



3 is Not a Crowd

Jeanie is trying to leave a suffocating situation only to discover her reality is much different than her perceptions. Upon really looking around, she begins to realize that she is right where she belongs.



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The Daily Reader – A Commuter’s Library
You Can Never Go Back **1**

Jeanie is washing dishes in the sink, staring off out the window, daydreaming about what her life could be. Now that she has turned twenty-one and old enough to be on her own, she applied and has been accepted to a college that is out of town, away from here. She has not told anyone what she is doing, didn’t need or want another lecture from her over protective brother, Cortland, about how she has to stay home. Where he can watch and protect her. She wants a life of her own and is determined to get one. Two years ago, their mom died but even when she was around, Jeanie had no real social life, her brother made sure of that. He always said it was for ‘her own protection’ that he scared away some of her friends. Plus, there was all that time she had to help her mom out.

All through high school she never dated any boy more than once because everyone was afraid of Cortland. He would make it very clear to all the boys that if they so much as tried to even think of a way to hurt her, in any way, he would pound the respect into them. Hence, she was very lonely through most of high school. Well, at least as far as boys were concerned. Although she does have a few guy friends but only because they considered her one of the guys

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You Can Never Go Back **2**

and would talk in front of her about “guy” things and she listened. A couple of them still keep in touch while away at school but emails and social media really aren’t a social life. Jeanie didn’t want to start college right away because she wasn’t sure what she wanted and the cost is so big, then her mom died and they had to watch all their money.

Jeanie knew she was attractive to some of the guys she hung out with at least, because she saw how the guys looked at her; and how the girls hated her because the guys didn’t look at them the same way. Maybe it is her personality that the girls hated because she had a bad habit of picking on girls who were very ‘girly’ and she had great comebacks for those who tried to insult her. Confirmation of her theory came to her when she was out with some of her so-called girl friends one afternoon, because the guys they met up would talk to Jeanie. On the other side, when any girl wanted to make sure she never talked to a particular guy again, usually because they wanted to date him themselves, they would make sure to let her brother know that someone was trying to make the move on Jeanie and then, in a flash, contact was lost.

This has to stop and it is going to, as soon as she finalizes her arrangements for leaving. Her

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You Can Never Go Back **3**

brother has no legal right to hold her home except to do his laundry and clean the house their folks left to them. She wants nothing to do with him anymore. He can keep the house and, without her being home, he can have his boys over whenever he wants, have his parties he always complains he never has, and have an orgy as far as she is concerned. Jeanie yells in her mind.

Cortland used to complain that because she is home he couldn’t have the guys over, but she knew the truth, he never wanted people around her to begin with. He knows how guys his age sometimes treat the women her age and she is off limits to the world, not just the boys his age. In his defense, she is all he has left, it is down to the two of them now. Their older brother ran out on them years ago and never looked back which is why it will be hard for her to tell Cortland she is going away for college. But she has to, she has to break away from under his watchful eye and become her own person not only a sister. Maybe this will give him the room he needs to become his own person too, someone who is on his own without the responsibility of caring for a sibling. Their circumstances are not his fault really, he was thrown into this mess as much as she was and thankfully, they have a house over their head that is

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You Can Never Go Back **4**

bought and paid for. She assumes anyway because he has never spoken to her about the upkeep of the house as far as money is concerned.

There is one thing she would like to do before she leaves though. Cortland has one friend who always has his eyes on her. He looks at her in a way no other guy does or has in the past. He doesn’t look at her like he is hungry for meat, more like he is happy to be in her presence. This friend always sits closest to her when he comes over for dinner, and he is living here with them now because his apartment flooded in the last big storm and he hasn’t been able to find someplace new yet. He gives her the impression that he doesn’t want to go home either. At twenty-five he is self-sufficient enough to be on his own, living here is temporary circumstances. She likes him a lot though, whenever they are together, they talk about everything so easily and laugh at the same stupid TV shows and jokes. As usual there is one problem – Cortland. Even his best friend is not good enough and there is a ‘hands off’ agreement between them while he is here. She will steal a kiss before she leaves, she really has to see if there are feelings other than brotherly love, at least from her side anyway, because if it’s one-sided she’ll have to leave sooner to get him out of her head. Although,

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You Can Never Go Back **5**

that may take a while since he is always there, day and night. In her head, that is.

Once again Jeanie’s daydreaming has caused her to drop a dish in the sink. The noise awakens her from her thoughts and she laughs at herself and picks the dish back up, it’s not broken. Back with reality, she hears the radio playing and sees the cars outside the window speeding down her street, as usual. With the last dish in her hand she hears Arthur come in from behind her, she can always sense when he is around before he even speaks.

Arthur is walking in with his empty mug and sees Jeanie at the sink doing hers and her brother’s dishes from breakfast. She is a fascinating creature, a shame her brother doesn’t see that. He has to let her go one of these days or she is going to run out on Cortland and his world will be crushed. Actually, Arthur already knows she is leaving but he doesn’t think she knows that he knows about her college acceptance. There was a guy from Boston University that called the other day to confirm when she is coming and Arthur answered the phone and told him to call back when she is home, he explained that he is only a guest. Poor Cortland, when is she going to tell him?

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You Can Never Go Back **6**

Never fear, he will stay by his friend’s side, like he did when their brother left and every other milestone event that happened in each other’s lives. Arthur never had a brother like Cortland, they are family in the truest sense of the word. Except for one little item, Jeanie. She is no sister to Arthur and Cortland has to wake up and see that. There is no way that Arthur can see Jeanie as a sister any more, no, not a sister.

Arthur shakes his head to get that idea out and comes up behind Jeanie to place the mug in the sink before she shuts off the water. That is the house rule, if the water is still running anyone is allowed to add their dishes, but if it is off then you have to do your own dishes. As he slides the mug into the sink, Jeanie turns the water off, turns around and, before he has time to think, she pulls his jacket lapel down and has her mouth on his in a grasp that is impossible to get out of. She pulls him into her and her mouth envelopes him with such fervor that he is caught up in the moment instantly. He doesn’t know what hits him. His hands gently go to her lower back and he slowly walks closer to her, to feel all of her in a way he has hoped one day he would.

His head is reeling in the thought of what would happen if Cortland walks in? Cortland will

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You Can Never Go Back **7**

plummet him to the ground and ask questions later. Jeanie is all he has, he isn’t going to like this one bit. Then Arthur has another thought, the reason Jeanie is doing both their dishes is because Cortland is out on his morning run. This thought makes him start to slide his hand up her back ever so slowly, he doesn’t want to miss one bit of this opportunity. Her curves are in all the right places, his body and mind are arguing with each other right now and he doesn’t know what to do about it because her mouth, well tongue, is doing things to him he has never experienced before and he is hard pressed to stop this. He is losing this battle, mind, soul and definitely body. Oh, this is going to end badly he knows, but he is too far gone to care and that makes him feel worse even though, at the same time, he is feeling so good. Damn you Cortland. Arthur finds himself uncontrollably moaning from deep in his throat and this makes him very confused, where the hell has that come from?

~ ~ ~

Jeanie does not know what to do when she sees that hand in front of her sliding that mug down. Her mind snaps and she has to grab at the opportunity she knows will never come again. All

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You Can Never Go Back **8**

those magazines articles she reads, about how to please a man in one easy lesson, has to come in handy some time and now is the time. She catches Arthur by such surprise it takes him a minute to realize what is going on, she can tell by his hesitant movements towards her and then by the softness of his touch on her lower back, now on her mid back. The taste of him is nothing short of amazing. The heat generating from his body next to hers is something she is not expecting and does not know what to do with. She wants to loosen her grip on his jacket but she can’t, now that she has him she doesn’t want him pulling away and it doesn’t look like he wants to either. Even if Cortland walks in right now – she wouldn’t care, good thing he won’t, she thinks, because he only left for his run a little while ago, it will be at least an hour before he is home.

Jeanie slowly releases one of her hands from the jacket and slides her hand up and around his neck to entangle her fingers in that lush brown hair she has always tussled with. She slides her fingers slowly up the back of his neck until her fingers are buried in his hair and then she slowly opens and closes her fingers over his curls. His hand is massaging her back while his body is starting to move in a rhythmic fashion as if they are in a dance. Jeanie

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You Can Never Go Back **9**

knows she has to stop this before it is too late, which it might already be by the sound of that moan that came from Arthur. On the other hand, she is very proud of herself that she could elicit such a response. For not having dated much this is a great compliment to her. ‘Stop this!’ she yells to herself.

~ ~ ~

Arthur is passed the point of no return. He is not sure when this ends how he is supposed to act and he is hoping that since she started this, she will start to pull away first, but that doesn’t seem likely now that her hand moved up to his hair. Oh, what that is doing to him, he wishes he could tell her. But this is Cortland’s sister, the girl he watched grow up, the girl who used to call him Arthur Farter. The girl he has admired since she turned sixteen. Damn you Cortland -- again!

Jeanie has come to the conclusion that this is no ordinary kiss and that she has to stop this. She started it so it is only fair that she stop, and not wait for him to because he sure doesn’t look like he wants to. She pushes her other arm around his neck, releases her hold on his mouth and pulls herself up to kiss his nose and then tries her darnest to turn around, only Arthur hasn’t let go of her yet and it’s

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You Can Never Go Back **10**

very hard to move when you are so close. She realizes there is barely room for air between them and his face is still lingering only centimeters above her own. She tries to slide her arms back down but he moves in closer making this act nearly impossible. So, she grabs back onto his curls because she is on her tiptoes and doesn’t want to fall. That, and there is nothing else to grab on to. Jeanie has to say something so why not the obvious, “Water is off, you have to wash your own mug.” She tries to say matter-of-factly.

Arthur smiles at her. “I think I can manage that but something or someone is preventing me from getting to the sink.” As he says the word ‘someone’ he is grinning at her.

“So, I guess that would be me. If you would be so kind as to let go of me and set me back down on the ground, I would be happy to step out of your way and let you do that.” Jeanie is trying really hard to be that little sister he always sees but it doesn’t look like this act is working anymore. She had wanted a kiss and she now she has all this inner energy, this part was not really planned. He is Cortland’s friend and she knows the rules, Cortland will be pissed beyond belief. Her biggest problem is how to not duplicate this situation again. Well, that

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You Can Never Go Back **11**

isn’t her biggest problem. *That* will be trying to convince herself she doesn’t really want to duplicate this situation again – now **THAT** is a real problem.

“I have to get some other things done today. If you don’t mind.” Jeanie looks down at the arms still wrapped around her as if to indicate that he should release her. Which he does not, in fact he is pulling her away from the sink now towards the door of the kitchen. She has so little restraint right now she allows him to pull her right out of the kitchen and into the living room where he promptly pulls both of them onto the couch. All the while his eyes are staring into hers as he sits down, he pulls her onto his lap. “Now you don’t have to stand on your toes. Talk to me Jeanie, please. You owe me that much.”

She quietly slides off his lap and onto the couch facing him. He moves to pull his legs up and cross them while facing her, she does the same. So now they at least have some distance between them and she can breathe, but how can she answer him? Is this merely a pent-up impulse? Is that what he wants to hear? I’m sex starved because my brother pushes everyone away, is that even correct? She isn’t starved, she never really craved being with a man intimately until he became such a fixture in their daily lives.

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You Can Never Go Back **12**

“Impulse?” Is all she can say, and say it quietly too with her eyes on *her* lap not even looking at him. All of a sudden, she is the embarrassed little girl and not a twenty-one-year-old young lady. Arthur reaches out and touches her under the chin, then rubs his thumb on her chin and cheek and pulls her face up to look at him. He isn’t sure what to say either so he figures he would say what is on his brain for the moment and live with the consequences later. “I like your impulses,” he says with a grin. “But do you really want to start something that you can’t carry through?” His face is inquisitive and sensitive at the same time. His eyes are green today, Jeanie always notices the change in his eye color depending on his mood but she has never seen them such a deep green as they are right now looking through her.

What does he mean I can’t carry through? Is he talking about Cortland because that would really tick her off to no end that her life begins and ends on his word. “I’m not sure what you mean,” she tries to sound innocent.

“Boston called the other day and wanted to know when you were coming. Have you even told Cortland that you applied? The semester starts soon. Jeanie, I, for one, will miss you if that makes

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You Can Never Go Back **13**

any difference to you. Oh, and one more thing, I’ve been wanting to do that myself for quite a long time, thank you again for not having impulse control this morning.” He finishes off with a bang she has to admit that. But DAMN! He knows, although he obviously hasn’t told Cortland yet. Which is worse because now she has to tell him and that’s going to kill him for sure. What is she thinking, she can’t hurt Cortland, she really can’t, but she wants a life of her own.

Jeanie sits back on the couch and pounds her hands down on both sides of her with a great big huff and then she does something she did not think she would do, she screams. Sits there and screams until her voice gives out because there is no more air coming out. It was an expression of all that has been pent-up for way too long.

“Been holding that in for quite some time, haven’t you?” Arthur smiles as he asks her in the gentlest voice he can muster, before he can hold her again Cortland comes bolting into the room out of breath. Panting in fact, “Are....are you ok Jeanie?” Breath, breath and deeper breath from him. “I heard you from down the block and bolted.” Arthur gets up and helps his friend to a chair.

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You Can Never Go Back **14**

“Breathe my friend, she is fine, only a release of a lot of pent-up energy that she has to release, it’s a therapy we used in one of my psych classes, I taught her how, that’s all. No need to give yourself a heart attack. You know I live here too now, why would you think she was in danger?” Arthur hands Cortland his glass of water he had out from before and goes back to sit down on the couch next to Jeanie, as he always does when they watch TV, with his arm around her shoulders. Jeanie knows she has to play the part right now so she doesn’t protest. She also doesn’t mind and would even possibly sit closer than usual but can’t move now because Cortland is watching them.

“You nearly scared the death out of me. I didn’t know I could run like that but thanks for showing me I could.” He picks up a nearby pillow and throws it at both of them. As he stands up, Cortland looks back at them and says, “Keep an eye on her Arthur while I go shower and find my head. Because of you two, I think I lost about a million brain cells today and put my heart into an aerobic workout it was not prepared to handle. Be down in ten.” He exits the room but not before trying to throw another pillow at them, which Arthur promptly deflects to the floor.

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You Can Never Go Back **15**

“Thank you, Arthur, I wasn’t ready to face him yet. I know I have to tell him but I don’t know how. We are all each other has as far as family is concerned. Maybe I won’t go. How about I mention the idea to him and if he really protests, I’ll re-apply to a local school and stay around here for a while longer. He needs me, at least until he finds himself a wife. I sure wish Peggy worked out. I like her.” Jeanie sits back into Arthur’s arms, somehow this most familiar place feels completely different this morning. It is not only comfortable his body feels like she is supposed to be here, right in his arms. This is becoming too complicated too fast.

“Stop nuzzling into me like that, you’re driving me crazy,” he whispers into the top of her head, “always has.” This second part is said so low that Jeanie isn’t sure she hears him right. Always has? Really? When did this start and why wasn’t she able to discern this body language. Oh yeah, one word.....Cortland. He has had her head so full of what not to do and feel she probably didn’t see what is going on right in front of her. But yet, somehow, she knew that she had to kiss him at least once before she left the house. Now that she did, why doesn’t she feel accomplished? In fact, she feels even more confused than ever. Good thing today is

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You Can Never Go Back **16**

Sunday and no one goes to work today, she is not sure she could have parted ways right now and yet she wants nothing more than to leave this place. Can anyone explain this madness to her? Please?!

Jeanie’s head is spinning now and she can’t seem to make sense of any of her own thoughts, her feelings, Arthur’s feelings, her desire to leave, it’s all a jumbled mess now.

Arthur turns on the TV and finds some mindless movie about two dogs roaming the countryside. This should be innocuous enough to keep their minds where they belong. At least until they can find time to sort things out. Part of him really wants her to stay now but, by the same token, living under the rule of Cortland for so long, he can be very sympathetic to her plight and desire to get out. Desire, damn wrong word to even think about....too late he looks at her again. I wonder how cold the showers can get here’ he thinks to himself, because I’m surely going to need one every day now, maybe even more than once a day until she leaves. He ponders.

Arthur leans his head back to the top of the couch and stares up at the ceiling. “Three thousand four hundred and fifteen, in case you are wondering.” Jeanie comments. He lifts his head up

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You Can Never Go Back **17**

and looks down upon her with a very inquisitive expression. “That’s how many little white dots there are in the ceiling from that view.”

Arthur puts his head back and laughs a hearty, out loud, laugh. Cortland walks in again to see them at that right moment. “What on earth could be so funny my friend?” He glances at the TV and noticed they are not watching a funny movie.

“Your sister told me how many white dots were on the ceiling,” Arthur responds to his friend

Before Arthur could finish his sentence, Cortland interrupts, “Three thousand four hundred and fifteen.” This makes Arthur laugh even harder. He is bowled over with laughter to the point of having tears run down his face. He has to get up and get a tissue, still holding his side. Cortland walks over and sits by Jeanie. “What did I say wrong?” he asks.

“Nothing, I guess he didn’t think we both knew that answer,” she smiles. Cortland pulls her over and gives her a kiss on the top of her head, like all brothers do.

When Arthur comes back into the room he sees his spot taken and goes to sit down on the giant bean bag chair on the floor near them. Cortland is looking rather pensive this morning which means something is probably really bothering him. Today

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You Can Never Go Back **18**

seems like a day of revelations from everyone but what could Cortland possibly tell us that we don’t already know? He is an open book about everything in his life. At least with the two of them he is.

Cortland works as a junior lawyer for a firm downtown and has spent a lot of time running out of town for them recently. Which is why he is happy to have Arthur move in with them, so he doesn’t have to worry about his sister. That’s what he told Arthur anyway. Now Arthur, looking at his friend, is feeling there is something else going on, something a lot more serious than him being here with Cortland’s sister.

Cortland is looking at the two people in the room with him trying to figure out how to tell them all he has to say. First, he is going to have to make sure everyone is in a good mood today. He’d rather tell them over dinner and after a great day of fun together. “Today we are going to have a fun day,” he declares. “What’s first on the agenda, I’ll give you a choice, either roller blading in the park or walking around the zoo.”

Arthur looks from Jeanie to his friend, ‘holy crap, they both have something to say and neither one of them is going to be the first to say what is going on, so they are going to play this, let’s have fun

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You Can Never Go Back **19**

together day and then ruin each other’s night’ NOT on his watch. He is going to call his friend’s bluff, and now. “Cortland cut the crap, say what you have to say. No one in this room needs buttering up to hear bad news and no one certainly wants to go rollerblading to fall on our collective asses. Let’s do today like the grown-ups, we pretend to be each day would, and say what’s on our minds for once. Plain and simple,” he glares at his friend and then at Jeanie. One of them has to be first.

Cortland looks down at his friend who is now sitting on the floor. Arthur is right and he knows he is, this had become a bad habit he has gotten into to save his sister from hearing bad news because he is always the one to tell her. When Dad ran out, when their brother left, when Mom got sick, always over ice cream or after a big treat. Time he stops this, he wouldn’t do this for a client, he has to remember she isn’t twelve anymore. He looks at his sister and for the first time he realizes she really is not twelve anymore, far from that. She is a full-grown woman and as much as he hates to admit, she is quite independent as well. She needs a life of her own and he is holding her back because of the house. But now the mess is all over. After all the fighting with his aunt, Cortland finally has full rights to sell the house

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You Can Never Go Back **20**

and they can start living their lives. Ok, adulthood here comes, he hopes Jeanie is ready for this. He looks again at Arthur, walks over to him, puts his hand on his shoulder for a second and takes a deep breath and starts.

“Right after Mom died, her sister Annie contested the Will. She got a lawyer and said that we were not to be trusted with the house and the responsibility that came with owning one. She fought to say that Mom’s money was better served in other places and for other more appreciative people like herself and her family. We should not be trusted with any influx of money and that she would set up a trust to make sure we weren’t out on the streets. So,” he takes another deep breath, squeezes his friend’s shoulder, and continues, “for the past two years I have been fighting her in court without you knowing. I have been working with one of the senior lawyers from the firm I work for. He took this on to both teach me how to win and to win over a person that he has had the unfortunate pleasure of knowing. – His words not mine when talking about both our aunt and her lawyer.

We did some investigation and found out that before Mom died, this sister tried to get her to change her Will so that she would get the house

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You Can Never Go Back **21**

away from us, Mom’s own children. That she needed this place more than you and I would. She said we would do fine in the small condo that we have in Boston. To that, I ask you, did you know our parents had a place in Boston?”

Jeanie doesn’t know how to respond. She has not known about any of this, the fight, the court, the condo. Why is he keeping all this from me? Why did he not trust me? As if reading her mind Cortland answers, “Our lawyer didn’t want you to know, he said this was a full on fight and was better that he handled all of garbage for both of us. Most of the time he even showed me things only after they had happened, so in many ways I was not in the loop any more than you. I did learn a lot from this case and let me tell you one thing. I will not let anyone screw you up, do you understand that? One day you will marry and I’m sure he will be great but still I will always look out for you, it’s my job and my pleasure. This showed me how little we have in terms of family. Our uncle on that side of the family decided to join in the suit to make sure he got what he felt was coming to him too. They were under the impression that Mom and Dad had money socked away somewhere and, more importantly, that they were entitled to partake. Even though Dad left long

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You Can Never Go Back **22**

ago, they still brought up his name constantly,”
Cortland comes up for air for a moment.

“Is it true? Do we have a place in Boston that is ours? Is there money out there that we could have used to spruce this place up with instead of doing all the work ourselves? No offense Arthur.”

“None taken” he grins.

“Yes, we have a place in Boston. I had to go out there and see the place with my lawyer, sorry I couldn’t tell you. This secrecy has been very hard for me all this time, keeping things from you, both of you actually, and no, there isn’t any windfall that we didn’t already know about. You see I haven’t been able to access any of our parents’ money until yesterday because the courts had to put a freeze on everything financial until the suit was over. Through some keen investigative work, my lawyer....sorry, our lawyer, found out that Mom’s sister and brother in law were both in hock up to their eyeballs and used to count on her to supplement them from time to time. That’s why she worked both jobs, one for us and one for them.....literally. Her boss from her night job said so during a trial that she often said how many hours she needed to work for her families, plural.

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You Can Never Go Back **23**

Bottom line? Our lawyer proved they had no intention of getting out of their debt and took the money and continued to live beyond their means. Dad had one sister who hated kids so she never wanted to meet us because she saw no purpose in young people, don’t ask. So as of right now my love, it really is only you and me against the world, and you Arthur, you are part of our family for sure. But I don’t like this world anymore and I want to leave,” Cortland begins to pace.

All this information is way too much for Jeanie to hold on to all at once. What the hell is he talking about? A family that uses each other, family that hates them without ever meeting them? A brother that left them because he couldn’t live with his own parents anymore? “Why Cortland? Why did our brother leave, you know, don’t you?” This is the first time she has ever confronted him on this subject. This question stops Cortland from pacing any more. He slowly turns around to face both his sister and his best friend, the man who has seen him through all the bad as well as the good times in their lives.

“Yes, I know, so does Arthur. You were only ten at the time, weren’t you? Too young to understand, and so was I. I was only sixteen and yet I

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You Can Never Go Back **24**

felt so much older than you because they told me what happened. They, meaning our parents. Our brother chose his addictions over his family. When Mom was dying she asked me if I had ever heard from him and I said no. She made me promise to look for him. I have not done this yet and I feel like a heel but I can’t bring myself to look, especially since I’ve been fighting her stupid sister these past two years. I don’t know if he is alive or not, to be honest.”

Cortland drops to the floor near his friend and starts to cry. More like a whimper but he is shaking with grief. “I can’t do this anymore. I can’t be in charge of everything anymore. God help me but I want to get out of here so we can start all over somewhere fresh. Do you understand that? Please tell me that someone in this room understands that!” He calls through his wet eyes Cortland looks from Arthur to Jeanie and back again. No one is answering. The room is dead silent.

Jeanie speaks first. “As long as we were all revealing things, I might as well too. Besides, you brought up Boston first. If we move to the condo in Boston, can I go to school?” she bows her head and mumbles, “I already got in.”

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You Can Never Go Back **25**

Arthur is watching this unfold in front of him and he still can’t believe his eyes and ears. The girl he has been pinning for all this time finally made him feel as if she has feelings too and his best friend/brother is telling him he wants to run far from this place as he could. He is not going to handle this well. One is bad enough but both leaving will be too much. His world is coming crashing down before his eyes and he is about to join Cortland in the land of the teary eyed. Arthur looks over at Jeanie who has caught his eye as a tear is coming down his cheek without him knowing. Well, so much for being macho, this is painful and he is not afraid to show them.

“What would you do for work Cortland? You’d have to pass the bar again, and what about Arthur? We can’t exactly leave him here high and dry now, can we? We are all he has as well and I’m not sure I’m ready to lose everything *and* everyone at the same time. Much of it I can do without, but not the people.” Jeanie has to look away from Arthur or she is going to join them, which is most likely inevitable anyway. She knows that her brother is a sensitive guy but she has never seen Arthur shed a tear even after his old girlfriend crashed her car and

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You Can Never Go Back **26**

was in the hospital for a while. Arthur is everyone’s rock.

The three of them sit in silence for quite a long time, each reveling in their own personal misery, each one trying to make sense of what the other is thinking and not saying. Cortland’s head is spinning, his heart racing, his hands sweating.....oh my god is he having a heart attack? He quickly looks over at Jeanie who seems to understand his thoughts – always. She jumps off the couch and hugs him tightly.

“No,” she whispers, “you aren’t having a heart attack you’re having a heart break, there has been way too much pressure on you to be ‘the man’ for too long, now you have to be a brother and only a brother.” With this her own tears begin to fall and she rocks with him for a few minutes, then as she is on the floor with her brother and right near Arthur, she does the unthinkable. She pulls Arthur into their hug. She reaches behind her brother and grabs Arthur’s arm to pull him in. They make a Cortland sandwich but she needs to feel Arthur’s arms on her again and this is the only way.

Jeanie is again the first to speak. She slowly pulls away from her brother and Arthur and sits beside Cortland closely so that she has her arm

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You Can Never Go Back **27**

around his back but her hand is in Arthur’s. Her head is leaning onto Cortland’s shoulders, “Before we do anything rash, I say we all go take that walk in the park and clear our heads. We will continue this discussion over pizza and ice cream for lunch. Yes?” Cortland looks up at his sister and taps her on her nose with his finger.

“Ok, go get walking shoes on, Arthur and I will lock up and meet you out at the car,” he says in his big brother voice.

The three of them each leave the room in different directions, thankful for the many doors in the room, so that no one faces each other for the next couple of minutes. Jeanie leaves first, she needs to go finish getting dressed, actually, she tears down the hall and up the stairs to get out of that room. Cortland does what he does best, cleans up all the pillows that have been thrown around from before, turns off the TV and goes into the kitchen to wash his face and clear his head. Arthur goes out the back opening into the den to collect his thoughts for a second. This is his family now and he isn’t going to lose them and he definitely isn’t going to lose her, not now, not before he gets the chance to really be with her unguarded. Somehow this is going to work. Somehow.

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They all seem to meander to the front door about the same time and clumsily make their way outside to the car, each one of them taking a deep breath right as they get outside. Individually, they each have the same thought, “this is going to work itself out.”

~ ~ ~

Cortland starts up the car, he looks over at Jeanie and says, “We’re going to survive this, I promise,” and then he looks in the rearview mirror at his best friend, “all of us.” The simple act of getting out of the house, and away from all that tension, makes Cortland feel better already. Had Jeanie really said that she already applied to school? She must have, he couldn’t have made that information up himself. Cortland feels like a big jerk, he had asked her to put off going to college until he settled a few things and then he would help her out.

He should have been honest with her and said he couldn’t afford to have her go to school without selling the house. She has to go to college, she has to become her own person but he has been so wrapped up in being her guardian and sheltering her from all the madness that he has smothered her. He sees that now very clearly. She is too ashamed to

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You Can Never Go Back **29**

admit to her brother what a jerk he has been and that part is not right but the fact that she got into Boston U. well, that’s pretty nice.

“So, you got into B.U.? That’s awesome! I’m sorry I wasn’t there for you to help you pick out a school that fits you best. I guess you found one on your own. I know I don’t say this enough Jeanie but I do love you and I appreciate you hanging around while I went through all this crap and.....and, well, I’m sorry, sorry to both of you for not being honest and letting you know what was going on. Believe me there were times when I could have used you,” he rambles.

Arthur reaches forward and touches his friend’s shoulder. “Always there for you man, you know that. But no more being mom, dad and sentry; time you acted like a big brother and only a brother as Jeanie said. As everyone else has, I too will apologize for being blatantly honest today, but someone had to call you both out and it might as well have been me.” Arthur sits back in his chair but not before rubbing Jeanie’s right shoulder, the one Cortland can’t possibly see. He needs her and he is hoping that she sees that now. He is going to get through to her that he does not want to be her big brother any more. Watching her hair move in the

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You Can Never Go Back **30**

breeze from the window is making him nuts on the inside. His mind keeps going back to the kitchen this morning and every time he does, so does his body. ‘Think cold shower’ he keeps telling himself. Damn! Not helping.

“I’ve been thinking about schools for a long time,” Jeanie starts in, “I didn’t know what or where. I sort of picked one arbitrarily not for any logical reason. But I got in all the same so I guess I’m meant to be there. I wish you could have trusted us more with the information, maybe you wouldn’t have been such a pain in the ass to deal with, especially these past few months.” As she finishes saying her words, she realizes they were hurtful but she is hoping for some leniency in his response. He doesn’t always do lenient, especially when insulted.

“Jeanie, I’ve treated you like the ten-year-old girl, the same one I had to protect all those years ago. Somewhere in my head you never grew up. I didn’t want you to see our older brother as he was, most days, and especially, the nights, they were not pretty. Didn’t want you to know the escapades of our poor excuse of a father but I couldn’t hide you from his outward insults, or the pain you received from Mom’s illness. I did the next best thing I could do and kept the world from invading your charm, kept

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You Can Never Go Back **31**

them all from ruining my beautiful little girl. I’ve probably been a lot more than a pain in the ass to you. Thanks for putting a mild spin on things for me.” Cortland pulls her over to give her a kiss on the head again; the only way he knows how to show her affection. He hopes that she will accept him as is.

Jeanie sits up and punches him in the shoulder like she always does. Good, everyone is settling back into their right places, he thinks to himself. Cortland glances in the rearview mirror to see Arthur staring at the front seat in Jeanie’s direction. Why has he not recognized that look before. Of course, Arthur is the one person who would treat his sister with the dignity she deserves. Ok, boys and girls, I’ll step away, but not too far and I won’t tell you I know either. He thinks to himself.

~ ~ ~

Cortland pulls up to a parking spot, he notices a peculiar sight over by the bandstand. “Hey, guys look at the bandstand, are there two people wrestling? Or is that.....Holy Shit!” Cortland jumps out of the car and takes off towards the bandstand barely having time to shut the car off. He can’t believe his eyes, someone is taking advantage of a woman right there in broad daylight. Arthur yells at

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You Can Never Go Back **32**

Jeanie to stay in the car and call the cops and he darts after his friend. Jeanie does as she is told and watches in horror as the two of them arrive at the bandstand and pull not one but two people off the woman on the ground. Thankfully, there is always police around this park so within minutes they show up and apprehend the two men in question. Of course, they had to peel Cortland and Arthur off of them first. This Jeanie can tell from the car.

Jeanie waits patiently for them to finish talking to the police and head back to the car. All the while, she is thinking that if one of them is hurt she will burst. This day is so full of emotion already, she doesn’t know what to do with herself. She sits there playing with her phone and then looking up at the action, back and forth and still no sign of them coming back towards the car.

Cortland is still on the ground with the girl and finally she sees Arthur coming back to the car looking quite ashen and beaten but not physically, emotionally. Jeanie jumps out of the car, on impulse of course, and runs to him. He greets her with open arms and stands there holding her for a couple minutes before he leads her over to the nearest bench.

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“Cortland is going.....” he pauses to look up at his friend who Jeanie sees is now getting into the ambulance “he is going to the hospital with..... Peggy.” Arthur puts his head down on Jeanie’s shoulder and she pulls him in. The two of them stand there for quite some time without saying a word. They hold each other and watch the people at the park. “You ready to go? I have the keys. Cortland said we could show up there if we’d like to. But I can take you home first if you’d like.” Now he is sounding like a big brother or is it more like a concerned friend. It is really hard for Jeanie to hear this side of him anymore.

“He never stopped loving her, did he? He had to give up their relationship because of me and because of the trial and other family bullshit. No, I don’t want to go home, I want to be there for him the way we should, the way he’d be there for us. I want to be there for her too.” She says in the calmest voice she can muster.

Silence overtakes them once again as they walk to the car and ride to the hospital. Once there, they have to look for some time until they find Cortland and Peggy. She had been admitted right away because they had beaten her up quite extensively. Cortland is at her side and she is drugged

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You Can Never Go Back **34**

up and lying in the bed. Cortland tells them there are probably broken ribs and her face is all bruised up pretty badly. Possibly a slight crack in the face but nothing to worry about. And no, she doesn’t know he is here yet, at least he doesn’t think so. He had to tell the doctors everything he knows about her. They are waiting for one or two more scans to confirm all of their suspicions, but usually the emergency doctors recognize these types of injuries. Like Cortland, Arthur and Jeanie, Peggy has no real family to speak of. Arthur has parents but they don’t like the fact that he is an electrician and doesn’t have a ‘profession’ as they say. He is nothing to them anymore, that’s what they have told him, time and time again.

Here they are, the four musketeers sharing their lives together, separately. Well, no more, thinks Jeanie, time they all banded together and make something of themselves, time to leave this town together and start anew. “Silly question Cortland but I am wondering if the condo in Boston could accommodate four people.” Jeanie is watching her brother as he slowly lifts his head off the bed by Peggy’s hand that he has been holding, he is moving as if his body is working its way through sludge, taking herculean efforts to move. His head turns ever

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You Can Never Go Back **35**

so slightly to catch her face, he looks at Arthur who is sitting across the way.

His head goes back to Peggy and he brushes the hair away from her face. “Yes, Jeanie, there are two large bedrooms, each big enough for two beds and dressers, if we need. Plus living room and kitchen; furniture is already there.” He is talking but all the while he is staring at Peggy’s face. The hurt is all over him, the guilt is evident in his face, Jeanie can see even from where she is sitting.

Arthur is watching his friend suffer and he watches his sister try and put all the pieces of the day together. This day, many years from now, will become a beginning or an ending, he is hoping for new beginnings for all of them. He stands up to walk over to Jeanie but she meets him half way unconsciously. The two of them stand there watching Cortland watch Peggy. No one moves for a really long time.

Their silence is interrupted by the door swinging open with a nurse and a policeman. He walks directly to Cortland and gently pulls him away while the nurse does what she has to do. Whatever the policeman is telling him, Cortland takes rather hard for he crumbles to the ground on his knees, Arthur is there at lightning speed holding onto his

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You Can Never Go Back **36**

friend and staring up at the policeman with contempt. “I’m sorry Sir, but I have to tell the truth, there is no other way to say what I had to say.

Without family, your friend has put himself and you two as her next of kin and so he is entitled to know that the two men you apprehended are being charged with rape and attempted murder. We have no motive right now but one of them confessed to working with her down at her offices on Fourth Street. They won’t be getting out any time soon. Not too many people would get involved, we thank you both. If I need to get in touch with you, the numbers you gave before are best?” Arthur nods. “I should also tell you that normally just because you put your name down doesn’t always work, but you also saved her life and it was clear when we showed up that there is an emotional attachment between the two of you.” The policeman points to Cortland and Peggy. Arthur shakes his head yes.

“An unusual case, that is for sure. The man who confessed has children and a wife of his own. This is messed up. My superior is getting involved. We all have daughters. In broad daylight too.” He walks away shaking his own head in disbelief.

The nurse finishes with Peggy as the policeman is leaving and Arthur helps his friend off

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You Can Never Go Back **37**

the floor and back onto the chair. “He should win the Medal of Honor as far as I’m concerned, both of you should. Few men would take that kind of risk for someone they don’t know – few men who aren’t already armed themselves. She is very lucky you came along when you did.” The nurse is kind to say those words but Jeanie knows the last thing either of them wants is a medal. They would settle for consciousness in their friend.

Jeanie walks the nurse out while the boys watch the patient. “Will she wake up soon?”

“Oh, darling that’s hard to tell. Some of her sleep is from the medicines they gave her so that she would not be in as much pain. Give her some time, she will. They are not worried about her, concerned, but no life-threatening injuries thankfully. Her head scan showed no danger to her brain so we are all hopeful.”

“Thank you for telling me, I know you probably shouldn’t have with privacy laws and such, but I won’t tell anyone. We are all each other has now, all four of us.” Jeanie cannot bring herself to walk back in yet. Their entire day has been one long emotional episode. Someone has to lighten the mood a bit. She asks for directions to the cafeteria and darts out with a great idea.

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Arthur looks up and notices that Jeanie has left. He could not imagine where she went nor can he leave his friend’s side, either of them, to go find her. He can really use some music right about now to help him clear his head.

~ ~ ~

As Jeanie gets down to the cafeteria she sees exactly what she wants. Thankfully, she always takes her purse with her when she goes out. She makes all her purchases with a smile and goes trotting up the stairs, no waiting for an elevator. However, by the time she gets to the fifth floor she isn’t trotting as fast that’s for sure. She passes the nurse’s station and a group of them look up and smile. She backs herself into the room carrying all her goods. Cortland is the first to spot her and walks over quickly to relieve her of her packages.

When Cortland looks again, he realizes what she is carrying. A big giant stuffed panda! Of course Jeanie would remember, who else would. Peggy loves pandas, she always said they are one of the most beautiful creatures on earth. She also has three pints of ice cream and some pizza. Cortland and Arthur pull over the small table in the room and they all sit around eating in silence, but at least they are

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You Can Never Go Back **39**

smiling. “You’re the best Jeanie.” Cortland says leaning over to bop her on the nose again. “I’ll second that emotion.” Arthur says quietly. Cortland looks up and smiles again.

Soon after they eat and talk some more about the idea of being in Boston, Peggy starts stirring. Cortland runs to her bedside and grabs her hand. “Peggy darling, you’re in the hospital. Do you remember what happened? Do you even know who I am?” Cortland has been on pins and needles waiting for her to recognize him. Even slightly, he will take slightly over not at all. The hours have felt like days today.

Peggy’s face looks contorted as she tries to speak, “I had hositals, too ma-e sick,” Cortland smiles. “Yes, I know you hate hospitals, too many sick people you always say that. Jeanie and Arthur are here as well.” The two of them come to the foot of her bed so as not to overwhelm her.

“Mice manda.”

“Yes, it is a nice panda – Jeanie went looking all over the hospital for one, just for you.” Cortland is lighting up a bit. His voice not as strained as it has been these past couple hours. “You don’t have to talk Peggy, we will be here all night don’t worry.”

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You Can Never Go Back **40**

Peggy tries hard to take in what she is seeing. Her memories are fuzzy but right before the beating stopped she could have sworn she heard Cortland’s voice. She looks at his eyes, and in a flash, she knows she is right. Somehow, he was there, her savior is back. Tears roll down her face uncontrollably. Cortland is there in a millisecond to wipe them away. She takes all her strength but she reaches up to him and pulls him down. “Sank you, ave me.” There are more tears, this time from both of them. Arthur and Jeanie pull back to give them some space.

Jeanie walks over to the table and starts to clean up from what they had eaten. “You certainly are your brother’s sister.” Arthur says, trying to lighten the mood. Jeanie looks up at him and he has heat in his eyes but not the lustful heat you see on TV when a man likes what he sees and doesn’t want to let go, but the kind you see in someone who has sincerity behind their feelings. Jeanie freezes inside. She looks right at him and those green eyes, they can melt her to her core. This is not supposed to happen. She was supposed to give him a simple kiss.

She was supposed to kiss him and leave, not take everyone with her. But maybe a new place will give new beginnings to everyone. Maybe now that Peggy is back, Cortland will stay here and take care

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You Can Never Go Back **41**

of her. Or, now, maybe this threesome will be a quartet. ‘Is this getting better or worse?’ she wonders. She looks back down at the table and continues to clear things up while she tries desperately to clear things up in her head. She doesn’t dare look back up at Arthur although he is making it very hard to forget he is there because he hasn’t moved an inch away. In fact, he starts to help her and is way too close for her head to clear. Well, if she is really honest with herself, it is comforting to know he is here. Oh my, Jeanie’s head is spinning. She doesn’t know which way is up right now. She scans the room to find the trash can and brings everything over to throw out. Arthur follows her, naturally.

She drops all the plates and other garbage into the can and looks over at Cortland and Peggy, he is leaning down with his forehead touching hers and their fingers are interlocked right at chest level in between them. Looks like they are praying together but she knows better, Cortland will only pray in private – that is his way. No, she knows they are talking or at least he is, because she probably can’t right now. She will bet that in these past few minutes he has rambled all that has happened to him in the past year that she has been away. Part of her wants to

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You Can Never Go Back **42**

go over and give Peggy a hug herself, let her know not only Cortland is here for her.

Of all the people to have been at the park, if she was a religious woman, she would think all this is not a series of coincidences but fate. Definitely something to ponder though.

Jeanie’s parents never brought them up with a particularly religious background. They were quite spiritual in their beliefs and they believed that their children would make their own decisions when it came to formal religion. Jeanie finds herself neither here nor there when it comes to traditional religion but she does believe there is a higher being and that through prayer some things could change. Arthur too is similar in his beliefs, so is Peggy. They used to talk for hours over such ideas when Peggy came over. As a matter of fact, the four of them used to talk about anything from the best fart joke to how to solve world hunger. What a group they are. Only Jeanie and Cortland are biologically related but when all four of them are together they are a family in their own way.

Jeanie finds herself holding her arms around herself and looking out the window of the hospital room. She has closed the curtain around Cortland and Peggy to give them an element of privacy that

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You Can Never Go Back **43**

they probably want and need right now, any moment the nurse will be back to see that Peggy has woken up. No one in the room has buzzed the nurse like they are supposed to. Besides, when she wakes, the cops will be coming back as well and they all had decided, while they were eating, that she needs to know other things before she has to deal with the police. Cortland has admitted that he pushed her away. Arthur and Jeanie smile because they had already come to that conclusion by themselves. Cortland said he thought the departure was for the best but clearly it was not. Not for her, him or anyone around.

They all need each other and that is how life needs to be from here on out. For whatever reason someone wants to come up with, the universe put them together and now it is their job to stay that way, whatever it takes. Without her realizing, Jeanie has begun to cry, the tears are flowing down her cheeks and she continues to stare out the window. Her head hits the window and she leaves it there sobbing at the circumstances of her life right now.

Arthur is watching Jeanie from only a couple of feet away and it is killing him not to run over there and hold her tight. He knows she wants and needs someone but he also knows she wants to be alone.

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You Can Never Go Back **44**

Her tears are ripping him up inside right now and he is not sure how all this emotion has come to the foreground when the day started out with a simple kiss. He has pinned for her for a while but he always thought it was a brotherly love watching a sister come of age and appreciating her beauty. Until the first moment of that kiss, he had no idea, or at least never admitted the idea to himself, that he really loves her, wants her and is willing to do anything for her.

This is not the time or the place for him to act upon how he is feeling, but then again, when is the right time? When she leaves? When they all end up leaving him and going to Boston? Surely, she didn’t mean what she said when she said he should be with them too. She has only said it because he was in the room. She wants her freedom, needs some time away from everyone and to start things anew. He will give her that, he doesn’t know for how long, but he will give her a fresh start. Alone.

Jeanie finally catches her own breath and sees where she is. She picks her head off the window and looks outside. She puts her hands on the window and slowly pushes herself back. She sees her reflection in the window and doesn’t like what she sees. She can’t do life alone. She is standing here for only a few minutes and she needs another person.

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You Can Never Go Back **45**

She needs to be in someone’s arms be it Cortland, Arthurs or even the nurse from before. She will never be able to be by herself. She needs people. Does that make her less of a person? Does that mean she can’t stand on her own two feet when she would need to? Or does it simply mean she is not ready? Her head is spinning and she can’t stop the whirling from happening. She turns around quickly and sees that Arthur has started to walk towards her.

She stares into his eyes and he slowly puts his arms up as if to say, ‘do you need a hug?’ Jeanie gladly goes into those arms and melts. Arthur puts his arms around her and envelopes her with all the strength he can give her. He bends his head down and kisses the top of her head and stays there for a minute. Their silence to each other speaking the volumes their mouths can’t find. Jeanie slowly lifts her head to look at Arthur and he is looking down at her in a way that makes her uneasy and comfortable at the same time. Before he can ask her what she wants him to do, the door opens again.

The nurse sees the curtain closed and then only sees two people. She looks around for a second and smiles. “Knock, knock” she says before she opens the curtain to reveal what she assumed. The patient is awake and in the arms of the most gallant

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You Can Never Go Back **46**

man she has ever seen. Good thing she is already married, she thinks to herself, because this one is a keeper.

“I take it you already know each other then,” she smiles. “I need to check her sir and you’ll have to step beyond the curtain please.”

Peggy shakes her head no, “It’s ok, he ban day.” The nurse smiles again, “Oh, I’m not kicking him out dearie I know he can stay but not when I’m checking your bandages. He will be outside the curtain. I can see by the way you are looking at each other that you knew each other long before today, huh?” Peggy tries hard not to smile because smiling hurts. She shakes her head yes instead, but finding that even doing that is not too comfortable either. The nurse points again to Cortland to leave the curtain area and reluctantly he steps to the other side.

There he sees Arthur still standing with his arm around his sister’s waist. Yeah, this is a good thing he thinks to himself, the four of them in Boston together, new place, and new beginnings. Only this time, he is not letting go of Peggy. He put his life on hold long enough because of that damn trial. Now that it is over with, he is full speed on. Cortland begins to pace, as he usually does when he

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You Can Never Go Back **47**

is thinking. He will take Peggy home with them until she heals enough to move on. They will put the house up for sale the day after she is well and sell as fast as they can.

In the interim, maybe Arthur and Jeanie can go ahead and get the Boston apartment ready for everyone. This will give them the time they need to figure things out and give him and Peggy the same space as well.

Cortland walks over to his sister and stands there smiling. He reaches out and pulls her into the biggest hug he can muster at the moment. He is holding her and swaying back and forth with her. “Things are going to be different, we are going to be happy now – you, me, Arthur and Peggy. Don’t worry, this will all work out.” He whispers this softly into her head as he always does when he has something serious to say.

Jeanie pushes him slowly away so she can see his face, like Arthur, she has to look up. Cortland is actually smiling. She hasn’t seen him do this in quite some time. He has been carrying this entire burden of their lives on his own thinking he was saving them from pain but it was painful to watch him become so introverted. Both she and Arthur knew all of this sorrow couldn’t have all been work. Those trips out

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You Can Never Go Back **48**

of town were to see the apartment in Boston for legal purposes. Everything he has been doing was for them and all she kept doing was thinking about how bad things were for her. If only they had talked.

“I’m sorry I didn’t tell you about wanting to get away for school. I’m sorry I didn’t tell you about wanting out of the house and all the bad memories the house holds for me. Can you forgive me Cortland? I don’t want to go to Boston alone anymore. I want us to be a family as we always have been.” Jeanie is not sure how her words ever came out so calmly because she is bursting on the inside.

“Ah, my sweet princess, it is I who should be apologizing to you again. I was given the job as sworn protector and I failed. You are not ten years old anymore and I should have trusted you with this information. I should have used you both (he looks over her shoulder to Arthur) as a sounding board when in fact I shut you out. I shut everyone out.” With this he looks rather longingly at the curtain, then back at Jeanie. “Yes, she knew what was going on and I didn’t want to drag her down with the ship. I was not sure if we were going to lose the house or possibly even more than that, I couldn’t have her be part of my downfall, I couldn’t. I failed you all.”

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You Can Never Go Back **49**

Cortland sits down on the chair and puts his head in his hands and shakes.

Arthur is next to him quickly, as seems to be his job today. “Listen, old man, you failed no one. You are here by heroic means even if you don’t think so. You did something no man has the guts to do anymore. You ran to someone’s care before you even knew who was in trouble. That, my friend, wins you everything in my book. You took a situation that totally sucked in your family and tried to save us all from uncertainty. Ok, lesson learned, we are here to help you through sickness or in health, for richer or for poor, till death do us part – if you pardon the cliché.”

“Amen,” says a voice from behind them. They all look up and see the police officer from before.

“You are a special group of friends that’s for sure. The nurse called me and told me that the patient is awake. Will you please go over with me and introduce me so that I can finish up what needs to be done?” Cortland is the first to rise; he puts both arms around Arthur and gives him a brotherly hug. Arthur is here to stay. He knew that, but now he feels it too.

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You Can Never Go Back **50**

Very gingerly, Cortland pulls back the curtain that the nurse left closed. “Peggy, this is the officer that was first on the scene. He needs to ask you a few questions. Are you up for that?” Cortland is already at her side and holding her hand before he finishes the sentence. Peggy nods yes.

“If it’s easier, I’ll ask you a few yes and no questions first. If you want to speak you can or you can write things down.” The officer says.

Jeanie pulls on Arthur’s hand and leads him out of the room. “I don’t think I want to hear what happened. Does that make me a bad person?”

“No, makes you an honest one, makes you human. How about we sit over on those chairs until the officer comes back out?” Arthur points to the chairs waiting by the nurse’s station. Hand in hand they go and sit down in silence. Arthur cannot help his body’s reaction, he wishes he can, but sitting there holding on to her makes him feel really good. He wants to shout out to anyone who will listen that she is his but he isn’t sure she is yet so he keeps his thoughts to himself. Barely.

Jeanie can feel her own pulse rising as they sit there holding hands. His fingers are interlocked with hers and their arms are touching up to their elbows. Arthur has pushed his chair closer so that they can

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You Can Never Go Back **51**

hold hands and put their collective hands on her lap with ease and not have them dangle down between the chairs. Now their legs are touching too and her heart rate is clearly getting faster. If she was not in the hospital, what would she be doing right now? Oh my, she had better curb those thoughts. She feels herself get a little flushed in the face.

Arthur catches site of the color rushing into Jeanie’s cheeks as he ‘accidently’ rubs his leg on hers. He smiles a bit because he is happy to see her reaction. But they are in a hospital right now waiting on the health of their good friend. In fact, you can’t get into a more public part of the hospital as they are in right now. So why are they sitting here? “Want to go get some more ice cream downstairs?” He finally musters out even though he is pretty sure she isn’t hungry yet.

Jeanie looks somewhat relieved that he said something about them getting out of their current spot. She is not sure how much longer she can be next to him without exploding. When they get up neither of them realizes that their hands are still locked until one of the nurses passes them by and smiles as she looks at them. They quickly let go and continue to walk towards the same door. Neither one of them loves elevators, so they head towards the

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You Can Never Go Back **52**

stairwell. Almost immediately after Jeanie gets passed the door Arthur is holding open, he pushes the door closed and before she can make it to the top of the steps to start going down, he has her backed up against the wall and this time it is his mouth on hers first.

First, he is very slow and deliberate, then he closes in on her a bit more and her arms rise almost instinctively to be around his neck. There is no surprise anymore, only pure feeling, at least on his part. Arthur cannot believe how good this feels. How much touching her makes him sing on the inside. How his own pulse is pounding in his ears while he feels hers through her shirt in his chest. They are connecting on levels he never thought possible with her or anyone else actually.

He slides his hands down her arms from his neck and then slowly down her sides and rests them on her hips for a moment and then he lets them slide back up barely touching her and he stops as his hands reach her chest. Could he venture forward? Lord knows he wants to. Oh, what he wants to do and what he can do are probably two totally different things. It takes all his restraint to allow his hands to move back down and come to rest on her lower back. He is breathing rather rapidly he notices.

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Jeanie can’t believe her luck. He makes the first move. She is thrilled to know that it isn’t only her who was having a hard time in those chairs. First, his hands are around her head and that alone makes her shiver. She gladly puts her arms around his head even if she has to reach for them on her toes, she doesn’t really care right now. She isn’t sure she is even touching the ground at the moment.

It is possible he has her suspended in midair because that is how she feels. She does not feel the concrete wall behind her, nor does she notice where they are. All she knows is how she feels right now, and it is all good. Jeanie feels his arms leave her head and head down her arms as if he is trying to discover them for the first time. Then he moves them ever so gently down her sides and she thinks she is going to scream, but who can scream when there is this most skillful tongue connecting to hers. She doesn’t want any of this to stop, not now or ever. Maybe she really doesn’t have to look any further. Oh, holy crap, his hands stopped at her chest, Jeanie lets out an uncontrollable moan from the back of her throat and her body is doing summersaults inside right now.

Is he going to caress her? Is he going to touch them? Is he teasing her, because this is not funny. Then his hands slide back down and Jeanie realizes

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You Can Never Go Back **54**

that he is pulling back with restraint. It is then that she opens one of her eyes and smiles.

Arthur looks down at her, this time he is hungry. “Did I say something funny to you?” Jeanie isn’t sure he is sarcastic or annoyed, she has to admit what happened. “I opened one eye to help me take in what is going on and through that eye I see the camera in the corner there. Someone must be enjoying this as much as we are.” Arthur quickly lets go and looks around. Jeanie has been on her tiptoes and slips down for a second. Not to worry, he catches her. They both sit down on the first step there, Arthur puts his arm around her waist and she puts her head on his shoulder.

“I don’t think we can hide this, whatever it is, from your brother. I know I won’t be able to be with you without my eyes and heart showing what they are feeling. Maybe you should go back into the room and I’ll go home for the night. You guys stay here. I need a cold shower anyway.”

Jeanie is not sure how to respond. What does he mean, whatever it is? Maybe he is not sure what to call their attraction either. She will put those thoughts in the back of her mind. Cortland needs her right now and Arthur is right – if they both went home, it could be disastrous – or totally beautiful,

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You Can Never Go Back **55**

she thinks. “If I said I wanted to come home tonight would that put a damper on your cold shower you seem to be looking forward to?” She is trying to get a read on his real mood and/or feelings. Arthur is never good at sharing what he is thinking when it comes to things that are personal.

Arthur lifts his free hand and puts two fingers under her chin and tilts her face enough to kiss her again. Only this time a quick one. “If you must know, I don’t trust myself around you anymore. I’m not sure Cortland would like me even for what we are doing now. He is my best friend, my brother I never had. You guys are my family, which makes how I am feeling very difficult.”

Jeanie smiles at him in a way that is making him melt. If he doesn’t leave soon, there is going to be no turning back and he isn’t sure she is aware of that yet. He does not think Jeanie is a virgin but she isn’t very experienced, at least he doesn’t think so because Cortland never let her date. But there is something in her eyes that is telling him that brother Cortland doesn’t know everything about his sister.

“Arthur, I’ve liked you for a long time, that kiss this morning was supposed to be the last thing we did together before I left. But now...” Jeanie looks down at her lap

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You Can Never Go Back **56**

“Yes?” Arthur is waiting for her to say it was fun but now I’m going to go out on my own and meet real people, but instead she says;

“But now, I don’t want to leave, not Cortland, not Peggy and certainly not you. I kissed you this morning to see how I would feel if I kissed this guy I’ve liked for so long. I have to be honest. I was not expecting you to kiss back. But as long as I’m being bold --- I’m awfully glad you did.”

Jeanie puts her hand on his knee and starts to move her hand slowly up towards his thigh. Arthur puts his hand on hers and pulls her in for another kiss. When he brings his head away from her, he can see they are both a little breathless. “We have to stop this Jeanie, our friends are right through that door. One of us needs to go home and we need to give each other some breathing room here. We need to figure things out. With all that has happened today, I don’t want this (he points back and forth from her to him) to be only a reaction to the drama of the day.”

Jeanie looks Arthur straight in the eye, well first she has to get on her knees but there she is, on her knees in front of him, looking him directly eye to eye and she is shaking from head to toe. Now or never, she tells herself. “Our day started together with our lips in a kiss to end all kisses. You didn’t

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You Can Never Go Back **57**

expect to get one and I certainly didn’t expect the reaction that I got. But you did and I did and now we are here with only our thoughts between us. No one is here, (she points to her own head) except for you. I am not thinking about anyone or any other situation than the one right here (she lifts her head to look around the stairwell and comes back to gaze into his eyes and what she sees astonishes her – there are tears there) Arthur, let’s go home together.” Jeanie leans down and takes one of his hands and puts his palm right over her left breast. “My heart can’t beat any faster than that without coming through my skin – you are making that happen. What else can I say to make you believe me?”

Arthur feels the tears well up when she is saying how much she wants to be only with him. He is not an emotional man but the emotions he is feeling right now are overwhelming him in a way that he never has felt. The most beautiful woman he has ever known wants him in the same way he wants her. What the hell? What did she do with his hand? He is staring at her, listening to her and oh, god, yes feeling that heartbeat she is referring to, along with his own pulsating loins. He had better get them out of this stairwell.

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You Can Never Go Back **58**

“Jeanie, I don’t know what to say to you – you do things to me that I didn’t think possible. But my responsible brain needs to work here for a moment. We need to go back and see how everyone is doing. We can’t run out on them as much as we both may want to. It’s going to kill me to take my hand away, but I have to.” Arthur moves his hand slowly down the front of Jeanie and almost knocks himself over with what he feels to be the most beautiful breast he has yet to see. But the promise is there, in her eyes and in her words. He will wait – he has to.

As they reach the door, Jeanie looks up and smiles. Arthur opens the door for her and taps her on the bottom as she walks passed him. Ooo, bad mistake, that felt too good. As they pass the nurse’s station they notice there are new people there now. There must have been a shift change. Hard to keep track of the time today, everything is moving at lightning speed in their life, or so it seems.

Jeanie opens the door to the room and is surprised to see Peggy sitting in a chair. “What happened? We weren’t gone that long, how did you get up? Not that it’s a bad thing.” Jeanie is stumbling over her words now but they know what she means.

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You Can Never Go Back **59**

“All of the doctors came by to see her. Seems her brain scan is good, no sign of serious injury there. They asked her to try and sit up, so she did and they pushed her to see if she could get into the chair. Well, clearly, she showed them, huh? They said she can stay here only for another hour. The nurses will be back to help move her back to the bed. The doctors only want to keep her overnight to make sure nothing shows up later. If you don’t mind, I think we should all stay the night for support. This way one of us is up with her at all times. In case she needs something.” Cortland looks from Arthur to Jeanie and can tell this isn’t their first choice but he knows they will do this, for Peggy anyway, if not for him.

“It’s for the best,” Arthur speaks first. “Can we get another chair or cot? I don’t think we can all fit on that one bed.” He smiles at Peggy and she tries not to laugh. Broken ribs and laughter aren’t the best combination. Doesn’t take long for the nurses to come back and help Peggy. The whole ordeal takes a lot out of her so she easily falls back to sleep.

“This will happen a lot at home too, you will see. Hard for the body to go through such trauma and not be exhausted. Healing takes a lot of energy and she has multiple places that have to heal. She

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You Can Never Go Back **60**

may need twenty-four-hour care for a week or so, are you guys up for the task? If not, you need to look into hiring twenty-four-hour nursing care.” The nurse asks them.

They look at each other and smile. Three taking care of one should be easy enough. Or so they think.

~ ~ ~

The gang takes Peggy home thirty-six hours after she was brought in. The doctors gave them a laundry list of things they each need to do to make sure Peggy will heal the fastest and safest. Each one of them is given a specific set of instructions. Of course, Jeanie’s job is to see to her personal needs like showers and other personal hygiene.

That first night home is a long one. They set her up in a room with two beds so that someone can be with her throughout the night. No one is prepared for the night terrors she experiences that first night, or the second, or even the third.

“We need to get the hell out of this town – maybe the sooner she is gone from here the sooner she can move on. I spoke to the policeman yesterday. Turns out the guy from her office thought she was getting a promotion over him and he didn’t

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You Can Never Go Back **61**

take the insult well, so he was going to teach her a lesson about where a woman belongs. His friend came along to make sure the lesson was learned well. Officer thinks the guy may be a suspect of a cold case rape they have too. So for them it’s a two for one.

When she woke last night she kept yelling, ‘I don’t want your job.’ I want to put the house up today. Can we get everything ready to show ASAP?’ Cortland is talking to Arthur while Jeanie has Peggy in the bathroom giving her a sponge bath and washing her hair in the sink. Cortland will give anything to be the one doing that but he knows it is not a good idea because he has a hard enough time keeping his hands off of her when his turn to watch her comes up. He wants her to understand that he still loves her and that she is as beautiful as she always was to him.

The group of them have been so busy with Peggy that Arthur and Jeanie have not had a chance to talk really without someone else in the room let alone act upon anything they spoke about in the stairwell at the hospital. It has been over a week already and he so badly needs to touch her he will come up with any reason to walk by and linger for a moment. Jeanie is feeling the same way too because

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You Can Never Go Back **62**

every time he does walk by, she manages to rub up against him somehow.

~ ~ ~

In the middle of the third week, the four of them are sitting down at the dining room table eating dinner when Peggy speaks up, “How long do you think it will take to sell this house?” She seems rather serious in getting the sale done quickly. This whole day actually she seems quite anxious.

Arthur knows something is up because he sees her on the phone more than once that day and getting off rather nervously. Her phone rings again and before she can get to answer, Arthur picks up the phone from her lap. “Hello? No, she is not available, who is this?” Peggy looks both annoyed at him and relieved at the same time. Arthur knows this is the same person who called earlier.

“Did you call earlier today? Oh, it is you then that I need to knock some sense into. Don’t try your nonsense on me, won’t work. You see, it only takes forty-five seconds of keeping you on the phone to allow for the tap to know who has been harassing her. You are nothing but a sick coward, and now you will be nothing but a sick coward sitting in jail. Swallow hard on whatever it is you’re chewing on

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You Can Never Go Back **63**

right now because that may be your last meal as a free man.” Arthur slams the phone down on the table and everyone jumps.

“Peggy, who the hell is that and what did he say earlier?” he says to her annoyingly but quickly gains his composure when he looks at everyone’s face.

Peggy looks a bit defensive all of a sudden, as if they didn’t trust her judgment about people anymore. Oh, who is she kidding, she doesn’t even trust her own judgment anymore either. She tells them she does not know who is calling but he keeps calling today asking her if she liked things rough, he could make things even more interesting next time.

Cortland is immediately on the phone to the police. They have someone at the door within minutes, or so it feels. That’s twice they’ve been lucky like that. Arthur hands over her phone and the police officer tells the group that they will take care of finding out who called before the day was out.

“I’m done! – Jeanie, Arthur go pack everything you want to take to Boston. We will be sleeping there tonight. Take all your valuables, your clothes and anything you think is important from this hell hole. When you are done, I’ll get mine and Peggy’s stuff. Jeanie can you also call your old friend

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You Can Never Go Back **64**

and ask them if we can borrow their large van. You know the guy, the one who I thought was hitting on you and turned out to be gay? Damn, what was his name?”

Jeanie laughs, he is not gay but it was the only way she could date the guy and pretending to be gay was his idea. He had really liked her enough to go on with the ruse for a while. They turned out to be great friends, he ended up dating one of her actual friends and she thinks might still be doing so. “Marc, is his name, and my dear brother, oh and he is definitely *not* gay.” Jeanie walks away laughing, Arthur starts to laugh as well as Peggy.

Cortland sits there trying to figure out what is so funny. This makes everyone laugh even harder. Poor Peggy is holding her sides so that she won’t kill herself, laughter is still hard with broken ribs, but it sure feels good to laugh, especially at Cortland – the protector from all things evil that might happen upon his sister. Does he even know how much Arthur and her are in love? ‘My poor Cortland’ Peggy thinks to herself. She really did miss this crazy family and is ever so thankful to be back in their clutches, in their warmth, in their lives.

Jeanie stops in the kitchen and calls her friend. Turns out he still has one of his rental trucks

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You Can Never Go Back **65**

at his house from moving all his own stuff back from college to his new apartment, and yes, he tells her he is still dating her old friend and that they are thinking of getting engaged soon. He will call his boss and ask if he can transfer the truck. He tells her they might have to bring the van by the rental place first for paperwork before heading out.

Jeanie runs upstairs and into her room to try and make a quick assessment of what she wants to bring with her. She looks to one side and sees her closet – well, most of her clothes she’ll take, the rest can go to charity, then she scans around going counter clockwise, her books she wants, her jewelry yes. As she scans around to her bed she sees Arthur sitting there holding one of her bears in his arms. He is looking rather pensive. ‘How long has he been there?’ she wonders. She turns around to her door and makes a double check that it is closed. No doors in the house lock – a weird superstition her mom had.

Jeanie feels her heart in her throat as she approaches Arthur who opens his knees for her to get closer to the bed and right in front of him. He sets down the bear and puts his head onto her chest, oh man it feels good to smell her so close again. She puts her arms on his shoulders and steps a bit closer

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You Can Never Go Back **66**

so she can run her hands down his back. As her hands are coming back up Arthur lifts his head to stare at her. He is so much taller than her that with his sitting down they are almost equal in height. He slides his arms around her and pulls her in, Jeanie takes this as an invitation and she leans over to kiss him, only he pulls back which stuns her.

“Jeanie, I can’t go with you guys until you tell me you want me there. Not me the other brother you’ve always had, not me the keeper of your secret hiding places or the one who kissed your boo-boos as you were growing up. But me, Arthur, the man who looks at you to complete him. I can’t go and be the third party of the group, I won’t do that anymore. This week, more than others, has been nothing short of torture for me watching you from afar. Is there an “us” Jeanie? I will not pack one thing until I get an answer.....an honest one.” He looks at her and knows that last part is a bit hurtful but he also knows she has to be honest with herself. This is their lives they are talking about. He is going to have to get a new job or start off on his own somehow. She is going to start school, Cortland will be looking for a job and Peggy as well but until they do all that, they will all be in close quarters, not a big roomy house where everyone can go to their respective rooms at

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You Can Never Go Back **67**

any given time or a den or a basement, for some peace and quiet.

Jeanie feels as if she is hit by a load of bricks. Not pack? What does that even mean? How could he not pack? Wait a minute, did he ask me if there is an “us”? Oh Jeanie, keep your cool honey, think about what he said, an “us”. Do you want this relationship? Do you want him? There is only one way to confirm this. Do what you set out to do in the first place. A kiss, that will tell you. Remember that song? ‘If you want to know, if he loves you so, it’s in his kiss...’ You used to sing that to yourself in the shower all the time.

Holy crap, I’m having a conversation with myself in my own head. Jeanie blinks a couple times and looks right into those big green eyes that always pull her in. Yes, this is what she wants. She leans over again and kisses him, slow and gentle so as not to disturb a thing, then she reaches behind herself and pulls his hand back to where it was on the stairwell. Hell yes, we are an us. Her heart is racing a mile a minute and now that his hand is on her breast, she can’t even hold onto his mouth with her lips because they are trembling.

Arthur feels what he wants to feel when she kisses him, and then it is too much when she picks

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You Can Never Go Back **68**

up his hand, he thought she was going to link their fingers. Now his hand is where he longed to put it and he sits there frozen. Her lips are trembling around his, her hands are sliding down his back and one hand decides to stay by his head and mingle its fingers in his hair. Do something damn you – he yells to himself. She is waiting for you, longing as much as you are. Arthur does his best to take a deep breath and then he lets his thumb wander around and discover everything there is to know about this breast that is in his hand. They stay like this for quite some time, until they hear Cortland at the door. “I know you’re both in there, want to let you know the rental truck is here – thanks for calling the guy Jeanie. Oh, and guys I want to leave in two hours so finish what you have to do and meet us downstairs. Two hours, no more.”

Jeanie’s body is lost in a world of splendor and even the sound of her brother’s voice does not take her out. In fact, his approval makes this all that much sweeter. Jeanie will have to thank Peggy later. She is sure she is the one to open her brother’s eyes. In the meantime, she will savor this moment when the movement of one finger has her doing more than cartwheels inside. What on earth could it be like to

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You Can Never Go Back **69**

actually have the time to really be with this man intimately?

Arthur hears Cortland’s voice and at first tries to ignore the words, but then he hears them loud and clear. Not only does he know but he approves, that is the biggest compliment he could get from Cortland – the approval of his sister. Oh, and the approval of that sister is doing things to him that should be illegal with a kiss. Her body is so warm right now, he can feel the heat emanating from her and he is wallowing in the warmth of her body. If he is able to please her so much with doing so little how much more so will they be when they have a chance.....oh he can’t think like that right now, but he can enjoy this right now. Oh no, Jeanie has moved close enough to rub things that can’t take too much rubbing. Arthur hears himself moan at her touch and then how she responds to that sound with a shiver of her own. How will they stop this in order to pack? This is not going to be easy. Pulling away is never easy from her but someone has to start. He tries but she pulls him in closer instead. She is not ready and that can be good and bad.

Jeanie is going out of her mind with pleasure and she doesn’t know what else to do so she wants to give him back some of what she is receiving. When

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You Can Never Go Back **70**

he moans she shakes, has she been able to do that with so little? His mind is reeling as to what it will be like when the two of them actually find the time to really explore. She wants so much more right now. Jeanie lifts one leg and puts it on her bed, Arthur helps her up with the other one. Now she is sitting on his lap, his hand motions are getting a little more rhythmic and so are her hips. Their kisses are getting deeper, and all of a sudden, he pushes her onto the bed next to him. Breathlessly he says, “you have to get off now, I don’t want to go there. I’m going to shower – you pack.” And he jumps off the bed before she can get to him. He turns around at the door and sees her smiling at him with enough heat to make him dart out the door.

Jeanie sits there for a minute to let her body calm down. She looks at the clock – only an hour and a half left. She has to move quickly.

~ ~ ~

Cortland is going upstairs to check on Jeanie, he has dropped a bomb on her about packing and leaving so quickly he needs to make sure she is ok. Peggy is close to him. He stops at her door because he hears voices, the only other voice would be Arthur’s. Cortland glares at Peggy, he is filling up with steam. Ok, sure he is thinking they like each

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You Can Never Go Back **71**

other but this is still his sister! He starts to pace. He is not sure if he should barge in there and break Arthur’s neck or pull his sister out of there, throw her in the truck and pack for her. So many things are going through his head and his heart right now he is going to explode. Then he looks up and sees Peggy standing there with her hands across her chest. Her eyes are speaking volumes.

She looks downstairs and then back at him and down at herself and back at him. Peggy is indicating that they were just doing the same thing, two consulting adults with a history. Cortland points to the door and then himself and puts his hand down as if to show her ‘it’s my little sister!’

Peggy responds by pointing to the door and putting her hand by her own head to say, ‘she is not little anymore and you are not her father – be her brother, be her friend’. Peggy walks over to Cortland and grabs his hands in hers; she leans up on her toes and gives him a soft peck on his already warm lips. Cortland immediately puts his arms around her waist and onto the small of her back. They stand there a moment having a whole conversation with their eyes. He knows she is right, he also knows that if it has to be anyone – why not Arthur? He trusts him more than his real brother. Cortland feels his anger calm in

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You Can Never Go Back **72**

Peggy’s arms. He drops his head to her shoulders and whispers, “Thank you for being part of my life again. You make me feel whole again Peggy, I can’t apologize enough for pushing you away. I don’t want to go without you, you have to come..... please say you’re coming with us. There is no point in me leaving if you aren’t there.”

“That sounds like something Arthur would have said too, isn’t it? Yes, my love I will follow you anywhere especially if it takes me away from this town. New places, new numbers, new life but..... old friends.” She slowly pushes him away and indicates with her head for him to go to the door. He puts his hand on the knob but she shakes her head, so he says what he has to say through the closed door, walks over to Peggy and leads her to his room for some ‘help’ in packing.

As slowly as the first hour went, the second is over faster than one can blink. Peggy is the only one not running around because she can’t still. All her things are already at the house, half still not unpacked yet, so she is easy to re-pack. Cortland has done that first. He takes all his personal belongings out of his room, throws pieces in every suitcase he can find that isn’t already taken. Then he rummages through the basement to see if there is anything of

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You Can Never Go Back **73**

personal value to him....no, he is not sentimental about too much. As a matter of fact, he doesn’t really want to remember much about this house, he needs what is truly his and only his.

About this time Jeanie is coming to the same conclusion, she has gone to the attic to make sure nothing is worth taking. She sees some old photos of people she doesn’t know so they have no meaning to her. A trunk marked dress up which also has no meaning because she never used to dress up as a child. Then she finds a box of pictures and other things that once belonged to her brother. He is a very handsome young man. Very troubled too, so she has been told. How can they leave him? What if he is still alive? What if he needs a place to come home to? She is holding a picture of him holding her as a small child when Cortland comes up holding a picture of the two brothers wrestling on the couch. They slowly show each other the pictures and their world becomes quite somber. With all this goodness around them right now – he is still their brother.

Cortland speaks first, “What if he...” Jeanie interrupts, “is still alive?” Cortland shakes his head yes. “Cortland, maybe your lawyer can use his detectives to find him. Maybe, if we know one way or another, we will feel better about leaving. Maybe we

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You Can Never Go Back **74**

can leave our forwarding address with him so that if he finds him....” Jeanie’s voice trails off. She isn’t sure she wants to see her brother or if she did, how she would react. But, at the same time, he is still all they have. There are only the three siblings, no one else that is blood. Jeanie leans her head on Cortland’s chest, he satisfies her with a sincere hug. “Ok, Jeanie, we sell the house and split the profit three ways unless we find out he is...he is, well, let’s say, not interested. I’ll talk to the lawyer, it’s a good way to go. Maybe he will reach out to us. If he does, the apartment in Boston will be pretty crowded. The two of us, each with a partner, and then a third.....” Cortland cannot speak anymore, he holds his sister as if this is the last time for a long time they will be together. Jeanie is in the same frame of mind so they stay there for a couple of minutes until they hear Arthur running up the stairs.

“Hey guys the truck is all packed up but before I finished I went looking for something in the basement and look what I found. A box full of stuff from your brother. It is not a very big box, but it is his.” Cortland reaches out and sees that it is a box of letters addressed to his mom that remained unopened. “This could have some answers for us Jeanie.” Cortland said cautiously.

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You Can Never Go Back **75**

“I’m not sure I want to know what he has to say, Cortland, let’s move on today. We will send this box to the lawyer and let him sort things out. If there is something to tell us, he will,” Jeanie isn’t going to let the good mood of moving be destroyed by what might be in those letters. Her emotions can only take so much and right now she barely has the nerve to leave and not look back.

Cortland leans down and gives his ‘big’ sister a kiss on her head. “Let me call the courier and tell him we are dropping some stuff off to him and then I’ll leave a message with my boss/lawyer. If everything else is packed, let’s take a walk around this place and say goodbye together. Then, my dear *big* sister we move on.” Cortland puts his arm around his sister as they walk by Arthur, he punches Arthur in the arm in a friendly manner.

Peggy is waiting for them downstairs, when she sees the three of them coming down together she knows things are going to be ok with this threesome.

After making the appropriate stops; courier, law office, real estate agent and food for the road, the quartet is on their way to a new life. Arthur is driving Cortland’s car with Jeanie as his co-pilot and Peggy is with Cortland in the rental truck. Arthur had sold his car a couple of days ago in anticipation of this move.

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You Can Never Go Back **76**

He kept all his tools but is going to need the extra cash to help him get started. They agree to stop halfway there to eat and stretch. At this rate they should be in their new place by midnight the latest.

~ ~ ~

As they pull up to the apartment Jeanie’s heart is in her throat. This is no ordinary apartment building. This building has a private gate to get in and as they pull closer to the front door, a doorman comes out to open the door for them. What kind of double life did her parents live? She slowly gets out of the car and is staring at her brother for answers.

“The lawyers said, all they know is that the purchase was on the up and up and it’s a hundred percent ours. Fully paid for. I have all the paperwork to prove ownership, we may never know the origins and that’s ok with me. I don’t think I want to know. Only thing though, there are no pets allowed so I’m not sure you can bring in this animal.” Cortland says this as he points to Arthur.

“Woof,” Arthur mumbles.

Everyone is tired, they follow Cortland and the doorman and three other men came out to empty the truck and the trunk of their car. These men put all the boxes and suitcases in a freight

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You Can Never Go Back **77**

elevator and will unload it on the appropriate floor. As they get to the elevator, Cortland sees an elderly man that he has met on one of his trips down to see this apartment. “Hello, I think you remember me, yes?” The old man asks.

“Yes sir. This is my sister (he pauses) my best friend and my girlfriend.” Arthur is the one to hit his buddy in the shoulder this time.

“I knew your dad, he saved my butt a couple times. Good man, like you. Maybe you don’t know him but I did. Welcome, welcome to you all,” with that he walks away down the hall.

There are only three apartments per floor, theirs is at the end of the corridor. Cortland opens up the door and they walk in one by one to their new lives. The men were there waiting for them, they drag in all of their boxes quickly and leave. Jeanie goes straight to the couch and crashes. She is too tired to care about the rest of the place. Peggy makes her way to the first bedroom and Cortland and Arthur go to the second bedroom. They will work out the details in the morning.

~ ~ ~

Arthur is having a hard time sleeping. New beds always unnerve him. He gets up to go investigate this new place. Trying not to trip over all

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You Can Never Go Back **78**

the suitcases and boxes is an adventure in balance. He gets all the way to the main room and passes the couch where he sees the sliding door open and Jeanie standing out on the balcony wearing nothing but her t-shirt. Now he is definitely awake. In fact, some of him is standing at attention. His brain tells him to go back to the bedroom, but his body is walking forward and he is standing right behind her before he even takes his next breath.

With his hands reaching out, Jeanie slowly leans back right into the hands that she was waiting for. “What took you so long? The view of the orange tree in the courtyard is nice but you’re much better,” she whispers.

“Jeanie, your brother can hear us, this place is not exactly big you know; and Peggy is here as well don’t forget. She is in the second bedroom, but still.” He is not sure how he is going to handle this tonight or any other night. This is not going to work, he will have to get his own place, but he needs a job first.

Jeanie grabs his hands and brings them around her stomach and then she slowly turns around to face him. Those lips are screaming touch me, his body is screaming as well but it is his heartbeat that she feels in her own chest, that really makes her blood start moving. How could they be

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You Can Never Go Back **79**

here so fast with so little? Jeanie is not sure how they can continue without exploding. The emotions are there and they both know what they feel isn’t lust. Jeanie is wondering how Cortland and Peggy are keeping themselves under control, after all, they had almost a full year of separation and before that they were inseparable.

~ ~ ~

Cortland sits up in his bed but does not quite see Arthur in the dark but he sees a large bump on the bed and assumes he is there. He quietly pushes the door open to Peggy’s room and stealthily slides into Peggy’s bed. He knows she is still uncomfortable but he also knows he cannot hold back any longer. By the sound of Peggy’s slight increase in breathing, he knows he is welcomed. Cortland has missed her beyond anything else he had ever known. He also knows that he has to take being physical with her very slowly because broken ribs are painful and take a long time to heal.

Cortland’s hands are moving slowly up Peggy’s stomach and she has to use all her self-control to keep from screaming. Cortland’s love shows through his fingertips, his body language does not need interpretation and Peggy’s every nerve is

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You Can Never Go Back **80**

responding accordingly. “Cortland, your sister is within hearing range, so is Ar.....Ar....Arthur. Oh my, you ha....have to....to...don’t s,s,s,stop.” Peggy can’t even breathe, the pain of breathing so hard surely does not outweigh the fantastic way the rest of her body is responding to his touch.

~ ~ ~

“Wait here Jeanie, I have an idea.” Arthur whispers in her ear. He quietly walks back into the living room and takes the blanket off the couch plus another one that is still folded up on a chair. He brings them both outside and closes the door to almost closed, he sets the fluffier one down on the floor of the balcony and pulls the other one over the two of them as they go down together to find their dreams.

~ ~ ~

As morning comes up Jeanie realizes she is still outside and wrapped up with Arthur. She nudges him and he responds with a smile and a kiss on her hand like a knight. “Good morning my queen,” he whispers and then he begins to get dressed under the covers. They both pull themselves up at the same

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You Can Never Go Back **81**

time and start to walk towards the door. Both with a blanket wrapped around them.

Peggy, always the early riser, wakes Cortland and tells him that they need to get up before the others and have breakfast ready. Cortland wakes with a smile and looks at Peggy who also has a smile on her face. “Good morning my love.”

“Ay, and here is to a super life ahead of us. Will you marry me today?”

Peggy’s tears are running down her face. “Yes, Cortland....Yes! But right now, we need to go get breakfast ready for this family.” They both laugh and drag themselves out of bed. Walking hand in hand they make their way down the hall and towards the kitchen.

The four of them reach the living room at exactly the same time. It takes everyone a couple seconds to have everything register and when they do, they all break down and laugh. The laughter is contagious. Poor Peggy is grabbing her sides and makes her way to the recliner. Cortland can’t even hold himself up, he drops to the floor holding his stomach, barely catching his breath. Arthur and Jeanie slide down back to back and are now on the floor. It is hard to tell who is crying and who is

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laughing. At this moment, they understand how the bedrooms will be divided from this day on.

~ ~ ~

Weeks have turned quickly into months, Jeanie is doing well in school. She does not know what she will be majoring in yet, but she will find her way.

The house sold quickly because they weren’t looking for top dollar, they were looking to get out, so the realtor priced the house to sell and sell it did. The house sold for more than their original price because there was a bidding war between three families.

A nice young family bought the house, one that was happy to see how much furnishing they were leaving. Made a big difference to them. Their daughter was even excited to see the box of dress up clothes. Best people to sell to, they will bring happiness back to the house. Cortland drove up for the closing; no other signatures were required. While there, he stopped by to see his old boss.

“Come in Cortland, come in. I was going to call you in a day or so. How are things in the new place?” he asks pleasantly.

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“Very well sir, thank you for asking. Everyone has adapted to their new lives, new towns and new jobs. I wanted to stop by to thank you for your recommendation to the office down there. It is a great place to work and I’m learning a lot,” Cortland says.

“Good to hear. My cousin has already told me you’ve helped out on a few key cases and that’s wonderful to hear. I knew you would do well with him. So now that the dust has settled, when are the wedding plans?” he smirks.

“Funny you should ask sir; that is the second reason I wanted to stop by. Seems I’m out of a person to walk me down and since you’ve given me so much in my adult life, I figured you’d be the perfect person to send me off into adulthood officially,” he says with caution. Cortland has never been good at expressing gratitude, he and Arthur spoke about this and they decided this is the best way.

Cortland’s boss looks clearly flustered.

“Well, son. That’s quite an offer you know. Let me call the Mrs. When did you say the wedding will be?” he asks for clarification and for stalling.

“Next Sunday, we’re having everything at my new place. Peggy and I bought a small starter house

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You Can Never Go Back **84**

together with my share of the house money and she had some put away for her future. Jeanie and Arthur are busy doing the decorating and the food. We’ve made some good friends there already as well. A small affair, with only family sir,” he says.

By the time he finishes explaining what will be going on Cortland’s boss has his wife on the phone. He explains the situation then holds the phone away from his ear, Cortland can hear the yes loud and clear. He owes this man his life, this honor only seems fitting.

“This brings my news even more meaning then. Please sit down, son.” The boss sits first then Cortland

Cortland is not sure what he could need to say. The suit from his family is over, the house is sold, what else does he have left open?

“I won’t stall. I’ve found your brother,” he pauses

Cortland takes this in for a moment and swallows hard, then he grips the arms of the chair he is sitting on. He has no words inside of him so he waits and hopes there is more to say.

“You may be surprised to hear this, but he has a wife and two children with one on the way. Here is his picture. Some of the letters you gave us

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You Can Never Go Back **85**

had hints as to where he has been all this time. Believe me when I tell you, better you chose not to read them.

However, when I finally did find him, I went out to meet him personally. We had a long chat. He is sad to know your mom is gone. He loved her very much, which is why the letters were always addressed to her only ,” he pauses again and stands up to sit near Cortland. He puts his hand on Cortland’s shoulder.

“He wants me to tell you how proud he is that you did this on your own, that you grew up well and took care of Jeanie. He mentioned there were times in his life he could have used a sibling and that he regrets not reaching out. Trust me when I say, he was shocked when I handed him a check and the box of his belongings. I believe his quote was ‘I can’t believe they did that for me. They owe me nothing. I gave them only heartache.’” The boss is watching Cortland go from happy to angry to sad.

“He doesn’t want to see us, does he?”

Cortland asks.

“The idea is hard for him. His time in that house, with your father, really did a number on him. There are things that are his to share with you, should he choose to. He has your contact

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You Can Never Go Back **86**

information and he asked that if he can go through me until he is ready to see you in person. Cortland, Jeanie was right, he is alive and he is family. You’ve reminded him of that with the check. He and his wife sat and cried for a long while, as if I was not in the room. It is my impression that she has been with him through all of his horrors or at least a lot of them. Know he is safe and happy,” he squeezes Cortland’s shoulder a bit.

Cortland stands and so does his boss, then he hugs his boss and doesn’t let go. The hug is very much reciprocated.

“The wife and I will see you next week then. Maybe we’ll even come a day early or so to help set things up,” he smiles at Cortland

Cortland can only shake his head and his boss’s hand.

~ ~ ~

Cortland, Peggy and the gang are finishing up the last touches of their new place. Painting has been done by Jeanie because she doesn’t trust the guys to not drip on the floor or make streaks.

Arthur upgraded all the electrical in their new home and Peggy furnished the place with everything they can find in their budget. They heard from

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You Can Never Go Back **87**

Cortland’s lawyer that she will be receiving a large sum of money from the people who did this to her as well as her old company. She never asked why the company owes her anything, she doesn’t want to know. Until then, she made do with what they have. Peggy decided they can do the next phase of improvements with that money, or save for when they have a family. She even made their den filled with pandas. No one is complaining.

The news of their brother was big. Jeanie jumped around the room for a long time knowing she did the right thing and that he is alive. She doesn’t care if it takes him five years or ten to call them, she is happy that he is alive and that he has worked past his demons.

Arthur and Jeanie have become closer with each day. They speak about everything. She brings out his inner thoughts and he is no longer afraid to share them, even with Cortland and Peggy. Their evening routine has worked well, each person assigned a different roll; cooking, cleaning, setting table and clean up afterwards. Household chores have also been divvied up, each according to their strengths.

But now that Peggy and Cortland will be moving into this house, new routines will evolve in

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You Can Never Go Back **88**

each household. They are only minutes away from each other, close enough to run when they need to, but far enough to be alone when they need that too.

“Well, tomorrow we bring in all the rest of the food and the decorations. It’s going to be a very long twenty-four hours for everyone. I’m so happy we’ve met so many good people here who are helping. This is going to be one kick ass wedding, if I do say so myself,” Jeanie says with pride.

Arthur is holding on to her from behind her and says, “HmMMM, wedding planner sounds like a cool profession.”

Everyone looks at Jeanie, “HmMMMM, a thought,” she says pondering.

“Jeanie you’ve done everything so perfect. On such a small budget, we will have everything we need. I can’t thank you enough. Who knew you could sew?” Peggy says.

“You can sew?” Cortland asks.

“Um, yeah! Where do you think I got my wedding gown?” Peggy asks.

“You said from an amazing hole in the wall boutique,” Cortland says this as the realization comes to him that Peggy has been having her fittings in one of Jeanie’s classes. He looks to his sister.

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“What? We needed a big project for the final. I got an A by the way,” Jeanie says proudly and Arthur stands a little taller. “I didn’t see the finished product,” Arthur complains

“You will tomorrow,” Peggy insists.

Everyone begins to laugh. They do this easily now. The knock on the door brings everyone to attention. For some reason they walk to the door together.

Cortland opens the door and sees his boss and his wife and kids. Then his boss moves to the side, “Thought you could use a best man.”

Cortland stares at the man behind him. Jeanie pushes him aside and jumps into her brother’s arms where she is readily accepted. Cortland is a heartbeat behind her. Peggy stands there and begins to cry, Arthur is at her side and puts his arms around her shoulders.

The boss’s wife speaks to pull everyone’s attention to her. “Hello everyone, while I’m happy this has worked out well, there are a lot of children who could use a bathroom and I for one have a bottle of Champaign that needs opening.” With each person holding on to someone, they all walk into Cortland’s and Peggy’s new home.

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Jeanie grabs the Mrs. and her brother’s wife and brings them up to see the gown. Ooos and ahhs all around and many, many hugs and giggles. The two youngest ones want to know what they get to wear and Jeanie quickly remembers she has leftover material and promises to make them each a rose to wear on a sash from the material.

The men meanwhile are busy walking around the house showing off what each one has done to the house. Cortland’s boss giving a few pointers as to what he thinks might make the house more of a home and Cortland’s brother is walking around holding his brother’s hand. The doorbell rings and everyone runs to the door, with the first knock being so good they could not imagine another surprise. Jeanie is the first one there and swings open the door to see the delivery boy there wondering why so many people have to come to the door for their dinner.

The whole crowd laughs. Arthur quickly calls and asks for more food, there are a lot more people in this family now.

~ ~ ~

The wedding weekend goes off without any problems. Jeanie’s coordination of all things is

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flawless. All the neighbors have given compliments and even asked for business cards from her. She doesn’t have those yet but she did give out her contact information.

The siblings have gotten along well, although Cortland knows this get together is only for now. He knows his brother is itching to get back to his own life and he is fine with this. They will be in touch, and sometimes they won’t, all will be good. Jeanie doesn’t fully understand that part but she respects her brother and will let him go without any guilt.

Everyone leaves after breakfast the morning after the wedding. Cortland’s boss pulls him to the side and hands him an envelope. “A little something from us. Don’t say no. We want to. I’m going to take him back now. You know that, right?” he looks to Cortland for reassurance there won’t be any problems.

“It’s ok, we’ve all made peace with the situation. He knows where we are. He can find us again, or not,” Cortland says.

“You’ve learned well. I’m proud to call you my son,” he smiles at Cortland, Cortland stands a little taller. He has made a father proud in his life; things have surely has come full circle.

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Jeanie watches as everyone leaves. She whispers to Arthur, “I don’t think he’ll come back for ours.”

“I know. You ok?” he asks.

“Surprisingly, yes. This has been good. All air is cleared. All doors are open. What else could we want?” she asks.

“Each other.” Arthur says as he kisses her neck.

“Hmmm. Let’s go home. We don’t want to disturb the newlyweds any more than we already have,” Jeanie smiles.

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