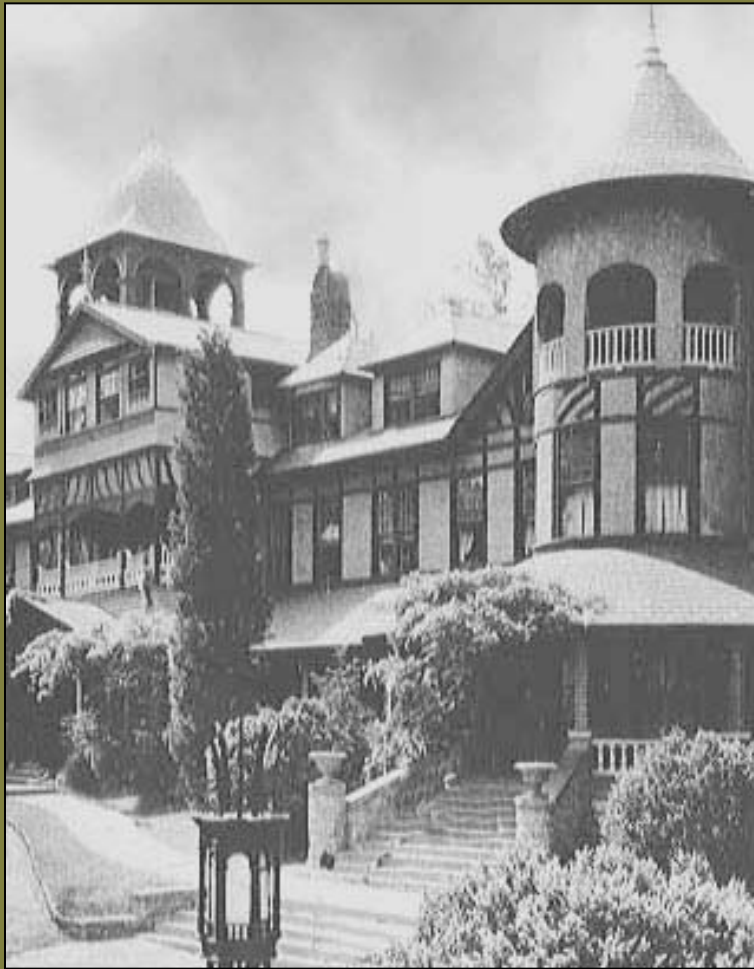


THE SEMINARY

By Les
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Thank you, Skye, for being my beta reader. Your response was overwhelming. Thank you, Doc II for doing the Combat Journals—they are an inspiration. The seminary (Walter Reed Annex) is a real place, although I took a few liberties here and there. Thank you to ABC, who owns Combat!, for letting us play with the guys, not for money but simply to continue the stories.



He stopped at the top of the hill and leaned against a large white oak growing on the edge of the old path. The pavement buckled up slightly near the tree. He estimated the tree at 100 years, and wondered whether the original builders had expected both the tree and their walkway to be there fifty years later.

It had been much tougher than he'd counted on. The nurses, male and female, the doctors, and especially the PT instructors, all had encouraged him to take walks for exercise. So, he'd set out to show how fit he was. He'd overestimated his strength and underestimated the difficulty of the trip. The gorge was deeper and, the path steeper going into and coming out of it than he'd expected. It was a warm fall day—yellow and red trees, blue sky, and a hot, bright sun. Now he was exhausted, and he still had to make it back somehow. He sighed and heaved himself off the tree and continued up the path.

His long legs used to stride easily, but now his left hip was stiff and would not move freely. They said walking might loosen it up. He made his way awkwardly out of the wooded area and across the B & O railroad tracks. The trains went into Washington, D.C. one way and all the way to Chicago, the other. 'Chicago, City of the Big Shoulders,' he thought to himself, and let his mind wander to those he knew out there.

He stopped and looked at the improbable building next to the tracks, on the edge of a parking area. It was a castle, covered with a sparkly, mica filled rock. There were crenulated battlements, two towers with barred windows and strange, decorative stone gates around the lot. There was a small, country store between the castle and a busy two lane road. He headed purposefully for the castle.

When he was closer, he could see the tavern that made up the first floor. The ordinary sash windows of the second story opened onto rooms that, he had heard from other patients, could be rented by the half hour. There were women in the downstairs bar who were also for rent. They were the reason he had come. He climbed the steps to the covered front porch, and stood catching his breath.

He spotted himself in the large plate glass window of the ground floor. Between neon signs advertising beer brands, a thin, dark, almost saturnine face looked back at him. The large green eyes and black hair were the same as always. The right side of his face was still handsome, almost pretty. The left, however, was badly scarred: several nearly parallel red streaks cut across from ear and hairline to the middle of his face. His left eye drooped crookedly, one scar cutting across the lid. The left side of his mouth was ragged with the corner decidedly lower than his right. One of the scars slashed from his left jaw, across his mouth and ended at the point of his nose. Without thinking, he raised his left hand to touch his face, but stopped and shrugged. Once again, he had forgotten that the arm ended above his elbow.

Lt. Hanley started to walk past the window, towards the entrance. He stopped again and looked through the glass at the three women sitting at the bar. One in particular was looking out the window past him into the gravel parking lot. She looked to be in her late thirties, maybe forties. Her dark hair was styled in a flip, her ample and curvy body in a tight, navy, sheath dress. She was smoking a cigarette, exhaling through her nose.

It was her eyes that killed all thought of desire. They were old and tired, exuding bored resignation. He didn't think she would welcome any business. Her face was watching the clock until time to punch out and head home. The slowly recovering soldier was hungry for comfort and intimacy, even if simulated, more than he desired physical release. He shook his head—he would do better on his own than he would disturbing these weary women.

He leaned against one of the porch's stone columns, and closed his eyes. The woman disturbed him more because he felt the way she appeared. His life was a long, dark tunnel, and he was counting the minutes. It was an empty routine of physical therapy, occupational therapy, and psychological therapy. He only got away from the hospital when he took the brown shuttle to Walter Reed's main hospital. He spent his free time in his room or in the small library, avoiding mirrors and shiny surfaces. *Counting the minutes...*

He looked back at the path leading to the foot bridge which was a sweet, fancy Victorian artifice. The gorge was deep and cool, smelling of wood and water. It was so peaceful, so beautiful. The large rocks in the creek thirty feet below could make a quick, definitive end to a dive.

He shook off the thought, although he'd had more and more like it lately. He had come through so much, was he going to throw it all away? Finish the job? On account of vanity? He remembered something about everything being as ashes in the mouth. That was how it felt: all was dry and dead,

joyless and gray. It had been so from the moment the detouring jeep had tripped the mine. He was standing on the roadside, talking with a young soldier, newly arrived from the States. In an instant, the kid was dead, and he, broken. He would never dazzle a pretty girl again, see admiring smiles from across a room, or feel the absolute power of his incandescent smile.

He had been so close to making it home intact. V-E Day meant that it was over. None of them believed they'd go to Japan, so the underlying, chronic fear seeped away. Then, just when he knew everything was going to be okay, it was all ripped from him. At what point would life be so desolate he could not bear it? Hanley sighed. *Not yet*, he thought. He shivered in spite of the heat. *It could be soon if I don't find a way out.*

So *what now?* His eye fell upon the little store. Its neon signs promised ice cold carbonated beverages. He was hot and thirsty. He forced his hip to obey, and he headed over—down the stone steps, across the sunny gravel, and up the wooden steps of the store. He moved steadily, if slowly. There were chairs on the small porch, including a metal glider. He could rest before heading back. He was uneasy about facing the drop off the bridge while in this mood.

Just then, a kid rode up on rusty, green and chrome bicycle. He noticed it was a girl in spite of the bike's crossbar. She slammed on the coaster brakes and slid the rear of the bike around, sending up a spray of gravel in his direction while putting her foot down just in time to keep from falling. After swinging the other leg over the seat, she looked up and realized he was there.

"I'm sorry," she said, "Did I hit you?"

He braced himself for her recoil. It didn't come. She looked at his face, glanced at his left arm, and dismissed them. She smiled apologetically.

"No, you just missed me."

"Oh, well, give me a minute. I'll try again and see if I can actually make contact."

This time he smiled, and watched as she straightened the bike and put down the kickstand. It squawked loudly in protest. She bounded up onto the porch so that the two of them reached the door at the same time. She extended her right hand and bowed.

"Usually, the gentleman opens the door for the lady," he said.

"Everyone tells me to respect my elders." She pulled the screen door open for him. The spring had a tight, rusty sound.

He laughed and went in. She followed, and the door slammed behind her. The store was dim and smelled of ice and sawdust. In one corner, there was a chest pop machine. Hanley walked over. The different flavors were in giant slots, the bottles hanging by the necks, half submerged in dark water with smooth hunks of ice bobbing about. Hanley put in a dime. He grabbed a bottle of ginger ale by the top and slid the bottle over to the coin operated gate. There was a shelf just above and he had trouble getting the necessary leverage with his right hand. He pulled the bottle up, but the gate only moved part way. He was stuck.

"My aunt once told me that I shouldn't offer help to a handicapped person, just give them lots of room, and wait for them to ask for help if they need it."

Hanley turned his head to look at her standing next to him.

"But, I get the feeling that you haven't been handicapped very long, and maybe you don't know about the asking part." She waited.

He waited for a moment.

"The man who put that in was left handed. The gate mechanism doesn't work quite right. It's really hard to open. Don't let the bottle back down, or you'll have to pay again."

"Thanks for the advice." He pulled harder on the bottle, but the angle was wrong, and nothing moved. "Uh...do you think you could help me?"

"Sure." She moved around him and unflinchingly slid her left hand between his stump and his ribs and seized the neck of the bottle below his hand. He let go and stepped back. She grabbed the top with her other hand and heaved with both. The bottle came up, opening the gate. She triumphantly handed him the bottle. He took it with a deep bow.

"Thanks. Can I buy you a bottle of pop?"

She brandished a nickel. "No, thank you, I'm getting a Popsicle." She rummaged in a nearby chest freezer.

He nodded, and then used the bottle opener on the side of the cooler. He heard the chink as the cap fell down inside. He saluted her with the bottle and went outside onto the porch. He sat heavily in one of the chairs, and took a long pull on the bottle.

Moments later, the girl came out and sat on the glider, and pushed rhythmically with her toes. She held up a cherry Popsicle. "Would you like half?"

He shook his head. "No, thanks, the soda pop is all I want."

She unwrapped the Popsicle and started sucking on it. The two sat companionably on the porch. He looked at her surreptitiously. She was what they called a big girl, not exactly fat, but *zaftig* and quite tall. Her hair was light brown and braided. She wore a large green flannel shirt and a pair of boy's dungarees. Hand me downs, he guessed.

"So, what does your aunt know about being handicapped?"

"She's had multiple sclerosis for twenty years." The girl turned and looked at him straight on.

"Does it hurt?"

"What?"

"Your arm, does it hurt?"

"Naaah, but the hand does, sometimes."

"How?" She was intrigued.

"It's called ghost pain. I can feel my fingers and my thumb sometimes."

"How can that be?"

"Well, how do you think?"

She thought a minute, frowning at the frozen red confection.

He gave a hint. "How do you know what your hand feels?"

"Well, the nerves in my fingers send a message to my brain."

He nodded encouragingly.

"Oh." Comprehension lit her features. "The nerves in your arm carry the wrong information to your brain?"

"That's about it."

"Must be frustrating when it tells you that it hurts. You can't make it feel better by rubbing it or anything."

"It is...very."

"So, were you in Europe?"

"Italy, England, France, Belgium, Germany."

"You're a lieutenant, right?"

"Yep. I had a platoon."

"How'd it happen?"

"I was standing with some of my men alongside a road. A jeep drove off the road to avoid a pot hole and hit a mine."

His mind slid back to the moment. Hot pain in sharp flashes struck his left side from his hip to his hair. Blood poured down from his face onto his jacket; deep gashes in his side and hip bled less dramatically but more dangerously. He had looked down, oddly unemotional, at his forearm on the ground. Then, his legs buckled slowly. It seemed to take forever to collapse onto the ground.

Meanwhile, the soldiers around him, his first squad, efficiently laid him out, and worked to staunch the bleeding.

Bandages, the white bulky, gauzy bandages, had appeared out of nowhere. God knows where they had been—the men didn't carry their first aid kits regularly any more. Doc, their medic, had checked the jeep's driver and the replacement, both of whom were dead, and then worked on him until all the bleeding was checked and the wounds were neatly bound. A stretcher and another jeep quickly materialized, and they loaded him up quickly.

"Wait," he had commanded, "Saunders, get my watch and the rings, would you?"

His sergeant had obeyed without hesitation and put the jewelry on his CO's right hand. There were no snappy jokes about 'million dollar wounds' as there would have been a month before, but there were cheerful reassurances.



"I seen much worse, Lieutenant, you've nuttin' to worry about."

"Couldn't you wait to get home, Lieutenant?"

"We'll get you to the hospital right away, Lieutenant. You're going to be all right."

Doc had stayed with him until they took him to the operating room. Hanley had a quick glimpse of the medic and his first squad later when he was moved from recovery and loaded into an ambulance, sending him off to London. The men exchanged quick waves, and that was that.

"Did you get a Purple Heart?"

"Not for this wound. It happened after the Germans surrendered."

"Doesn't seem fair."

"No, I guess it wasn't. Doesn't matter, though; I already had a couple."

"You have any other medals?"

"Bronze star, bunch of ribbons. They don't mean a lot. So many other men deserved medals, and never got them."

"Did you deserve them?"

"Yes, I think so."

They sat in silence again for a couple minutes. The cars passing on the nearby road and the creak of the glider were the only sounds.

"When'd you go over?"

"I was in Italy for a year, and then landed on Omaha Beach on D-Day."

"You were in a rifle company?"

"Yes. Your family in the Army?"

"No, but two thirds of my Girl Scout troop are Army Brats. So's about a third of my class at school. I learned a lot about it during the War."

"You go to the school over by the railroad tracks?"

"Uh huh. My little brother's in kindergarten. My older brothers went there, too."

"No sisters?" Hanley wasn't surprised, judging by her vehicle and apparel.

"I'm the only girl. My parents thought I'd be a boy. My father was one of five brothers, and most of them had boys, too."

"How come you're not in school today?"

"It's closed for teachers' meetings."

"You're not playing with the other kids?"

"I live on a Catholic street. The neighbor kids go to parochial school, and they're open." She sighed. "It's just one day, and I like being by myself sometimes."

"How old are you?"

"Twelve."

"Sixth grade?"

"Yep. I'm on the safety patrol."

"I bet you're good."

"I'm one of the best. Mrs. August said they'd have made me an officer, except I'm a girl."

"That doesn't seem fair."

She looked at him sideways, appreciating his perception.

"There'll be girl officers someday. Even the WACs are still new. Some things take time."

"My mother didn't get a promotion because Mr. Aument, a man she trained, got it. They told her that a woman can always get married and have someone take care of her, but a man has to be able to support a family."

"Your mother works?"

"Yeah, in a bank. She's thinking about working for the Federal Government. She thinks they'll be more fair because of the Civil Service. This is the second man she's trained who was promoted over her." She turned and looked at Hanley, indignation shining from her face. "She has to support a family, and nobody's lining up to marry her. She needs a promotion more than Mr. Aument. He doesn't have a family—he's not even engaged!"



"What about your father?"

"They're divorced. He drinks." She screwed up her face trying to remember the term. "He's an alcoholic, and he can't keep a job. They fought all the time."

"He doesn't even help out?"

"No, we don't even know where he is. We've been on our own for three years."

"Where do you live?"

She gestured up the long straight section of Seminary Road. "Up there about three blocks." The road was lined with houses and trees.

"Does your mother let you ride on this busy highway?"

"I'm careful, and I follow all the traffic laws."

Hanley smiled. This self possessed young woman had a quick response for everything, but she hadn't actually answered his question.

"What's it like at the Annex?" She changed the subject to something less risky.

"What do you mean?"

"Living in the seminary?"

"Seminary?"

"Yes, didn't you know? It used to be a girls' seminary before the war, what they call a finishing school. You know what that is?"

"I'm familiar with the term. I went to prep schools. We were always having dances and events with girls' schools."

"Where are you from?"

"Connecticut."

"What are you doing down here? Don't they have Army hospitals in New England?"

What was he doing indeed? He hadn't wanted to go home. His father had made it clear that he wouldn't welcome a maimed son who had enlisted against his wishes. His mother had died while he was overseas. He requested Washington for his rehabilitation partly because he had never spent much time in the capitol. More importantly, he thought he needed time to adjust to his new self without the distractions of friends or family. Now, he wondered if being alone had left him vulnerable to dark and dangerous moods.

"I thought maybe I'd get a chance to see Washington. Have you seen many of the sights?"

"Oh, of course. I've walked up the Washington Monument twice already. I've been everywhere."

"What do you like the best?"

They chatted about this and that monument, the Smithsonian, the Potomac River, and the cherry blossoms.

"When you're walking better, I'd be glad to show you around, if you like. Christmas vacation is a great time to go. Or maybe some weekend."

"That sounds like fun. Would your mother let you go alone with a strange man?"

She thought a minute. "I suppose not, but maybe my brothers would come. Roblin could even drive us down. We know some parking lots we can use when the offices are closed."

"What is your name?"

"Jesse, Jesse Bachman. We spell it with an E, not an IE. Like I said, they figured on a boy, and didn't bother to change the spelling."

"I'm Gil Hanley, Lieutenant Gil Hanley."

"Pleased to meet you, sir." She held out her hand, and they shook. She had a firm grip.

"Pleased to meet you, Jesse."

"Lieutenant, you didn't tell me what it's like in the seminary. I've always loved the buildings. My Girl Scout troop got a tour. It is very interesting architecturally." She pronounced the word carefully.

"You like architecture?"

"Oh, yes, it's art you can live in."

"I'm an architect."

Jesse looked at him disbelieving.

"Honest. I was planning to start a firm with a classmate when the war broke out."

"My mother says they're going to need a lot of houses for the soldiers. They're all starting families." She looked at Hanley. "Well, a lot of them are. I guess some may take a longer."

He smiled and shrugged.

"So, do you like the buildings?"

"Yes, I do. They are quite whimsical."

"Whimsical?"

"That means fun, a little silly."

"Would you like a tour? I could come by on Saturday and show you around the grounds. I mean, you've probably walked around a lot, but I could tell you what everything was. You could tell me about the architecture."

Hanley thought about it. The invitation was fraught with complications. He could think of several reasons why it could be a bad idea. He admitted to himself, though, that he could not resist spending some time with this loquacious and friendly child.

"What time Saturday? I have physical training in the morning."

"I have chores, anyway. I could be here by two o'clock." She hesitated. "I might have to bring my little brother."

"That would be all right."

"If something comes up, and my mother wants me to do something else, can I call you?"

They exchanged phone numbers. Hanley gave the number for the nurse's station closest to his room. Being an officer, he actually had a room instead of being in a ward. He had had a roommate, but he'd been discharged the previous week. The lieutenant actually missed him.

"Why don't we meet at the movie theater?" she suggested. "They might not let me in the hospital."

"Sounds good. I'll look forward to it."

"I guess I better head home." She looked at him with narrowed eyes. "Were you going to walk all the way back?"

He looked around. "Oh! The chauffeur left with the Bentley."

"Bentley?"

"It's an expensive British car."

"Like a Rolls?"

He smiled. The Rolls Royce people would've been pleased. "Yes."

She finally got the joke and laughed. "Would you like a ride?"

"On the bike?"

"Yep. You could sit on the seat and I could pedal standing up. I do it all the time with my friends. That would work better than your riding on the handlebars."

"I'm a lot larger than your friends."

"Well, even if I can't get you back up the hill, you would still be half way there. Riding downhill is a lot easier on a bike, but when you're walking, it doesn't make a lot of difference."

What the hell, he thought. *It'll get me past the temptation of the gorge*. Although, it wasn't the lure that it had been, not now.

"Well, let's give it a try. You sure it won't make you late getting home?"

"Yeah, I'm sure."

She hopped to her feet and tossed the Popsicle sticks and wrapper into the nearby trash can. Hanley took his bottle inside and put it with the empties near the pop machine. By the time he was outside, she had the bike ready. She stood on the left side, holding it by the handlebars. The bike was too big for her, but she handled it well. He stepped over the bike and found he could sit on the seat with his feet flat on the ground and knees bent comfortably. He braced the bike while she worked her leg over the cross brace and stood on the pedals.

"Ready?" he asked.

"Ready!"

He shoved off with his feet and picked them up as she started to pedal. He sensed her surprise at his weight. He held on to her waist and felt her work hard to get the bike moving. She was stronger than he expected. He gave another push with both feet and the bike really took off. She pedaled furiously. They went bumpily across the parking lot, and bounced across the railroad crossing. They were moving very fast and she leaned the bike into the turn onto the footpath leading down the hill. Their speed increased.

Suddenly, when faced with possible death by bicycle, Hanley knew that he did not want to die. He wanted to live with every fiber of his being. They flew down the hill and bumped onto the bridge. There was a wiggle, but she kept the bike heading straight. The fussy railings flashed by. The cool air over the gorge breezed across his sweaty face. His quadriceps ached from holding up his feet. She pumped as fast as she could to keep up their momentum. They thumped off the bridge and charged up the hill.

About a third of the way up, they slowed. She used her weight, pulling on the handlebars to force herself down on the pedals. Half way up, they were down to a crawl and started to wobble. Hanley felt the bike tip so he put his feet down and stood up. The bike slid out from under him, instantly moving faster. She stood on the brake and stopped about ten feet away. Jesse planted her right foot. Holding the bike up by the handlebars, her left foot resting on the pedal, she turned and grinned at him.

"Wow, we got farther than I thought we would!"

Hanley grinned back, "That was quite a ride. That old bike does pretty well for itself."

"It does, although, it's a little heavy. And the chain slips off easily. The sprockets are awfully worn, and the crank... Well, it's seen a lot of use."

"Thanks for the lift. I won't have any trouble getting back from here."

"I'll head on home, then." She turned the bike around. "See you Saturday!"

"Sure thing." He stood near the bike, noticing the worn seat and rust on the fenders and frame. "Be careful riding home."

"Always, Lieutenant." She turned the bike around, hopped up on it, and pushed off. Down the hill she went, building up speed for the other side.

Hanley stood and watched her attack the bridge with the same ferocity as before and conquer the hill easily. At the top, she turned and waved, and she was gone. The lieutenant stood for a while, suddenly aware of an odd lightness in his heart.



That Saturday afternoon was enchantment itself. She arrived at two with brother in tow. Gordy was eight, and looked at Hanley's arm and scars with great interest. He didn't say anything to the lieutenant except a quiet, "Pleased to meetcha," but he would whisper shyly in Jesse's ear. She was careful to include him as much as possible in conversations, and find diversions for him. At one point, while crossing a wide open lawn, the three tossed a tennis ball around while discussing the nearby chapel, one of the oldest parts of the complex.

They started at the post theater admiring the rococo decorations. Then the trio wandered about from one oddity to the next: caryatids, medieval chapel, Japanese pagoda, Tudor castle, Greek temple, Dutch windmill and Swiss chalet. Gordy climbed all over lions, urns and other Greek style statuary. Hanley dug into his memories of architectural history lectures. They talked about symmetry, balance, symbolism and building materials. The little group ended up at the ballroom, a huge, cavernous, wooden beamed room.

"I can just imagine beautiful girls in long dresses waltzing with their handsome boyfriends." Jesse danced across the polished floor with an exaggerated $\frac{3}{4}$ rhythm.

Her brother raced around the edges of the room, his high whoops echoing off the walls. Hanley smiled at the two who ended up playing a kind of tag across the space. A couple of enlisted men came in with chairs.

"Excuse us, Lieutenant; we have to set up for the talk tonight."

"We're just looking at the architecture. We'll be gone in a couple of minutes."

Outside, they got something to drink at the PX, and wandered down to the ornate footbridge. The three dropped small rocks and sticks off the bridge and watched the splashes in the creek far below.

"Lieutenant, if you're an architect, you know a lot about math and science, right?"

"Math, physics, engineering, that sort of thing. I also know a little about landscaping."

"Would you be willing to help me with my math? I can't get help from my teacher."

"You have trouble with math?"

"I'm in the top math group in my class, but I'd like a little help with more advanced stuff."

"Why don't you come by after school? I could help you with your homework, unless you have other obligations."



"I can take the school bus here. Gordy goes to a neighbor's house after school so I can have time to do my homework."

"You check with your mother and make sure that it's okay with her."

Jesse nodded enthusiastically. Then, she and her brother left for home.

Hanley sat on a nearby stone bench. He looked around the campus of the Walter Reed Annex as if he had never seen it. He visualized young women giggling and making their way from one class to another. Utilitarian, temporary Army construction intruded on the image, but the grace and magic of the place still held.



That week was the beginning of a regular routine. She came over three afternoons, the other two being Girl Scouts and piano lessons. They met in the post library. She brought all her books plus two extra math books: trig and algebra 2. He raised his eyebrows at such material in the sixth grade.

"It's the advanced group."

"Well, what other homework do you have?"

"Can't we do the math first?"

"No, with homework, you should start with the part you don't want to do. Save the stuff you like for last. So, what do you hate to work on?"

"Math."

Hanley gave her his best displeased officer look: narrowed eyes, mouth set in a hard scowl as he leaned back in his chair with folded arms. Jesse bowed meekly, and handed him her spelling list. He looked at it and returned it to her. She sighed, and then wrote each word five times with definitions, plus a paragraph using each word at least once. Meanwhile, the lieutenant looked over her list of other assignments. For the most part, they were easy for her, but they enjoyed talking over and polishing her answers to perfection. It was another hour before they were ready to tackle math.

They worked their way through both books. Occasionally, he had to review basic algebra, but she picked it up very quickly. They would read a new section, and then try the problems. Often, they both did them and compared their answers. Sometimes, Hanley would explain a tricky concept or show her a shortcut. Once he gave her a slide rule and showed her how to use it. Then, he made her explain how it worked. At the end of their sessions, Jesse would pack up and walk home in time to pick up her brother, and fix dinner for the family.

The librarians and volunteers watched the unlikely pair working together. The lieutenant had come in previously alone, sitting and reading desultorily in a back corner. Like many other patients at the Annex, fear and despair had emanated from him in a dark cloud. The change in his personality had been dramatic. One afternoon, his therapist slipped in quietly and watched his transformed patient. Everyone who worked with the lieutenant had told him about the change. He had started to care and made a real effort instead of going through the motions.

Jesse got a report card at the end of November. It was all A's except for handwriting. As a southpaw, she had resigned herself to less than perfect penmanship. Even so, they were both very proud of her marks.

"You need to practice writing. You can write more neatly if you take the time. Maybe you should make more of an effort when you practice your spelling."

Jesse rolled her eyes.

"Have you ever heard of calligraphy?" Hanley showed her some fancy letters, and she tried writing the words in the style. Pretty soon, the doodles all over her notebook and scratch papers reflected the new interest. Mrs. August even commented on the improvement in the appearance of her work.

One afternoon, they were sitting on a bench outside the library. It was sunny and warm for December, even for Maryland. They had finished her school work a little early, and were talking idly. Hanley stared off at a distant building, and spoke quietly, "Jesse, I want to ask you something. And I want you to be perfectly honest. Can you do that?"

There was a pause. "Sure."

He took a deep breath. "Am I scary?"

"Like frightening little children scary?"

"Yeah."

She got up and stood in front of him, and bent down a few inches until her face was level with his. She peered closely at his face. She moved slowly and looked at both sides. Hanley had trouble keeping still during her scrutiny. Jesse stared deeply into his eyes for a very long moment.

Then she straightened up. "Yeah, you are scary, especially when you're mad, and your face twists up. But I bet you were angry scary even before you were hurt."

Hanley smiled. "I think you're right about that. I know I frightened some of the men in my platoon."

"You're a lot like Two Face, you know, the villain in the detective comics. Your right side is perfect, but your left side is, I dunno, kinda ugly, but not disgusting. Your left eye is droopy. So is the left side of your mouth." She tilted her head, "Have you ever noticed that they don't look as bad when you smile?"

Hanley shook his head.

"It's true, you look ten times better." She screwed up her face in thought. "I think part of it's the scars, well, they look like they hurt a lot. And you were really handsome. It's like seeing a beautiful painting that's ripped up. It bothered me at first, but I got used to it." Jesse sat down and stared straight ahead. "You want to know if girls or, um, women, can like you, right?"

Embarrassed, the man reluctantly nodded. *Why am I asking a twelve year old this?* With the thought, he had the answer. She was old enough to understand what he wanted to know, and young enough to be brutally honest. She wouldn't sugar coat it the way an adult would.

"Rob, my oldest brother, had a bunch of zits before Homecoming. He was sure no one would go with him." She looked at him. "Mom said he couldn't do anything about how a girl felt when she first saw him, but he could help her see beyond the pimples. Besides, if a girl didn't like him just because of that, then she wasn't someone he'd like anyway. Mom said it could save him a lot of time and trouble."

Jesse drew her knees up to her chest, resting her feet on the edge of the bench. She didn't look at Hanley. "I've remembered that because, well, I'm, uh, I'm fat. Always have been. The kids used to make fun of me, but I never let on that it bothered me, so they stopped. When I meet people, I can see that most have ideas about me. I can't help that. But, if they give me a chance, they learn that I'm not lazy, I'm smart, and I can be a good friend. I have to give people time to get to know me. Then, if they still don't like me, well." She shrugged. "It's a quick way to, I dunno, sort people."

The precocious girl put her feet down and turned towards her friend. "You don't look like everyone else. You're handsome, in a way, kind of dashing, especially when you're talking or being funny or doing something you like. But, I think that when you meet people, you'll have to give 'em a little time to get used to you. If they can't, well, then you know you don't have to worry about them." She paused. "Is that what you wanted to know?"

"Yeah, thanks, I guess."

"You're welcome." She gathered her stuff up and, with a wave to the librarians, went home.

Hanley lay awake for a long time that night, thinking about their conversation. *I am scary, kinda ugly, but not disgusting. I look better when I smile. When I meet people, they'll need time to get used to it. I'll have to be patient.*



At a Girl Scout meeting, Jesse suggested that the troop do something for the patients at the nearby Annex for Christmas rather than serenading the residents of a local nursing home.

"But they're amputees!" protested Amy, a sensitive, shy girl.

"Yeah, it's kind of icky at first," answered Jesse. "But that's why they need us. And, you get used to it." Jesse looked thoughtful. "I have a friend. He's a lieutenant, and he lost his arm in the war. It bothered me for a while. Maybe he could come and talk to us about how it feels."

Mrs. Coach the troop leader said, "That is what makes a very good deed. You do something that helps someone, even if it is difficult."

So, a week later, Hanley steeled himself and faced the dozen 12 year old girls. He turned so they could see the good side and then turned to show the bad. The girls sat completely silent.

He sighed. "Go ahead, I know you have questions. Ask me whatever you want."

More silence.

"Okay, let me get it started, 'How did it happen?'" He went through a short summary of his service in Europe and the event that maimed him.

"Eewwww. You asked him to get your wristwatch?" Bonnie couldn't help the comment.

"Why not? It was an expensive watch, and I could still use it on my right arm." He held up his wrist and showed them the watch. He spread his hand to show the rings. "This was a present." He pointed to the pinky ring. "This," pointing to the other, "I got in Germany. It belonged to an SS officer."

There was a murmur of awe. Hanley smiled his most dazzling smile. Several girls sighed. Then hands went up.

"How do you tie your shoes?"

"Do you get stares?"

"How did your family feel?"

"What about your girl friend?"

He answered as simply and honestly as he could. He demonstrated the shoes. Yes, he got stares, but he tried not to let them bother him. "I have to accept that I'm different, and people will be curious." He explained that his father and he were not close, and he didn't have a girl friend, but his closest friends wrote him often with a lot of encouragement. "I hope to visit them in Chicago when I leave the hospital."

The rest of the afternoon went well. Hanley relaxed, and so did the girls. He saw them get over their awkwardness as he got over his. They were the ideal audience because they couldn't hide their feelings behind politeness the way adults would. With a start, he realized that he still had it. He could still charm and woo—skills that served him well all his life. His talent for leadership was there; it had never deserted him. His abilities to read a group, to change his approach to elicit the desired response, and to plan his next tack all without breaking his verbal stride were undiminished.

The lieutenant skillfully took the girls and their leader through a range of emotions. They laughed; they blinked tears of sadness and sympathy. He evoked some guilt, but led them through it to an understanding of the objects of their pity and themselves as well. Simultaneously, he revealed important truths to himself as well.

"I am still basically the person I was before I was injured. I am changed, physically. I can't do some things the way I used to. I have to learn to live with that. But, it's important to know that a handicapped person is a person first. My fellow patients have families, friends, home towns and interests beyond their injuries. You can help them by focusing on those things. We're trying to learn what parts of our lives have changed and what parts haven't."

At the end of the meeting, they had bug juice and cookies. Hanley was disappointed that they weren't Girl Scout cookies.

"They won't be available until March, Lieutenant," said Mrs. Coach. "I want to thank you for coming. You put the girls at ease, and taught them a lot. I'll contact the hospital and arrange for us to come caroling around Christmas. We'll have cookies and some sort of presents. We used to knit socks for the soldiers during the war. What do you recommend now?"

"They're in a hospital, so magazines, puzzles, cards, things like that are good. If you want to make things, you can still knit socks, but also scarves, hats or mittens. It's winter after all."



Dear Chip,

Well, rehab is going well. I'm making more progress. They might want to operate on my hip again, though. I hope not. I'd be in a wheelchair for a while. That would be tough--with only one arm to push, I'd end up going in circles. They're talking about a prosthesis--I prefer hook--for my arm. It will take a while to get it fitted properly and to teach me how to use it. But I actually care about it now.

I am doing better. I know you were worried about my "state of mind." I could read between the lines of your letters. Hell, I only had to read between the lines of mine.

But things are looking up. I have a girl friend. She's about 5' 6", long brown hair and bright green eyes. She's one of the most talkative people I have ever met. She thinks I'm handsome, "even dashing," and her admiration has done a lot for my morale. I'm trying hard not to rush things, but I'm thinking about getting her an expensive Christmas present--probably a new bicycle.

Yeah, she's a friend. She's a kid. She IS doing great things for my morale. We met on a particularly bad day for me. Since then, I haven't really had any, bad days that is.

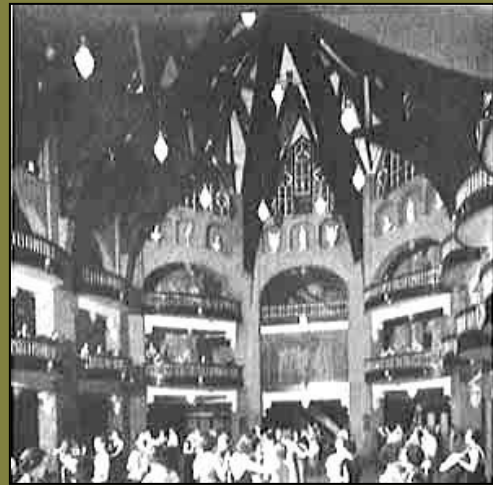
Her name is Jesse. She's 12. I've been tutoring her in math. She gave me a tour of this hospital. It used to be a fancy girls' school. I've told you about the architecture before. She knew the history of the buildings. We shared our knowledge.

She's also a Girl Scout, and her troop has adopted my hospital wing. They came over yesterday and sang Christmas carols to us in the old ballroom. Their troop leader told me that Jesse and Alice, her friend, arranged the music and taught the girls the parts. There was three part harmony. They even did a bit of the Hallelujah chorus. On key! It was a pleasure.

Then, they split up, and each girl buddied up with one of the patients. Each soldier got gifts, homemade cards and a package of decorated cookies. After presents, they played records and, well, danced. The men in the wheelchairs ended up on the floor, being whirled around. The couples didn't dance as well as you and Jeanne, or Doc and Jeanne, more like Littlejohn, but everyone's still smiling two days later.

Recently, we took a bus to downtown Silver Spring to go Christmas shopping. She brought her little brother, Gordy, and the three of us spent the entire Saturday together. We even took Gordy to see Santa. We packaged some things and got them in the mail. Hopefully, they'll arrive in Chicago before the 25th.

Anyway, if you don't get as many letters from me, don't worry. I'm just a lot busier than I was.
Yours,
Gil



It was Wednesday, December 20th when it exploded. They were sitting in the small Post library talking quietly about the winter solstice. Jesse was showing Hanley her illustrations for her report on the cause of the seasons.

"These are really good, did you trace them?"

"No, I drew freehand them from pictures in an encyclopedia."

"Really?"

"Really! I'd never lie to you." She blushed slightly. "I changed the colors, too..."

Hanley leaned back, indulgent, as he listened to her rattle on about her improvements upon the originals. He let her excitement and enthusiasm wash over him as he inserted appropriate noises in the pauses. He savored a perfect moment.

He did not notice the library personnel beaming at the unlikely pair. They had watched him from the beginning. Hanley had been morose and reclusive. Now, he was animated and wise. The librarians, volunteers, and even the men cleaning the floor found reasons to pass by the table. Instead of shushing the two when the laughter got a little loud, they exchanged pleased glances with each other.

Suddenly, there was a loud commotion at the entrance. An angry woman came barging in. Her short brown hair shook; her blue eyes swept the room while she argued loudly with the entrance guard. It was an unequal confrontation. The private was hampered by his politeness. She was powered by a ferocious anger.

"Ma'am, you can't come in without a military ID."

"I am a taxpayer, I have to come in and find my..." She spotted Hanley and Jesse. "She doesn't have an ID, how did she get in here?"

"She's the guest of the lieutenant. Wait! Ma'am, you can't come in here. Ma'am? Ma'am?" He trailed after her helplessly as she strode purposefully across the long room.

Her strident voice carried far. Everyone in the room watched, paralyzed, as she roared, "Jesse! Here you are! I have been searching everywhere! Everywhere! What are you doing here?"

Hanley had started out wondering what this troubled person's problem was. Quickly, he deduced her identity and turned to look at his companion. Jesse had paled and shrank down into her chair. When she glanced guiltily up at Hanley, hurt and anger surged through him.

"You'd never lie to me?" he demanded in a voice heretofore reserved for soldiers freshly returned from being AWOL. "You never even told your mother about me, much less got permission to be here. What were you thinking?"

Jesse's eyes shifted back and forth between the two angry adults.

"I checked at Mrs. Coach's, and she said something about your having a math tutor. Math tutor! You need a math tutor like a chicken needs feathers. I've been driving around looking for you. I only found you because I saw the bike outside..."

"Jesse, don't you realize what people will think if you're sneaking off to see me?"

Her voice trembled, "I don't care what people think."

"Well, I care! I can get into a lot of trouble. What do you think she's thinking about me right now?!"

Jesse's face lost what little color was left when she realized what people might believe.

The disheveled, thirty something woman arrived at their table. "Young lady, what do you have to say for yourself?"

"Mom, let me expl—"

"How dare you lie to me! You know where you're supposed to be! This is unconscionable! I wanted you to pick up Gordy this afternoon. They needed me to work late, but I had to leave early when I couldn't reach you!"

"Mother, please." Jesse's voice had risen in pitch, her face, anguished.

"I have to be able to count on you! I called home, and there was no answer. You have no idea how worried I've been."

"Mother!"

"I'm so mad I could just spit." She looked around the room. "And what the hell are you doing here?"

"Mother, I—"

"And who the hell are you?" Mrs. Bachman turned on Hanley with uncontrolled fury.

"Mrs. Bachman, I'm—"

A crescendo, "And what exactly have you been doing with my daughter?"

"Mrs. Bach—"

"Mom!"

A climactic shriek. "And how long has this been going on?" A shouted threat, "I may call the police when we get home, Lieutenant." She grabbed her daughter's arm and pulled her out of the chair.

"Mommy! Please! My stuff!"

Her mother did not heed her and dragged the now weeping, struggling girl back across the room. A continuous monologue listing all the frustrations and woes of the single parent spewed out in their wake, punctuated with agonized pleas for a chance to speak. Hanley numbly followed them, unable to comprehend what had happened. One of the librarians gathered up the girl's books and papers and trotted after the exiting pair.

Hanley reached the door in time to see Mrs. Bachman push Jesse into the old prewar sedan parked illegally and haphazardly in front of the library. She grabbed the bicycle and threw it into the large trunk. She was unsuccessful in getting the trunk to close until she had viciously shoved the bike around until it fit. Hanley winced, wondering what damage she had inflicted. Meanwhile, the young sergeant on duty at the library arrived at the passenger's window, and handed Jesse's things to the sobbing girl.

The library personnel, other patrons and Lt. Hanley watched in silence as the furious parent stormed around the car, got inside, started it and spun the wheels as she took off.

The resulting silence held them all for at least a minute. Most of the witnesses to this near violent drama quietly returned to what they had been doing. None looked at the one armed lieutenant who stood at the door lost in incoherent thoughts. After a very long time, he turned slowly and looked back at their empty table. His eyes wandered slowly around the cozy library, taking in the cheery Christmas decorations. He idly wondered whether they followed specific regs or some staff member just put them up. His mind refused to examine what had just happened.

He found his coat and hat on the rack by the door and got into them. He moved carefully, as if his head could roll off. He opened the door and went outside. About halfway between the library and his room, he sat on one of the ornate, cement benches. He had to think.

What was Jesse's mother going to do? Would she call the police? What would that mean for him? He shook his head. This was absurd. At some point the woman had to let her daughter speak. It

would be obvious that nothing untoward had happened between them. *How could the little fool have lied like that? I should have actually spoken with her mother.* If he had, this would never have happened. He'd been a kid; he knew children lied to their parents when it suited them. *But not about important things, not about something like this.* She didn't know about the dangers. He'd seen her face change when she'd realized what her mother, what others, might suspect.

What about the Girl Scout Troop? Would he still be welcome there? He'd planned to help some of the girls with the architecture merit badge. He shrugged. He'd assume it was still in the works unless Mrs. Coach called him. His thoughts settled on the hardest place. *Would he ever see her again? Did he want to?* She had lied to him. She had lied to her mother. It would be hard to trust her again. *Who am I kidding? I miss her already.* He had known they would part, eventually, when he was discharged. They had discussed his ultimate plans: a visit with Midwestern friends and then to Boston to join his friend's firm. *I don't want it to end now, not this way. What will happen to her?*

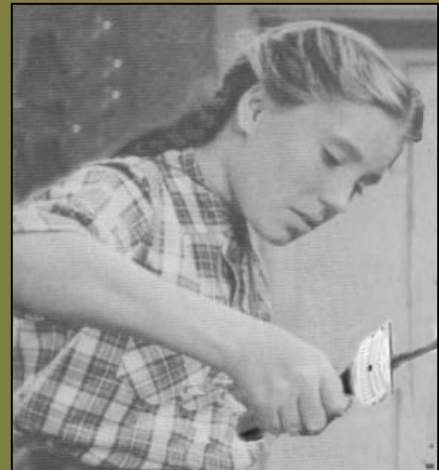
He considered Mrs. Bachman and her daughter. *Will Jess be all right?* She had manhandled her daughter, but hadn't hit her. She was an aggravated, stressed parent. *I've seen her at her worst.* This mother had ears and eyes only for what she thought necessary at the moment. *She's got everything balanced and spinning, running herself ragged like those performers with half a dozen plates.*

He now knew why the girl had attached herself so quickly. *She was starved for attention, for someone who'd listen.* There had been a connection between them, but he had also sensed a longing, and made himself available.

He smiled, remembering her excitement when they'd taken the old bicycle to the tiny motor pool and renovated it. The sergeant had allowed them to use his tools while he worked on a truck and an officer's staff car. Neither adult had done any work. They had instructed and demonstrated. She learned, acquiring skinned knuckles along with knowledge. *It looks brand new, and she was so proud to have done it herself.* It was a better present than buying her one.

She had come a long way. He was proud of how she bloomed under his tutelage. Jesse's self confidence had increased exponentially. She would not have arranged the partnership between the troop and the patients before. *She's not as self conscious about being good at math or her size any more. And how many girls can use a torque wrench?!* If they never met again, he knew there was no going back. She would only continue to build on her new skills.

There's no going back for me either. Even faced with the forced dissolution of their relationship, he didn't revert to his former, self destructive self. Instead, he examined options, made contingency plans and looked to a future. *Thanks, Jesse.*



Two weeks later, he got a phone call.

"Lieutenant Hanley?" The voice had a softer, more southern accent than most in this area.

"This is he."

"This is Betty Bachman, Jesse's mother."

His stomach clenched. "Yes?" he said as neutrally as possible.

"I've had several talks with my daughter, and some time to think about things. I want to apologize for my behavior last week."

He took a moment to breathe and release some tension. "I understand she lied to both of us. She had assured me that she had your permission." He felt compelled to say that at least once.

"You were never a teenager?"

"It was a long time ago. I should have insisted on speaking with you directly. I apologize for not doing that."

"She's been grounded for a month. That means only school, Girl Scouts and church."

"I see."

“You will get a written apology. We had a long discussion about the position in which she put you.”

“Thank you, but that’s not necessary.”

“Yes, it is. She has to think beyond herself. She was prepared to face any punishment, but she was devastated when we discussed what could have happened to you.”

There was a pause. Hanley couldn’t think of what to say.

“Even though she’s grounded,” she paused, “I think it would be all right if her math tutor came to work with her at home. Rob or Chase, her older brothers, or I would have to be around, though.”

“Of course.”

“You have no car?”

“No, ma’am. “

“Rob or I could pick you up. How does this Sunday sound? You could come for dinner.”

He was having trouble with the rapid changes. “Uh, yes, that sounds fine.”

The two worked out details and times, and Hanley hung up the phone, stunned.



Lt. Hanley leaned back in his chair, debating whether or not to surreptitiously loosen his belt. The fried chicken, mashed potatoes, gravy, green beans & bacon, salad and apple pie à la mode vied for room. Across the table, a carefully coiffed and made up Mrs. Bachman drank her coffee watching him.

“That was a wonderful dinner.”

“Jesse pulled out all the stops. She even made the pie from scratch.”

“You didn’t cook, Mrs. Bachman?”

“Call me Betty, and no, I don’t really care to.” There was a hint of defiance in her look. “I know how, my traditional mother made sure of that, but I don’t enjoy it.” She looked thoughtful.

“Jesse and Chase, on the other hand, like to cook a lot.”

“I didn’t know that. Jesse and I never talked about recipes. It’s something else we have in common, I guess. When I was younger, I could turn out a mean steak Diane.”

“To impress the debutantes?”

“Crêpes were better for that. They worked for breakfast, too. The steak impressed my college roommates.”

“Harvard? Yale?”

“Princeton.”

She smiled, “University of Maryland.”

The granddaughter of the small town, southern banker and the scion of an old money, New England family exchanged knowing smiles. Each had sized the other up—they were the same age, but from different worlds.

“Lieutenant...”

“Call me Gil.”

“Gilbert?”

He nodded reluctantly, “Call me Gil, please.”

“You know, Gil, she hates to do the dishes. She has a deal with Rob that they exchange cooking for dishwashing.”

“She hopped right up after dessert...”

“She wants us to be alone.” Betty looked at him. “You know, there’s nothing she’d like better than for us to fall in love and you become her stepfather.”

“I hadn’t thought about that.” He looked her in the eye. “I guess it makes sense from her perspective.” *Not half bad*, he thought. *Clear gray eyes, stylish brown hair, good skin, a trim figure. A lot like Lauren Bacall. A little matronly in style, but after all, she’s got four kids...*

“She’s sensible. She’s not counting on it, so don’t feel pressured.” Betty laughed, understanding their awkward situation. *I like him, but what a charmer! He’s coasted on his money and looks all his life.*



Jesse said he was kicked out of a couple of prep schools. He must have studied like hell to get into Princeton. Lotta broken hearts along the way, I bet.

Hanley's coat, copious fruit salad and all, lay on a couch in the neat, modest living room. He had noticed the worn spots in the rug, the frayed upholstery, and the faded paint in the tiny Cape Cod. The kids were scrubbed and dressed up: the boys in nice shirts, Jesse in a skirt. Rob, just eighteen, acutely felt his status as man of the house, and gravely shook the lieutenant's hand when he picked him up. They didn't speak much on the way over.

The dinner conversation had ranged over current events, the end of rationing, the still present shortages, and the children's activities. Chase was excited about his current Scout service project—setting up a tutoring program. Rob, Chase and Hanley discussed Chase's driving lessons. Jesse had been uncharacteristically quiet—watching the lieutenant interact with her family.

The two adults sat and fiddled with their coffee cups, wondering what kind of a relationship would result from this first dinner. The chatter of the three siblings doing the dishes filtered through the closed kitchen door. Jesse's voice rose in protest over the laughter of her brothers. Their mother stiffened slightly, trying to interpret the events. Betty relaxed when her daughter's laughter joined that of the other two. She looked up to see Hanley watching her.

"Lieutenant...Gil, you are a charming and very handsome man, but quite honestly, I'm stretched awfully thin. I've got four very different children: one in college, a new driver, a head strong daughter, and a son just starting grammar school. Each one has a long list of needs. I've a very demanding job, a house with a mortgage, and two unreliable cars. I simply don't have the time or energy to add anything to my long list of things to take care of.

Hanley looked at her speculatively, trying to frame his answer.

Before he could say anything, she blushed, mentally replaying her words. "Please, don't misunderstand me. I only meant that in the sense of a wife looking after a husband."

There was a long pause. Hanley took a deep breath and then said, "Mrs....uh, Betty, I'm not looking for someone to look after me...in any sense. I hope to find someone to share my life with. I want to share everything, good and bad." He swallowed some of the coffee, and then continued, "Jesse doesn't know that I was married briefly before the war."

"Your wife couldn't wait for you?"

His green eyes bored into her. "No, she died. I enlisted shortly after. I couldn't handle the memories."

"I am so sorry."

"I miss the sharing. During the War, I was pretty close to my men. I was an officer, so there was always a separation. But when you're on the line, you get very close, even officers. I miss that." He looked out the side window; his eyes had teared up unexpectedly. He didn't want to give in to the weakness, not in front of this new acquaintance. "There's a lot that I don't want to remember, but those relationships, I'll remember them the rest of my life."

Recovered, he looked again into her gray eyes. "I have had a tough time of it." His face clouded briefly, "A very tough time, but your daughter helped me out of it. She shared herself and her world with me, and it brought me back to life, if you will. I am profoundly grateful for that." He shook his head gently in wonder, "Here I am contemplating dating! Two months ago, I'd've thought that impossible."

"I can only imagine how difficult it has been for you."

"And I can only imagine how difficult it has been to be a single parent. Look, you and I are from completely different worlds. I think it's a little premature to think about getting serious, especially when neither of us is exactly looking."

Betty Bachman gave a genuinely relieved smile. "I'm glad you understand."

"But we do have one important thing in common."

"Jesse."

"Yes," he went on, "I understand that you can use some help, even if temporary. If I may be frank, I see you as someone who doesn't have much fun."

She bristled, but he ignored the body language.

"I like your kids, and I think they like me. What if I come over several afternoons and work with them? I can walk over easily, and take Chase driving. I can continue to work with Jesse, and I can look after Gordy, too."

"You don't have to do that, Gil."

"I'd like to. On a practical level, it would help me get used to a real home again. At the hospital, there's always someone to help me. Here, I can help someone else."

"It's an interesting proposition, but it's a little one sided."

"I know, but I'll try to find other ways to pay you back."

She laughed, "That's not what I meant, and you know it."

He added to the laughter, and then sobered. "You have to understand. That is how I see it. This will help me...a lot. Please, let's give it a chance. As far as you and me, well, first we work at being friends, and see what happens." He gave her his most practiced, his most ingenuous smile.

The laugh was less restrained this time. Then, in a thick drawl, she gushed, "Oh, Lieutenant, how you do go on!" She fanned herself coyly with a napkin.

They spent the next quarter hour going over schedules. The brothers and sister came back into the dining room and happily joined in making plans.

"Mom, are you and the lieutenant gonna go out?" asked Jesse hopefully.

"No, dear, we're just friends. But he needs a chance to be away from the hospital, and we can certainly use the help."



It was spring in Washington, D.C. The cherry blossoms bloomed early, and lost their petals in a wind storm the day after they peaked. It was two weeks before the Cherry Blossom Festival was to begin. The sky was full of torn gray clouds, but the ground around the Tidal Basin was pink and white, the water, gray and choppy. Jesse expected to see some white caps as they drove past.

"It's a good thing we came down Saturday to see the cherry trees. There's nothing left today." Jesse's nose pressed against the window.

"I've always wanted to see them. They were better than I expected. It was a great, farewell expedition." Hanley smiled at the older kids in the back seat. Gordy sat up front between his mother and the lieutenant.

"Coming in this way is a little longer," said the driver. "But, I thought we could give you a last look at the monuments and the Mall before we swing over to Union Station."

"No, it was a great drive, especially the part through the zoo."

"I like the fords," announced Jesse.

"Yeah, you would, you don't have to wash the car," said Chase darkly.

"I'll help."

"Yeah, right."

"Will, too."

"Will not."

"All right, kids, knock it off," said Hanley. He snorted, "I never realized how much running a platoon was like managing a family. I was an only child."

"Are you saying that my children are as mature as soldiers?"

"Not at all, some of my soldiers acted like kids."

"What about the man you're going to visit?"

"When I first knew him, he was like a big kid. We both were. At the end of the war, he was my friend and my most reliable man."

"That's Sgt. Saunders, right?" asked Jesse.

"Right. He and his wife live near Chicago. Another member of his squad has been staying with them, but they say they have room. I'll stay there a week, maybe. Then, I'll fly back to Boston."

"Can you afford that, Gil?"

"Yes, Betty, as long as I keep my expenses reasonable, I don't have to worry about money. My father set up a trust." He grimaced briefly. He'd trade the money for love or even approval in a heartbeat.

They had reached Union Station. Betty stopped, and the kids unloaded Hanley's duffle, ditty bag and knapsack, the latter filled with Thin Mints, PB & J sandwiches and fruit, all lovingly packed by Jesse and Gordy.

They carried his gear and went to pick up his ticket while Betty began the arduous task of finding a parking space during rush hour. She rejoined the group just as they finished checking the duffle bag.

"Will you be able to manage with both of these, Gil?"

Hanley held up the hook. "I'll manage just fine now that I know how to use this. Besides, this train is famous for its service. How long do we have before it's time to board?"

"Forty-five minutes. I'm afraid we left a little early."

Gordy jumped up and down, "Can we look at trains?"

They spent some of their time at a coin stamping machine. Everyone got a souvenir with all their initials and the date on it. They wandered out onto the platform to watch trains. Hanley's, the Capitol Limited, was in place, almost ready for passengers. A porter noticed the little group. "Captain, are you all taking this train?"

Hanley smiled; working the route he did, the man had to know military insignia. "Not all of us. I'm going to Chicago. And, it's lieutenant."

"Yes, sir, you can go ahead and board now, if you like."

"Thank you, in a couple of minutes. I need to say my good-byes."

Hanley turned toward the family. Jesse looked stricken, the others sorrowful. He shook the hands of the two oldest boys, wishing them luck with their studies, and telling them to look after the others. He swung Gordy up and hugged him, promising a souvenir of Chicago. The lieutenant turned to Betty, took her hand, and kissed it. "I hope you've had a little more fun the last three months."

"I have, Gil. Thank you. Thank you for reminding me how much fun my children can be. Things will continue to be a lot more relaxed around home."

He struck a heroic pose, "Then, my work here is done."

Everyone laughed.

He turned to Jesse. Her green eyes brimmed with tears. She threw her arms around his waist and buried her face in his chest.

"Hey, you'll get my jacket all wet." He disengaged her slightly and tilted up her teary face. "You knew that this had to come. I have to go and put a life together. I'm ready, now, thanks to you."

"Oh, Lieutenant, I will miss you so much! How will I continue my math?"

"C'mon, Jess, we've been over all of this. It's time for you to be on your own, too." He cupped her cheek. "Look, we'll write. I'll write you as soon as I get to Chicago. I promise. You'll write back. We'll still be friends, special friends, for as long as you want."

"That will be for a very long time," she responded shakily.

He laughed, his own eyes glistening as he squeezed her tightly. He bent his head and kissed the top of hers. "Jess, I shall miss you terribly. I can't tell you how much you helped me. Someday you'll understand."

The porter cleared his throat. "They're going to announce boarding for regular passengers, Lieutenant."

"I guess that's it, then." He released the girl, and tipped his hat to the rest of the family. He turned to board the train.

"You're Lieutenant Hanley?"

The officer nodded. "For the moment. I'll be discharged soon."

"This is your car right here, sir."

"Thank you." He started up the steps, paused, holding a grab handle with the hook, and saluted the watching family. Then, he glanced up the track, westward, toward Chicago and his future, and entered the vestibule.

The End