with it. What kind of example does that set for the people in this country?"

"We had heard the stories of harassment before we came."

"I know, but..."

"It's more real now." Abbey had that uncanny ability of finishing his thoughts for him. "You can't fix the world, Jed."

"I can try."

"That you can."

"But not this week?"

"Unless you can school yourself on the Egyptian legal system and get elected to a parliamentary position in the next seven days, I'm afraid not." She tucked her hand under his chin to lift his head so their eyes locked. "But I love that you want to."

Jed acknowledged that with a loving smile and without missing a beat, changed the subject. "Hey girls, get out here! Now that we've managed to skirt an international incident, who's up for some more fun? We have a whole list of things to see and do!"
Ellie and Zoey didn't need to be asked twice. Neither one could wait to hit the street once again and each had ideas about where to go, from the Cairo Tower to a walk along the Corniche by the Nile to a ride on one of the boats floating on the river. Jed listened to both girls, then came to the conclusion that they'd get to do it all if they moved quickly. Because their second day in Cairo would be spent at the pyramids, it was important to squeeze as much sight-seeing into their first day as possible, and so they were off for an afternoon jam-packed with adventure.

The Citadel was first on the agenda. The grand medieval castle-style compound that had been built by ruler Salah al-Din in 1183 A.D. was loaded with history that Jed couldn't wait to share with his girls. It was a hilltop fortress with breathtaking views of Cairo. There were watchtowers, gates, police and military museums, and historic mosques that symbolized the beauty of Egyptian architecture.

They visited the Muhammad Ali mosque first, a building that was somewhat detached from traditional Islamic monuments. Known as the most famous mosque in Cairo, it had more of a Turkish style, with domes flanked by a pair of towering minarets. The Bartlets went inside, where they were asked to take off their shoes in acknowledgment of Muslim culture as they approached the prayer room.

"Are pictures allowed?" Ellie wanted to know, her camera stuffed in her backpack.

"We got a photo pass just for you." Abbey always encouraged her girls' hobbies, but she was especially proud of Ellie's love of photography.

"Thanks!"

Several small chandeliers circled the praying area and Ellie took out her camera to snap pictures of the pulpit. They then walked through the courtyard door to see the clock tower, domed arcades, and the marble fountain outside. The Citadel sat on a bluff that overlooked Cairo and the wall that protected the mosque allowed sight-seers a chance to look out at the famous landmarks down below. It also gave the Bartlets the opportunity for a family photo taken with Egypt's most famous city in the background.

After taking in everything there was to see at the mosque, Abbey proposed a stop by the Al-Gawhara Palace. Legend had it that was where Muhammad Ali waited while his forces executed Mameluke leaders as they arrived at the Citadel in 1811. It was now a museum, complete with period costumes, furnishings, and paintings. Following their brief tour there, Jed wanted to see the National Military Museum and Liz had her heart set on a trip to the photo studio on the grounds where they could pose in old Egyptian costumes.

Liz's idea proved to be the most memorable.

"But I can't see where I'm going!" Zoey complained, bandaged up in a mummy outfit as Liz led her toward the photographer.

"That's why I'm leading you."

"How do I know you're not tricking me? You could make me fall and get hurt."

"Do you really think I'm that mean?" Liz asked sincerely.

"Yes!" Zoey took a few more cautious steps. "I don't wanna be a mummy!"

In the girl's dressing room, Ellie put the finishing touches on her desert princess outfit and then joined her sisters with a giant stuffed camel in tow. Meanwhile, Jed left the men's dressing room as
a Pharaoh, complete with black and gold headpiece, chest plate, and wrist guards.

He approached his daughters with a spring in his step.

"Okay, who's ready?" One look at Liz's get-up dulled the cheeriness in his voice. "Whoa, what the hell are you supposed to be, a harem girl?"

"No," she scoffed, twirling around in her hot-pink chiffon pants and a jeweled top that left her midriff bare. "I'm an Arabian princess."

"A half-naked Arabian princess. It's like this morning never even happened."

"This morning had nothing to do with how I was dressed."

"No, but this is a conservative country. The more skin you show, the less respect you get."

"I'm not hiking the countryside, Dad. We're taking yet another family picture, the bizillionth one this trip. I'm just changing things up a bit and trying to have fun."

"Having fun and looking respectful are not mutually exclusive."

"What does Lizzie look like?" Zoey asked behind the bandages of her costume.

Jed slouched down to look at her face. "Why can't you see?"

"Lizzie said mummies cover their eyes too."

With a disapproving glare at his eldest daughter, Jed cut one of Zoey's bandages to allow her to see. "There you go."

"What?" Liz argued with her father. "I thought it looked more authentic with her eyes covered."

"Lizzie, you look SEXY!"

"Thanks, Zo."

"No, she doesn't!" Jed disagreed. "A woman isn't sexy unless she looks classy and beautiful at the same time."

Abbey entered the conversation then. She had on an elegant Cleopatra costume. "Everyone ready?"

Jed continued with Elizabeth. "Your mother proves my point."

"What point?"

"I was explaining to Liz how a woman can look classy and beautiful all at once."

Liz addressed Abbey. "He doesn't like what I'm wearing."

"I think it's cute." Abbey was the one who green-lighted Liz's costume in the first place. "She's an Arabian princess. I helped her pick it out."

"She looks like a cross between a belly dancer and 'I Dream of Jeannie,' but whatever you say."

"How come Ellie gets a camel?" Zoey grumbled. "I want a camel!"

Ellie hollered back, "Mummies don't ride camels, Zoey! Duh."
"I don't wanna be a mummy!"

"What do you want to be?" Abbey asked her.

"Something that rides camels!"

"We don't have time to switch," Liz explained to her. "The place closes in 10 minutes. We have to do it now."

"And we will," Jed promised. "Just as soon as you change."

"I'm not changing, Dad."

"Leave her alone, Jed. She's fine."

"You really think she looks fine?"

"Well, her ponytail could be a little higher," Abbey grinned to Jed's dismay. "Come here, Lizzie."

Seeing Zoey pout, Ellie reached out to her. "We can share the camel, Zo."

"But you said mummies don't ride camels."

"They do if their desert princess sister is taking them back to the pyramids."

Hidden behind the bandages, Zoey's face lit up at that and with Jed's help, she leaned back as if hopping aboard the stuffed animal. Jed then took his place beside Abbey and the elder Bartlets stood behind their children as Liz pulled her chiffon cape over her exposed tummy to please her father and then stepped just behind her little sisters who posed on either side of the fake camel.

"We're finally ready," Jed told the photographer.

Having seen the family interaction play out before his eyes, the man muttered teasingly, "Abu el Banat."

"Huh?" The girls scrunched up their faces, confused by the phrase.

"Just say cheese," Abbey advised them.

"CHEEEEESSEE."

When everyone was satisfied with their Citadel excursion, they all piled into a taxi and took off for their next destination - Gezira Island and the Cairo Tower, the tallest building on the continent of Africa. The Bartlets dined at the rotating rooftop restaurant, although it soon proved to be too much for Jed and Ellie. Standing nearly 200 meters above the ground, they agreed the panoramic view overlooking Cairo was spectacular, but father and daughter shared a fear of heights that took away from the wonder of it all. Feeling slightly nauseated at being up so high, Jed led Ellie back down the elevator and the duo spent their time taking goofy pictures of one another on the ground while Abbey, Liz, and Zoey explored the observation deck and the gorgeous spectacle of the sun setting over the River Nile. Through the telescopes, the trio could even see the Giza pyramids and the boundary between the bustling city of Cairo and the sandy hills of the desert. They descended the tower shortly after and met Jed and Ellie out front.

"Hey El, check this out." Liz rummaged through a gift bag to pull out a pair of binoculars. "We stopped by the gift shop on the observation deck."
"Is it mine to keep?"

"Yup, it's from me and Zoey. Since you couldn't stay, we thought you'd like a souvenir."

One of Ellie's greatest loves used to be star-gazing through the telescope Jed had bought her when she was seven years old. On camping trips, her binoculars took its place, but when they left for Egypt, she claimed she had left them behind. The truth was, she had lost interest. She didn't like looking up at the sky because it brought back memories of the Challenger exploding in the clouds. She didn't like watching the stars glitter over the planet because it opened her mind to all the questions she had about the universe and about life beyond the soil of the Earth. Anything and everything that had to do with space travel and astronomy had been cast aside in Ellie's world and she did her best to try to hide it.

Instead of acting ungrateful for the gift her sisters had bought her, she plastered a smile on her face and said, "Thanks guys! I love it!"

And with that, they made their way down the spiral path, Jed and Abbey walking a few steps behind their daughters.

"Was that your idea?" Jed asked his wife, touched by Liz and Zoey's thoughtfulness.

"Nope, it was all them. We got to see the pyramids through the telescopes and they felt bad that Ellie missed out."

"I missed out too. I don't see any presents for me."

"That's because you hadn't asked for one...until now." Abbey stopped then and dipped her hand into her tote bag to pull out an identical pair of binoculars for Jed. "From me, with love."

"As always." He placed a kiss on her lips.

"Today's been a pretty good day, considering it began with Lizzie in police custody." She gave a soft laugh at that.

"Yeah, it has. You know what though, tomorrow's going to be even better!"

With an arm around Abbey's waist, Jed picked up the pace as the girls began a power-walk through the crowd of pedestrians and toward the river.

TBC
With the call to prayer at the first streak of sunlight over the Nile, the Bartlets rose to begin their day. Jed and Abbey shared a shower, then woke the girls. All three of them were still sound asleep, worn out from their midnight swim in the hotel's water park-style pool the night before. But there was no time to waste, Abbey insisted as she tossed their things into their suitcases and prodded them mercilessly until they stirred. The plan was to check out of the hotel and leave their bags behind the front counter for pick-up at nightfall, then grab breakfast on the road since there was so much to do before leaving Cairo, starting with a walking tour of the nearby sights and a chance to explore the culture of the Egyptian capital in true Arabic form - a bazaar.

Khan el-Khalili was the biggest bazaar in Egypt, Jed recalled, and when he, Abbey, and the girls set off on foot to check it out, they saw how remarkable it truly was. The narrow streets were crowded with tourists and locals; the vendors had all their items on display, from perfumes and souvenirs to gold and silver to artwork to antique lamps to colorful glass, brass, and copperware. Anything they could have possibly wanted was found in this flourishing open market, the largest center of commerce in Cairo.

There were also coffee shops, cafés, and restaurants on the block, including the Naguib Mahfouz, an eatery named for the world-renowned Egyptian author who Jed was convinced would one day win the Nobel Prize in Literature. That's where they ended up dining that morning, however brief it was. The girls ordered fast and gulped their breakfast down, wanting to hurry up and get out to see the bazaar. They had allowance money to spend and Abbey agreed to give each of them extra pounds to buy souvenirs for their grandparents. Elizabeth also had Doug on her shopping list and Ellie wanted to pick out something for her best friend, Wendy, which meant Zoey, reluctant to be left out, had to buy a trinket for her friend, Cindy.

Because of the incident between Liz and the Egyptian man at the museum, Jed asked that the whole family stay together instead of splitting up to tour the market. Of course, he soon realized that plan made it more difficult to buy what caught his eye - a silver charm bracelet he wanted to get for Abbey. It wasn't a fancy diamond necklace, a string of pearls, or any of the other fine jewelry pieces he was used to buying for her. No, this was just an ordinary bracelet with a water lily dangling off the chain. It was a lotus flower and the lotus, he had read, was a symbol of love...
and devotion in Egypt. As Abbey tested perfume scents and helped Ellie pick out a T-shirt for Wendy at a neighboring stand, Jed negotiated with the vendor to purchase the bracelet and stick it into his jacket pocket before Abbey knew anything about it. Zoey saw him do it and giggled when he caught her.

"Come here," he told her, kneeling down so he could whisper softly enough that Abbey couldn't hear. "You saw what I bought?"

"Uh huh."

"And you saw where I put it?"

"In your pocket."

"You know who it's for?"

"Me?" Her green eyes opened wide. Zoey was hoping his answer would be 'yes,' even though she knew it was most likely for her mother.

"Nice try," Jed winked before leaning in to whisper softer. "It's a surprise for Mommy, so let's keep it between us for now, okay?"

"Okay." The six-year-old held out her pinky the same way she did with her sisters when she was sworn to secrecy. "I pinky swear."

"Good girl," Jed replied as he curled his pinky around his daughter's.

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It wasn't long after they got there that the Bartlets left the Khan and headed back to the hotel to drop off their shopping bags. The clerk behind the front desk offered to let them store their belongings there until it was time to catch their overnight train to Luxor. They would spend the rest of the day at the pyramids in Giza with a trip to Saqqara if there was time, and they didn't want anything weighing them down. Plus, it went without saying that Ellie was likely to lose her purchases or leave them behind if they took them with them.

A car picked them up at the hotel a little before 11 a.m. to drive them out of the city limits toward Giza. Most tourists made the trip before daybreak and that's what Jed and Abbey had been planning as well, but after the hold-up with Liz at the police station in Cairo the day before, they had lost the time they were going to spend at Khan el-Khalili. They could have either skipped the market entirely or postponed their trip to the desert. They agreed to the latter, although it meant taking extra precautions against the unforgiving afternoon sun. Abbey brought a large bottle of sunblock with her and passed it around in the car. Liz and Ellie took liberal doses, but when it got to Jed, he insisted he was fine and rejected the 'greasy concoction.' Zoey followed her father's lead, stubbornly refusing to use it.

"I'm not giving you a choice," Abbey told her youngest daughter firmly.

"Daddy got a choice."

"Daddy's an adult."

Realizing she wasn't going to get anywhere with her mother, Zoey turned her jade green eyes to Jed. "Daddy, do I have to wear it?"
"Zoey." Abbey's voice held a not-so-subtle warning.

"I don't wanna wear it!" she shrieked.

"Hey!" Jed intervened. "No whining allowed. Do what Mom says or you'll end up waiting in the car while we see the pyramids."

"It makes me feel sticky and gross," Zoey replied in a calmer tone.

"Just put on a little bit. Here, I'll do it too." Jed took the bottle from Abbey and poured a dime-sized amount in his hands to rub onto his bare arms and legs. He was wearing a pair of khaki shorts and a short-sleeved blue polo shirt. "Your turn."

Zoey took the bottle next and poured out an even smaller amount. She made a show of rubbing it all over her arms, legs, and shoulders, even under the straps of her tank-top, until Abbey was satisfied. Then, she closed it and handed it back and she and the rest of the family stared out the windows of the car as the scenery changed from the clogged roads of the city to the narrow lanes of a barren hillside. The pyramids were actually on the outskirts of Cairo, paradoxically close to residential neighborhoods, but their driver took them on a longer route so they could get a spectacular view of them from the desert.

It was a beautiful day out. The thin layer of gray that had lingered in the air early in the morning was gone, replaced by sunshine and blue skies, bluer and bluer the further they got from the urban smog of Cairo. There was no doubt they were close to their destination; not only were the pyramids suddenly less distant, but sand dunes dotted the landscape and heavy gusts of wind caused ripples in the sand, blowing it onto Pyramids Road, the street that linked Cairo and Giza.

Jed and Abbey had heard about the hassles in taking a taxi and arranged for a highly recommended Bedouin guide named Ahmed to take them instead. Ahmed was a native man who spoke good English. He took his role as a guide very seriously and devoted his time to helping travelers soak up all the treasures Egypt had to offer. He would not only be driving them to the pyramids, but he also agreed to accompany them inside the complex when they got there to keep at bay the peddlers who frequented the area to take advantage of tourists.

"Oh my God, it looks just like in the books," Liz was heard whispering under her breath as they neared the Giza Plateau, where the three pyramids stood as if vigilantly guarding the land.

"Wow," was all Ellie could say. It was more of a breath really. She had never seen anything so extraordinary in all her life.

Jed and Abbey exchanged a smile then, both feeling that incredible tingle in the pit of their stomach, the same one their older daughters were feeling. Zoey, meanwhile, was taken by the sight of people riding camel-back around the land. She was impressed by the pyramids too, but she couldn't wait to hop aboard a real-life camel and prance around the desert, something she had been dreaming about ever since she, her sisters, and Abbey surprised Jed with the Egyptian vacation.

Ahmed drove them to the main entrance's ticket office, where they could buy tickets to see the pyramids and even go inside, and once they were set, they walked through the gates and into the complex. There were hundreds of other tourists around, but it might as well have just been them in this legendary necropolis where one of the seven wonders of the ancient world towered over the sandy knolls. It was a feeling of selective solitude, just the five of them experiencing this together. Privately. As if the other tourists didn't exist. In the comfort of his family, Jed knew he was seeing a piece history no one could adequately describe to anyone who hadn't been there to see it for themselves. Lizzie was wrong. The books didn't do it justice.
Abbey was wearing a long, flowing red and white dress that had layers suitable for circulating air. It had thin sleeves that extended to her elbows and she wrapped a matching red and white scarf around her head as they walked, not a hijab or chador worn to recognize traditional Muslim custom, but an ordinary silk scarf to protect her from the fierce desert heat. Lizzie, Ellie, and Zoey opted for hats instead of scarves and all four wore large, black sunglasses.

At the camel station, camel owners were urging visitors to take camel rides and Zoey, who needed no encouragement, begged Jed to let her go. Ahmed negotiated with the men for four camels - one for himself as their official guide, one for Abbey and Zoey, one for Lizzie and Ellie, who wanted to ride together, and one for Jed, whose hopes of riding with Abbey were dashed when they decided that Zoey might get scared if she rode alone. It was just as well, he thought. Public displays of affection were seen as disrespectful in Egypt and he knew from past experience that he'd be unable to resist his wife if they shared a camel. Back at the farm, they had gone horseback riding together a number of times. It was the only way to get Jed on a horse, Abbey used to tease. She always sat in front and every time Jed saddled in behind her and felt the warmth of her backside as she pushed against him, he felt a surge of energy in his nether regions. Those rides usually ended in a fiery lovemaking session in the hayloft in the barn, the kind that left them both breathless and gasping for air. Abbey kept a special blanket up there just for those days and right now, Jed was longing for that blanket and for the privacy of a hayloft where he and Abbey could have a few minutes alone. He settled in on his camel instead as he watched his wife sweep a wind-blown strand of hair from her face and take the owner's hand to help her climb on-board behind Zoey.

The four camels began the trek up to the base of the pyramids then. Because they moved both legs on the same side of their body at the same time, the pace was much too slow for Zoey, the amateur equestrian. Abbey explained to her that this was one of those moments when she had to sit back, relax, and enjoy the scenery, which she did once she learned no amount of cajoling would get the animal to speed up.

The camel Liz and Ellie were riding was a bit of a rebellious one. She was a single-hump female and the girls picked her because her name was A'isha, meaning 'innocent but fierce' in Arabic. She certainly was fierce, but she wasn't even close to being innocent. As if intentionally disobeying her caretaker, she strolled out of line and took a detour across the sand.

"Hey, what are you doing?" Liz nudged her sister who was sitting in front.

"It's not me, it's her!" Ellie addressed the animal. "Where are you going, A'isha? We're supposed to stay with everyone else." She was used to talking to horses, but camels were a whole new beast to Ellie.

"Pet her, Ellie," Jed said, frozen as his camel, Babr, stood still and watched A'isha's rebellion in pure amazement. "Make her feel safe."

Ellie and Liz both began running their hands over A'isha's back. "Good A'isha. Good girl."

Ahmed got off his camel to help lure A'isha to where she was supposed to be and with the help of the caretaker, they were able to get the rogue camel back into line. At least for a little while. In the 45 minutes they were on the camels, A'isha challenged her riders at least a dozen times. It was the thrill of freaking them out, the caretaker said. A'isha would have never roamed off the path; she just liked to surprise people by doing the unexpected. Before Liz and Ellie got comfortable with her personality, the journey was over and the camel owners made the animals kneel so the riders could climb over their heads. It was a bit of a challenging maneuver, but the Bartlets successfully got off the animals to explore the complex on foot.

The Great Pyramid of Khufu was the first stop.
The girls were taking pictures of it as Jed enlightened them with a history lesson. "This here is the only structure still standing that was part of the seven wonders of the ancient world."

"Are they all wonders, Daddy?" Zoey wanted to know.

"Nope, just the Pyramid of Khufu. That reminds me, five points for anyone who knows what Khufu was called by the Greeks."

"Cheops!" Ellie blurted out.

"Very good!"

"What do I get for the points?"

"An atta girl isn't enough?"

"Nope."

"Okay, smarty pants, you can double your points and earn yourself some extra spending money if you can name the other six wonders of the ancient world and explain why they don't still exist."

Even Abbey couldn't answer that question. "Cruel, Jed. Very cruel."

She was right, Jed agreed, but that didn't stop him from baiting Ellie anyway. When his middle daughter confessed she didn't know, he promised he'd share his knowledge later, but for now, he went on with the history of the Great Pyramid. It was built in 2540 B.C., he told them, as a tomb for Pharaoh Khufu of the Fourth Dynasty of Ancient Egypt. Remarkably to Ahmed, Jed even began to explain to them about the number of stone blocks it took to build it and about the casing stones that were used on the surface. He kept going until he realized he was ruining Ahmed's fun. He then feigned ignorance to allow Ahmed to do his job and guide them around the monument while telling the girls about its architectural and cultural history.

The entrance to the inside of the pyramid enticed them all. They took a few steps in and the girls immediately felt the rush of excitement. Their voices echoed, Ellie pointed out, and she and Zoey started a round-robin until Abbey quieted them down.

There were three chambers in the Great Pyramid - the King's Chamber, the Queen's Chamber, and a third chamber called the subterranean chamber. There were cramped passageways and steep stairs with ceilings that were the ideal height for little Zoey. Everyone else had to crouch down and virtually crawl to make it through. The uncomfortable waddle was worth it, they all agreed, and they ascended the stairway toward the King's Chamber, soon discovering that it was more hot and muggy than they had imagined and that the climb was back-breaking exhausting.

Abbey, who was hunched over following Ahmed, was concerned about her husband. The hike was difficult enough for her. Knowing that Jed didn't like small places and that he had a bad back to boot, she couldn't imagine how bad it was for him. She checked in with him. "Jed, how're you doing?"

"I'm all right, I think," he said. They had to form a single-file line to fit through the tunnel. Ahmed was up front. Abbey was next with Zoey on her heels, then Liz and Ellie. Jed was bringing up the rear at the back of the line.

"We can call it off if you want," Abbey offered.

"No, we can't," Ahmed countered. Once they began the climb, there was no turning back, he told
"I kinda wish I didn't know that," Jed mumbled. He could feel his blood pressure rising.

They finally reached the Grand Gallery, a step below the King's Chamber. There was a Horizontal Passage to reach the Queen's Chamber on the same level, but by now, the novelty of being in a pyramid had worn off and they were tired and irritable. They continued on the steep incline to the King's Chamber, the highest of all the chambers. When they finally arrived, they could stand upright, take a breath, and admire what little surroundings there were. With the exception of one piece of furniture, it was bare.

To Ellie's horror, that one piece of furniture was a sarcophagus made of granite. Jed remembered how she reacted to the coffin at the Egyptian Museum and he instantly noticed the change in her expression here. He grabbed her as she tried to back away and step out of the chamber.

"It's okay," he said gently. "It's empty. It was never used for burial."

"Why's it here?"

That's when Abbey saw it, the fear in Ellie that Jed had caught at the museum.

"If it makes you uncomfortable, we can start back down the exit." Ahmed was used to tourists getting nervous and he tried his best to reassure Ellie.

Ellie looked at her family for permission. It had been such a long climb, she didn't want to ruin it for them, but she was relieved when her sisters and her parents admitted they had gotten as much out of it as they were going to get and that it was time to go. Liz was especially happy about leaving. She turned toward the door and began the descent until Ahmed stopped her.

"Hang on." He took her hand and pulled her back into the chamber. "We go down backwards. That's the only way."

Abbey's eyebrows shot to the top of her forehead as she silently cursed the idea of entering the pyramid.

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Upon reaching the outside world again, the Bartlets needed a few minutes to regroup before exploring the two other pyramids and the solar boats that were on display. A visit to the Great Sphinx was also part of the plan. With so much more they wanted to do, they had to re-adjust their itinerary, which originally included a short detour to Saqqara to see the Step Pyramid. Time was slipping away from them and they had to sacrifice that excursion in order to take in everything at Giza. They took a family vote and unanimously decided to skip Saqqara, then turned their attention to Ahmed who was about to tell them about the Pyramid of Khafre. Named for Khufu's son, it was standing beside his father's monument.

Next was the smallest of the three pyramids - the Pyramid of Menkaure - and after they had learned about Menkaure, they investigated the solar boats. These wooden vessels were for the King to use on his journeys, they heard. Three of them had been buried by the Great Pyramid and once they were excavated in the 1950s, a museum had been built with walkways to show them off to tourists.

"In World History, we read that the boats were also used to carry the King's body across the Nile for funerary ceremonies at the Funerary Temple." Liz addressed Ahmed. "Is that true?"

"That's what some people say, yes."
"What's a funerary temple, Lizzie?" Zoey asked.

"It's a place where they mummify the bodies and stuff like that. They do rituals to protect the spirit and prepare it for the afterlife."

Ellie remained silent during the exchange. She didn't fidget the way she did when they ran into the sarcophagus, but she wasn't elated with the solar boats either. She simply stood there quietly until her family finished looking around.

Finally, it was off to the Great Sphinx. The famous mythical statue carved to reflect a human head on a lion's body stood in its own complex on the Giza Plateau. There were two Sphinx temples and Ahmed explained that the one in front of the statue dated back all the way to when the monument was built. It was made of limestone that had eroded over time. The newer temple was the New Kingdom version and was situated on a small elevation north of the statue.

"Is there a way inside?" Zoey was on the prowl for their next adventure.

"NO!" Abbey answered resoundingly. An avid hiker, even she was still recuperating from that near-crawl up the cramped walkway of the Great Pyramid. She wasn't ordinarily claustrophobic, but she now had greater appreciation for the condition. The confined walls of the pyramids restricted her motion so much that she had to admit, it elevated her heart rate. Even if there had been a way inside the Sphinx, the last thing she wanted to do was commit herself to another laborious, anxiety-producing climb.

"Why does it have a man's head but a lion's body?" Ellie prodded their guide.

Jed chimed in on that one. "Because Egyptians believed lions were the fiercest animals in the world. It was the symbolism." Realizing he stepped on Ahmed's turf again, he looked over at the Bedouin. "Right?"

"You're a lover of history, Mr. Bartlet," Ahmed concluded. "Yes, that's right. It's not just a human head, Ellie. It's a Pharaoh's head. No one knows which one. The Sphinx, or as many know it, Abu el Hol, sends a message."

"What does Abu el Hol mean?"

"In Arabic, 'abu' means father and 'hol' means terror. 'Father of Terror.' Over here at the new Temple..."

Jed, Abbey, and the girls continued to follow Ahmed around the complex. There was so much to see at the Giza Plateau that even a full day wasn't sufficient, but they had several fun-filled hours and experiences that most would only read about in textbooks.

As the sun went down, they took their seats on a blanket in the sand in anticipation of the Sound and Light Show and an English narration of the history of Ancient Egypt.

"You have come tonight to the most fabulous and celebrated place in the world. Here on the Plateau of Giza stands forever the mightiest of human achievements. No traveler, emperor, merchant or poet has trodden on these sands and not gasped in awe."

It all began with the Sphinx telling the story of Egypt and Giza. In this script, it was made clear that his watchful eyes had been guarding the famed burial ground for 5,000 years and this was his chance to share all that he had seen. As the building of the pyramids was mentioned, the three monuments came alive under a parade of floodlights and lasers, each shining its own distinct hue and reflecting that color up into the skies.
Zoey was the one most intrigued by the show, but everyone in the Bartlet family considered that the highlight to their wonderful day. Before leaving for a local restaurant to grab some dinner, they used up the last of their rolls of film, snapping pictures of each other and of the monuments glowing in the moonlight as keepsakes of their outing to Giza.

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A cool breeze was coming in from the desert and Abbey and the girls put on light sweaters over their clothes as Ahmed led them to Felfela, a restaurant in walking distance with a menu full of authentic Egyptian dishes, like shorbet 'ads, lentil soup splashed with lemon juice. It was served with a side of fresh-baked pita bread and the Bartlets snacked on it while waiting for their main course to arrive and reminiscing about their day, an exercise that prompted Jed to take part in one of his favorite pastimes - teasing his eldest daughter.

"Show of hands," he said. "Who here is surprised that Lizzie ended up with a camel that couldn't take direction?"

Liz rolled her eyes as if exasperated. "My camel was spirited."

"OUR camel," Ellie was quick to correct her.

"Aloof and defiant is more like it," Jed replied.

"Hey, at least A'isha had some fire in her!" Liz gave as good as she got. "Your camel, Babr, just stood there like a bump on a log."

"Babr was lost in thought."

"Babr had no thoughts."

"All right, missy..." Jed could see Liz fighting a smile, the way she always did when he picked on her and she wanted to pretend she wasn't enjoying it. "Why don't you drink your drink and stop insulting my camel."

The waiter brought them their dinner then and the conversation detoured as they all shared their food so everyone could try a little bit of everything. Jed and Zoey had ordered shish kebabs made of lamb while Ellie ordered a beef kebab, all three served over a plate of white rice, Abbey and Elizabeth opted for Shakshouka - a North African dish made with sautéed vegetables and poached eggs cooked in tomato sauce - and Ahmed ate a traditional Bedouin meal of Maglubeh. It was chicken, vegetables, and rice stacked into layers and served upside down. A pitcher of sahlab, a Middle Eastern drink popular in Egypt, was brought to the table and after dinner, in typical Egyptian fashion, it was tea all around as Jed quizzed Ahmed about Bedouin life.

Stuffed and ready to call it a day, the Bartlets all piled into the car an hour later to be driven back to their hotel in Cairo, where they said their goodbyes to Ahmed, browsed the gift shop for more rolls of film and some postcards to send to friends and family back in New Hampshire, collected their belongings from behind the front desk, and caught a cab to the train station.

Their Cairo adventure was coming to an end, but there was a new adventure on the horizon and as they all boarded the sleeper train for the overnight ride to Luxor, they could hardly wait to discover it!

TBC
Father of Daughters

Series: Snapshots of the Past

Story: Father of Daughters

Chapter 37

Disclaimer: See Chapter 1

Previously: The Bartlets enjoyed a day at the pyramids in Giza where they rode camels and climbed one of the monuments

Summary: On the train ride to Luxor, Jed discusses a concern with Abbey; the girls want a night off from sight-seeing; Ellie questions her mother about death during a visit to the Valley of the Kings

AN: Sorry for the delay in getting out the last few chapters; the next chapter is almost finished so I anticipate posting it sometime next week

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An overnight sleeper train took the Bartlets from Cairo to Luxor along a route that snaked through the Nile River Valley, giving passengers a moonlit glimpse at the rural villages along the way. Elizabeth, Ellie, and Zoey had their own compartment while Jed and Abbey took an adjoining one. Both rooms were a bit cramped, but everyone agreed they were sufficient for the 10-hour ride, especially when all they'd be doing is sleeping.

The girls' room had a set of bunk beds. Ellie and Zoey shared the bottom bunk and Liz took the top. In their parents' room, it was Abbey who slept soundly on top. The bottom bunk, which belonged to Jed, was empty most of the night. Abbey woke up at 5 a.m. to find the sheets in a tangled mess and her husband nowhere in sight. It was typical, she thought. Jed hadn't had a decent night's sleep since they arrived in Egypt. After calling for him to see if he was in the bathroom or shower, she stuffed her feet into a pair of slippers and headed out of the room in search of him.

"Khu. The 'k' is not a sound Americans are used to."

"Khu."

"Khu."

"I'll get it, just give me time."

Abbey turned toward her husband's voice and saw him standing alongside another man in the corridor looking out the window. "Jed?"

"You're up!" he replied as he turned to see her, but then he stared at her for a minute. She was wearing a pair of black sweatpants, the kind she always wore at home. She had taken off her bra for bed and thanks to the form-fitting gray T-shirt she wore, it was obvious that she had forgotten to put on another one.

"So are you." Abbey looked at the man he was with. "Hello."

"This is my wife, Abbey." Jed stepped in close and wrapped his arm around Abbey protectively.
"Abbey, this is Nassor Bahjat. He's a professor at Boston University."

"Oh really? I graduated from there years ago."

"Your husband tells me."

"Nassor and I have been discussing Egyptian mythology. He's teaching me Arabic."

"I should have known when you were missing from bed." It was just like Jed to go looking for people to socialize with, even in the middle of the night.

"Sorry, I didn't want to wake you." Jed had gone to check on the girls before turning in and when he returned to his and Abbey's compartment, Abbey had already dozed off. He tried to join her in a restful sleep, but he was wide awake and excited about the day they had planned in Luxor, so he tip-toed out of the compartment and wandered the corridor, where he met Nassor. The two men started out admiring the view of the Nile and what they could see of the Egyptian countryside and soon, they began talking about culture and literature in this part of the world.

"What time is it?" Nassor asked.

"After five," Abbey told him.

"Already? Gosh, it's like we just started talking. We've gotta wake the girls for breakfast." Jed turned to Nassor. "I didn't mean to keep you up all night."

"It's all right. I had a good time."

Abbey went on, "What brings you to Egypt? Vacation?"

"Family. My mother lives in Cairo, my brother in Luxor."

"No kidding. Do you get a chance to visit often?"

"Not as often as I'd like."

Jed continued guarding Abbey with his arm around her waist. He never released his grip. Never even lightened it. Abbey brought her hand around to cover his at one point when she felt his strong hold. She didn't mind, but she was confused. He only ever held her like that when they were dancing, in bed, or if he felt he needed to protect her from something. But from what? She couldn't imagine, standing in the corridor of their train early that morning.

After exchanging contact information with Nassor in case they wanted to look each other up back in the U.S., the Bartletts returned to their compartment to shower, change, and wake the girls for a family breakfast at the club car before the scheduled 7 a.m. arrival in Luxor.

"Listen," Jed began as he opened the door to their cabin and entered after her. "Don't get mad at me."

"I hate any conversation that begins with that."

"From the point of view of a man, do you think you could avoid going out in public in outfits like the one you have on? At least for as long as we're here?"

Abbey looked down at her clothes. "What's wrong with what I'm wearing? A pair of sweats and a T-shirt, same as you."
"True, but I don't have your curves." He sat at the edge of the bed to take off his shoes. "I've always said you can make a paper bag look good, hot pants. I wasn't kidding."

"Wait a minute, are you...? Jed, are you telling me to cover up because you're afraid of other men looking at me?" Abbey was surprised by such a request. In all the years they had been married, Jed had never complained about the way she dressed.

"It's not how it sounds, Abbey."

"Then how is it?"

"All right, maybe it's slightly how it sounds. You're a gorgeous woman and I don't want men leering at you. Can you blame me?"

"So why stop at ordinary clothes? Why not blend right into the culture here? Go ahead, ask me to wear a veil or better yet, a full-body chador."

She had a right to be testy, he conceded. Ever since they stepped off the plane in Cairo, she had been mindful of the more conservative culture in Egypt. Nothing she wore was too revealing, except maybe her night attire and that, he reasoned, was only because no one but family would see her in it. Had she not been groggy and concerned about him when she stumbled out of their train compartment in search of him that morning, she would have remembered to grab her robe and this whole conversation would have been irrelevant.

Still, Jed couldn't tell if she was annoyed at him or giving him a sarcastic retort because she was genuinely angry. "See, when you get like this, it usually leads to an argument. I don't want that. I'm going to assume you don't either. Would I be right?"

"That depends." She played on his doubt.

"On what?"

"On what you plan to do about the women who've been leering at you since we got here."

He furrowed his brows. "What women?"

Abbey tilted her head to the side the way she always did when he asked an obvious question. "The women. All over the place."

"Where?" He stood up. "When were women leering at me?"

"Every time you showed your face in public."

"You're imagining things."

"Uh huh." She spoke with hand gestures to punctuate her argument. "So when you're concerned about men leering at me, you're justified, but when I bring up women leering at you, I'm imagining things?"

"Yes," he said with a straight face.

"Jed!"

"No one's been leering at me! And they won't. Just because you like to look at me, Abbey, doesn't mean every other woman does."
She gave him a smile. "Say that again."

Jed stopped for a second, realizing she had turned the situation around to prove a point and she was about to use his statement against him. "I don't think I will."

"Then allow me. Just because you like to look at me, pumpkin, doesn't mean every other man does."

"I hate when you trap me like that."

"Then why do you make it so much fun?" Abbey looked in the mirror to brush her hair.

"It's different for women, in Egypt anyway. Men ARE looking at you and that's not your husband talking. That's an objective observer."

"Okay, if you want me to be serious, you have stop calling yourself an objective observer." There was nothing about Abbey that Jed could see objectively. "Did you have a problem with my clothes yesterday?"

"No."

"And the day before that?"

"No."

"So it's just this morning?"

"Yes. It's what you're wearing right now. That's my only concern."

"If I didn't have to roll out of bed and look for you at 5 a.m., you wouldn't have a concern."

"You're right. It's just when I saw you..." he trailed off. "We both read the literature before we got here and we were both there with Lizzie and that creep at the museum."

"Lizzie wasn't dressed provocatively the other day. It had nothing to do with what she wore and you know it. Sexual harassment is a problem in Egypt, but are we supposed to pin the blame on the women who choose not to cover themselves from head to toe instead of the lewd men who behave so obscenely?"

"No, of course we're not. You and every other woman here has the right to wear whatever she wants and no one has the right to take that as provocation."

"We agree."

"Theoretically, yes."

"Theoretically?"

"It's an ideal is all I'm saying. Practically speaking, there's a subset of men here who think they can hoot and holler at female tourists all day long and sometimes even touch them, grab at them, put their hands in places they shouldn't be. And there's nothing - nothing - the police can do about it."

"That's right." She could see his frustration coming out now. She loved him for it.

"So maybe showing some skin isn't the best idea under those circumstances." He sat back down. "That's all."
"The skin on my arms," she said, taking a seat beside him. "That's all I was showing when I ran into you and Nassor, Jed. The skin on my arms."

"Literally that's true. But that shirt, which looks stunning for a raggedy T-shirt by the way, does a mighty fine job of showing off all your assets. And that's especially the case when you're not wearing any undergarments."

Abbey ran her fingers over her breasts and realized he was right. She had forgotten to put on her bra and it was obvious in a shirt so snug. Her face slightly red, she quietly replied, "Oops."

"Ordinarily, I'd tell you how sexy you look and I wouldn't care if it drew attention from other people, but I'd prefer to fly under the radar here. If some man tries to grope you, I'm afraid I won't even think about it. It'll be instinct. My fist, his face."

"Don't even joke about that! Unlike Lizzie, you don't have the benefit of being a 17-year-old girl defending herself. They might actually put you in jail."

That didn't matter. "It would be worth it to protect your honor."

"So those are my options? Wear a chador or you go to jail?"

"I never said wear a chador," he returned in a lighter tone. "I'd settle for a bra."

Abbey took a beat, then cocked a brow suggestively. "Only in public though, right? The bra?"

"Of course." Jed had a twinkle in his eye. "In private, I'll just rip it off you."

Letting out a soft laugh and sitting by his side, she looped her arm around his and rested her head on his shoulder. "Next time, I'll grab my robe before I come looking for you."

He dropped a kiss to the top of her head. "I'm sorry."

"For what?"

"For having to ask."

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Before Abbey could open the door to the girls' compartment, Zoey did it for her. 'Bright-eyed and bushy-tailed' might have been cliché, but it was the only phrase to accurately describe the strawberry-blond six-year-old who answered the door with a hairbrush in her hand and two sunshine ribbons so that Abbey could give her pigtails.

Abbey put her hands on Zoey's shoulders and walked her over to the bottom bunk where she sat down to brush her hair and call out for her older daughters at the same time. Ellie opened her eyes first. Being on the same bed that Abbey and Zoey were on, she stirred and mumbled, but refused to sit up. Abbey continued to call their names until Liz finally tossed and turned.

"Mom," Liz groaned. "Part of being on vacation means getting to sleep in at least once or twice."

"We've got a little while longer before we're in Luxor and we have to get ready for breakfast."

"I'm skipping breakfast."

"Come on, your father's looking forward to all of five us sitting down together. Don't disappoint him."
"We've been together every minute of every day since the plane ride. What difference does it make if I stay in bed instead of going to breakfast?"

"Me too," Ellie piped up. They were all tired. They were still recovering from their fun yet exhausting visit to the Giza pyramids the day before and they had spent half the night staring out the window of the train at the Egyptian countryside passing by.

"We have a packed day today and who knows if the hotel restaurant is open for breakfast," Abbey warned them. "If you don't eat now, I can't guarantee we'll find something else before lunch."

"Missing breakfast isn't a tragedy. I'm getting sick of t'aamiyya. I'd give anything for some blueberry pancakes right now." Liz was feeling homesick for American food.

"Then you're in luck. The club car has pancakes on the menu," Abbey told her.

"You're making that up."

"That would be a mean trick."

"I know!"

Abbey forgave her the skepticism.

"Mom, will our hotel in Luxor have any TV channels in English?" Ellie was feeling homesick in general.

"They probably do. And you know what, I read in the brochure that they have American movies we can rent down in the lobby."

"Not that we'll ever have time to watch them," Liz complained. She hated that there was little time for relaxation on this trip.

"Elizabeth, do you have something to say?"

"I'm into Egypt and all, but I feel like I'm going to need a vacation from my vacation when we get home. Can't we just take one night and do nothing? I need to catch my breath."

"I feel the same," Ellie confessed.

Abbey couldn't blame them. A week wasn't nearly enough time to see all Egypt had to offer without tiring themselves out. "Okay, I get it. Why don't you get ready and meet us at the club car? Spend the day with us today and tomorrow and before we leave Luxor we'll take a time out."

"What does that mean?"

"It means a night off, just like you want."

"As in rent videos, lay around the hotel room, and pig out on junk food all night?" Ellie was elated.

"Something like that. But you're obligated for today and that includes breakfast, so let's get a move on, okay?"

Liz looked over at her sisters before agreeing. "Okay."
The Winter Palace Hotel became a part of the Luxor skyline in 1886, one hundred years before the Bartlets' visit to Egypt. Built in the tropical gardens on the East Bank of the Nile, its British Colonial architecture and regal fixtures demanded international attention that attracted kings and queens, princes and princesses, and royal families from around the globe. This was where Abbey booked a guestroom for her, Jed, and the girls. It was extravagant - as extravagant as their five-star luxury resort in Cairo - but this whole trip was a celebration of Jed's birthday and she had no qualms about doing it first-class all the way.

A grand staircase led them to the entrance hall where they checked in and claimed the keys to their 8th floor guestroom. Just like in Cairo, Abbey had reserved a master suite with a sitting room and two bedrooms and after seeing the elegance of the lobby, neither she nor Jed could wait to see it. The girls were fired up too. As soon as her parents opened the door, Zoey charged toward the window, pulled back the drapes, and looked out at the view.

"How come we can't see the river?" she asked immediately.

"Because I got a garden view room instead," Abbey said, admiring the beautiful antiques and fine wood used to decorate the suite.

"Why'd you do that?" Ellie wanted to know.

"I wanted something different."

Jed joined his younger daughters by the window. "What's wrong with a garden view? I think it's gorgeous."

"It's not the Nile," Liz offered.

"We got a view of the Nile at our hotel in Cairo."

"Why can't we have one here?" Zoey's question was bordering on a whine this time.

"Because we have a garden view here."

"But I wanted to see the boats on the water."

"You know, you three are awfully demanding, considering where we are. What are your friends doing this week?" Abbey had lost patience with all the complaining that day, first about all the activities they had planned and then about the room. She had gone out of her way to set up an enjoyable vacation and it seemed nothing could satisfy the girls.

Liz, Ellie, and Zoey exchanged stares, none of them saying a word. Abbey was right, after all. It was February break and while most kids were spending the week off from school parked in front of the television, playing outside with friends, or at the mall, they were getting a chance to tour another country and visit sights and monuments most of their peers would only read about in history books.

"New game," Jed suggested, sensing some tension and wanting to intervene. "Let's see who can go the longest without bellyaching about something. Maybe there'll even be a prize at the end."

"What kind of prize, Daddy?" Zoey's face lit up at the possibility.

"You'll have to wait and see," Jed teased. "Meanwhile, Zoey, you said you wanted to see boats on the water. Is that really want or would you rather be ON a boat in the water?"
He grinned with a hint of things to come.

The Winter Palace was right next to the Luxor Temple, which Abbey had read they could explore on their own without a guide, along with the neighboring Karnak Temple. She had decided it would be more convenient to save those two outings for the evening before they returned to the hotel and use the morning and afternoon to visit two other famous sites - the Valley of the Kings and the Valley of the Queens.

Everyone gathered their hats and sunscreen and to the girls' delight, boarded a passenger ferry to the West Bank of the Nile. It was their first journey on the famed waterway. They had wanted to take an evening cruise the night they visited the Cairo Tower, but they had missed the last departure and ran out of time. Excited now that they were finally floating on the river, the girls snapped pictures of each other on the deck of the ferry and didn't even need to be cajoled into posing together so Jed could take a photo of the three of them. Their arms looped, with Zoey on a step-stool in the middle, they leaned against the railing as the water sparkled under the strong rays of sunlight, a dry breeze lifted their hair, and the Thebes Mountain range stood in the background. The camera flashed and Jed grinned a proud fatherly grin, then made a mental note to have that picture framed for his desk.

When they docked, it was nearly impossible to drag Zoey off the boat, but Jed managed with promises that they'd be back for the return ferry that evening. They bypassed a bicycle rental stand - Abbey deciding the physical exertion in the heat was going to be too much for the girls - and met up with a guide who drove them up the long and winding road to the entrance where tour buses parked and tourists flocked to buy tickets.

The Valley of the Kings, the desolate burial ground that was also known as the 'Land of the Dead' because it served as the final resting place for the pharaohs and rulers of Ancient Egypt. Jed had read so many books about it, but he couldn't believe he was actually here to see it with his own eyes. He stepped out of the car and scanned the barren land. The mountains towered up above, the guard posts at the peaks barely noticeable from the parking lot, and jagged trails carved the rocky slopes, criss-crossing the hillside and leading to the tombs.

It was a mystical experience.

"Mommy, it's hot!" Zoey complained as she got out of the car. She caught herself the instant she said it and covered her mouth with her hand. "Did I lose the game?"

"I won't tell." Abbey smiled as she put her arm around her youngest daughter and handed her one of the water bottles she had brought with her to keep them all hydrated. It was not only hot, it was also dusty and the surrounding cliffs provided no relief from the harsh rays of the late-morning sun. "Put on your sunglasses. Lizzie, Ellie, you too. Jed..."

"I'm good," he said before she told him the same.

"You need your sunglasses."

"I left them at the hotel."

"No, you didn't." Abbey had picked them up behind his back. She dug through her tote and handed them to him. "Here."

"I don't need them," he argued.
"You're going to get sand in your eyes, not to mention the sun can do a number on your retina."

"I'm fine."

She lowered her voice. "Do I have to treat you like one of the kids?"

"Abbey, I don't need sunglasses."

"Even if you think you don't, there's such a thing as setting an example." She pressed the glasses into his chest until he accepted them, then took out a second water bottle she had packed, the one for her and Jed.

"Are you going to mother me the whole day?" He asked, putting on the glasses.

"I hadn't planned on it." She handed him the water bottle. "Here, drink up before you get dehydrated."

"Yes, mother."

"You know, when you roll your eyes behind the sunglasses, I can still see it."

Peddlers and hawkers roamed the tourist station and the Bartlets and their guide had to fend them off in order to make it to the visitor's center to buy tickets to the tombs. With Zoey already complaining about the heat, Jed also purchased tram tickets so they wouldn't have to hike the sun-baked trails to get to where they wanted to go. A few minutes later, they all hopped on board to be taken to their first destination.

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After visiting the tombs of Horemheb and Ramesses VI, the Bartlets came upon the most famous tomb of all, that of Tutankhamun. There was a metal stairway they had to take to reach the entrance and then a set of steep stairs they had to climb down to get to the tomb itself. Their guide, Mohammad, led the way and immediately behind him was Zoey being held steady from the back by Abbey. Ellie was next, followed by Liz and Jed.

Only two days earlier, Jed, Abbey, and the girls had visited the Tutankhamun gallery at the Egyptian Museum and seen all the beautiful artifacts inside the room. The masks, the ornaments, and the jewelry had all been discovered and dug out by a British archeologist named Howard Carter. It was a thrilling experience to now get to see the place where it all came from. They strolled through the short corridor that took them through a room toward the burial chamber, the only portion of the tomb that had been decorated with religious scenes and paintings of Egyptian life. Although it was smaller than they thought it would be and not nearly as elaborate as some of the other tombs, the treasures in the chamber - a sarcophagus and the mummy of the boy-king himself - were well worth the hike.

Jed kept his eye on Ellie, remembering how she reacted to the sarcophagus in the Great Pyramid and the one at the museum. She backed off from the sarcophagus, just as she had done before, but the sudden panic he was expecting to see in her face wasn't there this time, or if it was, it wasn't as prominent as it had been at the museum. Was it getting easier for her, he wondered. Was she becoming desensitized to all the reminders of death? He noticed that this time, Abbey was watching her too and since he hadn't yet discussed it with her, he concluded that she had also witnessed Ellie's reaction in the pyramid. It made him feel good, knowing that he and Abbey were on the same page, both aware of their daughter's problem and each looking out for her.

When Ellie turned away from the mummy as if it bothered her more than the sarcophagus, Abbey
spoke up. "If everyone's satisfied, let's get back."

No one objected, so one-by-one they began the trek out of the chamber.

The tomb was dark enough that the glow of the African sun was like a flashlight shining right in their eyes. They all grumbled when they hit the outside and hurriedly reached for their sunglasses. Even Jed, who had scoffed at the idea when they first arrived, donned his shades without complaint this time as he and Mohammad led the pack toward the waiting tram. The girls shared another round of water, then took their seats next to their parents.

A couple more tombs and it was time to call it a day. They still had to get to the nearby Valley of the Queens and back to the East Bank to visit the Karnak and Luxor Temples that night, so they took a quick vote on which hillside café everyone wanted to dine at for lunch and made a beeline for the parking lot, where Zoey asked for a restroom break before they loaded into Mohammad's car.

As Abbey chaperoned her to the ladies' room, Liz and Ellie decided to join them and Jed acknowledged it wasn't such a bad idea for him either. He headed to the men's room while the girls took off after their mother.

"This place is kinda dingy," Liz observed as everyone washed their hands.

"Lizzie lost the game!" Zoey had appointed herself the official scorekeeper now. "She complained about something!"

"That wasn't a complaint."

"Yes, it was! Wasn't it, Mommy?"

"We'll let that one go," Abbey said.

"Why?"

"Because it IS dingy in here."

"So what?"

"So, if it's true, it doesn't count." Zoey huffed then and when she turned her back, Abbey did a double-take. It was blistering red. "Oh Zoey, you're sunburned."

"I am?"

"Hang on." Abbey took out some cream from her bag and began to rub it on her daughter.

"You should cover up your skin like I do, Zo," Liz told her, pulling up her hair so she could splash her face.

"But you said you wanted a tan," Zoey countered.

"Yeah, but I don't want to burn." Like her mother, Liz had been dressing more conservatively in cute summer shirts that had thin sleeves that ran down to her elbows, and while it was true that she wanted a tan, she was happy not to have to deal with a wicked sunburn like she suspected she would have if she had been wearing tank tops like her sister.

"Liz, don't swallow the water," Abbey advised her.
"Don't worry. You made me drink enough water today to last me my whole life."

"It was either that or dehydration. Choose your pick." As she twisted her hair up into a bun, Abbey realized that Ellie had yet to say anything. She could see her middle daughter's reflection in the mirror and she stared at her for a moment. "Lizzie, Zoey, why don't you guys go back to the car and let Dad know we're coming?"

Liz picked up on her cue and also realized it was strange that Ellie had been so quiet. "Okay. Come on, Zo."

Abbey waited until they were gone before she addressed Ellie. "Are you all right, sweetheart?"

"Yeah."

"What'd you think of the tombs?"

"They were okay." Ellie pulled her hair up into a ponytail and secured it with a hair tie.

"Just okay?"

"I guess." She reached for a paper towel to dry her hands. "Mom, can I ask you something?"

"Of course."

"What did they think of death? Egyptians. Back then, I mean. When people died, what did they think would happen?"

"Well, they believed in the afterlife. They thought that death was just a transition, going from this world to the next. Everything you see in the tombs was put there because that's what they thought they'd need in the afterlife."

"Why don't we do that?"

"Because Christians believe that everything we'll need will be provided."

"By God?" Ellie paused. "What if God doesn't exist?"

That caught Abbey off-guard. "Of course He exists."

"But what if He doesn't?"

"Ellie, what are you getting at?"

"Egyptians weren't scared of death?"

"No, they weren't."

"Did they think that the spirit could live forever without the body?"

"Something like that. Your father knows more about this than I do, but if I remember right, they believed in two spiritual elements - one that remains with the body throughout life and even after death and another that leaves the body at death to exist on its own out in the world. It returns to the mummy every night in order renew its spiritual link to the body it represents."

"Do you believe in stuff like that?"
"Some of it, sure."

"Are you afraid of dying?"

It occurred to Abbey that Ellie had asked questions about death before. During her CCD classes leading up to her First Communion, she embraced the Catholic Church's teachings on what happened to the spirit when the body stopped breathing. But when her Grandpa Bartlet died a few months later, she struggled to reconcile what she had learned with the idea that someone she loved was gone forever and she had turned to Abbey for answers.

Abbey was honest with her back then, just like she planned to be now. After a brief pause, she said, "No."

"You're not scared at all?"

"I'm not saying I'm ready to die. I just mean I won't fear it when it happens." Abbey prodded, "Are you scared?" Ellie nodded. "What scares you the most?"

"Leaving everyone. Being by myself. I'm afraid of what happens after you die."

"You've read about what happens."

"I don't know that it's all true."

"You think it might not be?"

"I don't know. What if it's not? What if I'm all alone? What if I can see you and Daddy and Lizzie and Zoey and I can't get over not being with you? What if I'm always sad about it and it never gets better? If I call for you, you can't hear me. What if I need you? What if I can't get used to not being able to run to you? Or what if I can't see you at all? What if you're just not there? What if I'm sent to Hell and it's just as awful I imagine? What if..."

"Whoa, whoa, whoa! There are a lot of what ifs in your thoughts."

"I've been thinking a lot."

"You didn't used to have all these questions. Some questions, yes, but you really opened up the floodgates this time."

"I used to think everything I read was right and I just had to understand it. I used to think that people knew what really happens when we die. Now I know they don't. They like to pretend they do, but they don't. No one does."

"By people you mean..."

"People at church."

"Is that why you don't like to go to church anymore?"

"I guess so."

Immediately after the Challenger explosion, Abbey had told Jed that Ellie didn't want to go to church because the mass was going to be dedicated to those who died. As the weeks went by, she urged Jed not to push her. 'Give her time to deal with it,' she had said, 'she'll accept it in her own time and when she does, she'll be back at church every Sunday, just like always.' But now it appeared that she was wrong. Ellie's disinterest in church ran deeper.
"You used to believe what they believe. What's changed to make you doubt it?"

"It doesn't make sense anymore."

"What doesn't? Death? Heaven?"

"None of it. Not even God. Why should I believe that God is always with us when he doesn't care who dies? Good people die all the time and evil people live."

"It's not as simple as good versus evil."

"It's supposed to be. Everyone talks about a master plan, but there's no proof of that. I think that's just something people say to make others feel better when they lose someone they love. There is no plan. It's chance. Anyone can die at any moment and there's no one looking out for us."

It was that thought that disturbed Ellie more than anything. That the future was random and anyone she loved could be taken from her without even a moment's notice scared her to her core. But what she didn't know was that she was going through what so many people had been through before her. What she was feeling wasn't all that unique and questioning God's existence in the aftermath of such a traumatic event wasn't unheard of, not even in her own family. All she had to do to find another person who had walked in her shoes, another who had doubted her faith and questioned her Catholic upbringing, was turn her head and look at her mother. If she had, she would have seen it in Abbey's eyes and known, without a doubt, that Abbey knew her struggle because what she was feeling now was what Abbey had felt six years earlier, when Zoey almost died.

TBC
It was 4 a.m. and three sleepless nights in a row coupled with a full day of sight-seeing around Luxor - from the Valleys of the Kings and Queens to an awe-inspiring tour of the Luxor and Karnak Temples and the light and sound show afterwards - had all caught up with Jed. He was in a deep sleep for once, but it was Abbey who was tossing and turning. She told herself it was the breeze filtering through the open window of the suite's master bedroom that kept her up. But it wasn't. The thoughts that played on her mind kept her up, thoughts about her conversation with Ellie about God. It had been cut short by Jed tapping on the door to the ladies room at the Valley of the Kings when they didn't come out after Liz and Zoey, and Abbey kept thinking that if they'd had a few more minutes, she would have shared her own struggle with faith in hopes that it would bring Ellie out of her stupor. At the very least, maybe her little girl wouldn't have felt so alone, like no one understood the emotions warring in her heart.

Abbey climbed out of bed. She kept her eye on Jed, careful not to wake him, as she slid her feet into a pair of slippers and padded the carpet to the girls' bedroom. Liz's bed was close to the door. She had her back to her mother and Abbey saw that she had been so exhausted, she had fallen asleep without changing into her nightgown or taking out her ponytail. Sleeping with a ponytail was 'split-end city,' Liz always said, so Abbey gently pulled on the hair tie to get it out of her hair, then set it on the nightstand. She then turned to the other bed, a queen-sized one that Zoey and Ellie shared. Zoey's arm was curled across her chest, as if she was still snuggling with the stuffed teddy bear that had fallen on the floor. Abbey picked it up and gingerly slipped it through the crook of her arm. Ellie was on the other side of the bed, but when Abbey looked over, she found it empty and her middle daughter nowhere in sight.

Remembering what happened when Ellie was missing one morning in D.C., Abbey went immediately to the balcony.

Just as she hoped, Ellie had fallen asleep on a large sofa chair outside. "Ellie?" She stepped out the sliding glass door and shook her softly. "Ellie, honey, wake up."

Ellie's eyes fluttered. "Huh?"

"Come inside. Sleep on a real bed."
"I wanna stay here. Please?"

"I don't think I like this new habit of yours. Am I going to have to tie you to the mattress at night? Why didn't you wake me to ask if you could sleep outside?"

She rubbed her eyes. "I didn't wanna disturb you. Can I?"

"May I." Abbey closed the door and pulled up the other chair, taking note of the camera in Ellie's lap. "See anything good?"

"Not yet. I wanna take a picture of the sunrise."

"It's supposed to be beautiful."

Ellie nodded in agreement. "Why are you up?"

"I couldn't sleep."

"Why?"

"I just couldn't."

"You don't wanna tell me why?"

"The truth?" Abbey started. "I was thinking about you and about our conversation earlier."

"What about it?"

"There's something I didn't tell you that I think you should know. It's probably too deep for 4 a.m."

"No it's not." Curious now, Ellie prodded. "Everyone will be up soon and we won't get to talk alone any other time."

"Yeah, that's what I was thinking too."

"So what is it?" Hesitation on Abbey's part concerned Ellie. "Mom?"

"Give me a minute. I don't like talking about it."

"Oh. You don't have to if you don't want to."

"Yes, I do. If I'm going to ask you to open up to me, it's only fair that I open up to you." Abbey leaned forward and said not much louder than a whisper. "The thing is, you said you didn't know if you believed in God anymore. Well, I didn't always believe in God either. That's difficult for me to admit."

"When did you not believe in God?"

"When Zoey was a newborn. I struggled with it for months."

Abbey had done a decent job of shielding Lizzie and Ellie from how sick Zoey was back then. All Ellie knew at the time was what her five-year-old instincts allowed her to know - that something was wrong with her sister and she couldn't come home until the doctors helped her. Abbey was now about to tell her the toll it took on her parents.

"Your dad and I hadn't even been trying to get pregnant, so when we did, it was as if it was God's
little miracle," she went on. "He blessed with us with a baby we didn't even know we wanted. And then it all went wrong."

Ellie listened to her mother recall the pain of watching her baby fight for her life. It was a deep kind of pain, the kind that radiates from the depths of one's soul. Terrified that Zoey would die, Abbey devoted every second of every day to her, practically shutting out everyone else. There were weeks that even Jed couldn't reach her. She was scared, tired, and hurting and she ridiculed any mention of church or God. The God that she had worshipped all her life wouldn't allow this to happen to an innocent child, she convinced herself, and she couldn't summon the strength to open her mind to her faith, no matter how much Jed wanted her to.

"There was one night when he begged me to go to the hospital chapel with him," she said, referring to Jed. "And I went, but I just couldn't do it. I couldn't pray to a God who had already let me down. So, I left and I went back to Zoey."

"What did Daddy do?" Ellie asked.

"He stayed. I went to the NICU and he sat in the chapel. He must have stayed there for hours."

"Was he mad at you?"

"No. Not for that anyway."

"I think he's mad at me." Ellie felt like she had been disappointing Jed a lot lately.

"He's not, Ellie. What would make you think that?" Abbey was surprised. "He's been so understanding since this all started. He even offered to stay in Washington with you if you didn't want to come to Egypt. Does that sound like someone who's mad?"

"No, it doesn't." It meant a lot to Ellie that Jed offered to stay with her. "But he gets upset when I say I don't want to go to church."

"Not because he's mad. Your dad is a deeply religious man, but he's never forced his faith on others, especially not his family. When I went through it, it bothered him that I had let go of my spirituality when he felt I needed it most. He tried to reason with me, tried to talk me into using the church and our friends there as a source of support, but he only did that because he loved me and wanted to help. He never held it against me when I shot him down. All he did was support me until I was ready to embrace God again."

"What if you had never been ready to? Would Dad have understood?"

"Yes." There was no question in Abbey's mind. "His Catholicism is his Catholicism. He's never tried to make me believe what he believes and he'd never do that with you either."

Ellie took a beat before she asked her next question. "Has he forgiven me skipping church all these weeks?"

"There's nothing to forgive, sweetheart."

Abbey never guessed that Jed's reaction weighed so heavily on Ellie's mind, although in retrospect she probably should have. One of the most precious gifts she and Jed had given their girls was their faith, and it was common knowledge in the family and to their fellow parishioners that Ellie was the daughter most like her father when it came to church. She loved listening to Jed talk about the Bible, loved reading it herself. Her spirituality rivaled his and for that, Jed was proud. He had given her a silver cross for her 10th birthday. That necklace was so special to Ellie that she always
wore it around her neck. About a month ago, she took it off and she hadn't put it back on. She kept it in her Sun-Moon-And-Stars jewelry box that she tucked away between two books on her bookshelf. Jed asked her about it once and Ellie avoided the question. Afraid that he wouldn't understand if she told him how she was feeling, she kept her reasons to herself. Abbey now realized why.

"It's not anger you're seeing in him; it's helplessness," she told Ellie. "He's worried about you and he doesn't know how to make this better. See, that's the thing with your father - nothing is more important to him than his family's happiness and when something is wrong with one of us and he can't fix it, it drives him crazy."

"If I knew how he could fix it, I'd tell him." Ellie pursed her lips together. "I HATE feeling like this."

"I know. I did too."

"When did it get better for you? When did you believe in God again?"

"I can't pinpoint a time. I went from railing against Him to feeling so desperate for Zoey's health that I prayed to Him. It was like a teeter-totter, going up and down over and over again. All I know is that at some point during the ordeal, I reclaimed my faith and I made my peace with Him and the day we brought Zoey home from the hospital, I went to confession and then began attending church again."

"Just like that?"

"No, not just like that. It took time."

"If Zoey hadn't gotten better, would you have ever returned to church?"

It was a question Abbey didn't expect, one she wasn't prepared to answer. If she was being completely honest, she'd have to admit she didn't know. "I'd like to think that I would have."

"But you don't know."

"There were so many variables, Ellie. I can't predict what I would have done if the outcome had been different. But I can tell you that once I made the decision to go back, I was stronger than ever before and I know now that nothing will ever make me turn my back on God again."

"How could you know that? What if something really awful happens?"

"Something really awful did happen...last year."

"What?"

Another deep breath and then, "For a very short amount of time, I was pregnant."

Ellie raised her brows. "What? What happened?"

"I lost the baby. I miscarried." Abbey lowered her head then, a reflex when talking about the miscarriage. "We didn't want to tell you or your sisters. Liz figured it out, but Zoey still doesn't know, so I'd appreciate it..."

"I won't tell!" Always loyal, Ellie didn't even need to promise. "You had a miscarriage?"

"I don't want to get into all the details, but it happened before it was a fully developed baby.
Sometimes there are difficulties during conception...usually it has to do with chromosomes...and for the briefest moment, a baby ends up in its mother's womb. But if there's something wrong, he or she won't make it and so the body takes care of it.

"It died in your womb?"

"That night I was in the hospital, the night Grandma said I had an ovarian cyst..."

"You didn't."

Abbey shook her head. "No, I didn't."

"How did you deal with it?"

"That's just it. When Zoey was sick, I didn't realize that by losing my connection to God, I lost a part of myself. In dealing with the miscarriage, I held on tightly to my faith and although it was one of the hardest things your dad and I had ever faced, having that made a difference. It didn't take away the sadness, but it did take away the helplessness I felt before."

"And Daddy?"

"Instead of pushing him away, this time I held him closer. I mean, it was rough at first, but we helped each other through it and in the long run, we strengthened our bonds, with each other and with God."

"That's why you're telling me?"

A nod from Abbey this time. "I want you to know that it's possible to open your heart again. You can move past this and re-establish a relationship with God. It doesn't have to be like before; you can re-invent it, and you won't have to live in fear of losing it the next time something horrible happens. That's what you want, right? That's why you asked all those questions earlier in the ladies room. That's why you told me all your fears. You want to find your way back to believing in Him."

"Maybe," Ellie admitted.

"Your fears are natural, Ellie. The world is a scary place. It's even scarier if you feel you're all alone in it, without God or someone charting the path." Abbey didn't want to pressure her, so she stopped herself there. "Look, this has to be your choice. We don't want you to believe in God because we tell you that you should. We want you to do it because you want to. Think about it and if you decide that you're ready to approach God or church again, I'll be here to help you do it."

"Thanks." A moment of silence passed between them and Ellie's attention turned during that moment. She saw something up in the sky and pointed to it. "Mom, look."

"A hot-air balloon. Pretty, isn't it?" Abbey watched as it soared high above Luxor. "They launch before dawn every morning. I had booked us a tour, but then I canceled it."

"Why?" Ellie began snapping pictures.

"I didn't know if you'd be comfortable with something like that." Getting her daughter to Egypt was one thing, but Abbey was worried about how she'd react to boarding a contraption like a hot-air balloon if she was still afraid after the Challenger explosion.

"Is it dangerous?"
"Everything has the potential to be dangerous, Ellie. It's no different than anything else."

"But chances are nothing would happen? If we went, I mean?"

"That's right. Chances are, we'd be perfectly safe."

Ellie avoided looking straight up at the sky nowadays, the memories of smoke and fire in the clouds still fresh in her mind. A sunrise she could see on the horizon, a sunset, she could capture the same way. But that morning, the balloon caught her eye and she couldn't let go of it. She followed it for minutes, with and without her camera, as high as it could go and for the first time since that day in January, her heart didn't beat any faster.

"Is it too late to get our reservation back?" Her stare fixated on the balloon, she handed Abbey the camera. Photography was a love mother and daughter shared.

"I could look into it." Abbey took some pictures then handed the camera back to her. "Is that what you'd like me to do?"

It took a few minutes to ponder that question, but Ellie replied, "Yeah. I mean, I think so. You and Dad always say to face your fears, right? And if you're with me, I think I can do it."

"Of course I'll be with you."

Other balloons joined the first and soon, half a dozen were flying high above the landscape.

"It's almost a month since the shuttle exploded. I think that's long enough to be afraid without doing anything about it. I wanna make myself ready to try things again."

Abbey couldn't have been more proud of her daughter. "That sounds like a really grown-up decision to me."

"I'm a grown-up." Ellie shrugged.

"Don't push it."

A mutual smile.

A few more photos and then silence as Ellie lowered her camera. Finally, she asked, "I could have had another sister?"

'Or a brother,' Abbey thought, but she didn't say it out loud. Ellie was crazy about her sisters. If Abbey had had another child, she would have wanted it to be a girl. "You could have. I didn't mean to make you sad, sweetheart."

"I'm not sad. I'm glad you told me about the baby." She got up from her own chair and walked over to Abbey. "I'm sorry you lost her."

"Me too." Abbey leaned forward and hugged her tight.

Ellie climbed up next to her mom on the overstuffed sofa chair that Abbey had been lounging on. She laid her head on Abbey's lap and stared up to see the last few minutes of darkness before daybreak. "We released balloons at school a few days after the Challenger blew up."

"I remember."

"It was the last time I wanted to look up at the sky...until tonight."
Abbey softly stroked her daughter's hair and as the sun broke the horizon, the duo talked more about life and death, the existence of fate, and God's role in the universe. Jed found them there an hour later, sound asleep. Abbey was still sitting with her hand on Ellie's golden curls and Ellie was lying down with her legs thrown over the side. It was the sweetest image Jed had seen in a very long time. Ellie had her camera cradled under her arm and he thought about borrowing it to get photo of his girls asleep on the chair, but he felt guilty disturbing them. Instead, he took a moment to register the scene in his own memory bank, then went inside to hit the shower.

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By 7 a.m., everyone was up and ready to rush out the door for a brisk walk to the river where they hopped aboard a Lotus Boat, a ship carrying 90 passengers along with the Bartlets, on a cruise to the Upper Nile Valley to visit the remains of the ancient town of Dendera. It was a four-hour trip that would take them through the primitive Egyptian villages Jed had been researching since August and expose them to all the farming communities on the riverbank that Nassor had raved about on the sleeper train from Cairo.

The wind was fierce that day. It swept over the water and kicked up the current, and as the Bartlets sat down to breakfast on the boat's open deck up top, it ripped through Abbey's hair and gave her what Jed affectionately termed 'unfortunate hair issues.' Unlike the girls who showered the night before, Abbey had just stepped out of the tub when it was time to go. She threw a towel over her head while she dressed and ran a comb through her wet mane to straighten out any tangles, leaving it to air dry outdoors. She knew that a cruise was bound to be windy, but she didn't expect the gusts to be as unrelenting as they were, disrupting her natural waves before they had a chance to set and giving her more of a Bride-of-Frankenstein hairdo.

After breakfast, Abbey headed below deck to get out of the wind. She took a brush to her hair, pulled it back with some spritz gel Elizabeth carried with her, and anchored a twist with one of her clips. She thanked Liz before climbing the stairs to the top deck and approaching Jed, who had chuckled - good-naturedly from his point of view, yet annoyingly from hers - when her gorgeous strands were flying around her head completely out of control. He was standing at the railing now, contrite as he saw her new look. No frizz. No wild strands sprouting up in Chia-Pet fashion. Her reddish-brown locks were tamed in a stylish upsweep with a few rogue tendrils that refused to behave curling around her blushed cheeks and lovely green eyes.

"I notice you're not laughing now," she said.

"No, I'm definitely not," he replied. "How long will I be in the doghouse for that?"

"How long did it take to build the pyramids?" Despite her arched brow and serious expression, there was still a bit of playfulness in her tone.

"Mommy, Daddy said you brought my swimsuit. Can I go swimming?" That was Zoey. She had been so excited when she saw the pool on the top deck that she had begged Jed to let her take a dip when Abbey was downstairs, but taking note of the chill on board the boat, he had told her to wait and ask her mother.

"Maybe on the return trip, sweetie. It's too chilly up here right now."

"It's hot outside."

"Not on the boat, it's not. It'll warm up on the way back."

"But I wanna go now."
"Sorry, Zo. Ask me again later."

And with that, Abbey abruptly turned toward the railing to look out across the water to the sandstone cliffs that bordered bright mud-brick homes of the little hamlet on the riverbank, where Jed was gesturing while telling Liz and Ellie about the way of life in the less-affluent Egyptian villages of the Nile River Valley. The waterway was narrow here and they could see the townspeople with the naked eye, making them feel like they were somehow intruding by not looking away. Many of the citizens were poor, Jed told them. Not that he had to. It was clear with the first glance. Women were lined up on the shore with their daughters, washing clothes and dishes in the river water that Abbey had warned the girls against drinking or even swimming in, rickshaws took men and boys to work, and donkey carts loaded with produce wobbled down the road over narrow canals that were maintained by water buffalo, the farm animal of choice, to help with irrigation.

"Those look like marshmallows." Ellie pointed at the fields where children no older than herself were working.

"I'm pretty sure that's cotton," Abbey told her.

"It's a cotton field," Jed agreed. "They grow cotton here. They also grow rice, wheat, corn, onions, and sugarcane. Kids work out in the field about 10 hours a day."

"Ten hours? They must be exhausted," Liz observed.

"Wouldn't you be?" Jed asked.

Liz and Ellie suddenly felt guilty for how good they had it. Each year around the Thanksgiving holiday, they would volunteer at a soup kitchen with their father and when their mother wasn't working or on-call, she would join them. It was a periodic reminder to the girls of how much they had and of the importance of giving back to their community and to the people who were a lot less fortunate than they were. Every time they got that lesson, it was like a pang in their heart. That's how they felt now, on the Lotus Boat, enjoying a first-class vacation where their parents had taken care of everything and to the people who were a lot less fortunate than they were. Every time they got that lesson, it was like a pang in their heart. That's how they felt now, on the Lotus Boat, enjoying a first-class vacation where their parents had taken care of everything and their biggest worry was sunburn. Back home, they had chores, but they also had Mrs. Wilburforce and farm hands, so their chores were restricted to cleaning up their rooms, the bathroom they shared, and helping out with the laundry, the cooking, and cleaning out the barn. They had no idea what it was like to have to work to eat or to be forced outside at the crack of dawn for 10 hours of manual labor just so their family could afford bread.

It brought a tear to Liz's eye. It was an uncomfortable sight, seeing what other kids had to deal with while she led a relatively privileged life.

Seeing her discomfort, Abbey put a hand on her shoulder and gently steered the subject. "Ask your dad how they protect the farmland."

Liz turned to Jed. "How?"

"I'm glad you asked!" Jed was always happy to share little tidbits of trivia he had stored in his head. "The Aswan Dam, or the High Dam, as it's called now, was built in 1970 about four kilometers upriver from the old dam. It regulates flood waters in the Nile Delta to keep the land fertile and provide electricity to the townspeople. Now go on, ask me why we're not visiting the Aswan Dam, one of the most important structures in all of Egypt. Go ahead. Ask."

Abbey rolled her eyes. "Oh, brother."
"I'll tell you why!" Jed went on, teasing his wife. "Mom didn't plan for it in the itinerary."

Zoey, meanwhile, hadn't been listening to the conversation. Fully clothed in a navy blue cotton shirt and denim capris, she was just a few feet away from her family, circling the pool and longing to jump in for a swim.

"Exactly where would you have wanted me to put it?" Abbey challenged back at the railing. "Would you have wanted to skip Cairo? Luxor? How about the Sinai?"

Jed answered cheerfully, "None of the above. I just like messing with you. But now that it's come up, I want it on the record that one week is hardly enough time to see Egypt the right way."

Zoey looked over at her parents. They were too engrossed in their dialogue to notice that she had that sneaky glint in her eye, the one she always got when she was about to risk their wrath to do what she wanted to do.

"If the girls didn't have school, we could have stayed longer," Abbey was saying. "My other options were Christmas or summer, neither of which you would have liked."

"Definitely not summer. It's over 90 degrees at dawn!"

**SPLASH!**

Pool water went everywhere and Abbey was the first to turn around.

"Zoey Patricia Bartlet!"

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It was noon when they reached the dock in the town of Qena, which sat opposite Dendera. Still angry with his youngest daughter for taking a swim in the pool and then refusing to come out when he called for her, Jed took Zoey's hand as they disembarked, refusing to let her out of his sight. The crew had lent them a blanket after he'd fished her out of the water and her shirt was almost dry now, but her denim capris were still wet and they had to stop by a clothing mart to get her into some dry pants before continuing on with their day.

"I don't like those!" Zoey protested when Abbey picked up a dark green and lime yellow flower-print pair of pants.

"That's too bad. They're here and they're inexpensive so that's what you're going to wear."

Abbey didn't feel the need to cater to Zoey's taste. Part of her considered that if they left her in those wet capris, she'd learn her lesson and be less willing to disobey her parents next time, but the other part knew that Zoey had to be cold and uncomfortable and she couldn't stand to leave her like that while they toured the ruins in Dendera. Buying her dry clothes to change into wasn't a question, but she couldn't have cared less if Zoey liked what she picked out.

"Daddy!" Zoey complained.

"This isn't a shopping spree, Zo. Mom's right." Jed and Abbey were on the same page and he wasn't about to run interference.

After paying for the pants, Zoey unhappily changed into them. Her wet capris went into a plastic bag that Abbey stuffed in her tote before they climbed into a taxi that would take them to Dendera and to the temples that stood on the desert's edge.
The temple complex was enclosed by a brick wall made of mud from the Nile and the main building inside that wall was that which was dedicated to Hathor, the goddess of joy, love, beauty, and motherhood. 'The Mistress of Dendera,' she was called by the Egyptians. The temple and birth house were constructed to celebrate her and to tell the story of her courtship with her husband Horus and of the conception and birth of their son Ihy. Images of Hathor in her usual cow-horn headdress topped the columns and in a curious mix of mythology and history, on the rear wall, a carved relief showed Cleopatra with the son she conceived with Julius Caesar.

"That's kinda weird," Liz said.

"It is, isn't it?" Jed agreed. "It's like a portrait of Franklin Roosevelt next to a statue of Superman."

"Hon?"

"Yeah?"

Abbey's lips curved into a smile. "Not everything is about men."

He looked back at the picture of Cleopatra. "You didn't let me finish. I was going to..."

"Change Franklin to Eleanor and Superman to Wonder Woman?"

"Right!"

"Isn't it interesting that the Ancient Egyptians celebrated their women with temples and carvings and yet you had trouble even naming a modern American woman?"

"No, I don't find that interesting in the least." He noticed a set of staircases just in the nick of time. "Hey girls, I bet we can climb to the terrace upstairs. Let's go!

Abbey kept talking. "When thinking of popular American icons to compare to two female Egyptians ones, why would your first thought be of men?"

"Dear God, you're gonna make this a thing." Jed turned sharply at the foot of the stairs.

"It's just a question, babe."

"It's the cut of my jib, okay?"

"The cut of your what?" Ellie had never heard that before.

"It's an old sailing phrase. Jib is the triangular sail on a boat. Sailors used to use that phrase to refer to the way their sail was trimmed."

"You're not a sailor."

"In common language it means, it's my style."

Abbey interjected, "Outdated nautical references aside, are you skirting my question?"

"Pun intended?" He didn't get a laugh for that, not from Abbey anyway. "I answered your question."

Now, he was looking for an escape hatch.

"Not sufficiently," she kept on.
"Somehow, I just know this is going to end with me praising the glorious service of Wonder Woman."

"Eleanor Roosevelt..."

"Married her fifth cousin by the way."

"...was an extraordinary woman, to whom we all owe a great deal."

Jed stored that generic little statement in the back of his mind. Someday, he'd use it to get himself out of trouble. "Ellie, get your camera and follow me. There's bound to be some great views upstairs."

Abbey nipped at his heels as he retreated quickly up the stone steps.

TBC
"Why does everything in Egypt have to happen at the crack of dawn?" Elizabeth grousched.

It was another early morning for the Bartlets, their last in Luxor. Abbey and Ellie had conspired to surprise the family and their plans involved a 4:30 hotel departure and, to Liz's chagrin, a hike to the river and down the rocky shores of the East Bank in the pre-dawn hours. She huffed as she tied a white cardigan around her frame and gave a dramatic shiver of her arms. Unlike their trek the day before in preparation for the cruise to Dendera, it was dark this time and without the sun, a cold February chill permeated the air.

"I'm gonna be a popsicle by the time we get there!"

"Knock it off, Elizabeth," Abbey chided her. "This is going to be fun."

"Hey, you know what's more fun? Sleep!" Liz had been woken up, cajoled, bribed, and finally dragged out of bed and she wasn't happy about it.

With Abbey leading the way, they hopped on a small ferry that would take them across the river to the West Bank, where they docked and disembarked to board a van with other tourists who took the same trip. On the ferry, Jed had tried to engage them in conversation, hoping to find out exactly where they were going, but Abbey had pressed her finger to her lips, a gesture that indicated to the others that her husband was left in the dark on purpose and their destination would remain a surprise. Until they got in the van, that is.

The short and bumpy drive included a safety briefing and so Jed, Lizzie, and Zoey were quickly clued in to what the morning had in store - a hot-air balloon ride soaring over Luxor. The van turned into a clearing and the passengers got off to find their balloon among a dozen colorful ones all lined up and being inflated by ground personnel. Ellie spotted the Bartlet balloon first and ran over with Zoey and a now-enthusiastic Liz as Abbey and Jed trailed behind.

"Are you sure Ellie's ready for this?" Jed asked his wife, thinking back to how difficult it was just getting Ellie on the plane to Egypt.

"Whose idea do you think it was?"
"You're kidding!"

"Look at her. Doesn't she look excited?" Abbey hadn't yet told him about her heart-to-heart with Ellie about her fears, but she didn't have to. Jed was seeing a completely different Ellie now and when he flashed back to finding mother and daughter asleep on the balcony the day before, he put two and two together. 

"That she does," Jed said, clearly a little hesitant himself as they approached the balloon. It was no secret that he had a few phobias of his own, height and fire being the most prominent.

"Are you ready for it?"

"Me? Yeah, I'm fine." He and Abbey had gone up alone in a hot-air balloon above the Swedish countryside the week he won his Noble Prize. He had arranged it as a surprise for her and he managed to swallow his trepidation back then.

"When we did this in Sweden..."

"I said I'd do it again in a heartbeat," he finished for her. It was true and he meant it.

"Right. That's why I booked the tour. But if you'd rather not go..."

"Nonsense! I'm going to go."

"Are you sure?" Abbey had booked with a reputable company which had a long history of accolades for customer comfort and safety.

"Positive." And even if he wasn't, seeing Luxor from the air sounded like a dream come true. It was too good an opportunity to pass up for a curious history buff like Jed. He would steady himself and abandon his fears to do it.

They hustled to catch up with their daughters who met the pilot and crew and were in the middle of getting another safety lecture, this one concerned more with landing than in-flight instructions. There was no entry door, so the girls were lifted one-by-one into the basket. Jed helped Abbey climb over and she then took his hand from inside to return the favor. The ground crew offered drinks to the girls before lift-off and Jed and Abbey both enjoyed a mimosa with their toast and jam. 

A total of 16 people fit on the balloon, families and tour groups separated by compartments. In the Bartlets' compartment, they grabbed hold of the straps on the walls of the basket and went over landing instructions again. Within a few minutes, the pilot started the gas and flames erupted into the balloon, which provoked Abbey to wrap her arms around Jed's mid-section in a show of comfort in case the fire made him uneasy.

"Well, if that's the reaction I can expect, we should hang out around live flames more often," Jed teased as he snuggled into his wife's embrace.

It was no coincidence that as the balloon started its ascent off the ground, he turned in her arms so that he was facing the inner circle of the basket. Just like in Sweden, he couldn't bear to look down. And he wasn't the only one. While Lizzie and Zoey peered over the edge of the basket, Ellie averted her eyes as well. She, like her father, wasn't fond of heights, and staring up at the flame she could hear roaring from the burners in the balloon was out of the question, so she tightened her grip on the straps inside the compartment and kept her eyes level with the horizon until they reached an altitude that would offer her the chance to look out without looking down.
"You okay, Ellie?" Abbey asked, her hand extended to her middle daughter in case she needed some extra support.

"Yeah. As soon as this first part is over, I'm gonna take pictures."

The morning call to prayer rang out from the minarets of the local mosques and the sun began to rise, warming the chilled landscape. In no time, as sunbeams cast red and orange hues over the foothills of the Thebes Mountains, the balloon smoothly climbed into the clouds and floated above the famed temples of Luxor, giving the Bartlets an unobstructed aerial view of the monuments. The Temple of Hatshepsut sat among a chain of rocky reddish-brown cliffs, in stark contrast to the fertile valley beyond. They had visited it on the ground the day they toured the Valley of the Kings, but spying from the sky was a different experience entirely and the exhilaration of the altitude brought out the teacher in Jed. Queen Hatshepsut, he told his daughters as he had before, sometimes posed as a man and rose through the ranks from princess to queen to pharaoh, becoming the longest-ruling female pharaoh of Ancient Egypt.

Their balloon changed direction then and gave them a view of the calm waters of the Nile drifting tranquilly under the ferries, sailboats, and cruiseliners that dotted the waterway. Riverside villages on the outskirts of Luxor glowed under the early morning rays as townspeople began their day. The green fields of crops and vegetation along the river separated the water from the vast desert vista miles away and they could hear nests of House Sparrows coming alive at daybreak, their chirps mingling with dozens of other species of birds that made their home in the Nile River Valley.

"LOOK!" Ellie pointed as a purple heron flew just under their balloon too fast to get a picture. "Darn, I missed it!"

Liz saw a flock of the large birds flying toward them. "It's okay, El. Look out there, there's more."

"Get a picture, Ellie! Get it! Get it!" Jumping up and down, Zoey cheered her sister on as Ellie snapped photo after photo. Zoey had only been bird-watching once - to earn a Girl Scout patch - but it had instantly awakened an interest in her.

"Is that the Valley of the Kings out in the distance?" Liz asked her parents as they passed a pair of binoculars around their compartment.

"Looks like it!" Jed concurred, taking the binoculars from his eldest daughter. "Yup, that's it. Completely different seeing it from up here, isn't it?"

"It's like a whole different world."

"See? Aren't you glad we made you come?"

As much as Liz wanted to deny it, her brilliant smile gave her away. She couldn't believe a balloon ride would give her this big a thrill, but looking down from her perch high above at all the sights she had seen on foot, she had to admit it did. For her so far, this was the highlight of the trip to Egypt.

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Following a smooth landing, the Bartlets took off in the direction of a breakfast café by the pier. They loved dining after their adventures because it gave them a chance to decompress, to talk about the experience and compare memories and laughs before their next destination. Over an hour in a hot-air balloon had given them plenty of material to discuss as they sat at a circular booth at the café and ordered a big American breakfast they would all share - eggs, sausage, bacon, toast, and
pancakes. Jed didn't even mind that the syrup wasn't New Hampshire's own. He was just happy to be enjoying his favorite breakfast staples with his family.

It was a quick trip across the river back to the hotel after their meal, where everyone agreed it was time for a mid-morning nap. The girls immediately retreated to their bedroom while Jed and Abbey retired to their own.

"All right, babe, what's on the agenda for tonight?" Jed asked, stripping out of his shirt.

"Nothing."

"Come on, I can't handle another surprise like this morning's."

"No surprises," Abbey insisted. She, too, was undressing. "There's nothing on the agenda for tonight, Jed. The girls wanted an evening in, remember?"

"So what did you cancel to make that happen?"

"Don't worry about it." Telling him would only disappoint him.

"Hm, that means it was good. Spill."

"Jed."

"You know I'm going to get it out of you one way or another."

"All right, if you must know, I wanted to take a carriage ride along the waterfront to the West Bank, dine at this Mediterranean restaurant by the docks, and end our day sailing up the Nile at sunset."

"Boy, when you plan something, you really plan it." Jed should have guessed. Abbey had gone all out the whole time they were in Egypt.

"I'm sure we'll have fun here at the hotel," she said as she turned down the covers and climbed into bed. "We'll order room service and watch videos with the girls and then we'll turn in early."

"Forget it. Why don't we do what you planned? You and me."

"I already canceled."

"So? We can re-book."

"You want to?"

"Yeah. I've been trying to get you alone since Cairo." Jed joined her in bed. "It's a weeknight. I'm sure we can make last minute reservations. Let's do it, everything you want."

"You don't want a night off?"

He dismissed that thought. "I'll have the rest of my life to take a night off. We're only in Egypt for a week and this is our last night in Luxor. Besides..." He slipped an arm under her. "it's been a while since we've had a date."

"Yes, it has." She giggled when he kissed her ear.

"It's been a while since we've done other things too."
"A few days does not constitute 'a while.'"

"It should." He continued to kiss her down her neck.

"Jed?"

"Hmm?"

"You're going to wear me out."

"I know."

"I'm tired."

"I know that too."

"You're going to take advantage of me anyway?"

"I thought I might," he said, his kisses now trailing the slope of her breasts.

She smiled. "Good."

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As Abbey stepped out of the shower that afternoon, she looked around. Her husband was nowhere in sight. The girls told her that he went down to the lobby and would return soon, so she slipped into a satin robe and started to do her make-up and dry her hair. It was just going to be her and Jed tonight and she wanted to look her best, which was why she chose to wear the sexy burgundy number she had packed in her suitcase. It had spaghetti straps made of a thin line of burgundy crystals, a fitted waist, and a flared skirt that dropped down to her calves. It came with a matching shawl, trimmed in the same crystals as the straps, and she planned to drape it over her bare shoulders in public.

She was putting on her earrings when there was a knock at the door of the suite. She shouted for the girls to answer it and Liz reluctantly got up off the couch where she, Ellie, and Zoey had made themselves comfortable with videos and snacks in preparation for their movie night. The teen opened the door to find her father standing there, a bouquet of long-stemmed red roses in his hand.

"Cool, thanks!" she took them as if they were meant for her.

Jed smacked her hand to get them back. "Get away! They're for your mother."

"You guys are so cheesy."

"It's called romance, smartass. And I don't want to hear it after the head-in-the-clouds reaction you had when Doug brought you flowers."

"Yeah, but we were just starting our romance."

"Was that before or after Doug knew how to spell the word?"

"You know what..."

"Last joke about him." Jed held up his hand to silence her protest. He remembered quite well that just a few days earlier, he had given Liz permission to call him a jerk if he ever made fun of Doug again, so he changed subject. "How do I look?"
"Your hair is messed up."

"You're just saying that because I picked on Doug."

Liz turned to her sisters. "Guys?"

"It is kinda messed up," Ellie agreed.

"I think you look good, Daddy," Zoey was quick to offer.

"Thank you, Zoey, my favorite daughter." He shot a sharp glance at Liz.


"I will." He turned from her, then turned back. "Okay, what's wrong with it?"

Liz grinned as she straightened out the strands of hair that had fallen over his forehead. "There. Now you look good." She playfully jabbed him. "You jerk."

"You're grounded," Jed jabbed back, then headed to his and Abbey's room and knocked on the door.

Abbey asked him to come in and he did, but he stood speechless in the doorway for a moment as he admired her beauty. His wife never failed to take his breath away. His wasn't the only heart skipping a beat in that second. Jed looked good in almost anything he wore, but there was a regal appeal to him when he was all decked out in a fine black suit, a crisp white dress shirt, and a designer tie. Tonight, he had chosen one in deep blue, a favorite of hers because it brought out the color of his eyes. Abbey saw the bouquet in his hand and remembered how she had commented on the gorgeous arrangements in the flower shop in the lobby when they had first checked in. It wasn't meant to be a hint to him, but he had kept it in the back of his mind and their date night gave him the perfect opportunity to give her what she wanted.

"I thought we agreed no more surprises." Abbey's tone gave her away. She was touched beyond words.

"No, you agreed no more surprises. I didn't agree to anything. Why? Do you want me to stop surprising you?"

"I didn't say that."

"Good, because it's been 19 years and I'm still doing it, so I feel comfortable saying it's bound to continue, both tonight and in the future."

"How in the world did I get so lucky?"

Jed handed her the flowers. "Happy Valentine's Day."

She dipped her nose into the bouquet to get a whiff of the fragrance. "Valentine's Day was 10 days ago."

"Yeah, but I was in Washington, you were in New Hampshire. We didn't get to have our traditional Valentine's Day date."

"It's traditional, is it?"

"Yeah." He was shocked that she'd question that. "Why? You think it's not?"
Abbey chuckled. "We missed it a lot of years when I was in residency. It's more of a hit-or-miss holiday for us than a tradition, don't you think?"

"No. Some of my fondest memories are of our Valentine's Day dates. Remember the year I put in the gazebo on the farm and we had dinner out there? The year I took you to that bed and breakfast up in the White Mountains? The year you planned a candlelight dinner-for-two at home so you could tell me you were pregnant with Ellie? The year..."

"Okay, okay, I concede. We're both right. We did miss a lot of Valentine's Days, but the ones we celebrated have turned into a bit of a tradition for us."

"That's all I'm saying."

Neither dared to bring up Valentine's Day only one year earlier. A brutal snowstorm had moved across New England, a classic nor'easter that left treacherously icy roads and snapped tree branches that downed power lines. The girls were visiting their grandparents in Boston, leaving Jed and Abbey snowed in at the farm that weekend. When the storm hit, it wiped out the electricity and phone service, but they took advantage of it, called it a romantic rendezvous, had dinner, then spent Friday night in front of the fire place, where Abbey told Jed she was pregnant with their fourth child. By Sunday morning, she had lost the baby.

That sad memory would always be somewhere in their minds, but it didn't define this special day. They wouldn't allow it too.

"You look terrific," Jed told her.

"You're quite the looker yourself." Abbey slid her fingers into the crook of his arm as they walked out of the room. "Happy Valentine's Day."

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The Tutankhamun Restaurant was known for its French-Egyptian flare and Mediterranean dishes that made it a favorite in Egypt. It sat on the docks on the West Bank of Luxor and to get there from the Bartlet hotel on the East Bank, Jed and Abbey could have planned a trip by land or by river. This time, Abbey had chosen land.

A horse-drawn carriage, adorned with dangling ornaments made of Egyptian jewels, met them at the entrance to their hotel. A loud whinny alerted others to their arrival and from one of the windows up in the suite, Zoey looked down to see a stunning white horse sitting on the street, the black carriage unoccupied until her parents walked out the double glass doors of the lobby and climbed in - Abbey first, then Jed.

"ELLIE! LIZZIE!" she yelled frantically, regretting her decision to follow her older sisters' lead and stay in.

As the driver negotiated the turn out of the hotel drive and onto the narrow streets of Luxor, Jed and Abbey agreed that there would be no discussion about the kids tonight. They were like many other parents, often guilty of taking a night devoted to themselves and turning into a night spent complaining about or praising their three girls. It wasn't a big problem back home, but now they were in Egypt and this was their one and only opportunity to explore the romance of the country alone. So for that evening, Lizzie, Ellie, and Zoey were off-limits and their attention shifted from parents to lovers.

There were two stops along the way - one at the bazaar in the center of town so Abbey could eye
an authentic African sculpture she had noticed their first night in Luxor, and the second to a papyrus shop Jed wanted to see. Afterwards, they loosely clasped hands and took in the amazing scenery of the waterfront as their caleche rolled down the Sharia al-Corniche, the main street that ran along the Nile.

- - -

Just as Jed predicted, the restaurant wasn't overcrowded, at least not at this time of the day. Abbey wanted a sunset sail, so they chose to go for an early dinner, arriving at the Tutankhamun at four o'clock. It was on the rooftop of a two-story low-rise and Jed and Abbey were seated at an intimate table on the terrace which gave them a breathtaking view across the river at the Luxor Temple.

"Did you know that the ram is the Egyptian symbol for fertility?" Jed asked his wife as they dined on appetizers of toasted pita bread and a homemade hummus dip.

"How in the world did I let that little piece of trivia escape me?" Abbey gave him a coy wink.

Rams Road, a street lined with ram-headed sphinxes, stretched from the base of the Luxor Temple to the Great Temple of Amun-Ra at Karnak. They had toured the whole area with the girls after their day at the Valley of the Kings and Jed thought about sharing his knowledge of rams then, but he'd decided to save it for Abbey's ears only.

"You joke, but I'm serious. If you look straight across, you can see them from up here."

"Are you hinting at something?"

"I'm just saying, Egypt is full of mysteries and little-known facts, one of which is that once upon a time, rams were worshipped because of their virility, strength, and energy."

"What other mysteries and facts are you going to entertain me with tonight?"

"Well, when a cat died, it was tradition for the family members to all shave their eyebrows as a sign of mourning. Cats were sacred in Egypt and they were the superstars of Egyptian mythology. Take Bast, the Cat Goddess, widely recognized in folklore as the protector of the household. To this day, she's depicted in art and literature with the body of a woman and the head of a domestic cat. According to legend, she was a warrior who roamed the sky with her father, Ra, the sun god, and protected him from his enemies. At night, she turned herself into a cat so that her superior night vision could guard Ra against his greatest adversary, Apep."

"Bast, the Cat Goddess," Abbey repeated, making a mental note to tell Zoey the story.

"And then we have the flowers. The lotus flower, specifically. There's some debate on its historic symbolism. It's a water lily, see. It opens up with the sun every morning and closes after dusk every night, which is why Ancient Egyptians recognized it as a symbol of rebirth and rejuvenation. Academic types believed the lotus flower's real meaning was found in its interdependence with the sun, the element of nature that cast, among its warm rays, a touch that awakened the lotus and gave it the ability to bloom every morning. That interdependence has been the subject of many a scholarly essay and it's why some theorize it's true place in mythology is as a symbol of love."

He pulled out a small box from his jacket pocket and passed it across the table to her.

"What's this?" Abbey took it suspiciously.

"Open it," he said. "Sorry the box is generic. It was the best I could do in the hotel gift shop."
Abbey gasped as she flipped the lid to find a silver charm bracelet with a flower dangling off the chain. "This is the lotus flower?"

"That's it. Looks just like our own water lilies."

"Where did you get it?"

"At the bazaar in Cairo when you weren't looking. They say it should be given to a woman from the person in her life who loves her the most."

"Oh, Jed." Her eyes shined with tears. "You dear sweet jackass."

Not exactly how he expected that sentence to end. He furrowed his brows. "We're using 'jackass' as a term of endearment?"

"First the flowers and now this touching story and romantically sentimental bracelet that I will always treasure. Meanwhile, I'm sitting here with nothing for you."

He grinned. "And I'm the jackass?"

Abbey couldn't help a smile too as she wiped her eyes. "My mascara's running now."

"Uh oh, am I in trouble for that too?" Jed reached over to take her hand. "You already did your part in the gift-giving department. This whole vacation has been one present after another, Abbey. The flowers and the bracelet...they're just my way of showing you how I feel about you and saying thank you for planning one of the best birthday gifts you could have given me."

"I love you. I can't compete with the beautiful story or the bracelet you just gave me, but I really love you."

"No 'jackass' at the end of that?" He drew a laugh out of her.

"Help me put on my bracelet..." Abbey looked at him affectionately and added, "jackass."

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Cruise ships and motorized barges routinely navigate the Nile River, ferries cross the waterway every hour to transport passengers from the East Bank to the West Bank, and floating hotels dock in Luxor for days at a time so that sight-seers can explore the tombs and temples of the ancient city. Amid all the river traffic on that February evening, there was another type of vessel that calmly floated among its counterparts and grabbed the attention of the both natives and foreigners - the traditional Egyptian sailboat called a felucca.

Centuries ago, the only way to travel up and down the Nile was by felucca. They were made of wood and had tall masts and sails made of cotton and native materials. With no motor, captains relied on the wind to push the boats upstream while the current carried them back down. Once there were more modern means of transportation, the boats were primarily used for tourists who wanted to embrace Egypt's history while opting for an alternative to the crowded ships, or a pair of sweethearts looking for a romantic sail to one of the islands just off of Luxor's shores. Jed and Abbey fit both profiles.

Abbey had originally made the reservations back in New Hampshire. She requested a medium-sized boat, thinking that the girls would want to experience a felucca ride as well, but after they asked for a night at the hotel, she canceled the booking. When Jed suggested he and she go ahead with their own plans earlier that day, she called again and this time, asked for a smaller vessel. This
one was perfect. It was comfortable yet cozy enough for a couple who planned to lose themselves in each others company as they watched one of nature's most alluring spectacles - a Nile sunset.

From the moment they stepped on the boat, Jed had taken an interest in the captain. His name was Mustafa and he had been working the river for the better part of 40 years. It was the family business, he'd explained. He'd grown up on the Nile and learned his trade by observing his father and grandfather steer the feluccas from Aswan to Luxor, sometimes even traveling as far away as Cairo during the off-season.

"When is that?" Jed asked him. "The off-season? July and August?"

"No, no. People stop coming in spring. Sandstorms," Mustafa replied with a heavy Arabic accent, but decent English.

"It thins out enough to put you out of business as early as spring?" Jed had read about those infamous sandstorms that usually began in April; he just didn't think it scared off the majority of tourists from visiting the more populated areas of Egypt, like Luxor.

"It's bad. We do what we can the rest of the year to make up for those months."

Jed felt for the man. With five kids, a wife, and his elderly parents to care for, Mustafa was working 15-hour days on the boat. Jed made a mental note to give him an extra large tip when he dropped them off back on the East Bank.

"You want tea?" Mustafa offered.

"That sounds good, actually."

Another ten minutes with Mustafa and Jed was ready to steer the vessel himself, but Mustafa's protectiveness of his boat, as well as local laws that wouldn't allow it, forced him to decline Jed's request. Jed took it in stride, exchanged a few jokes with the captain, then picked up two cups of tea and led Abbey to the deck so they could enjoy some time alone. There were benches on the sides of the boat with cushions that Jed piled on the floor so they could sit more comfortably and sip their tea while looking out at the charming countryside.

"What are you thinking about?" Abbey prodded.

"Everything we've seen and done this week. You ever think we take everything we have for granted?"

"Sometimes."

"We are blessed, you and me. Seeing the rural villages on the riverbank yesterday and talking to Mustafa just now, it just makes me sad that everyone can't be as fortunate as we've been. We have great kids, good careers, financial security, a house..."

"And each other."

Jed looked her in the eye. "I was coming to that. What would we do without each other?"

"I don't ever want to find out." Abbey arranged the cushions so that she could sit in front of Jed and lean back against his frame.

They were headed to Banana Island, a popular plantation up the river that boasted, among its fruit trees and sugar cane, a unique jungle-like atmosphere the hotel had raved about. But the
destination didn't matter to Jed. He was content with holding Abbey as the wind helped them drift along this peaceful stretch of African coastline.

It was dusk now and the water shimmered with reflections of the sky just before the sun went down. A combination of red, orange, and yellow made it look like a pool of glittering gold welcoming them as they approached a quiet little cove where they'd anchor to see the sunset.

"It's our last night on the Nile," Jed said.

His arms circled her around her waist and his hands clasped at her stomach. She covered them with her own. "We'll be back."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah."

Mustafa dropped the anchor then. The boat began to rock gently against the current when Jed readjusted himself. He stretched out so that he was lying on his back, his arm extended toward Abbey who laid down beside him with her head resting on his chest. He held her closer than he had before and grabbed a quilt from the bench to cover them as they relaxed in each others arms, looking up at the myriad of colors in the sky to see the sun slowly dip below the horizon.

TBC
"Daddy, how come the Red Sea isn't red?"

"It wasn't named for its color, sweetheart."

That was the start of the explanation Jed gave Zoey, but even as the first words left his lips, he knew that wouldn't be enough. Bursting with enthusiasm, Zoey had been asking questions ever since they left Luxor and arrived in Sharm el-Sheikh on the southern tip of the Sinai Peninsula. It was a seaside resort town that was once a small fishing village where Bedouins pitched tents and settled on the shores. Rich in history, Sharm el-Sheikh, had fallen under Israeli control in 1967 after the Six Day War between Israel and Egypt, Jordan, and Syria. It wasn't until 1982 that it was returned back to Egypt and it now served as a naval base for the Egyptian military and as a 'Red Sea Riviera' for foreigners.

Jed was also interested in the background of Sharm el-Sheikh, but truth be told, Abbey had designed this part of the trip more for the girls than for her and Jed. She figured that after touring Cairo and Luxor, they'd welcome a day of fun at the beach, snorkeling in the clear blue waters of the sea, jumping waves, or sunbathing on the shore. Lizzie and Ellie had talked of nothing else when they started planning their vacation itinerary last summer. Their only complaint was that they couldn't spend more than one day here.

Jed and Abbey checked into the hotel and the girls ran immediately to the elevator. Zoey, still bouncing around with excitement, chased her sisters out when it stopped on the 10th floor where Abbey had reserved a room. Liz opened the door to the suite and all three girls ran in to change into their bathing suits, determined not to miss a second of their first snorkeling lesson. The plan was to rent wetsuits and gear at the beach.

"Zoey, come in here when you're finished changing please," Abbey called out as she and Jed strode toward the suite's master bedroom.

"Am I in trouble?" the six-year-old asked timidly in the doorway of her parents' room a few minutes later.
"No, you're not. I just want to make sure you remember our talk this morning about how dangerous snorkeling can be."

"I remember."

"If you ignore direction from the instructor, Daddy, or me even once, I'm bringing you right back to the hotel and you'll stay here for the rest of the day."

"Okay."

Abbey didn't like making that threat, but when Zoey got an idea in her head, she had a tendency to do whatever she wanted without regard for the rules, and this wasn't an extra cookie she planned to sneak after lunch or a swimming pool she planned to jump in after being told not to. Out on the beach and especially underwater, taking off on her own would have serious consequences that Abbey was desperate to prevent. With that in mind, she laid down the law guilt-free. But she knew that Zoey was thinking she'd been singled out and feeling upset that her sisters didn't get the same lecture.

So, Abbey kneeled down and said, "And you're going to help me keep an eye on Lizzie and Ellie. The same rules go for them. If they do anything they're not supposed to, you let me know and I'll take care of it. Okay?"

A cheerier response this time. "Okay!"

"Good. Now, go tell them to hurry up while Daddy and I get dressed."

"Lizzie has to do her hair."

"To go snorkeling?" Jed asked with an incredulous tone. He was standing at the bed, rifling through his and Abbey's suitcase for swimming garments.

"She has to braid it or it'll tangle because it's so long. Mommy, should I braid my hair too?"

Zoey's hair was too short to hold a decent braid, so Abbey suggested instead, "How about a high ponytail for you? See if you can borrow Ellie's purple scrunchie. It matches your bathing suit perfectly."

"I'll ask her!"

Jed grumbled before she left, "While you're at it, tell Rapunzel she's got five minutes. If she's that concerned about tangles, she can shave her head."

Zoey stopped, confused. She knew the fairy tale well, but she wasn't that good at detecting Jed's humor. "Huh?"

"Never mind," Abbey replied.

Zoey shrugged and skipped out of the room then, shouting for Ellie.

"All this fuss about hair just to go swimming," Jed complained. "I'll never understand women."

"Are you finished?"

"Explain it to me. Why is braiding a pre-requisite to snorkeling?"

"It's for the dive, Jed," Abbey smiled. "She can't leave it down because it'll tangle and get in her
"face while she's underwater, so she has to braid it to make it more manageable to twist into a beanie."

Finally, he got it. "Once more, I thank God I wasn't born a female."

"So do I, babe." She opened up a smaller suitcase to pull out a pair of Speedos that she dangled in front of him.

"What's that?"

"Your swimsuit."

"I don't think so," he sneered. "Where are my trunks?"

"Hon, you can't wear trunks under your wetsuit. You need to wear these. That's why I bought them."

"Why do I have to wear a wetsuit?"

"Because it's February and a wetsuit will keep you warm in the water."

"Fine, but I'm not wearing those, Abbey."

"Why not?"

"Because I'll be on display."

"Maybe a little." Her eyes wandered below his waist. "You're certainly well-endowed and that's going to make for a snug fit."

She was grinning wide now.

"You're enjoying this."

"No, I'm just thanking God I wasn't born a male." Her chuckle wasn't appreciated by him. "Come on, Jed. No one's going to see you in them. Just put your shorts on over them until we get there so you can put on your wetsuit."

He didn't move. "Forget it. You guys have fun. Tell me all about it when you get back."

"Jed! The girls have been looking forward to this. Don't disappoint them by backing out."

"Believe me, they'll be thrilled I won't be going when they find out the dress code."

"No, they won't."

"Then they'll get over it."

"Jed."

"Fine, I'll go, but I'm not wearing those."

"Okay, don't wear them if you don't want to. If you'd rather go naked in a rented wetsuit, that's entirely up to you."

That thought was even more repulsive to Jed. He noted her unrelenting stare and grabbed the Speedos out of her hand. "All right, if I'm going to do this, I want you in that black G-string I'm
crazy about."

"Like that's ever going to happen."

He badgered her as he stripped out of his clothes. "What's good for the goose..."

"Is not good for the gander, not in Egypt anyway. For once, being a woman works in my favor."

"Being a woman always works in your favor as far as I'm concerned, sweet knees."

Abbey watched him as he pulled up the Speedos. Her eyes admired his form from top to bottom and she wondered how it was that he had managed to become even sexier over the last 20 years. He didn't have bulging muscles or a chiseled chest, but he was toned and with his broad shoulders and tapered waist, he looked natural. Handsome. He had the body of a man who led a busy life and worked out when he could, a man whom God had blessed with stunning good looks that withstood the test of time. He was gorgeous, both above and below the waist.

"Turn around," she requested in a flirty voice. Her gaze followed his strong back down to his rear-end.

"Well?" he asked. "I'm feeling like a piece of meat here."

She moved in to press her body to his and circled her arms under his to hold him from behind. "I definitely approve. And you know the best part of wearing those things?"

"What's that?"

"I get to take them off you when we get back here."

"You should have said that from the start."

"You would have been more cooperative if I had?"

"What do you think?" He spun around and grabbed her hips.

"Jed, we don't have time." She gave him a throaty laugh as he unzipped her skirt.

"I bet we do."

"I still have to change."

He threw her on the bed. "I'll help you get undressed."

Unable to resist, Abbey pulled him in for a kiss just before a familiar voice hollered from the other room.

"MOM, DID YOU TELL ZOEY SHE COULD HAVE MY PURPLE SCRUNCHIE?"

"I'M NOT A LIAR, ELLIE! TAKE IT BACK!"

And it was over. Jed rolled to Abbey's side so she could get up and deal with their feuding daughters.

He growled before she left the room, "Next time we decide to go on vacation, I vote we leave the girls at home."
After everyone changed, the Bartlets left the hotel and headed to the pier. Jed had followed Abbey's advice and put on a pair of shorts over his Speedos, the girls all wore their bikinis, and Abbey opted for a red one-piece suit and an ankle-length sarong she tied around her waist. Her hair was tied in a knot at the nape of her neck and she had a large-brimmed straw hat and a pair of sunglasses to protect her from the sun. She wrapped a thin red scarf around the hat to match her outfit and slid her feet into a pair of red strappy sandals. She was the picture-perfect symbol of elegance, Jed told her. 'A classic beauty who oozed sensuality with style and grace.'

It was no secret that he favored his wife's hour-glass figure in a two-piece, but as much as Abbey had liked to wear bikinis in the past, her tastes were changing. She was still in incredible shape and while age and childbirth had taken a toll on her abdominal muscles, she guessed she'd still look good in a bikini. But she chose not to wear one. She felt more elegant in a one-piece and she had enough confidence to trust that she didn't need to bare her mid-section to be beautiful.

Jed confirmed that theory with the wide-eyed, open-mouth expression he donned when he saw her. He had been hoping for something similar to the cinnamon-red bikini she used to wear, but back at the farm, they hadn't been swimming or soaking in the hot tub in a while and he didn't know that she had added to her collection of swimwear with several one-piece suits. He loved the subtle and understated sexiness of this look and he let her know as they led their daughters toward the jetty to meet their instructor and guide for the hour-long sail to their snorkel site.

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The company that Abbey had booked with took families out alone and used small glass-bottom boats with an outdoor deck and benches circling the glass in the center. It made the journey to Ras Mohamed National Marine Park even more exciting for the girls. Once they arrived, they'd get to snorkel above some of the most famous coral reefs in the world and swim with a thousand species of fish, but along the way, they got to observe marine life they had only read about in books.

Ellie sat cross-legged on the floor with her camera for a prime view through the glass, Zoey sat across from her with Jed at her side, Liz leaned back against the raised benches on the side of the boat, and Abbey sat on the bench, looking down into the water. Among the sea urchins and barracuda, Ellie and Zoey spotted a fish with bluish-white spots all over its body. It had a broad snout and wing-like fins.

"What's that?" Zoey asked, pointing to it.

"Looks like a spotted eagle ray," Jed told her. "See the fins? They look like wings. That's because they virtually fly through the water."

"They can fly?"

Seated at the edge of the bench so she didn't have to look through glass to see the ocean, Abbey replied, "In the water they can. They flap their fins and gracefully swim along the reefs."

"Oh my God, look at the SHARKS!" Ellie began snapping pictures through the glass on the bottom of the boat at the school of sharks she could see swimming below them. "There's a whole bunch of them!"

"They're black-tip sharks," Jed said. "You can see the black spot on their fins."

Liz tensed up. "Hey, no one said anything about sharks!"

Amused by the way her eldest daughter curled up tighter against the bench, Abbey reached down
with a comforting hand. "Where we're going, we'll be safe."

"Newsflash, Mom - sharks can swim to where we are."

"Newsflash, Lizzie - some people come to Sharm el-Sheikh just to swim with these sharks."

Jed teased, "This is true, but I read that what this particular species of shark hates more than anything is snotty American teenagers. They attack as soon as they see one. I'd say Lizzie's right to be worried."

Abbey smacked Jed's arm when he began to sing the Jaws theme.

Often guilty of taking jokes too seriously, Zoey replied with outrage, "I don't want the sharks to eat Lizzie!"

Abbey addressed her husband, "See what you did? She's going to be traumatized for life."

"It's okay, Zo," Liz replied. "Dad likes to tease me because he thinks he's hilarious."

Jed smirked. "And Lizzie gets pissed about it when she doesn't have a comeback."

"Just because I choose not to say anything, doesn't mean I don't have a comeback."

"Right," he sputtered. "Your mom wore out that lame excuse years ago."

Abbey jumped into the fray then. "Jed, honey, are your Speedos on too tight?"

Three sets of eyes promptly turned to Jed as Ellie stopped taking pictures and, along with Lizzie and Zoey, stared at her father. At the start of the sail, while everyone else stayed on deck to slip into their wetsuits, Jed had gone below deck to change in the bathroom. No one but Abbey had known why, until now.

"Ugh, Dad!" Liz said. She had admired the physique of an Egyptian teen in a pair of Speedos at the pier, but the image of her father in one gave her the creeps.

"I'm not any happier about it than you are," Jed scowled as he shot a sour glance to a chuckling Abbey. "You think it's funny?"

Although Abbey thought he looked great in his Speedos, she couldn't help but laugh at the girls' reaction. "I do."

Jed meant to give her a gentle shove at that point, but he accidentally pushed too hard and Abbey, still sitting on the edge of the bench, lost her balance and tumbled overboard. Her hat flew off her head and landed several feet away.

"MOM!"

The girls called out for her, their synchronized voices more of a plea, as a panicked Jed dove into the ocean after her. The school of sharks Ellie had admired moments earlier was now swimming toward them. Jed grabbed Abbey from behind and wrapped his body around hers to shelter her the best he could. At that moment, their lives flashed before their eyes. Their biggest regret was that their children were going to witness whatever was about to happen to them.

Their daughters would be orphaned if the sharks mistook them for prey, they each acknowledged to themselves. Jed didn't work that through in his mind before he jumped in after Abbey. All he knew was that his wife was in shark-infested water, thanks to him, and if she got hurt in any way,
he might as well die right then and there because he'd never be able to live with himself. It was instinct. He had to help her.

Back on the boat, the guide threw a line and steered the vessel, circling around to get back to them. He wanted to calm the girls and assure them that their parents wouldn't be harmed. He tried to tell them that black-tip sharks weren't particularly aggressive and weren't interested in people, that they only attacked humans by mistake. Abbey was right when she'd told Liz that some tourists came to Sharm el-Sheikh just to swim with the sharks, he said. He also made it clear that shark attacks were rare in these waters, but that didn't stop Zoey from crying for her parents.

"Stay still," Abbey whispered to Jed in the water, reminding him of their safety lecture when they rented their gear. If they were cornered by a shark, they were told by the clerk, they were to remain still because splashing and flailing about attracted the menacing creatures like prey.

"I'm doing my best," Jed whispered back as he pedaled his feet to keep them afloat. "We'll be fine. Black-tip sharks don't attack unless lured by food."

"Why am I not surprised that you know that?"

They each held their breath as the sharks swam directly below them, so close that Jed could have touched them if he had wanted to. Abbey's hat had been riding the waves, floating further and further away, and was no longer within arm distance. One of the sharks followed it, its fin cutting the surface and gliding across the top of the water as it grabbed at the tail of the red scarf that trimmed the hat. Satisfied, it then trailed the other sharks toward the reefs in the opposite direction.

Seconds later, they were gone.

Jed let out a huge sigh while Abbey cried tears of relief, her body vibrating against his frame. As he released his tight hold on her, she turned in his arms so that she was facing him. She trembled still, but he could see the fear melt from her features and he reached up to sweep her wet hair out of her eyes.

"For a minute there, I thought we were as good as dead," he admitted, his breath ragged.

"You said we were fine."

"That was for your benefit. I was trying to comfort you."

"I'm touched," she replied flippantly, yet playful. "You realize you lost your Husband of the Year award the minute you threw me to the sharks."

She was needling him now and Jed didn't fight it. He had it coming, he thought.

He smiled at her. And then, a more serious expression, a sincere one filled with remorse. "Abbey, I am so sorry. I didn't mean to push..."

Abbey cut him off with a kiss to his mouth as she coiled her arms around his neck. However she got there, Jed did jump in after her, risking his own life to save hers. How could she be mad at him?

"You'll have plenty of chances to apologize in the future," she said evenly when their eyes locked for several seconds after the kiss.

"I will?"

"Oh yeah." She gave a splash of water in his direction. "I'll be bringing this up for years to come."
Ras Mohamed National Marine Park was known as one of the most unique nature spots in all of Egypt. Seven and a half miles out from the hotels and restaurants of the tourist strip in Sharm el-Sheikh, it sat at the tip of the peninsula where the Red Sea separates into two channels and the sandy islet and coastal cliffs of the shore are suddenly bordered by the Gulf of Suez on the West and the Gulf of Aqaba on the East.

The Bartlets' boat anchored just past a lighthouse that guided ships leaving the Red Sea. They put on their snorkel masks, stuffed their feet into their fins, and Abbey helped Zoey with a snorkel vest to keep her afloat amid the rough currents of this stretch of water. Then, they each jumped out of the vessel into the crystal blue ocean that allowed them to spy for miles below the surface. There were sea turtles and water plants and thousands of fish - red ones, yellow ones, orange ones, and black ones - swimming over the colorful corals that were close enough to walk across.

It was peaceful in the ocean and quiet underwater. Jed had bought everyone waterproof cameras made for snorkeling and scuba-diving, and drawn by the beauty of what she saw, Elizabeth made good use of hers. She snapped more photos than Ellie that afternoon, taking a picture of anything that moved, even her sister Zoey, who's tiny body suddenly went wild with excitement.

Zoey was doing as she was told, staying close to her parents, the boat, and their guide, who was explaining the details of the reefs they were exploring, when her six-year-old curiosity got the best of her. She spotted something repeatedly breaking the surface of the water out in the distance. She could hear it and could see the ripples made by the splash. She ducked her head underwater, then leapt out with a squeal.

"MOMMY, A DOLPHIN!"

She began paddling just as fast as her little arms could take her, until Abbey grabbed her.

"Not so fast, Zoey! That's further than we want to go."

"But it's a DOLPHIN!"

Abbey looked over at their guide.

"It's a lot deeper out there and the current is stronger," the guide warned. "I don't think she's old enough for it."

"I'll be careful, I promise," Zoey cried to her mother. "Please? I'll do whatever you say and I won't ask for anything else...ever!" While Abbey mulled it over, Zoey turned her pleading eyes to Jed. "PPPPPIllllleeeeeeaaaaassssseeeee, Daddy?"

Jed, as always, was unable to resist his daughter's tearful request.

"All right, come here," he said.

Jed held her in his arms and swam toward the mammal as it lunged out of the water over and over again. Unwilling to be left out, Elizabeth and Ellie swam behind him and Abbey came along too. They got close enough for a sprinkling of a splash that made Zoey scrunch up her face and giggle with delight before the rough water forced them to swim back toward their guide.

Jed had never been scuba diving before, a fact he strongly regretted when he realized that the
wreck of the SS Thistlegorm was in the Straits of Gubal near their snorkel site. On the way back, he saw other boaters headed directly to it. The British military supply ship had been bombed by the Germans in World War II and was now an underwater museum open to the public, but such an adventure required certification as an experienced diver and that was something that Jed didn't have. So, he filed away the idea and kept it in the back of his mind for a future visit to Egypt, then enjoyed a picnic lunch on the deck of their glass-bottom boat as he ramped up his enthusiasm for a late afternoon swim when they returned to shore.

By three o'clock, they docked at the pier at Sharm el-Sheikh and took off for the beach. Having peeled off his wetsuit like the rest of his family, Jed was now wearing more comfortable swim trunks over his Speedos and he had promised Zoey he'd help her build a sand castle. As the two got started, Ellie sprinted into the surf and Liz retreated up the hill toward the sunbathers that lined the seafront. An exhausted Abbey joined her with two towels she dropped on the sand.

"I thought you didn't like to tan?" Liz questioned her mom as she laid face-down on her towel.

"I'm not tanning; I'm napping," Abbey corrected as she found her way under the shade of an umbrella. It was no secret that she wasn't big on sunbathing. Being exposed to the sun's rays was part of life if you enjoyed the outdoors, but lying in it for hours just so it could darken her skin seemed silly to her. Sure, it would look good then, but the damage it would cause - the premature aging and leathery texture she could expect as she got older - didn't sound all that appealing.

"So you'll tan by default."

"I'm prepared." She held up a big bottle of sunblock. One of the reasons she looked younger than most of her peers was because she rarely laid out and on those occasions that she did, she always made sure to have plenty of sunblock on-hand. "Here, put some on."

"You made me put on a ton of it on the boat," Liz reminded her.

"You can never have too much."

"I'm good, Mom."

"Suit yourself," Abbey left the bottle sitting beside her. "But don't say I didn't warn you when you're 25 with lines and wrinkles."

Sharm el-Sheikh wasn't like the rest of Egypt. It was more laid back here, more tourist-friendly. People walked around in bathing suits and bikinis without a care about conservative Egyptian customs. It was because of that liberal spirit that Abbey felt safe shedding her outer garments and lounging in her red one-piece. She adjusted her sunglasses, took off her sarong, covered herself in lotion, and stretched out on her towel.

Soon, she was lulled to sleep by the salty scent of the air, the mist of the sea, and the sound of the waves as they lapped the shore. But it wasn't a deep sleep. She was still awake enough to hear her family's voices. Jed and Zoey were with Ellie now and they managed to lure Liz from her suntan perch on the sandy slope to join them for a game of volleyball in the water. Abbey could hear them shouting to each other in a spirited challenge that brought out that Bartlet competitiveness in all of them.

The umbrella offered little protection against the four o'clock sun. It was filtering through the side, hitting her face, and so she rolled over onto her belly. Her swimsuit, a halter top with a single strap that wrapped around her neck, left her back bare all the way down to her waist. It enticed a couple of college freshmen who were trolling the beach. One of them dared the other and he kneeled
down close to Abbey. He picked up her bottle of lotion, squeezed it into the palm of his hand, and began to rub it over Abbey's back, lightly at first.

She was half-asleep and she thought it was Jed. She moaned at his touch, which only turned on the sleazy stranger. He mounted her hips and continued to massage her, forcing his fingers deeper and deeper into her flesh. When he leaned forward, Abbey took in his scent. It didn't smell like Jed. It didn't feel like Jed. And when she heard her husband's unmistakable voice from the water cheering for the girls, she realized it definitely wasn't Jed. It was someone else, someone she didn't know, sitting on her derrière and rubbing her back. She could feel a bulge in his pants and knew it was arousing him. The thought of it turned her stomach. Fully awake now, she summoned her strength to brace her weight on her hands and jerk herself up, but he was too heavy. His torso still leaning forward on top of her, she swung her shoulder in a burst of energy and gave him a sharp elbow to the side of the head.

Surprised, he tumbled off and fell onto the sand.

"What the HELL do you think you're doing?" Abbey yelled at him.

Jed, who was engrossed in his volleyball game with the girls, heard her. He looked up to the shore and even from several yards away, he could see how her eyes pierced into the two men. One was standing and one was scrambling to get up off the ground. Jed didn't know what was going on, but he raced out of the water and up the hill to get to his wife.

"Abbey!"

The two men saw him charging toward them and ran.

"Abbey?" Her name was said as more of a question this time. Jed reached her as the men disappeared behind one of the resorts. "What happened?"

"Nothing. I'm going to go back to the hotel."

"No, not until you tell me what that was about."

"Fine, they were rubbing suntan lotion on my shoulders. Thinking it was you, I moaned and one of them straddled me and continued to run his hands all over my back."

Her tone was an angry one, but it wasn't directed at Jed. She was embarrassed by what happened.

The girls rushed over then, Liz leading the pack. "Mom, what happened?"

"Nothing."

"But you yelled at those guys..."

"Liz," Jed interjected. "Take your sisters back to the beach. Get in a few more minutes of swimming and then we're going to dinner."

Liz hesitantly did what he said, urging Ellie and Zoey back to the water. Eventually, Abbey would tell her what happened in hopes that it would make Liz feel better to know that she wasn't the only one harassed in Egypt, but it could wait until later. The one person she wanted to talk to now was Jed.

"Did they hurt you?" Jed asked her, his rage barely simmering beneath a boil.
"No, it wasn't like that. It lasted only seconds and all they did was what I told you."

"So they just walked up and began rubbing lotion on you?" He was scanning the area and she knew he was looking for them.

"They're gone, Jed. They're not coming back."

"We'll see about that."

"Jed!" As he took one step toward the resorts on the strip, Abbey grabbed his arm. "Stay with me. I'd rather have you here with me than looking for them and giving them what they deserve."

"There's something wrong with this country."

"It's not the country. The country's been great, the people have been so helpful and solicitous. Like you said before, it's a small subset of the male population who think they can treat women this way."

"They wouldn't if the law didn't allow them to get away with it."

"Yeah, well, unless we want to move here, I don't think we can change the law."

"It's disgusting."

"It happens at home too. The difference is, the offenders there expect to get called on it."

"It shouldn't happen anywhere."

"No, it shouldn't. But it does." He stood silent. "Jed?"

"Yeah?"

She moved toward him and looked into his eyes. "I really did think it was you."

"I know." Jed took her in his arms and held her for the next several minutes. "You wanna go back to the hotel?"

"You know what, I don't."

"You said you did."

"I did at first, but now, I think I want to join you and the girls in the water."

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah." She wasn't going to allow a couple of teenage jerks to ruin their day at the beach. "I want to get my mind off it and go on with our day. Is there still a volleyball game going on?"

"We could start a new match."

"Me and Lizzie against you, Ellie, and Zoey?"

"No way! I don't like the idea of you and Lizzie teaming up like that unless I have a ringer on my side."

Abbey was a volleyball champion in high school, a talent that Liz had inherited and nurtured thanks to her mother's coaching.
"Chicken!"

"Damn right," he said without denial as he put his arm around her and they walked toward their girls. "Are you sure you're okay?"

"I am now. They rattled me, but they didn't hurt me. They're gone and I just want to forget about them." She nudged him with a wicked grin. "Besides, it's not like they threw me into shark-infested waters."

"How long til I live that down?"

"Quite a while, I would say. We're talking decades!"

TBC
“I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. Thou shalt worship no other God before Me.”

Jed knew Exodus like the back of his hand and he recited quite a bit of it on that morning in Egypt when the Bartlets hired a driver and a Bedouin guide to accompany them on a pilgrimage into the Sinai Desert. They boarded a jeep used for desert safaris and headed north from Sharm el-Sheikh, watching as the view changed abruptly once they left the seashore shops and hotels of the coastal town and crossed into the barren land where lonely narrow-laned roads were blanketed with sand from the outlying dunes thanks to the gusty winds of the warm morning breeze. As the only part of Egypt in Asia instead of Africa, the Sinai Peninsula bridged the two continents and its vast desert plains stretched from the Red Sea to the Mediterranean.

The road they were on snaked through jagged sandstone cliffs, spectacular granite peaks, and maroon canyons rising from deep valleys where shallow streams had carved the rusty terrain. There were several security checkpoints they had to pass before they arrived at their destination - St. Catherine's Monastery. It sat at the foothills of Mount Sinai near the spot praised by people of faith as the place where Moses received instructions to lead the Hebrews out of Egypt. Later, Jed, Abbey, and the girls would travel up the mountain to the very top where Moses received, from God, two stone tablets inscribed with the Ten Commandments, but first, it was the drive to the monastery that inspired Jed to call upon the theological trivia stored in his brain and challenge his daughters to do the same.

"Lizzie, your turn."

"My turn what?" Elizabeth asked. Impressed by the scenery, she had been staring out the window daydreaming while Jed was talking. She had no idea why he called her name.

"Tell us your favorite Commandment."

"I don't have one."

"Of course you do," he insisted. "Everyone does."
"Dad, really, I don't."

"Come on, Zoey wants to know. It's educational for her. She hasn't been through CCD classes yet like you and Ellie."

Using her baby sister to lure her into conversation? In that case, Liz sat up straight and answered frankly, "The one about adultery. Thou shalt not commit adultery. That's my favorite."

Jed's expression suddenly changed as he prepared for the question he knew was coming.

"Daddy, what does adultery mean?"

And with that, Liz gave her father a triumphant little smile, knowing he'd now be too distracted to quiz her. She turned to the window to continue daydreaming in peace.

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The jeep drove toward a remote gorge that bisected the granite rocks of the towering mountain. Youssef, the Bartlet's Bedouin guide, pulled over and parked adjacent to a complex that looked like it was in the middle of nowhere. It was built as a fortress with high exterior walls guarding it from the scrutiny of the public. He opened a door that led them through an alleyway, at the end of which was the entrance to St. Catherine's.

Named for Catherine of Alexandria who died a martyr defending Christians against Emperor Maximinus and converting those he sent to silence her, the monastery was constructed sometime between 527 and 565. Youssef told the family. Its original purpose was to house monks in the area, but in the Eighth Century when Catherine's body was found at the top of 'Jebel Katarina,' the highest mountain in Egypt, the name was formally changed to St. Catherine's and the young saint's remains were laid to rest in a sarcophagus inside the basilica. Youssef droned on without the benefit of Jed's lively interruptions as he explained that it was recognized as an official UNESCO site and had housed hundreds of monks over the centuries.

The Bartlets followed him past the main entrance and discovered that inside the secured walls of the fortress were cobbled streets that connected the smaller buildings of the complex. Within those buildings was a library and a museum that stored sacred codices and manuscripts written in Greek, Arabic, and Hebrew, a collection of mosaics dating back to the Fifth Century, and treasured religious gems, like stone-encrusted Bibles and chalices that were hundreds of years old.

There was a garden on the grounds where the current monks grew their own vegetables, a bell tower for the call to prayer, a mosque used by Bedouin groundskeepers and passersby, a well from which to draw water in the brutal desert heat, a cemetery, and a basilica with several chapels, the most famous of which opened into the alleyway at the east end of the complex right next to the monastery's most holy claim on history, a bush said to be a descendant of the original burning bush.

Jed removed his shoes, remembering the biblical lines about God's admonition to Moses, and approached it tentatively, every step slower than the last, every footfall sweeping the ground with deliberate gentleness in a way that showed him in awe of where he was. If the Valley of the Kings spurred a mystical experience, the burning bush would mesmerize him, Abbey thought. And it did. Jed was a man so committed to his faith that he once flirted with the idea of devoting his life to the priesthood. Standing in the presence of such a significant figure in spiritual history now rendered him positively speechless.

"Jed?" Abbey rubbed his upper arm. "Honey?"
"Dad's in a trance. This is the quietest he's been in years," Liz observed with a bit of mischief dancing in her eyes. "Quick Ellie, get your camera!"

Abbey turned a disapproving eye to her eldest daughter. "The next time he teases you mercilessly, Elizabeth, I'm going to remind you this is why."

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That afternoon, Youssef led the Bartlets out of St. Catherine's Monastery and to the nearby camel station, where they reserved camels to take them two-thirds of the way to the top of Mount Sinai. The final third of the journey, from the natural amphitheater to the summit, they planned to hike on foot.

Everyone had dressed in layers. It was February and they were warned that the mountain would be cold, so Abbey packed an extra bag of jackets and sweaters as a precaution. Aluminum canteens held enough water for the trip and Ellie brought a small bag with her camera, hair ties, and a pair of binoculars. Lizzie, who had shared a camel with Ellie at the Giza Pyramids, had her own camel this time. To Zoey's displeasure, she was considered too young to ride by herself on such a long climb, so Ellie rode with her, leaving Jed to get his wish of riding camelback with Abbey.

"No friskiness," Abbey cautioned him, a reminder that public displays of affection weren't welcomed in Egypt.

"Sweet Knees, we're about to soar to the top of one of the holiest mountains in all the world. Trust me when I say the only friskiness on this ride will be from..." he looked at the camel they would be riding.

"Lawrence," Abbey finished for him.

"Lawrence?" Jed was incredulous. "Of Arabia'?"

"That's his name. Leave it alone."

"What kind of name is that for a camel? You name a man Lawrence. You name a camel...what's his name...the one I had at the pyramids?"

"The stupid one?" Liz asked from her seat on top of her camel.

"Hey, you wanna start something with an animal that can't defend itself?"

"Even if he had a voice, Babr wouldn't be able to defend himself," Liz smirked.

"Babr!" Jed told Abbey with a spark of conviction and a snap of his fingers. "THAT'S what you name a camel. Not Lawrence."

"Would you rather mount Casanova over here?" Abbey asked him as she helped Ellie and Zoey onto their camel.

"There's something so wrong about that sentence," he said. "I'm not sure I want Ellie and Zoey riding anything that calls itself Casanova either."

"I like him," Ellie added to the discussion.

"Me too!" Zoey agreed.

When she got the six-year-old settled on the camel, Casanova turned his head and gave Abbey one
long lick up the side of her face.

"If there was ever a Kodak moment..." Jed laughed.

"Got it, Dad!" Ellie held up her camera. "Sorry, Mom."

"You're not forgiven!" Abbey wiped her cheek with the back of her hand.

"Casanova's affectionate." Youssef looked on, amused.

"Then he was appropriately named." Jed began to mount his own camel, so wrapped up in Abbey's response to Casanova that he didn't notice Lawrence turn his head and attempt to bite him. Only when he felt the first prick of teeth did he yell, "What the hell!"

"He won't hurt you," Youssef assured him. "Lawrence enjoys scaring those he doesn't like."

"Why wouldn't he like me?"

"Oh, I don't know," Abbey started as she strode over to Jed. "Maybe because you made fun of his name?"

"That would imply he understands what I said."

"They can sense hostility and criticism, Jed." She soothingly ran her hands over Lawrence's back to calm him before she mounted.

"How do you know that?"

A grinning Liz jumped in for another jab at her father. "You mean among all the useless trivia you've collected over the years, Dad, you never learned anything about camels?"

Jed scowled at her. "Just because we take you up the mountain, little girl, doesn't mean we have to bring you back down.

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It was one in the afternoon when they finally began their ascent. Most of the other tourists started the climb in the middle of the night or the late afternoon so they could reach the summit for sunrise or sunset, but the Bartlets wanted to avoid the crowds on the hike up the narrow cleft and chose a time when the trails would be mostly deserted. Their strategy paid off. Except for some stragglers here and there, they were alone on the mountainside, taking in the awe-inspiring setting as their camels braved the meandering path. The wind hummed through the desert and their chatter was the only noise that cut through it.

By three o'clock, Ellie and Zoey were bickering and Jed's leg had fallen asleep thanks to Lawrence's constant swaying. They were all ready for a break, just as Youssef had predicted, so he led the way a little further toward one of the many Bedouin camps on the mountain. Lizzie followed first, then Ellie and Zoey, and finally, Jed and Abbey. They arrived at the camp to find the tribe greeting them with a feast of fresh vegetable salad, chicken, rice, and a side of warm, crisp pita bread and a dip of cucumber yogurt. It was then they realized that this had been pre-arranged by Youssef, who knew the tribesmen.

"Abu el Banat," Youssef introduced Jed when he dismounted his camel.

The other camels all kneeled by the edge of the camp and everyone climbed off as the Bedouins
approached, their hands outstretched to welcome them with a handshake. The women wore their usual garb - loose-fitting black robes and black scarves that covered the head and throat. They recruited Abbey and the girls to their side of a table they had draped with a red and white checkered cloth while the men guided Jed to the head of table.

'Abu el Banat' is what Youssef had called him. The Bedouins had laughed good-naturedly. Before they ate, they made a toast in Arabic in honor of the whole family, then invited them to dive right in to the meal. There was a slight language barrier, but because of their interactions with American and British tourists over the years, the tribe had a good command of conversational English, enough so that Jed was able to carry on a discussion with the men about the way of life in the desert, Abbey spoke with a couple of the women about the benefits of herbal medicine, Ellie and Zoey both managed to communicate with girls their own age, and Lizzie learned about the use of flowers and plants in everyday Bedouin life, not just for nutrition but also for things like body art and hair dye.

The whole time they dined, the tribe showered the Bartlets with the hospitality they were known for in the Sinai, and after lunch, they served tea. It wasn't the ordinary American tea Jed and Abbey were used to drinking, but a traditional Bedouin tea made of classic desert herbs and tea leaf with sugar. Soon, it was time for the Bartlets to continue their trek up the mountain. They said their goodbyes and the Bedouins welcomed them back if they needed a place to relax on the way down. The girls prepared to mount their camels as Jed attempted to pay for the meal and the tea. His money was denied by the Bedouins, even after he insisted.

Touched by their generosity, Jed thanked them once more, then headed over to the camels to join Youssef, Abbey, and the girls.

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At the natural amphitheater, a small mountain oasis sat in the barren slopes, catching Ellie's attention immediately. The camel trail intersected the Steps of Repentance and the Bartlets left their camels to hike the short distance to the summit. The steps were narrow and steep, too big a climb for Zoey, whose little legs were tired. But when Jed reminded her that they were following in the footsteps of Moses, it energized her and she offered to race Ellie to the top. The sisters got into position, ready to take off, when Abbey grabbed both girls by the shoulder.

"Not a chance!" She cautioned them, "Anyone who takes one step ahead of the rest of us has to hold my hand for the rest of the day."

A sly grin on his face, Jed lunged forward then, his innocent eyes flirting with her when he turned back for his reprimand.

"Unless of course you're Daddy," Abbey went on. "In which case, you get to carry my bags instead."

"No fair changing the rules mid-game!"

They passed by a tea stand set up by a local Bedouin family. It was chilly, even with the layers of clothing they wore, and everyone agreed it was time for another break. Youssef approached the stand with Jed, introducing him to the patriarch as 'Abu el Banat.' Just like at the camp, the Bedouin and Youssef exchanged a laugh before Jed took his tea.

"What does that mean?" Ellie asked her mother as they stood to the side. "Abu el Banat. What does it mean?"
"It's just their way of greeting other men," Abbey told her. She knew exactly what it meant and she wasn't fond of the implication, which is why she wasn't about to explain it to her daughter then and there.

At the stand, Jed pulled out his wallet, but the Bedouin shook his head. Youssef assured Jed it was fine and they turned toward Abbey and the girls to continue up the steps.

They reached the summit around five o'clock. Another group of Bedouins manned the stalls and small shops that were set up for tourists. A tour group could be heard climbing the trails in the distance, but for a few precious minutes, the Bartlets had the mountaintop to themselves. They stood at the rim, the furthest that one could go without the danger of falling. This was it, the sacred ground they had all read about. 'Jebel Musa,' it was known in Arabic. The "Mountain of Moses."

Abbey and the girls explored the area while Jed remained frozen in reflection at the edge of the mountain. He looked out into the distance, the hum of the wind the only sound he heard. His eyes didn't focus on anything in particular. The sun started to set, throwing gold tones on the rugged maroon peaks that rose toward the sky. It was the most beautiful sight he had ever seen, the most peaceful place he had ever been.

A few feet away, a chapel marked the spot where Moses received the Commandments. From there, Abbey noticed Jed lost in his daze. She walked over and quietly stood beside her husband, careful not to startle him.

"'Pass before the people and take with you some of the elders of Israel.'" He began to recite Exodus 17 when he felt her near him. "'And take in your hand your staff with which you struck the Nile, and go.'"

He continued, but this time, Abbey joined him and they quoted the next verse together.

"'Behold, I will stand before you there on the rock at Horeb; and you shall strike the rock, and water will come out of it, that the people may drink.'"

Husband and wife gazed at each other for several seconds after they finished.

"I feel such peace looking out from here," Jed said. "Those verses don't explain whether or not Moses enjoyed the same peace. It's hard to believe he could, considering the enormous burden he carried on his shoulders leading his people into the wilderness on nothing but faith."

"His faith was strong."

"What an awesome responsibility. To have the fate, the very existence of his nation on his conscience."

"The trust he had in God, his people had in him," Abbey returned. "That was the essence of his strength, wasn't it?"

He smiled in agreement and put out his hand to her. Hands joined, their eyes swept the craggy silhouette of the mountains.

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The sunny sky faded into dusk with a beautiful navy hue. Soon after, it became dark, but not the kind of dark the Bartlets were used to in New Hampshire. It was even darker here. Blacker. The stars were out in full-force, to Ellie's delight. She always had a great love of astronomy. She remembered looking out at the stars at home with the telescope Jed had bought her. She hadn't
done much stargazing since the shuttle explosion, but when darkness fell that evening and she stared up at the glittery sky, it was like she was back at the farm, relaxed and comfortable, long before that terrible January day stole her innocence and security in the world.

A crescent moon shined down on Mount Sinai where the family spent the night. It was their last night in Egypt and the girls had asked to see their final sunrise from the summit and so, Jed and Abbey bought some blankets and sleeping bags from the Bedouins and decided to cancel their reservations at the lodge in the foothills in favor of camping out at the top of the mountain. At midnight, when Liz was fast asleep and Abbey was putting Zoey to bed, Ellie pulled out the binoculars she carried with her and listened as Jed guided her.

"Right over there, do you see it?"

"Not really."

Jed took the binoculars from her. "I swear you could see it a minute ago."

The stillness of the desert served as the backdrop for the most amazing cluster of stars Ellie had ever seen, but she had no idea what she was looking at.

"Dad?" she asked. "Do you know what you're talking about?"

He narrowed his eyes at her, then admitted as he handed back the binoculars, "No, not really. If I had known you'd want to star-gaze, I would have come prepared."

"Are the stars here that different from the stars back home?"

"They're more visible. Can't you tell?"

"I bet the Bedouins know all about the stars we can see from here. Can we ask them?"

Abbey watched father and daughter interact, her heart warmed by the scene. Jed claimed he didn't understand Ellie, but she couldn't help thinking that sometimes, he understood her better than anyone else. After all, he was the one who predicted that Ellie would have such a hard time accepting the shuttle tragedy. Within days of the accident, he'd told Abbey that she would isolate herself and live in her own fears. He was right, she did do that. But now, it looked as if she was healing. She was slowly becoming the Ellie they had raised and loved for eleven years, and it was fitting that just as she was closing the book on the Challenger explosion, she was reclaiming the hobby she shared with Jed.

"It's late," Abbey reminded them with her interruption. "Everyone's gone or asleep."

"Mom's right. Sorry, Ellie." Jed was just as disappointed as she was. "Next time we come back here, we'll find a Bedouin to teach us all about the stars."

"Are we really gonna come back?"

"Sure, if you want to. Do you?"

"Yeah!" Ellie beamed. "When?"

"That's a discussion for some other time." Abbey gave her a kiss to the forehead. "You should go to bed, sweetheart. We have to get an early start in the morning if we want to catch our flight."

"Night, princess."

Abbey waited for her to duck into the tent they set up and then addressed her husband. "Quite a switch, huh?"

"She's coming around," Jed agreed happily.

"You have a way with her, you know that?"

"Come on."

"I mean it, Jed. You may not see it, but I do."

Sitting down, Jed invited Abbey to sit in front of him and lean back against his frame.

"They call me Abu el Banat," he said as she got comfortable. "The Bedouins."

"I've noticed."

"They won't let me pay for tea."

"I noticed that too."

"In Arabic, Abu el Banat means 'father of daughters.'"

"I know," Abbey replied. "And they laugh when they say it."

"Daughters are a lot of work is what they mean. They have no idea."

"Of what?"

He embraced her tighter and said, "That I couldn't be prouder of that title."

They sat quietly for a while, enjoying the peace they found in each others company and in their wondrous surroundings that final night in Egypt.

The End

To be continued in The Candidate's Daughter

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