

DAVID BALDACCI

A Novel by the #1 *New York Times* Bestselling Author

One Summer

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BALDACCI

One
Summer



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*To Spencer, my little girl all grown up.
And I couldn't be prouder of the
person you've become.*

*One
Summer*

I

Jack Armstrong sat up in the secondhand hospital bed that had been wedged into a corner of the den in his home in Cleveland. A father at nineteen, he and his wife, Lizzie, had conceived their second child when he'd been home on leave from the army. Jack had been in the military for five years when the war in the Middle East started. He'd survived his first tour in Afghanistan and earned a Purple Heart for taking one in the arm. After that he'd weathered several tours of duty in Iraq, one of which included the destruction of his Humvee while he was still inside. That injury had won him his second Purple. And he had a Bronze Star on top of that for rescuing three ambushed grunts from his unit and nearly getting killed in the process. After all that, here he was, dying fast in his cheaply paneled den in Ohio's Rust Belt.

His goal was simple: just hang on until Christmas. He sucked greedily on the oxygen coming from the line in his nose. The converter that stayed in the corner of the small room was on maximum production, and Jack knew that one

day soon it would be turned off because he'd be dead. Before Thanksgiving he was certain he could last another month. Now Jack was not sure he could make another day.

But he would.

I have to.

In high school the six-foot-two, good-looking Jack had varsity lettered in three sports, quarterbacked the football team, and had his pick of the ladies. But from the first time he'd seen Elizabeth "Lizzie" O'Toole, it was all over for him in the falling-in-love department. His heart had been won perhaps even before he quite realized it. His mouth curled into a smile at the memory of seeing her for the first time. Her family had come from South Carolina. Jack had often wondered why the O'Tooles had moved to Cleveland, where there was no ocean, a lot less sun, a lot more snow and ice, and not a palm tree in sight. Later, he'd learned it was because of a job change for Lizzie's father.

She'd come into class that first day, tall, with long auburn hair and vibrant green eyes, her face already mature and lovely. They had started going together in high school and had never been separated since, except long enough for Jack to fight in two wars.

"Jack; Jack honey?"

Lizzie was crouched down in front of him. In her hand was a syringe. She was still beautiful, though her looks had taken on a fragile edge. There were dark circles under her eyes and recently stamped worry lines on her face. The glow had gone from her skin, and her body was harder, less supple than it had been. Jack was the one dying, but in a way she was too.

"It's time for your pain meds."

He nodded, and she shot the drugs directly into an access

line cut right below his collarbone. That way the medicine flowed directly into his bloodstream and started working faster. Fast was good when the pain felt like every nerve in his body was being incinerated.

After she finished, Lizzie sat and hugged him. The doctors had a long name for what was wrong with him, one that Jack still could not pronounce or even spell. It was rare, they had said; one in a million. When he'd asked about his odds of survival, the docs had looked at each other before one finally answered.

"There's really nothing we can do. I'm sorry."

"Do the things you've always wanted to do," another had advised him, "but never had the chance."

"I have three kids and a mortgage," Jack had shot back, still reeling from this sudden death sentence. "I don't have the luxury of filling out some end-of-life bucket list."

"How long?" he'd finally asked, though part of him didn't really want to know.

"You're young and strong," said one. "And the disease is in its early stages."

Jack had survived the Taliban and Al-Qaeda. He could maybe hold on and see his oldest child graduate from college. "So how long?" he'd asked again.

The doctor said, "Six months. Maybe eight if you're lucky."

Jack did not feel very lucky.

He vividly remembered the morning he started feeling not quite right. It was an ache in his forearm and a stab of pain in his right leg. He was a building contractor by trade, so aches and pains were to be expected. But things soon carried to a new level. His limbs would grow tired from three hours of physical labor as opposed to ten. The stabs of pain became

more frequent, and his balance began to deteriorate. His back finally couldn't make it up the ladder with the stacks of shingles. Then it hurt to carry his youngest son around after ten minutes. Then the fire in his nerves started, and his legs felt like an old man's. And one morning he woke up and his lungs were like balloons filled with water. Everything had accelerated after that, as though his body had simply given way to whatever was invading it.

His youngest child, Jack Jr., whom everyone called Jackie, toddled in and climbed on his dad's lap, resting his head against his father's sunken chest. Jackie's hair was long and inky black, curled up at the ends. His eyes were the color of toast; his thick eyebrows nearly met in the middle, like a burly woolen thread. Jackie had been their little surprise. Their other kids were much older.

Jack slowly slid his arm around his two-year-old son. Chubby fingers gripped his forearm, and warm breath touched his skin. It felt like the pierce of needles, but Jack simply gritted his teeth and didn't move his arm because there wouldn't be many more of these embraces. He slowly turned his head and looked out the window, where the snow was steadily falling. South Carolina and palm trees had nothing on Cleveland when it came to the holidays. It was truly beautiful.

He took his wife's hand.

"Christmas," Jack said in a wheezy voice. "I'll be there."

"Promise?" said Lizzie, her voice beginning to crack.

"Promise."

2

Jack awoke, looked around, and didn't know where he was. He could feel nothing, wasn't even sure if he was still breathing.

Am I dead? Was this it?

"Pop-pop," said Jackie as he slid next to his father on the bed. Jack turned and saw the chubby cheeks and light brown eyes.

Jack stroked his son's hair. Good, thick strands, like he used to have before the disease had stolen that too. Curious, Jackie tried to pull out the oxygen line from his father's nose, but he redirected his son's hand and cupped it with his own.

Lizzie walked in with his meds and shot them into the access line. An IV drip took care of Jack's nutrition and hydration needs. Solid foods were beyond him now.

"I just dropped the kids off at school," she told him.

"Mikki?" said Jack.

Lizzie made a face. Their daughter, Michelle, would be turning sixteen next summer, and her rebellious streak had been going strong since she'd become a teenager. She was into playing her guitar and working on her music, wearing junky

clothes, sneaking out at night, and ignoring the books. “At least she showed up for the math test. I suppose actually passing it would’ve been asking too much. On the bright side, she received an A in music theory.”

Jackie got down and ran into the other room, probably for a toy. Jack watched him go with an unwieldy mixture of pride and sorrow. He would never see his son as a man. He would never even see him start kindergarten. That cut against the natural order of things. But it was what it was.

Jack had experienced an exceptionally long phase of denial after being told he had little time left. That was partially because he had always been a survivor. A rocky childhood and two wars had not done him in, so he had initially felt confident that despite the doctors’ fatal verdict, his disease was beatable. As time went by, however, and his body continued to fail, it had become clear that this battle was not winnable. It had reached a point where making the most of his time left was more important to him than trying to beat his head against an impenetrable wall. Most significantly, he wanted his kids’ memories of his final days to be as positive as possible. Jack had concluded that if he had to die prematurely, that was about as good a way to do so as there was. It beat being depressed and making everyone else around him miserable, waiting for him to die.

Before he’d gotten sick, Jack had talked to his daughter many times about making good life choices, about the importance of school, but nothing seemed to make a difference to the young woman. There was a clear disconnect now between father and daughter. When she’d been a little girl, Mikki had unconditionally loved her dad, wanted to be around him all the time. Now he rarely saw her. To her, it seemed to Jack, he might as well have been already dead.

“Mikki seems lost around me,” he said slowly.

Lizzie sat next to him, held his hand. “She’s scared and confused, honey. Some of it has to do with her age. Most of it has to do with . . .”

“Me.” Jack couldn’t look at her when he made this admission.

“She and I have talked about it. Well, I talked and she didn’t say much. She’s a smart kid, but she really doesn’t understand why this is happening, Jack. And her defense mechanism is to just detach herself from it. It’s not the healthiest way to cope with things, though.”

“I can understand,” said Jack.

She looked at him. “Because of your dad?”

He nodded and rubbed her hand with his fingers, his eyes moistening as he remembered his father’s painful death. He took several long pulls on the oxygen. “If I could change things, I would, Lizzie.”

She rested her body next to his, wrapped her arms around his shoulders, and kissed him. When she spoke, her voice was husky and seemed right on the edge of failing. “Jack, this is hard on everyone. But it’s hardest on you. You have been so brave; no one could have handled—” She couldn’t continue. Lizzie laid her head next to his and wept softly. Jack held her with what little strength he had left.

“I love you, Lizzie. No matter what happens, nothing will ever change that.”

He’d been sleeping in the hospital bed because he couldn’t make it up the stairs to their bedroom even with assistance. He’d fought against that the hardest because as his life dwindled away he had desperately wanted to feel Lizzie’s warm body against his. It was another piece of his life taken from him, like he was being dismantled, brick by brick.

And I am, brick by brick.

After a few minutes, she composed herself and wiped her eyes. “Cory is playing the Grinch in the class play at the school on Christmas Eve, remember?”

Jack nodded. “I remember.”

“I’ll film it for you.”

Cory was the middle child, twelve years old and the ham in the family.

Jack smiled and said, “Grinch!”

Lizzie smiled back, then said, “I’ve got a conference call in an hour, and then I’ll be in the kitchen working after I give Jackie his breakfast.”

She’d become a telecommuter when Jack had gotten ill. When she had to go out, a neighbor would come over or Lizzie’s parents would stop by to help.

After Lizzie left, Jack sat up, slowly reached under the pillow, and pulled out the calendar and pen. He looked at the dates in December, all of which had been crossed out up to December twentieth. Over three decades of life, marriage, fatherhood, defending his country, and working hard, it had come down to him marking off the few days left. He looked out the window and to the street beyond. The snow had stopped, but he’d heard on the news that another wintry blast was expected, with more ice than snow.

There was a knock at the door, and a few moments later Sammy Duvall appeared. He was in his early sixties, with longish salt-and-pepper hair and a trim beard. Sammy was as tall as Jack, but leaner, though his arms and shoulders bulged with muscles from all the manual labor he’d done. He was far stronger than most men half his age and tougher than anyone Jack had ever met. He’d spent twenty years in the military and

fought in Vietnam and done some things after that around the world that he never talked about. A first-rate, self-taught carpenter and all-around handyman, Sammy was the reason Jack had joined the service. After Jack left the army, he and Sammy had started the contracting business. Lacking a family of his own, Sammy had adopted the Armstrongs.

The military vets shared a glance, and then Sammy looked over all the equipment helping to keep his friend alive. He shook his head slightly and his mouth twitched. This was as close as stoic Sammy ever came to showing emotion.

“How’s work?” Jack asked, and then he took a long pull of oxygen.

“No worries. Stuff’s getting done and the money’s coming in.”

Jack knew that Sammy had been completing all the jobs pretty much on his own and then bringing all the payments to Lizzie. “At least half of that money is yours, Sammy. You’re doing all the work.”

“I got my Uncle Sam pension, and it’s more than I need. That changes, I’ll let you know.”

Sammy lived in a converted one-car garage with his enormous Bernese mountain dog, Sam Jr. His needs were simple, his wants apparently nonexistent.

Sammy combed Jack’s hair and even gave him a shave. Then the friends talked for a while. At least Sammy said a few words and Jack listened. The rest of the time they sat in silence. Jack didn’t mind; just being with Sammy made him feel better.

After Sammy left, Jack lifted the pen and crossed out December twenty-first. That was being optimistic, Jack knew, since the day had really just begun. He put the calendar and pen away.

And then it happened.

He couldn't breathe. He sat up, convulsing, but that just made it worse. He could feel his heart racing, his lungs squeezing, his face first growing red and then pale as the oxygen left his body and nothing replenished it.

December twenty-first, he thought, my last day.

“Pop-pop?”

Jack looked up to see his son holding the end of the oxygen line that attached to the converter. He held it up higher, as though he were giving it back to his dad.

“Jackie!”

A horrified Lizzie appeared in the doorway, snatched the line from her son's hand, and rushed to reattach the oxygen line to the converter. A few moments later, the oxygen started to flow into the line and Jack fell back on the bed, breathing hard, trying to fill his lungs.

Lizzie raced past her youngest son and was by Jack's side in an instant. “Oh my God, Jack, oh my God.” Her whole body was trembling.

He held up his hand to show he was okay.

Lizzie whirled around and snapped, “That was bad, Jackie, bad.”

Jackie's face crumbled, and he started to bawl.

She snatched up Jackie and carried him out. The little boy was struggling to free himself, staring at Jack over her shoulder, reaching his arms out to his father. His son's look was pleading.

“Pop-pop,” wailed Jackie.

The tears trickled down Jack's face as his son's cries faded away. But then Jack heard Lizzie sobbing and pictured her crying her heart out and wondering what the hell she'd done to deserve all this.

Sometimes, Jack thought, living was far harder than dying.

3

Jack awoke from a nap late the next day in time to see his daughter opening the front door, guitar case in hand. He motioned to her to come see him. She closed the door and dutifully trudged to his room.

Mikki had auburn hair like her mother's. However, she had dyed it several different colors, and Jack had no idea what it would be called now. She was shooting up in height, her legs long and slender and her hips and bosom filling out. Though she acted like she was totally grown up now, her face was caught in that time thread that was firmly past the little-girl stage but not yet a woman. She would be a junior in high school next year. Where had the time gone?

"Yeah, Dad?" she said, not looking at him.

He thought about what to say. In truth, they didn't have much to talk about. Even when he'd been healthy, their lives lately had taken separate paths. *That was my fault*, he thought. *Not hers.*

"Your A." He took a long breath, tried to smile.

She smirked. “Right. Music theory. My only one. I’m sure Mom told you that too. Right?”

“Still an A.”

“Thanks for mentioning it.” She looked at the floor, an awkward expression on her features. “Look, Dad, I gotta go. People are waiting. We’re rehearsing.”

She was in a band, Jack knew, though he couldn’t recall the name of it just now.

“Okay, be careful.”

She turned to leave, and then hesitated. Her fingers fiddled with the guitar case handle. She glanced back but still didn’t meet his gaze. “Just so you know, when you were asleep I duct taped your oxygen line onto the converter so it can’t be pulled off again. Jackie didn’t know what he was doing. Mom didn’t have to give him such a hard time.”

Jack gathered more oxygen and said, “Thanks.”

A part of him wanted her to look at him, and another part of him didn’t. He didn’t want to see pity in her eyes. Her big, strong father reduced to this. He wondered whom she would marry. Where would they live? Would it be far from Cleveland?

Will she visit my grave?

“Mikki?”

“Dad, I really got to go. I’m already late.”

“I hope you have a great . . . day, sweetie.”

He thought he saw her lips quiver for a moment, but then she turned and left. A few moments later, the front door closed behind her. He peered out the window. She hopped across the snow and climbed into a car that one of her guy friends was driving. Jack had never felt more disconnected from life.

After dinner that night, Cory, in full costume, performed

his Grinch role for his father. Cory was a chunky twelve-year-old, though his long feet and lanky limbs promised height later. His hair was a mop of brown cowlicks, the same look Jack had had at that age. Lizzie's parents had come over for dinner and to watch the show and had brought Lizzie's grandmother. Cecilia was a stylish lady in her eighties who used a walker and had her own portable oxygen tank. She'd grown up and lived most of her life in South Carolina. She'd come to live with her daughter in Cleveland after her husband died and her health started failing. Her laugh was infectious and her speech was mellifluous, like water trickling over smooth rocks.

Cecilia joked that Jack and she should start their own oxygen business since they had so much of the stuff. She was dying too, only not quite as fast as Jack. This probably would also be her last Christmas, but she had lived a good long life and had apparently made peace with her fate. She was uniformly upbeat, talking about her life in the South, the tea parties and the debutante balls, sneaking smokes and drinking hooch behind the local Baptist church at night. Yet every once in a while Jack would catch her staring at him, and he could sense the sadness the old lady held in her heart for his plight.

After Cory finished his performance, Cecilia leaned down and whispered into Jack's ear. "It's Christmas. The time of miracles." This was not the first time she'd said this. Yet for some reason Jack's spirits sparked for a moment.

But then the doctor's pronouncement sobered this feeling.

Six months, eight if you're lucky.

Science, it seemed, always trumped hope.

At eleven o'clock he heard the front door open, and Mikki slipped in. Jack thought he saw her glance his way, but she didn't come into the den. When Jack was healthy they had kept

a strict watch over her comings and goings. And for months after he'd become ill, Lizzie had kept up that vigil. Now she barely had time to shower or snatch a meal, and Mikki had taken advantage of this lack of oversight to do as she pleased.

When everyone was asleep, Jack reached under his pillow and took out his pen. This time he wasn't crossing off dates on a calendar. He took out the piece of paper and carefully unfolded it. He spread it out on a book he kept next to the bed. Pen poised over the paper, he began to write. It took him a long time, at least an hour to write less than one page. His handwriting was poor because he was so weak, but his thoughts were clear. Eventually there would be seven of these letters. One for each day of the last week of his life, the date neatly printed at the top of the page—or as neatly as Jack's trembling hand could manage. Each letter began with "Dear Lizzie," and ended with "Love, Jack." In the body of the letter he did his best to convey to his wife all that he felt for her. That though he would no longer be alive, he would always be there for her.

These letters, he'd come to realize, were the most important thing he would ever do in his life. And he labored to make sure every word was the right one. Finished, he put the letter in an envelope, marked it with a number, and slipped it in the nightstand next to his bed.

He would write the seventh and last letter on Christmas Eve, after everyone had gone to bed.

Jack turned his head and looked out the window. Even in the darkness he could see the snow coming down hard.

He now knew how a condemned man felt though he had committed no crime. The time left to him was precious. But there was only so much he could do with it.

4

Jack marked off December twenty-fourth on his calendar. He had one letter left to write. It would go into the drawer with the number seven written on the envelope. After he was gone, Lizzie would read them, and Jack hoped they would provide some comfort to her. Actually, writing them had provided some comfort for Jack. It made him focus on what was really important in life.

Jack's mother-in-law, Bonnie, had stayed with him while the rest of the family went to see Cory in the school play. Lizzie had put her foot down and made Mikki go as well. Bonnie had made a cup of tea and had settled herself down with a book, while Jack was perched in a chair by the window waiting for the van to pull up with Lizzie and the others.

Sammy came by, stomping snow off his boots and tugging off his knit cap to let his long, shaggy hair fall out. He sat next to Jack and handed him a gift. When Jack opened it he looked up in surprise.

It was five passes to Disney World, good for the upcoming year.

Sammy gripped Jack by the shoulder. "I expect you and the family to get there."

Jack glanced over to see Bonnie shaking her head in mild reproach. Bonnie O'Toole was not a woman who believed in miracles. Yet Jack knew the man well enough to realize that Sammy fully believed he would use those tickets. He patted Sammy on the arm, smiled, and nodded.

After Sammy left, Jack glanced at the tickets. He appreciated his friend's confidence, but Jack was the only one who knew how close he was to the end. He had fought as hard as he could. He didn't want to die and leave his family, but he couldn't live like this either. His mind focused totally on the last letter he would ever compose. He knew when his pen had finished writing the words and the paper was safely in the envelope, he could go peacefully. It was a small yet obviously important benchmark. But he would wait until Christmas was over, when presents were opened and a new day had dawned. It was some comfort to know that he had a little control left over his fate, even if it was simply the specific timing of his passing.

He saw the headlights of the oncoming van flick across the window. Bonnie went to open the front door, and Jack watched anxiously from the window as the kids piled out of the vehicle. Lizzie's dad led them up the driveway, carrying Jackie because it was so slick out. The snow was still coming down, although the latest weather report had said that with the temperatures staying where they were, it was more ice than snow at this point, making driving treacherous.

His gaze held on Lizzie as she closed up the van, and then

turned, not toward the house, but away from it. Jack hadn't noticed the person approach her because his attention had been on his wife. The man came into focus; it was Bill Miller. They'd all gone to school together. Bill had blocked on the line for Jack the quarterback. He'd attended Jack and Lizzie's wedding. Bill was single, in the plumbing business, and doing well.

Jack pressed his face to the glass when he saw Bill draw close to his wife. Lizzie slipped her purse over her shoulder and swiped the hair out of her eyes. They were so close to one another, Jack couldn't find even a sliver of darkness between them. His breath was fogging the glass, he was so near it. He watched Bill lean in toward Lizzie. He saw his wife rise up on tiptoe. And then Bill staggered back as Lizzie slapped him across the face. Though he was weak, Jack reared up in his chair as though he wanted to go and defend his wife's honor. Yet there was no need. Bill Miller stumbled off into the darkness as Lizzie turned away and marched toward the house.

A minute later he heard Lizzie come in, knocking snow off her boots.

Lizzie strode into the den, first pulling off her scarf and then rubbing her hands together because of the cold. Her face was flushed, and she didn't look at him like she normally did. "Time for the presents; then Mom and Dad are going to take off. They'll be back tomorrow, okay, sweetie? It'll be a great day."

"How's your hand?"

She glanced at him. "What?"

He pointed to the window. "I think Bill's lucky he's still conscious."

"He was also drunk, or I don't think he would've tried that. Idiot."

Jack started to say something, but then stopped and looked away. Lizzie quickly picked up on this and sat next to him.

“Jack, you don’t think that Bill and I—”

He gripped her hand. “Of course not. Don’t be crazy.” He kissed her cheek.

“So what then? Something’s bothering you.”

“You’re young, and you have three kids.”

“That I get.” She attempted a smile that flickered out when she saw the earnest look on his face.

“You need somebody in your life.”

“I don’t want to talk about this.” She tried to rise, but he held her back.

“Lizzie, look at me. Look at me.”

She turned to face him, her eyes glimmering with tears.

“You will find someone else.”

“No.”

“You will.”

“I’ve got a full life. I’ve got no room for—”

“Yes, you do.”

“Do we have to talk about this now? It’s Christmas Eve.”

“I can’t be picky about timing, Lizzie,” he said, a little out of breath.

Her face flushed. “I didn’t mean that. I . . . you look better tonight. Maybe . . . the doctors—”

“No, Lizzie. No,” he said firmly. “That can’t happen. We’re past that stage, honey.” He sucked on his air, his gaze resolutely on her.

She put a hand to her eyes. “If I think about things like that, then it means, I don’t want to . . . You might . . .”

He held her. “Things will work out all right. Just take it

slow. And be happy.” He made her look at him, and he brushed the tears from her eyes. He took a long pull on his oxygen and managed a grin. “And for God’s sake, don’t pick Bill.”

She laughed. And then it turned into a sob as he held her.

When they pulled away a few moments later, Lizzie wiped her nose with a tissue and said, “I was actually thinking about next summer. And I wanted to talk to you about it.”

Jack’s heart was buoyed by the fact that she still sought out his opinion. “What about it?”

“You’ll probably think it’s silly.”

“Tell me.”

“I was thinking I would take the kids to the Palace.”

“The Palace? You haven’t been back there since—”

“I know. I know. I just think it’s time. It’s in bad shape from what I heard. I know it needs a lot of work. But just for one summer it should be fine.”

“I know how hard that was for you.”

She reached in her pocket and pulled out a photo. She showed it to Jack. “Haven’t looked at that in years. Do you remember me showing it to you?”

It was a photo of the O’Tooles when the kids were all little.

“That’s Tillie next to you. Your twin sister.”

“Mom said she never could tell us apart.”

Jack had to sit back against his pillow and drew several long breaths on his line while Lizzie patiently waited.

Finally he said, “She was five when she died?”

“Almost six. Meningitis. Nothing the doctors could do.” She glanced briefly at Jack, and then looked away. Her unspoken thought could have been, *Just like you.*

“I remember my parents telling me that Tillie had gone to

Heaven.” She smiled at the same time a couple of tears slid down her cheeks. “There’s an old lighthouse on the property down there. It was so beautiful.”

“I remember you telling me about it. Your grandmother . . . still owns the Palace, right?”

“Yes. I was going to ask her if it would be all right if we went down there this summer.”

“The O’Tooles exchanging the sunny ocean for cold Cleveland?” He coughed several times, and Lizzie went to adjust his air level. When she did so he started breathing easier.

She said, “Well, I think leaving the Palace was because of me.”

“What do you mean?”

“I never really told you about this before, and maybe I’d forgotten it myself. But I’ve been thinking about Tillie lately.” She faltered.

“Lizzie, please tell me.”

She turned to face him. “When my parents told me my sister had gone to Heaven, I . . . I wanted to find her. I didn’t really understand that she was dead. I knew that Heaven was in the sky. So I started looking for, well, looking for Heaven to find Tillie.”

“You were just a little kid.”

“I would go up in the lighthouse. Back then it still worked. And I’d look for Heaven, for Tillie really, with the help of the light.” She paused and let out a little sob. “Never found either one.”

Jack held her. “It’s okay, Lizzie; it’s okay,” he said softly.

She wiped her eyes on his shirt and said, “It became a sort of obsession, I guess. I don’t know why. But every day that went by and I couldn’t find her, it just hurt so bad. And when

I got older, my parents told me that Tillie was dead. Well, it didn't help much." She paused. "I can't believe I never told you all this before. But I guess I was a little ashamed."

His wife's distress was taking a toll on Jack. He breathed deeply for several seconds before saying, "You lost your twin. You were just a little kid."

"By the time we moved to Ohio, I knew I would never find her by looking at the sky. I knew she was gone. And the lighthouse wasn't working anymore anyway. But I think my parents, my mom especially, wanted to get me away from the place. She didn't think it was good for me. But it was just... silly."

"It was what you were feeling, Lizzie." He touched his chest. "Here."

"I know. So I thought I'd go back there. See the place. Let the kids experience how I grew up." She looked at him.

"Great idea," Jack gasped.

She rubbed his shoulder. "You might enjoy it too. You could really fix the place up. Even make the lighthouse work again." It was so evident she desperately wanted to believe this could actually happen.

He attempted a smile. "Yeah."

The looks on both their faces were clear despite the hopeful words.

Jack would never see the Palace.

5

Later that night his father-in-law helped Jack into a wheelchair and rolled him into the living room, where their little tree stood. It was silver tinsel with blue and red ornaments. Jack usually got a real tree for Christmas, but not this year of course.

The kids had hot chocolate and some snacks. Mikki even played a few carols on her guitar, though she looked totally embarrassed doing so. Cory told his dad about the play, and Lizzie bustled around making sure everyone had everything they needed. Then she played the DVD for Jack so he could see the performance for himself. Finally his in-laws prepared to leave. The ice was getting worse and they wanted to get home, they said. Lizzie's father helped Jack into bed.

At the front door Lizzie gave them each a hug. Jack heard Bonnie tell her daughter to just hang in there. It was always darkest before the dawn.

“The kids are the most important thing,” said her dad. “Afterward, we’ll be right here for you.”

One Summer

Next, Jack heard Lizzie say, “I was thinking about talking to Cee,” referring to her grandmother Cecilia.

“About what?” Bonnie said quickly, in a wary tone.

“Next summer I was thinking of taking the kids to the Palace, maybe for the entire summer break. I wanted to make sure Cee would be okay with that.”

There were a few moments of silence; then Bonnie said, “The Palace! Lizzie, you know—”

“Mom, don’t.”

“This is not something you need, certainly not right now. It’s too painful.”

“That was a long time ago,” Lizzie said quietly. “It’s different now. It’s okay. I’m okay. I have been for a long time, actually, if you’d ever taken the time to notice.”

“It’s never long enough,” her mother shot back.

“Let’s not discuss it tonight. Not tonight,” said Lizzie.

After her parents left, Jack listened as his wife’s footsteps came his way. Lizzie appeared in the doorway. “That was a nice Christmas Eve.”

He nodded his head dumbly, his gaze never leaving her face. The tick of the clock next to his bed pounded fiercely in Jack’s head.

“Don’t let her talk you out of going to the Palace, Lizzie. Stick to your guns.”

“My mother can be a little . . .”

“I know. But promise me you’ll go?”

She nodded, smiled. “Okay, I promise. Do you need anything else?” she asked.

Jack looked at the clock and motioned to the access line below his collarbone, where his pain meds were administered.

“Oh my gosh. Your meds. Okay.” She started to the small

cabinet in the corner where she kept his medications. But then Lizzie stopped, looking slightly panicked.

“I forgot to pick up your prescription today. The play and . . . I forgot to get them.” She checked her watch. “They’re still open. I’ll go get them now.”

“Don’t go. I’m okay without the meds.”

“It’ll just take a few minutes. I’ll be back in no time. And then it’ll just be you and me. I want to talk to you some more about next summer.”

“Lizzie, you don’t have to—”

But she was already gone.

The front door slammed. The van started up and raced down the street.

Later Jack woke, confused. He turned slowly to find Mikki dozing in the chair next to his bed. She must have come downstairs while he was asleep. He looked out the window. There were streams of light whizzing past his house. For a moment he had the absurd notion that Santa Claus had just arrived. Then he tried to sit up because he heard it. Sounds on the roof.

Reindeer? What the hell was going on?

The sounds came again. Only now he realized they weren’t on the roof. Someone was pounding on the front door.

“Mom? Dad?” It was Cory. His voice grew closer. His head poked in the den. He was dressed in boxer shorts and a T-shirt and looked nervous. “There’s someone at the door.”

By now Mikki had woken. She stretched and saw Cory standing there.

“Someone’s at the front door,” her brother said again.

Mikki looked at her dad. He was staring out at the swirl of lights. It was like a spaceship was landing on their front lawn. *In Cleveland?* Jack thought he was hallucinating. Yet when he

looked at Mikki, it was clear that she saw the lights too. Jack raised a hand and pointed at the front door. He nodded to his daughter.

Looking scared, she hurried to the door and opened it. The man was big, dressed in a uniform, and had a gun on his belt. He looked cold, tired, and uncomfortable. Mostly uncomfortable.

“Is your dad home?” he asked Mikki. She backed away and pointed toward the den. The police officer stamped off his boots and stepped in. The squeak of his gun belt sounded like a scream in miniature. He walked where Mikki was pointing, saw Jack in the bed with the lines hooked to him, and muttered something under his breath. He looked at Mikki and Cory. “Can he understand? I mean, is he real sick?”

Mikki said, “He’s sick, but he can understand.”

The cop drew next to the bed. Jack lifted himself up on his elbows. He was gasping. In his anxiety, his withered lungs were demanding so much air the converter couldn’t keep up.

The officer swallowed hard. “Mr. Armstrong?” He paused as Jack stared up at him. “I’m afraid there’s been an accident involving your wife.”

6

Jack sat strapped into a wheelchair staring up at his wife's coffin. Mikki and Cory sat next to him. Jackie had been deemed too young to attend his mother's funeral; he was being taken care of by a neighbor. The priest came down and gave Jack and his children holy communion. Jack nearly choked on the host but finally managed to swallow it. Ironically, it was the first solid food he'd had in months.

At my wife's funeral.

The weather was cold, the sky puffy with clouds. The wind cleaved the thickest coats. The roads were still iced and treacherous. They'd been driven to the cemetery in the funeral home sedan designated for family members. His father-in-law, Fred, rode up front, next to the driver, while he and the kids were squeezed in the back with Bonnie. She had barely uttered a word since learning her youngest daughter had been instantly killed when her van ran a red light and was broadsided by an oncoming snowplow.

The graveside service was mercifully brief; the priest seemed

to understand that if he didn't hustle things along, some of the older people might not survive the event.

Jack looked over at Mikki. She'd pinned her hair back and put on a black dress that hung below her knees; she sat staring vacantly at the coffin. Cory had not looked at the casket even once. As a final act, Jack was wheeled up to the coffin. He put his hand on top of it, mumbled a few words, and sat back, feeling totally disoriented. He had played this scene out in his head a hundred times. Only he was in the box and it was Lizzie out here saying good-bye. Nothing about this was right. He felt like he was staring at the world upside down.

"I'll be with you soon, Lizzie," he said in a halting voice. The words seemed hollow, forced, but he could think of nothing else to say.

As he started to collapse, a strong hand gripped him.

"It's okay, Jack. We'll get you back to the car now." He looked up into the face of Sammy Duvall.

Sammy proceeded to maneuver him to the sedan in record time. Before closing the door, he put a reassuring hand on Jack's shoulder. "I'll always be there for you, buddy."

They were driven home, the absence of Lizzie in their midst a festering wound that had no possible healing ointment. Jackie was brought home, and people stopped by with plates of food. An impromptu wake was held; devastated folks chatted in low tones. More than once Jack caught people gazing at him, no doubt thinking, *My God, what now?*

Jack was thinking the same thing. *What now?*

Two hours later the house was empty except for Jack, the kids, and his in-laws. The children instantly disappeared. Minutes later Jack could hear guitar strumming coming from Mikki's bedroom, the tunes melancholy and abbreviated.

Cory and Jackie shared a bedroom, but no sound was coming from them. Jack could imagine Cory quietly sobbing, while a confused Jackie attempted to comfort him.

Bonnie and Fred O'Toole looked as disoriented as Jack felt. They had signed on to help their healthy daughter transition with her kids to being a widow and then getting on with her life. Without the buffer that Lizzie had been, Jack could focus now on the fact that his relationship with his in-laws had been largely superficial.

Fred was a big man with a waistline large enough to portend a host of health problems down the road. He tended to defer to his wife in all things other than sports and selling cars, which was the line of work that had brought him to Cleveland. He was a man who would prefer to look at the floor rather than in your eye, unless he was trying to sell you the latest Ford F-150. Then he could be animated enough, at least until you signed on the dotted line and the financing cleared.

Bonnie was shorter than her daughter. The mother of four grown children, she was now well into her sixties, and her figure had lost its shape. Her waist and hips had turned into a solid wall of flesh. Her hair was white, cut short and rather brutally, and her eyeglasses filled most of her square face. Fred kept sighing, rubbing his big hands over his pressed suit pants, as though attempting to rub some dirt off his fingers. Bonnie, who had kept on her black outfit, was sitting very still on the couch, her gaze aimed at a corner of the ceiling but apparently not actually registering on it.

Fred sighed again, and this seemed to rouse Bonnie.

"Well," she said. "Well," she said again. Fred eyed her, as did Jack.

One Summer

She looked over and gave Jack a quick glance that was undecipherable.

Then came more silence.

Finally, a few minutes later Fred helped Jack get into bed, and then he and Bonnie went up to Jack and Lizzie's room. They would be staying here full-time until other arrangements were made.

Jack lay in the dark staring at the ceiling. The days after Lizzie had died had been far worse than when he'd received his own death sentence. His life ending he'd accepted. Hers he had not. Could not. Mikki and Cory had barely spoken since the police officer had come with the awful news. Jackie had wandered the house looking for his mother and crying when he couldn't find her.

Jack slid open the drawer of the nightstand and took out the six letters. He obviously had not written one on Christmas Eve. In these pages he had poured out his heart to the person he cherished above all others. As he looked down at the pages, wasted pages now, his spirits sank even lower.

Jack rarely cried. He'd seen fellow soldiers die horribly in the Middle East, watched his father perish from lung cancer, and attended the funeral of his wife. He had shed a few tears at each of these events, but not for long and always in a controlled way. Now, staring at the ceiling, thinking a thousand anguished thoughts, he did weep quietly as it finally struck him that Lizzie was really gone.

The next morning Bonnie took charge. She came to see Jack with Fred in tow. “This won’t be easy, Jack,” she cautioned, “but we really don’t have much time.” She squared her shoulders and seemed to attempt a sympathetic look. “The children of course come first. I’ve talked to Becky and also to Frances several times.”

Frances and Becky were Lizzie’s older sisters, who lived on the West Coast. The only brother, Fred Jr., was on active military duty, stationed in Korea. He had not been able to make it to the funeral.

“Becky can take Jack Jr., and Frances has agreed to take Cory. That just leaves Michelle.” Bonnie had never called her Mikki.

“*Just Michelle?*” said Jack.

Bonnie looked momentarily taken aback. When she spoke, her tone was less authoritative and more conciliatory. “This is hard on all of us. You know Fred and I had planned to move to Tempe next year after things were more settled with Lizzie

and the kids. We were going this year, but then you got sick. And we stayed on, because that's what families do in those situations. We tried to do our best, for all of you."

"We couldn't have gotten on without you."

This remark seemed to please her, and she smiled and gripped his hand. "Thank you. That means a lot."

She continued, "We'll take Michelle with us. And because Jack Jr. will be in Portland with Becky and Cory in LA with Frances, they will all at least be on or near the West Coast. I'm sure they'll see each other fairly often. It's really the only workable solution that I can see."

"When?" Jack asked.

"The Christmas break is almost over, and we think we can get all the kids transitioned in the next month. We decided it was no good waiting until the fall, for a number of reasons. It'll be better all around for them."

"For you too," said Jack. As soon as he said it, he wished he hadn't.

Bonnie's conciliatory look faded. "Yes, us too. Jack, we're taking care of all the children. They'll all have homes with people they love and who love them. You can't have an issue with that."

Jack touched his chest. "And me?"

"Yes, well . . . I was getting to that, of course." She stood but didn't look at him. Instead, she stared at a spot right over his head. "Hospice. I'll arrange all the details." Now she looked at him, and Jack had to admit, she didn't look happy about this. "If we could take care of you, Jack, in the time that you have left, we would. But we're not young anymore, and taking in Michelle and all . . ."

Fred added, "And Lizzie dying."

Jack and Bonnie stared at him for an instant. Each seemed surprised the man was still there, much less that he had spoken. Bonnie said, “Yes, and Lizzie not . . . well, yes.”

Jack drew a long breath and mustered his strength. He said, “*My kids, my decision.*”

Fred looked at Jack and then over at his wife. Bonnie, though, had eyes only for Jack.

She said, “You can’t care for the kids. You can’t even take care of yourself. Lizzie did everything. And now she’s gone.” Her eyes glittered; her tone was harsh once more.

“Still my decision,” he said defiantly. He had no idea where he was going with this, but the words had tumbled from his mouth.

“Who else will take three kids? If we do nothing, the matter is out of our hands and they’ll go into foster care. They’ll probably never see each other again. Is that what you want?” She sat down next to him, her face inches from his. “Is that really what you want?”

He sucked in some more air, his resolve weakening along with his energy. “Why can’t I stay here?” he said. Another long inhalation. “Until the kids leave?”

“Hospice is much cheaper. I’m sorry if that sounds callous, but money is tight. Tough decisions have to be made.”

“So I die alone?”

Bonnie looked at her husband. Clearly, from his expression, Fred sided with Jack on this point.

Fred said, “Doesn’t seem right, Bonnie. Taking the family away like that. After all that’s happened.”

Jack shot his father-in-law an appreciative look.

Bonnie fidgeted. “I’ve been thinking about that, actually.” She sighed. “Jack, I’m not trying to be heartless. I care about

you. I don't want to do any of this." She paused. "But they just lost their mother." Bonnie paused but didn't continue.

It slowly dawned on Jack, what she was getting at.

"And to see me die too?"

Bonnie spread her hands. "But you're right. You are their father. So I'll leave it up to you. You tell me what to do, Jack, and I'll do it. We can keep the kids here until...until you pass. They can attend your funeral, and then we can make the move. They can be with you until the end." She looked at Fred, but he apparently had nothing to add.

Jack was surprised, then, when Fred said, "Anything you want, Jack, we'll take care of it. Okay?"

Jack was silent for so long that Bonnie finally rose, clutched her sweater more tightly around her shoulders and said, "Fine, we can have an in-home nursing service come. Lizzie had some life insurance. We can use those funds to—"

"Take the kids."

Fred and Bonnie looked at him. Jack said again, "Take the kids."

"Are you sure?" asked Bonnie. She seemed to be sincere, but Jack knew this way would take a lot of the pressure off her.

He struggled to say, "As soon as you can." *It won't be long*, Jack thought. *Not now. Not with Lizzie gone.*

When she turned to leave, Bonnie froze. Mikki and Cory were standing there.

Bonnie said nervously, "I thought you were upstairs."

"You don't think this concerns us?" Mikki said bluntly.

"I think the adults need to make the decisions for what's best for the children."

"I'm not a child!" Mikki snapped.

Bonnie said, “Michelle, this is hard on all of us. We’re just trying to do the best we can under the circumstances.” She paused and added, “You lost your mother and I lost my daughter.” Bonnie’s voice cracked as she added, “None of this is easy, honey.”

Mikki gazed over at her father. He could feel the anger emanating from his oldest child. “You’re all losers!” yelled Mikki. She turned and rushed from the house, slamming the door behind her.

Bonnie shook her head and rubbed at her eyes before looking back at Jack. “This is a big sacrifice, for all of us.” She left the room, with Fred obediently trailing her. Cory just stood there staring at his dad.

“Cor,” he began. But his son turned and ran back upstairs.

A minute went by as Jack lay there, feeling like a turtle toppled on its back.

“Jack?”

When he looked over, Bonnie was standing a few feet from his bed holding something in her hand.

“The police dropped this off yesterday.” She held it up. It was the bag with Jack’s prescription meds. “They found it in the van. It was very unfortunate that Lizzie had to go back out that night. If she hadn’t, she’d obviously be alive today.”

“I told her not to go.”

“But she did. For you,” she replied.

The tears started to slide down her cheeks as she hurried from the room.

8

The room was small but clean. That wasn't the problem. Jack had slept for months inside a shack with ten other infantrymen in the middle of a desert, where it was either too frigid or too hot. What Jack didn't like here were the sounds. Folks during their last days of life did not make pleasant noises. Coughs, gagging, painful cries—but mostly it was the moaning. It never ceased. Then there was the squeak of the gurney wheels as the body of someone who had passed was taken away, the room freshened up for the next terminal case on the waiting list.

Most patients here were elderly. Yet Jack wasn't the youngest person. There was a boy with final-stage leukemia two doors down. When Jack was being wheeled to his room he'd seen the little body in the bed: hairless head, vacant eyes, tubes all over him, barely breathing, just waiting for it to be over. His family would come every day; his mother was often here all the time. They would put on happy expressions when they were with him and then start bawling as soon as they left his side. Jack had witnessed this as they passed his doorway. All

hunched over, weeping into their cupped hands. They were just waiting, too, for it to be over. And at the same time dreading when it would be.

Jack reached under his pillow and pulled out the calendar. January eleventh. He crossed it off. He had been here for five days. The average length of stay here, he'd heard, was three weeks. Without Lizzie, it would be three weeks too long.

He again reached under his pillow and pulled out the six now-crumpled envelopes with his letters to Lizzie inside them. He'd had Sammy bring them here from the house before it was listed for sale. He held them in his hands. The paper was splotted with his tears because he pulled them out and wept over them several times a day. What else did he have to do with his time? These letters now constituted a weight around his heart for a simple reason: Lizzie would never read them, never know what he was feeling in his last days of life. At the same time, it was the only thing allowing him to die with peace, with a measure of dignity. He put the letters away and just lay there, listening for the squeaks of the final gurney ride for another patient. They came with alarming regularity. Soon, he knew it would be his body on that stretcher.

He turned his head when the kids came in, followed by Fred. He was surprised to see Cecilia stroll in with her walker and portable oxygen tank resting in a burgundy sling. It was hard for her to go outside in the cold weather, yet she had done so for Jack. Jackie immediately climbed up on his dad's lap, while Cory sat on the bed. Arms folded defiantly over her chest, Mikki stood by the door, as far away from everyone as she could be. She had on faded jeans with the knees torn out, heavy boots, a sleeveless unzipped parka, and a black long-sleeve T-shirt that said, REMEMBER DARFUR. Her hair was

now orange. The color contrasted sharply with the dark circles under her eyes.

Cory had been saying something that only now Jack focused on. His son said, "But, Dad, you'll be here and we'll be way out there."

"That's the way *Dad* apparently wants it," said Mikki sharply.

Jack turned to look at her. Father's and daughter's gazes locked until she finally looked away, with an eye roll tacked on.

Cory moved closer to him. "Look, I think the best thing we can do, Dad, is stay here with you. It just makes sense."

Jackie, who was struggling with potty training, slid to the side of the bed and got down holding his privates.

"Gramps," said Mikki, "Jackie has to go. And I'm not taking him this time."

Fred saw what Jackie was doing and scuttled him off to the bathroom down the hall.

As soon as he was gone, Jack said, "You have to go, Cor." He didn't look at Mikki when he added, "You all do."

"But we won't be together, Dad," said Cory. "We'll never see each other."

Cecilia, who'd been listening to all this, quietly spoke up. "I give you my word, Cory, that you will see your brother and sister early and often."

Mikki came forward. Her sullen look was gone, replaced with a defiant one. "Okay, but what about Dad? He just stays here alone? That's not fair."

Jack said, "I'll be with you. And your mom will too, in spirit," he added a little lamely.

"Mom is dead. She can't be with anyone," snapped Mikki.

"Mikki," said Cecilia reproachfully. "That's not necessary."

“Well, it’s true. We don’t need to be lied to. It’s bad enough that I have to go and live with *them* in Arizona.”

Tears filled Cory’s eyes, and he started to sob quietly. Jack pulled him closer.

Jackie and Fred came back in, and the visit lasted another half hour. Cecilia was the last to leave. She looked back at Jack. “You’ll never be alone, Jack. We all carry each other in our hearts.”

Those words were nice, and heartfelt, he knew, but Jack Armstrong had never felt so alone as he did right now. He had a question, though.

“Cecilia?”

She turned back, perhaps surprised by the sudden urgency in his voice. “Yes, Jack?”

Jack gathered his breath and said, “Lizzie told me she wanted to take the kids to the Palace next summer.”

Cecilia moved closer to him. “She told you that?” she asked. “The Palace? My God. After all this time.”

“I know. But maybe...maybe the kids could go there sometime?”

Cecilia gripped his hand. “I’ll see to it, Jack. I promise.”

9

They all came in to visit Jack for the last time. They would be flying out later that day to their new homes. Bonnie was there, as was Fred. Cory and Jackie crowded around their father, hugging, kissing, and talking all at once to him.

Jack was lying in bed, dressed in a fresh gown. His face and body were gaunt; the machines keeping him comfortable until he passed were going full blast. He looked at each of his kids for what he knew would be the final time. He'd already instructed Bonnie to have him cremated. "No funeral," he'd told her. "I'm not putting the kids through that again."

"I'll call you as soon as I get there, Dad," said Cory, who wouldn't look away from his father.

"Me too!" chimed in Jackie.

Jack took several deep breaths as he prepared to do what had to be done. His kids would be gone forever in a few minutes, and he was determined to make these last moments as memorable and happy as possible.

“Got something for you,” said Jack. He’d had Sammy bring the three boxes to him. He slowly took them from the cabinet next to his bed and handed one to Cory and one to Jackie. He held the last one and gazed at Mikki. “For you.”

“What is it?” she asked, trying to seem disinterested, though he could tell her curiosity was piqued.

“Come see.”

She sighed, strolled over, and took the box from her father.

“Open them,” said Jack.

Cory and Jackie opened the boxes and looked down at the piece of metal with the purple ribbon attached.

Mikki’s was different.

Fred said to her, “That’s a Bronze Star. That’s for heroism in combat. Your dad was a real hero. The other ones are Purple Hearts for being...well, hurt in battle,” he finished, looking awkwardly at Cory and Jackie.

Jack said, “Open the box and think of me. Always be with you that way.”

Even Bonnie seemed genuinely moved by this gesture, and she dabbed at her eyes with a tissue. But Jack wasn’t looking at her. He was watching his daughter. She touched the medal carefully, and her mouth started to tremble. When she looked up and saw her dad watching her, she closed the box and quickly stuck it in her bag.

Cecilia was the last to leave. She sat next to him and patted his hand with her wrinkled one.

“How do you feel, Jack, really?”

“About dying or saying good-bye to my kids for the last time?” he said weakly.

“I mean, do you feel like you want to let go?”

One Summer

Jack turned to face her. The confusion, and even anger, seeping into his features was met by a radiant calm in hers.

“I’m in hospice, Cee. I’m dead.”

“Not yet you’re not.”

Jack looked away, sucked down a tortured breath. “Matter of time. Hours.”

“Do you want to let go?” she asked again.

“Yes. I do.”

“Okay, honey, okay.”

After Cecilia left, Jack lay there in the bed. His last ties to his family had been severed. It was over. He didn’t need to pull out the calendar. There would be no more dates to cross off. His hand moved to the call button. It was time now. He had prearranged this with the doctor. The machines keeping him alive would be turned off. He was done. It was time to go. All he wanted now was to see Lizzie. He conjured her face up in his mind’s eye. “It’s time, Lizzie,” he said. “It’s time.” The sense of relief was palpable.

However, his hand moved away from the button when Mikki came back into the room and held up the medal. “I just wanted to say that . . . that this was pretty cool.”

Father and daughter gazed awkwardly at each other, as though they were two long-lost friends reunited by chance. There was something in her eyes that Jack had not seen there for a long time.

“Mikki?” he said, his voice cracking.

She ran across the room and hugged him. Her breath burned against his cold neck, warming him, sending packets of energy, of strength, to all corners of his body. He squeezed back, as hard as his depleted energy would allow.

David Baldacci

She said, "I love you so much. So much."

Her body shook with the pain, the trauma of a child soon to be orphaned.

When she stood, Mikki kept her gaze away from him. When she spoke, her voice was husky. "Good-bye, Daddy."

She turned and rushed from the room.

"Good-bye, Michelle," Jack mumbled to the empty room.

Jack lay there for hours, until day evaporated to night. The clock ticked, and he didn't move. His breathing was steady, buoyed by the machine that replenished his lungs, keeping him alive. Something was burning in his chest that he could not exactly identify or even precisely locate. His thoughts were focused on his last embrace with his daughter, her unspoken plea for him not to leave her. With the end of his life, with his last breath, the Armstrong children would be without parents. His finger had hovered over the nurse's call button all day, ready to summon the doctor, to let it be over. But he never pushed it.

As the clock ticked, the burn in Jack's chest continued to grow. It wasn't painful; indeed, it warmed his throat, his arms, his legs, his feet, his hands. His eyes became teary and then dried; became teary and then dried again. Sobs came and went. And still his mind focused only on his daughter. That last embrace. That last silent plea.

The nurses came and went. He was fed with liquid, shot like a bullet into his body. The clock ticked, the air continued

to pour into him. At precisely midnight Jack started feeling odd. His lungs were straining, as they had been when Jackie had pulled the line out of the converter at home.

This might be it, Jack thought, button or no button; not even the machines could keep him alive any longer. He had wondered what the moment would actually feel like. Wedged in a mass of burning metal in Iraq after being blown up in his Humvee, he had wondered that too: whether his last moments on earth would be thousands of miles away from Lizzie and his kids. What it would feel like. What would be waiting for him.

Who would not be scared? Terrified even? The last journey. The one everyone took alone. Without the comfort of a companion. And, unless one had faith, without the reassurance that something awaited him at the end.

He took another deep breath, and then another. His lungs were definitely weakening. He could not drive enough oxygen into them to sustain life. He reached up and fiddled with the line in his nose. That's when he realized what the problem was. There was no airflow. He clicked on the bed light and turned to the wall. There was the problem; the line had come loose from the wall juncture. The pressure cuff had not come off, however, or he would've heard the air escaping into the room. He was about to press the call button but decided to see if he could push the line back in himself.

That's when it struck him.

How long have I been breathing on my own?

He glanced at the vitals monitor. The alarm hadn't gone off, though it should have. But as he gazed at the oxygen levels, he realized why the buzzer hadn't sounded. His oxygen levels hadn't dropped.

How was that possible?

He managed to push the line back in and took several deep breaths. Then he pulled the line out of his nose and breathed on his own for as long as he could. Ten minutes later, his lungs started to labor. Then he put the line back in.

What the hell is going on?

Over the next two hours, he kept pulling the line out and breathing on his own until he was up to fifteen minutes. His lungs normally felt like sacks of wet cement. Now they felt halfway normal.

At three a.m. he sat up in bed and then did the unthinkable. He released the side rail and swung around so his feet dangled over the sides of the bed. He inched forward until his toes touched the cold tile floor. Every part of him straining with the effort, little by little, Jack pushed himself up until most of his weight was supported by his legs. He could hold himself up for only a few seconds before collapsing back onto the sheets. Panting with the exertion, pain searing his weakened lungs, he repeated the movement twice more. Every muscle in his body was spasming from the strain.

Yet as the sweat cooled on his forehead, Jack smiled—for good reason.

He had just stood on his own power for the first time in months.

The next morning, after the hospice nurse had come through on her rounds, he edged to the side of the bed again, and his toes touched the floor. But then his hands slipped on the bedcovers and he crumpled to the floor. At first he panicked, his hand clawing for the call button, which was well out of reach. Then he calmed. The same methodical, practical nature that had carried him safely through Iraq and Afghanistan came back to him.

He grabbed the edge of the bed, tightened his grip, and pulled. His emaciated body slipped, slithered, and jerked until he was fully back on the bed. He lay there in quiet triumph, hard-earned sweat staining his hospice gown.

That night he half walked and half crawled to the bathroom and looked at himself in the mirror for the first time in months. It was not a pretty sight. He looked eighty-four instead of thirty-four. A sense of hopelessness settled over him. He was fooling himself. But as he continued to gaze in the mirror, a familiar voice sounded in his head.

You can do this, Jack.

He looked around frantically, but he was all alone.

You can do this, honey.

It was Lizzie. It couldn't be, of course, but it was.

He closed his eyes. "Can I?" he asked.

Yes, she said. You have to, Jack. For the children.

Jack crawled back to his bed and lay there. Had Lizzie really spoken to him? He didn't know. Part of him knew it was impossible. But what was happening to him seemed impossible too. He closed his eyes, conjured her image in his mind, and smiled.

The next night he heard the squeak of the gurney. The patient next door to him would suffer no longer. The person was in a better place. Jack had seen the minister walk down the hallway, Bible in hand. A better place. But Jack was no longer thinking about dying. For the first time since his death sentence had been pronounced, Jack was focused on living.

The next night as the clock hit midnight, Jack lifted himself off the bed and slowly walked around the room, supporting himself by putting one hand against the wall. He felt stronger, his lungs operating somewhat normally. It was as though his

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body was healing itself minute by minute. He heard a rumbling in his belly and realized that he was hungry. And he didn't want liquid pouring into a line. He wanted real food. Food that required teeth to consume.

Every so often he would smack his arm to make sure he wasn't dreaming. At last he convinced himself it was real. No, it wasn't just real.

This is a miracle.