



***Renovation of the Heart***  
***By Kiernan Kelly***

In Josh Langram's mind, his father had been born six-foot, two-inches tall, springing forth from the womb as a fully-formed, invulnerable, buzz-cut tower of muscle. Growing up, it'd been impossible for Josh to even *imagine* General John Nelson Langram as a child, or as anything other than what he'd always been to Josh -- a formidable, hardcore, toe-the-line Marine.

Even now as an adult, it was almost impossible for Josh to accept that this wizened man tethered to the hospital bed by wires and tubes, was his dad. There must be some mistake. This brittle old man, chest and cheeks sunken, bones and veins clearly visible beneath his nearly transparent, parchment-paper thin skin, must be someone *else's* father. He couldn't *possibly* be General John Nelson Langram.

The father Josh remembered would never allow weakness in any form -- not in his Corps, not in his family, and definitely not in himself. Surely, General John Nelson Langram would've fought and annihilated the cancer just as he had everything and everyone else he'd deemed his enemy over the course of his life.

Including his own children.

Josh felt a warm, strong hand slip into his. He cast a grateful half-smile at Brett, his partner. *Husband*, he thought, instantly correcting himself, and felt his smile grow imperceptibly wider. They'd married in a beautiful ceremony in California, one of the few lucky ones to exchange vows just before Prop 8 had destroyed the dreams of millions.

"You okay?" Brett whispered. His gaze shifted toward the bed, then met Josh's eyes again.

"Yeah, I guess." He gave Brett's hand a squeeze, grateful for having found such an understanding, compassionate man to share his life. Not many would've dropped everything, left the kids with a sitter, and flown halfway across the country to a VA hospital on the East coast to visit a man who he'd believed, up until three days ago, was dead. Not to mention forgive the lie he'd been told since the day he and Josh met. He'd thought Brett would freak out when he was finally forced to admit the truth.

*"I thought you told me that your father was dead?" Brett had asked, showing Josh the telegram he'd fished from the trashcan, the one Josh had crumpled into a ball and thrown away. Josh should've known that Brett wouldn't let it be, not with the way Josh's hands had shook when he'd read it. "You told me your parents died in a car accident."*

*It had been so long, so oft-repeated, that Josh had almost begun believing the lie himself. "I'm sorry. It's just so hard to talk about."*

*"Even to me?" Brett's eyes flashed with hurt and indignation, making Josh wince. Supposedly, they told each other everything. It was a rule, a promise they'd made to each other early on in their relationship.*

*"I'm sorry. I should've told you the truth before. My mom died in the wreck. My father survived, but as far as I was concerned, he may as well have died that day, too. He was always distant, but after my mom passed away he really became a cold, hard bastard. After what he did to my sister, I sure as Hell wished him dead. He doesn't deserve my pity. He doesn't deserve jack shit from me." Josh spat vehemently as he took the telegram from Brett's hand and shredded it into dozens of tiny pieces, dumping them back into the trash.*

*It had taken Josh a few good, long minutes to contain his rage. Brett, knowing him as well as he did, had wisely given him all the time he'd needed, for which he was grateful.*

*"I was living at the base when my sister got pregnant. Her boyfriend split; she was so afraid of disappointing our father that she hid it from everyone, including me. She waited until her last*

*trimester, when she got too big to hide under baggy clothes anymore. When she finally told him, he called her a whore, told her she'd shamed him, and threw her out into the street without a fucking nickel to her name! I still thank God she called the base and got hold of me, or who knows what might've happened to her... to Seth..." His voice choked on his adopted son's name. He loved Seth with all his heart and soul, and had ever since the day Seth was born -- the same day his sister had died giving birth, and the same day Josh had truly begun to hate his father. "He never called to ask about her. Never saw Seth. Didn't come to the funeral. He means nothing to me."*

*Brett had wrapped strong arms around Josh, holding him close. "I'm not sure if that's entirely true, Josh. Look at how upset you are... if you really didn't care, you wouldn't be having such a strong reaction to the news. I think you may need closure, Josh. I think you need to go to see him, if only to tell him how you feel. You may never get another chance."*

He'd argued, of course, dead-set against the idea, but Brett had a way of changing Josh's mind, usually in a most enjoyable, if slightly underhanded, manner. In a moment of weakness, when he'd been thinking solely with the head three feet below his shoulders as Brett's talented tongue and lips played his cock like a virtuoso with a Stradivarius, he'd agreed. Before he had the opportunity to come to his senses, Brett had dragged him aboard a plane headed east.

And so he'd come three thousand miles to stare at the withered old man in the hospital bed, fighting demons he thought he'd buried with his sister.

He felt Brett's lips brush his cheek. "I'll be right outside, if you need me."

Josh nodded, never taking his eyes off the shriveled version of his father who lay under a thin, hospital-issue, thermal blanket. How could Josh say the things he needed to say to a sick old man? He wanted -- needed -- to scream, to swear, to punch the bastard right in the fucking mouth, but of course, his honor wouldn't allow it. General John Nelson Langram had not only fucked up Josh's life but his sister's, and Seth's, too, and now he was going to slip away peacefully without any recriminations for his actions. It wasn't fair. It wasn't right. *Wake up, old man*, Josh thought, trying to project his thoughts into his father's nearly-bald skull. *Wake the fuck up and at least have the decency to let me say what I should've said to you years ago. Give me that much.*

Minutes ticked by, counted by his father's slow, wheezy breaths, but John Langram's eyes never fluttered open. Ten minutes stretched to fifteen, then to twenty.

Josh sighed, feeling an uncomfortable mix of frustration and anger tinged with a twisted bit of disappointment, and buried deeper still, a twinge of grief, burning in his gut. There was a single wooden chair near the window; he dragged it to the bedside, turned it around and straddled it, resting his arms on the ladder back. "I wish I knew if you could hear me. It would make me feel better if you could, if I knew I wasn't wasting my breath.

"She loved you, you know, even after you turned your back on her. Talked about you all the time. She made me promise that I'd mend the fences between all of us, once the baby came."

Josh barked a short, gruff laugh. “As if anybody short of God could change your mind once it was made up about anything. Maybe not even He could do it. I never once knew you to back down from a decision, good or bad. Mom always used to say you were as stubborn as a mule and twice as ornery.”

He fell silent for another few minutes, watching his father’s sunken chest rise and fall. “After Melanie d-died,” he continued, his voice catching as grief surged to the surface, taking him by surprise, “I finished my tour, adopted her baby, and raised him as my own. His name is Seth. He doesn’t know the truth yet, that I’m really his uncle, not his father. He’s getting so big... he looks more and more like Melanie every day.” His throat constricted with the hot burn of tears as he thought about his little sister, and remembered the agony she’d suffered to bring her son into the world. “I guess I need to tell him the truth soon. He deserves to know more about Melanie. All he knows is that his mama is in Heaven. I show him pictures of her...” His voice trailed off as hot tears escaped his control.

The old man’s eyes twitched. Josh could see his eyeballs flitting back and forth under paper-thin lids. Was he dreaming of the daughter he’d put out, or the grandson he’d never seen? Or had he forgotten all about them, about Josh, too? The thought fueled bitter bile in Josh’s stomach, churning. “How could you, dad? I know why you disowned me, but how could you turn your back on Melanie when she needed you the most? How could you hurt her to save your own fucking pride?”

Righteous anger began to roil up, forcing Josh to his feet. He gripped the aluminum rails on the side of the bed, knuckles whitening. “Did you ever care about her at all? About me? Did you ever see us without seeing imperfections?”

He didn’t realize his voice was growing louder, not until Brett eased into the room. “Hey, Josh. You doing okay in here?”

Josh let go of the railing and took a step away from the bed. He was shocked to find himself trembling. “Yeah. I’m fine. I’m done here. Let’s go.”

“Is... is he awake?”

“No.”

Brett’s warm hand on his arm seemed to ground him. “Do you want me to give you some more time? Maybe he’ll wake up. I can go down to the cafeteria--”

Josh cast one more look at the old man, then shook his head. “No. I need to get out of here. Besides, we have to get back home and supervise the renovations to the house.” They were having a new room added to their small house, a family room. Josh felt a twinge of satisfaction chip away at his black mood. *Family, that’s what’s important... something the old man knows nothing about.*

Brett wouldn’t hear of it. He was adamant about staying. “The kids are staying next door with

Mrs. Beatty, and she agreed to keep an eye on the construction crew, too. She'll call us if there's a problem. You need to be here. Look, we'll go back to the hotel for a while. We can both use a shower and a nap, maybe some food."

Ordinarily, Josh would've argued, but he didn't feel as though he had the strength. The short time he'd spent in the hospital room alone with his father and his memories had left him feeling drained.

He told himself it was not longing he felt when he looked briefly over his shoulder on his way out the door.

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The hotel room was adequate, but it wasn't anything special. No room service, no turndowns or mints on the pillows. Then again, they weren't there on vacation. Josh knew amenities hadn't been foremost in Brett's mind when he'd called for reservations. Proximity to the hospital had been the only concern. *Besides*, Josh told himself, *I've stayed in worse. At least, it's clean.*

The sound of water spattering against tiles abruptly stopped, and he turned to look at the bathroom door. Brett stepped out into the bedroom, clad only in a small towel wrapped loosely around his trim waist. His wet hair was slicked back from his tanned face, rivulets of water tracing a path along his jaw, down his neck, and over the sculpted muscles of his chest. Josh had hit the shower first, at Brett's insistence.

"Feeling better?" Brett asked. He was rubbing a second towel over his hair, mussing it, as he sat down on the bed with his back resting against the headboard. "You look a little more relaxed now that you've rested a while."

"Well, I don't know about *relaxed*, but I'm feeling more... human, at least." Josh answered. He felt a shadow of a smile tilt his lips, about all he could summon up considering the circumstances.

"This has to be so hard on you. You're dealing well, though. I'm not sure I could be as controlled if it was me." Brett scooted closer, and slipped his arm over Josh's shoulders.

Josh sighed, and leaned against Brett gratefully. "The hardest part is not knowing whether he can hear me. I want so badly for him to hear everything I should have said to him years ago. Now, I guess it's too late."

"What do you want to say to him?"

"I want to tell him he's a bastard, that he's ruined a lot of lives. That he might as well have put a bullet in my sister's head, because he killed her just as surely as the preeclampsia did. That if he hadn't been such a cold-hearted son of a bitch, she might have told him she was pregnant in time to get prenatal care."

“And...?”

Josh shrugged and pulled away, looked at Brett askance. “And, what? Isn’t that enough?”

“There’s got to be more, Josh. I know what your father did to your sister was awful, and that you miss her, and blame your dad for her death, but what about what he did to *you*?” Brett caught his arm as Josh started to rise from the bed. “Don’t run from me, Josh. We need to talk about this. Whether or not your father hears it doesn’t matter. You’ve kept it bottled up for far too long.”

Sometimes Brett’s tendency to play armchair shrink irritated Josh to no end, especially now. “Don’t try to analyze me, Brett.”

“I’m not. Josh, I love you. I married you, for Christ’s sake. There shouldn’t be any secrets between us. I’ve told you all about my ex-wife, my coming out, and the trouble she gave me over sharing custody of Amanda, yet you’ve never once spoken to me about how your father handled your homosexuality.”

“Not well.”

“Wow, a virtual font of information, aren’t you? Come on, Josh. Tell me. You’ll feel better if you share.”

“What’s with the girl talk all of a sudden?” Josh scoffed irritably. “Want to have a pillow fight, and then paint our nails?”

Brett leveled a glare at him that normally would’ve told Josh he was in the doghouse. “Don’t piss me off. We’ve always talked about what was bugging us, so don’t try to play the “macho” card, Josh. It’s not going to work.”

Josh sat up, and looked away. *Brett knows this is tough for me... why is he pushing so hard? Why can’t he just let it go?*

*Because he loves you, that’s why,* Josh chided himself. *You can hide from the world, but not from him, and if you were honest with yourself, you’d admit you want to tell him everything. You want at least one person on this fucking planet to understand.* “I couldn’t really come out,” he said, still hedging. “I was in the military, remember? Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell.”

“Is that the only reason you didn’t tell him?”

Josh looked away, his mind’s eye turned inward. Suddenly, he was fifteen again, standing at attention near the edge of the bed in his bedroom in his parents’ house. His father was glaring at him with the stern look, stoic and uncompromising, that seemed the only expression his granite features were capable of sustaining -- brows knitted, lips pressed into a thin, white line, eyes steely and unforgiving.

The gay porn magazine his father had found hidden under Josh’s mattress was clenched in one

large, white-knuckled fist.

Josh hissed through his teeth as he relived all the emotions from that long ago day. They hit him full force, twisting his stomach into a hard, tight knot. Humiliation. Anger. Self-loathing. Fear.

*“How dare you bring this... this... disgusting garbage into my house!” His father’s voice reverberated in the small room as he took the skin magazine between his hands and shredded it. Bits of paper floated down, covering the rug in a colorful snowfall. “Pervert! Degenerate!”*

John Langram had gotten right up into Josh’s face, until their noses nearly touched. A shiver raced across Josh’s spine as he remembered the heat of his father’s breath on his face. *“Pick up this mess, take it out to the yard, and burn it. You will stop this behavior as of right now, mister. You will never bring such filthy, nauseating trash into my house again, do you hear me?” His father had paused, one hand on the doorknob. “I won’t have gossip about you tarnishing my reputation. Find a girlfriend. I don’t care who she is, what her family does, where she lives, or even if you like her or not, as long as she’s female. And boy, if I ever catch you looking at another man, I’ll make you wish you’d never been born.”*

He’d never forgotten the way his father had looked at him after that, as if Josh were filth. That was the day Josh had buried himself so deeply in the closet that he wouldn’t even admit his own desires to *himself* for the next five years. By the time he was mature enough to question his sexuality, he was in the military. He remained in the closet out of necessity, until his sister died and he mustered out.

Josh looked out of the window as he told Brett the story, unwilling to meet his lover's eyes. It was easier that way.

“He never trusted me after that, either. Watched me like a hawk, questioned me when I hung out with my friends. By the time I was seventeen, he was pushing me to get married to my girlfriend right after graduation. I joined the military to get away from him. If I hadn’t, if I’d been strong enough to stand up to him, maybe Melanie wouldn’t have--”

“Stop,” Brett cut in. “Stop right there. What happened to Melanie wasn’t your fault, Josh. You were her brother... *he* was her father. *He* was the one who was supposed to be responsible for her, and *he* was the one who fucked up, not you.”

But Josh had kept guilt simmering in his heart for too many years to give it up so easily. “She’d still be alive if I was home, and--”

“You can’t possibly know that, Josh. Sometimes, these things are out of our control. She may still have developed preeclampsia even if she’d gotten prenatal care. It’s sad, and I wish it were otherwise, but it happens. You need to let it go, and stop beating yourself up. Be proud of what you did do with your life. You got out before you grew to be like him. You were a decorated Marine, you’re a terrific father for Seth, and now Amanda, and the best husband anyone could ever hope to have. I’m a lucky man to have met you.”

A small smile defied Josh's intentions to continue torturing himself with the unpleasant game of what-if he'd been playing. "Nah, I'm the lucky one. I've got a great family. You, Seth, Amanda... you're my whole world." His voice cracked as he leaned closer, and pressed his lips lightly to Brett's.

Brett's strong fingers were surprisingly gentle as they cupped his face. One soft kiss followed another, each growing longer, deeper. Brett's kisses were potent aphrodisiacs; once tasted, Josh craved more. In fact, all he wanted at the moment was to lose himself in Brett's body, until he remembered nothing about the reason that'd brought them to the motel room, felt nothing except the muscular arms holding him, the decadently hot mouth kissing him, and the inviting body hardening against his.

"God, I love feeling you wanting me," he whispered, sliding his hands over Brett's still-damp skin to his hips. He jerked the towel away, and wrapped his hand around Brett's cock. "Always ready for me."

Brett's voice rumbled, husky with need. "Always. All you have to do is look at me, and I'm hard. Nobody does it for me like you."

"Fucking A. You'd better keep it that way, too. This is *mine*," he growled, repositioning himself so that he could take Brett into his mouth.

Brett's taste was familiar, sexy and comforting at the same time. Josh took him in deep, sucking hard, then teasing the hot flesh with his tongue. When he tasted the bitter salt of Brett's pre-come, he backed off, not wanting to end it too soon. Lowering his face, he paid some attention to Brett's soft sac, tonguing it, sucking the stones into his mouth, until Brett hoarsely begged for release.

He sat up, straddling Brett's legs, fully aware of the smug smile gracing his lips. Leaning forward a bit, he took both of their cocks in his hand. His hand squeezed and stroked them rhythmically, slowly quickening to keep pace with his breathing and mounting climax.

"Oh, fuck, gonna come, Josh!"

"Do it. Let me see you come," Josh hissed, watching eagerly. The sight, smell, and feel of Brett's semen coating his hand and prick pushed Josh over the edge. He shuddered as a white-hot bolt of ecstasy ripped through him, and he added his come to Brett's.

"Fuck, that was good. *You* were good. Just what I needed," Josh said, his heart still thudding in his chest.

Brett laughed and patted his hand. "I'm *always* just what you need. Best medicine in the world for what ails you."

"Mmm. If we could bottle you, we'd be rich men."



“Nope, sorry. I’m strictly a one man show.” Brett’s mouth was warm and soft when it covered Josh’s, his kiss tender. “I love you, Josh.”

“I know. I love you, too. Thanks again for being here with me. I don’t know what I’d do without you. I really don’t want to go back to the hospital tomorrow.”

“There are times in life when we all have to do things we’d rather not do. It’s called being an adult.”

Josh huffed, and rolled his eyes. “Yeah, well, there are times when being an adult sucks. This is one of them.”

Brett laughed again, and smacked Josh playfully on the belly. “Come on. Let’s shower, get dressed, and go grab some dinner. I’m starving.”

“Yeah, okay. To quote Scarlett O’Hara, ‘I can’t think about that right now. If I do, I’ll go crazy. I’ll think about that tomorrow.’”

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A man was waiting for Josh when he and Brett arrived at the hospital. Short and trim, the man carried himself with an air of self-importance, as if he were condescending to walk the same hallway with them.

“Corporal Joshua Langram?” he asked, as soon as Josh was in earshot.

“Yes,” Josh answered automatically. “Former. What can I do for you?”

The man thrust a large, manila envelope into Josh’s hands. “I’m Lewis Van Deet, Attorney-at-law. Your father is my client. I sent you the telegram at his request, and he instructed me to give these to you if you came. The nurses told me you’d arrived.”

Josh almost dropped the envelope. “I don’t want anything from--”

“It’s yours to do with as you please,” Van Deet peevishly cut in. “Keep it, throw it out, light it on fire for all I care. I’ve done what I promised to do. Good day.” He turned, but paused and looked over his shoulder at Josh. “Off the record, I think you’re a lousy son, and don’t deserve to get shit from his estate. Believe me, if it was up to me, you wouldn’t get within fifty feet of his property, but he insisted.” He shot Josh a venomous look, then strode away down the hospital corridor without looking back.

“What the hell was that about?” Brett huffed. His hand was warm on the small of Josh’s back, lending him support. “What an asshole!”

“Forget it. Who knows what bullshit my father has been spewing about me over the years. For all I know, he’s told everybody that I’m a serial killer. A *gay* serial killer,” he amended. He looked

at the envelope in his hands, then passed it to Brett. "Do me a favor? Get rid of this. I don't even want to see what's inside."

Brett took the envelope, and slid his fingers along its length. "Feels like there's a key in here."

"I don't care. Throw it out." He turned toward his father's hospital room, and slipped inside before Brett could argue with him.

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"Did he wake up?" Brett asked.

Josh frowned when he noticed Brett still carried the manila envelope. "No, he didn't, and didn't I ask you to get rid of that envelope?"

"Yeah, you did, but you didn't say I couldn't read it first. When I did, I realized you wouldn't want me to throw it away, not yet."

"You read my mail? That's a federal offense!"

"Only if it's been postmarked, and this hasn't. It's not even marked 'private and confidential.'" Brett's smile was a little smug as he shook the envelope. Josh could hear something sliding around inside it. "That's the key to your father's house. There's a letter in here giving you full use of the property."

"I told you already that I don't want anything from that bastard!" Josh retorted. His voice rose, but at a dark look from a passing nurse, he checked his tone.

"Even photographs of your mother or of you and Melanie as children?"

Josh was stunned into silence. He hadn't thought of the possibility of his old man keeping mementos of his childhood, or Melanie's, or keepsakes of their mother's.

"Even if *you* don't want them," Brett said, "Seth might someday."

"We don't know if the old man kept any of that stuff. He wasn't exactly the sentimental sort," Josh argued.

"You won't know until you go to the house and look, and you can't go to the house and look if you don't have the key." Brett's logic was irrefutable. He held up the envelope again, and shook it.

Josh rolled his eyes. "All right, you win. We'll stop there on the way back to the motel." He narrowed his eyes, and stabbed a finger at Brett. "But then we're checking out and going home. I'm not going to give that man another day of my life."

Brett held a hand up in mock surrender. "Okay, okay. I get it. We'll go the house, and then go home if that's what you want to do."

Josh nodded sharply, then took the envelope from Brett's hand and opened it. A silver house key slid out onto his palm. He removed a single sheet of paper bearing the letterhead from the offices of Lewis Van Deet, which informed him that he was invited to avail himself fully of John Langram's house and property.

"Shit," he muttered under his breath. "Why do I get the feeling this is the key to a whole new set of doors I'd rather not open?"

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At some point during the past eight years, Josh's father had sold the family home and moved into a much smaller one. If he'd been trying to outrun the ghosts of his past, he hadn't gotten very far. His new home was located only a few miles from the house in which Josh had grown up.

General John Langram's new home was a stucco bungalow built on the curve of a cul-de-sac. Everything about the house was in keeping with Langram's military nature, from the buzz cut lawn and plain, white walkway, to the barracks' style interior design. The furniture was simple and utilitarian; there were no "homey" touches anywhere in the house. No flower arrangements, no curtains, no knickknacks. A few pieces of memorabilia from Viet Nam and the first Gulf War were on display in a glass case over the small sofa in the living room. A single bookcase graced one wall; all the titles were related to the art of war. Everything was spotless, as if even *dust* kept a wide berth of the General. Josh supposed his father had hired a cleaning service, and wondered whether he'd given them White Glove Inspections, as he had Josh and Melanie.

"See what I mean?" Josh asked Brett. He gestured around the Spartan living room. "There's nothing to remind him of us."

Brett clucked his tongue, and looked thoughtful for a moment. "Maybe it was too painful to remember every day," he said softly.

"Oh, bullshit. He's a hardass. Always was, always will be," Josh grumbled. He didn't miss the sharp look Brett tossed him. "Who's side are you on, anyway?"

"This isn't about picking sides," Brett said. "You know that, balls to the wall, I'd be on your side all the way, but this is just a... a fact-finding mission."

Josh opened his mouth to argue, but Brett had gone off in the direction of the bedroom. By the time Josh gave in and followed him, Brett had opened the large trunk at the foot of the bed.

Ribbons, trophies, an old rag doll, several scrapbooks, and other miscellaneous items filled the footlocker. "These were Melanie's," Josh said, touching the fragile curls of the rag doll. "This was her favorite doll. When she was four and five, she couldn't go to sleep without it," he whispered. He pointed to the doll's eyes. One was a bright blue button, the other a brass button

with an embossed eagle. “Melanie was inconsolable when the doll lost its eye and she couldn’t find it. My father took a button off his dress blues to replace it. I’d nearly forgotten about that.”

“Wow,” Brett said, then dug into the trunk again. He pulled out a misshapen lump of clay, painted red, white, and blue. “What the heck is *this* thing?”

Josh huffed. “Anybody can see that it’s a paperweight,” he said, ignoring Brett’s soft chuckle. “I made it during a father-son weekend with the Cub Scouts. I must’ve been, oh... eight, I guess.”

“*Your* father took you on father-son weekends with the Scouts, and kept this patriotic piece of crap all these years? Is this the same hardass-never-cared-for-anyone-but-himself father you were talking about earlier? There’s another scrapbook in here with *your* name on it, you know.”

“Shut up,” Josh said gruffly. He pushed past Brett to look into the trunk himself, more as an excuse not to look Brett in the eye than for any real sense of curiosity.

He passed up the book with his own name on it, and pulled out a third scrapbook instead, opening it to the first page. He blinked, unable to believe what he was seeing.

*Seth Ingram, 8lbs 5oz, 22 inches long* was written in bold, black lettering on the top half of the page, along with the date of Seth’s birth, and the hospital in which he’d been born. A photograph of Seth in his bassinette, obviously taken through the nursery window, was pasted below the lettering. It was slightly out of focus, and there were six other babies in the photograph, but Josh could make out the words, “Ingram, Boy” on the placard attached to the front of Seth’s bassinette.

There were other photos on the following pages, always from a distance, always in a public place, like a park or supermarket. Each photograph was accompanied by a short description in neat, tight script. Seth, age one. Seth, age two. Seth, age three... they continued up to the last photograph, taken just over a month ago. It was Seth at school, playing ball with a few of his friends.

“He was spying on us?” Josh gasped, flipping through the scrapbook.

“I think he was trying to keep a connection to his family,” Brett said. “These photographs just show that he didn’t forget about any of you -- not Melanie, not you, and not Seth.”

“That’s creepy... he was watching us, stalking us! If he wanted us to be a part of his life, then why didn’t come to me?”

Brett’s sigh sounded heavy, and his eyes were full of compassion. “Well, at least we know why his lawyer was so nasty to you. He must have known about your father keeping tabs on you, and thought it was because you refused to let him see his grandson. Josh, out of curiosity, what *would* you have done if he’d shown up at your front door? Be honest.”

Josh rolled his eyes and looked away. He got the point. “Probably slugged him a good one, then

slammed the door on his bleeding face.”

“That’s what I figured. He probably thought so, too, which would explain all this. He must’ve spent a fortune making trips out west to take these photos. Keeping a connection, no matter how tenuous, obviously meant a lot to him.”

Josh gestured angrily toward the footlocker. “Do you honestly think this could make up for what he did to Melanie?”

“Of course not! I’m just saying that people can change, Josh. *Minds* can change. His was narrow and bigoted, but you have to admit that your mind was set against the possibility of any reconciliation.”

“None of what happened was my fault!”

“I didn’t say it was, Josh. It was him, *all* him, but you were ready to carry your feud to the grave, either his or yours, whichever came first. Even if he fell to his knees begging forgiveness, you wouldn’t have changed your mind.”

Josh ground his teeth, seething because he couldn’t refute what Brett was saying. “A trunk full of scrapbooks, and a bunch of covertly-taken pictures of Seth means nothing. I’ll never forget what he did to my sister... or to me!”

“No one is asking you to forget, Josh. Only to forgive.”

Josh felt his face crumple into a scowl. Brett was putting him on the defensive, and he didn’t like it one bit. “*Forgive?* How can I forgive him after what he did? He needs to pay for what he’s done.”

Brett’s smile was soft and sad as he touched the scrapbook with Seth’s name on it. “I think he has, Josh. He lost his daughter. He lost you, too, for all intents and purposes. For almost eight years, he’s watched his grandson grow up from a distance. It had to have been difficult for him, never to talk to any of you, or let you see him watching, always sneaking around, hiding like a thief. You’ve said Seth looks like Melanie. Don’t you think she’s in his mind whenever he sees Seth? Don’t you think he agonizes over what might have been? And you... when he looks at you and Seth, don’t you think he’s seeing himself and you? I think this trunk represents a lifetime of regret, Josh, and I’m willing to bet it’s exactly what he was hoping you’d find when he gave you permission to come here.”

Was it possible? Could his father have felt remorse, but have been too ashamed or intimidated to ask for forgiveness? Josh wanted to believe it wasn’t true but couldn’t quite convince himself of it anymore. His eyes kept straying to the footlocker, glancing over the scrapbooks, the doll, the paperweight... a lifetime’s worth of memories. If his father really didn’t care about them, why would he have kept all the trinkets and photographs? Why spend his time spying on them, taking photographs of his grandson? It just didn’t jibe with the image of the callous, selfish man in Josh’s memory.

"I'm never going to know whether he wanted to apologize. It's too late now," Josh said. He placed Seth's scrapbook back in the footlocker, and closed the lid.

"No, it isn't. Listen to me, Josh. This rift between you and your father has caused you a lot of pain over the years. It's not too late to give yourself permission to finally let it go. You need to find a way to forgive him, not for him, but for yourself."

Josh was skeptical, but he nodded. "I need to think about it." He smiled, and leaned toward Brett for a kiss. "Thank you, for everything. For making me come here, for being here with me."

"Yeah, well, that's what husbands are for, right?"

"Well, that and a few other choice assignments."

"Perv."

"And you love me for it."

Brett laughed. "Come on. I'm hungry, and I think I spotted a pizzeria on the highway coming in. I want a large pie with everything, and extra cheese."

"Except onions. No onions."

"But I love onions!"

"I know, but they don't love you back. I'm not spending half the night choking on your fumes, dude," Josh said, chuckling.

"Now, do I say that to you when you order cabbage? You eat one serving of coleslaw and qualify as a methane plant."

Their mock-argument dissolved into laughter as they locked up John Ingram's house and got into the car. Josh had a lot of heavy thinking to do, but for now he needed to be distracted and dinner with Brett was just the ticket. It reminded him of how much he had to be grateful for, of how much love he had in his life.

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Josh sat on a chair next to the bed, head bowed, hands clasped as if in prayer. He'd come to the hospital more than an hour before, and had spent the time trying to gather his thoughts, to put his feelings into words. It had been two days since he'd visited his father's house and discovered the trunk of contraband photographs, and it had taken since then for him to come to his decision.

"Dad," he began, "I'm not really sure what to say here. I think I let what happened between you and me, and later between you and Melanie, color my memories of you. You weren't such a bad

father when I was growing up. You were military. Me, too, so I understand now why you couldn't be with me all the time. Still, you were there for me whenever you could. I remember the camping trips, and the Scouts, and the summer you taught me to fish.

"But dad, things went bad for us when I was fifteen. I guess finding that magazine must've hit you hard, finding out about me that way. Maybe it was a knee-jerk reaction, but what you said hurt me, dad. You scared me enough to make me try to be someone I wasn't, and it screwed with my head for a long time."

John Ingram's chest continued to rise and fall in regular intervals, as Josh paused to take a deep breath.

"I forgive you, dad."

There was still no reaction from Josh's father, but oddly enough, Josh felt as if a great weight had been lifted from his shoulders. He decided to go all the way. "I hated you for the way you treated Melanie, dad. She was only a kid herself, and scared. You were her father; you had no right to turn your back on her when she needed you most! She forgave you, but I didn't. When she died, I blamed you. I think maybe I still do. I can't ever forget, dad, but... I forgive you for that, too."

He paused again, and swiped at his cheek, surprised to find it wet with tears. "I don't know if you can hear me, but Brett was right -- I needed to say it out loud. It feels good to say it, and mean it. He's a pretty sharp guy, my Brett. A good man. I married him, dad. Made it legal, went all out, tuxes, flowers, rings... the works. It was the best decision I ever made, next to adopting Seth. Brett has a daughter named Amanda who lives with us part of the time, when she's not with her mom. Sweet little thing. She's Seth's age, and they get along great, and we love them both very much.

"I found the footlocker, dad. I can't believe you kept tabs on us all those years, but never tried to talk to me. I wish I knew if you'd changed. It would've meant so much to me to know that you accepted me for who I am, but since I'm trying to be brutally honest, I have to admit I probably wouldn't have listened to you."

He fell silent, and let his head fall back, staring at the white popcorn ceiling. He felt immeasurably lighter, having shrugged off the mantle of hate he'd been carrying for so many years, but in its place came an equally heavy load of sorrow and wistfulness over what might have been. Staring at the nooks and crannies of the ceiling, he almost missed the slight movement on the bed.

"Dad?" He shot out of his chair, clutching the bedrail, staring into his father's open eyes. Filled with pain and cloudy from the drugs, they nonetheless looked back at him, saw him, connected with him for the first time since he'd left home. "Dad..."

John's hand lifted to touch Josh's cheek, and he nodded his head weakly, a thin smile tilting his paper-dry lips. Then his hand fell back to the bed, and his eyes drifted closed again.

It hadn't been much of a dialogue, but it was enough. That simple pat on the cheek, the smile, and nod had told Josh everything he needed to know. Yes, John had heard him. Yes, he was sorry for the way he'd acted years ago. Yes, he missed Josh. Yes, he accepted Josh.

Yes, he had changed.

As had Josh.

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When John Ingram passed away at four o'clock in the afternoon on the following day, both Josh and Brett were at his bedside. He would be laid to rest next to Josh's mother and sister, reunited by death with the wife he'd lost, and the daughter he'd rejected in life. Josh prayed they would all rest in peace.

They brought John's footlocker home with them, and spent an entire evening slowly combing through the contents. Josh found a beautiful wedding photo of his parents, and another of Melanie at her Sweet Sixteen party.

When the family room renovation was finally complete, the two photos would hang on the wall next to the ones of himself and Brett, Seth, and Amanda, a family again, forever changed, but finally complete.

~END



Renovations of the Heart

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