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No
Apologies
J.M. Snyder
Aspen Mountain Press

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No Apologies

Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, 6 December 1941

It's hard to imagine it's the end of the year already, especially here, with the palm trees rustling in a balmy breeze, the sparkling ocean, the sandy beach. This is a tropical paradise, and the Decembers I grew up with in the Midwest—short, dark days full of snow and ice, Santa Claus, Christmas trees, cold mornings and freezing nights, bulky coats, ski caps—those Decembers are a million miles away, just like the rest of the world.

I keep having to remind myself I'm here on duty, I'm stationed here, but it's hard to stay focused on the military on nights like these when I feel like I'm on vacation here in Honolulu and the air is still and warm and smells of heady hibiscus blossoms. Here in this tiny bar every man's a sailor, the “undress-white” uniforms with blue neckerchiefs and Dixie-cup hats marking us all as proud members of America's Navy. Though it's getting late, the local girls are out tonight, mingling with the seamen and providing a breath of fresh air for us stale GIs.

Even though our waitress is a pretty Hawaiian girl my own age, she hasn't managed to snag my attention—I can't seem to keep my gaze from wandering over to Jack Sterling, my shipmate, my best friend, and the sexiest man I have ever met in the twenty years I've been alive.

He sits beside me and laughs at everything I say because he's had too much to drink. I've known him for years—we went to the same high school back home, enlisted in the service at the same time, and somehow got assigned to the same company before being stationed on the U.S.S. Oklahoma together.

He's a year or two older than me, and I'd be lying if I didn't say I've always thought him pretty, with those gray eyes that mirror the sky on a cloudy day and a fine dusting of light brown hair covering his scalp, all that remains from the Navy's barber. He's tall and lean, almost lanky, and has a way of looking at me that seems to eclipse the rest of the world. When he leans close, I always take a deep breath to draw in his scent, a clean, soapy smell that makes me ache below the belt. He's a touchy kind of guy, free with a pat on the back or a hand on my arm, and if the Navy hadn't straightened my spine, I swear I'd fall into him and drown.

Tonight the paper lanterns hanging from the bar's rafters cast flickering lights that shine in Jack's faded eyes. His full lips burn a dark red from the exotic drinks we're sharing; all the girls in the room pale in comparison to him. When he looks my way, I catch my breath and can't imagine how I'll sleep tonight, knowing he's in the narrow hammock below mine. "You want the rest of this, Donnie?" he calls out, despite the fact that I'm right beside him. His voice is louder than it needs to be in this crowded room. Yes, he's drunk.

I take the offered drink for an excuse to brush my fingers over his. The touch is electric, igniting my evening. "Sure."

The drink is some kind of fruity alcoholic slush that melts on my tongue and slides down the back of my throat. I'm not as drunk as I'd like to be for a Saturday night—it's getting late enough that we should think about heading back to the ship, but I don't want to lose these precious moments where Jack and I are just two sailors adrift in a sea of men, anonymous in our uniforms and sitting close enough that I can feel the heat radiate off his thigh where it burns beside mine beneath the table.

As I finish the drink, I let my hand drop to that leg, touching his knee in an almost absent gesture. I strive to keep my mind clear, my thoughts innocent, my fingers relaxed, hoping the whole thing looks nonchalant as I fight the urge to trail up the length of his thigh. I imagine the pleasure that would dull those gray eyes when my hand cupped his crotch, or the moan that might escape his pinked lips. *Watch it, Novak*, my mind warns through the haze of alcohol and smoke. *Neither of you are that drunk.*

But Jack doesn't brush my hand away, and when our shipmate Chuck Boehringer stumbles over and says it's time to go, I don't want to leave. Chuck sprawls across the table, his short blonde curls disheveled and sticky with beer, his dark eyes crossing from drink. "Come on, you guys," he mumbles as he folds his arms beneath his head, eyes shut. "Ralph says we got to go."

Ralph Folkes is another shipmate who bunks with us, and he's two steps behind Chuck, the only guy in the whole place not inebriated with alcohol or some exotic beauty. His red hair stands up in a sharp, tight crewcut above his heavily freckled face. When he sees Chuck on the table, he rolls his eyes and sighs. "Can't take you boys nowhere," he teases.

"His fault." I point at Chuck, whose rumbling snore elicits another laugh from Jack. His breath tickles the collar of my shirt and when I turn, he's leaning his chin on my shoulder, his face so close to mine that I could stick my tongue out and taste his pouting mouth. I have to bite the insides of my cheeks to keep from doing just that.

Ignoring us, Ralph hauls Chuck to his feet and slings one of our friend's heavy arms over his own bony shoulders. With a glance at Jack and me, he asks, "Don't you think it's about time we started heading back? I'm sure the girls will still be here tomorrow."

Into my ear, Jack breathes, "But will we?"

He laughs, leaning his head on my shoulder like it's too heavy to hold up anymore. It's a joke around the base—the war's in Europe and here we are, stationed in the Pacific, drinking margaritas and wearing leis and living it up. At any moment it can all end. We know this, but it's so hard to believe that when we're drinking down the salt and lime and waiting for America to join in the war.

"You're drunk," Ralph announces.

I snicker at him, but don't have the strength to push Jack away. The four of us pal around a lot, and Ralph's the only one who never drinks. Chuck's already half gone, I can tell by the way he smiles at every nurse and barmaid who passes by, winking and offering them a place to stay tonight as if he could really sneak a woman onto the ship.

Jack laughs again, burrowing his head into my shoulder, and maybe he *is* drunk but I like the feel of him leaning against me, his breath warm where it curls beneath my collar, his hair ticklish along my chin.

"You're both drunk," Ralph tells us. "We're shipping out."

Straightening my back, I snap my hand against my eyebrow in a sharp salute, then spoil the image with an insincere, "Aye, aye, cap'n."

That sets Jack off again. His laughter makes me smile and I squeeze his knee, daring to move my hand just a little higher up his thigh. I've never done this before, touched him this intimately—yeah I'm drunk, not from the alcohol but from *him*, his laughter, his grin, and the warm feel of his leg beneath the thin cotton pants of his uniform.

Standing up, Jack catches my hand in his and hauls me to my feet. "We're coming. Get up, Don."

I *am* up, in more ways than one, and I'm all too aware of the fact that my thin white pants do little to hide my erection. I snatch my cap off the table and dangle it from my fingers as I hook my thumb into my belt, hoping no one sees the thick bulge at my crotch. Jack's touch does this to me, and it doesn't help that when I shake free of his hand, he holds my elbow instead, then leans his whole body against mine because he's too plastered to stand. We fall against the table, him laughing and me trying not to cream myself when his hand brushes over my ass.

Ralph frowns at us like he thinks we might just fall back into our chairs when he turns around.

"Lighten up," Jack tells him, hauling me up.

For a delicious moment, his hands are on my waist and if I closed my eyes, the rest of the world would disappear. It would be just the two of us here, alone, God what a heady illusion.

Then Jack releases me to pull on his hat, and to keep from reaching for him again I fiddle with my own cap, folding it between my hands as we follow Ralph and Chuck out of the bar.

Outside, the crash of surf on sand whispers beneath the laughter and music that spills from the bar. The warm breeze is thick with the scent of night flowers and sea spray, and I tell myself again it's December, a few weeks until Christmas, but I can't believe it. Jack staggers into me—damn, he's wasted—and without thinking I wrap one arm around his waist to help support him.

He leans against my shoulder and I know I'll dream of him tonight, how can I not? I'll lie awake for hours in my hammock and ache for this touch again, and wonder if he'll remember this evening and the flirty touches in the morning.

"Donnie." He breathes my name like a sigh.

I look at him, those eyes, that hair, and I can't keep from smiling. "What, Jack?"

He stops walking. "I'm sleepy," he announces.

At his words, Ralph turns around in front of us, already frowning.

"I can't walk anymore. I just want to lie down here..." He starts to sit down on the ground, but I keep him upright.

"Shit," Ralph says, a little ticked. He's got Chuck hanging all over him because he's too drunk to walk anymore, and I know the last thing he wants is to deal with another one of us. With a beseeching look, he tries, "The Jeep's not that far away. Get up, Jack."

No dice—Jack's grin widens and he slides a little further down my side.

Ralph grunts. "Donnie, can't you get him up?"

With a leer, I tease, "I'd love to."

The words slip out unbidden, and I clap a hand over my mouth, too late to stop them. Ralph glares at me and I try to explain, "I meant..."

I can't find anything else to say so I try to laugh it off, but it's hard with Jack leaning against me, head on my thighs, arms around my knees, his face almost in my crotch. Ignoring Ralph, I murmur, "Come on, man. Get up already. We're almost there."

A goofy grin spreads across Jack's face as he hugs my legs tighter. "I *am* up," he whispers.

His breath is hot along my pants, burning me beneath the thin fabric. When he sees me looking at him, his grin widens, then he bares his teeth and gives a playful snap two inches above the bulge in the front of my pants.

Damn.

My body steps back, my mind too buzzed to think straight. He didn't ... did he just...? *God*. I know I'm going to fall a second before I tumble backward to the ground. Jack falls with me, his body landing heavily on mine, one knee pressing against the erection that throbs in my pants. I gasp his name and my hips raise up a bit on their own, rubbing me against him. Despite all my willpower, I come just a little bit, just enough to dampen the front of my underwear, and God, I hope that doesn't show through my pants.

"Jack," I sigh, breathless.

His hands are on me, all over me, trying to find purchase to push himself up but Jesus, does he know what he's doing to me? Those fingers tickle along my chest, brush over my nipples, glance over the front of my pants. His legs are just as bad, entangled with mine, his knees pressing into my thighs, and his face is just inches from mine. His scent drowns out the rest of the evening smells, his laughter becomes my world.

"Jack," I try again, laughing myself as I make a weak attempt to push him off, but it's late and I'm tired and I don't really want him to let go. "Ralph's getting pissed."

Footsteps swish through the grass and then Ralph is glowering down at us—the look on his face sobers me up. "Damn right I'm getting pissed," he snaps. One shoe kicks out to connect with my hip, more to prompt me into sitting up than to hurt.

It works. I extract myself from the tangle of limbs and push Jack off me. "Sorry," I mutter as I stand. There are grass stains on my white uniform; I run a hand over my ass in an ineffectual attempt to clean myself off a bit. And yes, there is a small, very faint stain at the front of my crotch where I couldn't hold back. *Shit* .

Ralph just stares at us as I help Jack to his feet. Chuck is still draped his shoulder, eyes closed as if he's asleep. When Jack sees the stern expression on Ralph's face, he frowns, mumbling an apology of his own.

"I'm glad you think this is funny," Ralph says, in an icy tone that makes it apparent he's not amused with our antics.

My cheeks heat up. I look at my shoes like a reprimanded child but part of me *does* think this is funny—part of me is having a blast. I still feel Jack pressing me to the ground, his knee grinding into my hard cock, the ghosts of his hands fluttering over my body.

But Ralph didn't feel those touches. He's angry we're acting so silly, in uniform even, and he just wants to get us all back to the ship in one piece, his duty done. "Now come on already."

"Ralph, no," Jack says suddenly. "I'm tired. Can't you bring the Jeep around? I can't walk any more."

Chuck rouses himself and nods. "I'll get the car," he mutters, pushing away from Ralph.

With one of his patented *see what you've started?* looks, Ralph grabs onto Chuck's arm. "Fine. We'll get the Jeep. You two stay here."

"Like we're going anywhere," I mumble.

Only Jack hears me, but he snickers loud enough that Ralph throws an evil glance over his shoulder as he leads Chuck to the parking lot.

Turning, I notice the weariness in Jack's face and sigh. It *is* late, and he had a lot more to drink than I did. He probably won't remember this moment tomorrow—hell, it won't mean anything to him, even though I'll never forget it—and that makes me sad. "You're really tired, eh?"

"Yeah." His voice is drenched in weariness, and with a shuffling walk, he stumbles to a tall palm tree nearby. I follow him, watching the way his body moves beneath his white uniform. With every step, the fabric pulls smooth across his round buttocks, and I have to shove my hands into my pockets to keep from reaching out to cup his ass. When he leans against the trunk of the palm tree, I raise my gaze to his face so he won't think I've been checking him out. Pulling his hat off his head, he toys with it in his hands. "Ralph's mad at us, you think?"

I lean beside him and shrug. "He's just being Ralph."

This close in the darkness I can count each of Jack's eyelashes if I want to, and every time he blinks, I catch my breath to see the faint shadows flutter across his cheeks. I lean my head against the rough bark of the tree and can smell the faint aftershave he used this morning, a clean, delicious scent that clings to him like fog.

He's watching the road, waiting for Ralph and Chuck to drive up, but he knows I'm watching him and every so often he'll glance at me from the corner of his eye, apprehensive, unsure.

I can't stop staring at him, his pale skin, his glistening eyes, his full lips that part as his tongue licks them nervously. "Jack," I whisper, drunk on the moment, the night, and him.

He clears his throat and turns towards me. "What?"

He studies me for a moment, eyes dull with drink, and tentatively I reach up to touch his downy cheek. Closing his eyes, he leans into my touch, and that's all the prompting I need to move closer.

My lips brush his with the gentlest of kisses, and at his sigh my heart begins to hammer in my chest. I kiss him again, stronger this time, pressing my lips to his in a velvet crush that is sweeter than I ever imagined it could be. I feel his hand on my chest, his fingers grasping the knot in my neckerchief as my lips part his and my tongue licks out to taste him. His slight moan goads me on, and I lean into him, my body pushing his against the tree behind us, my eagerness and hunger hard against his hip.

When I pull back, his eyes are still closed, his lips slightly parted. God, he's so beautiful, an angel on this island paradise, a vision in white on this dark evening. I stroke his cheek, the soft skin beneath my fingers exactly the way I've imagined it a million times before, and his throat works reflexively as he swallows.

He's afraid, I can feel it—afraid that someone will see us, maybe, out here behind this tree, or afraid of the war clouds gathering on our horizon, or afraid of me, and my sudden tenderness, my hungry kisses. *Don't you know?* I want to say as I study him in the scant moonlight. *Don't tell me you never guessed the way I feel for you. Don't tell me you never looked at me and couldn't see the lust and love and need in my eyes looking back.*

I lean down for another kiss, but this time his hand hardens on my chest, suddenly strong and keeping me at bay. I frown, confused, as he swallows again and opens his eyes.

I don't know what I expected to see there—maybe a mirror of my own feelings, a sudden realization that he's always loved me too, *that* would be nice—but his gray eyes waver, watery and unsure. "No," he whispers, his usually deep voice failing him at the moment. Clearing his throat, he tries again. "Donnie, no."

"Why not?" My body aches for him; my lips tingle at the memory of our kiss.

He pushes me away, and suddenly I see it all, too clearly. I just assumed he'd feel the same—how could he not? But he doesn't, and in my drunken state I've made a mess of things, of *us*. I kissed him, showed him with the press of my body how much I wanted him, how I *needed* him, and he doesn't feel the same about me. I'm an idiot, I'm a *fool* ... now things will never be as they were between us; we will never be the best of friends again. Now he knows that every time I look at him, my thoughts are on the two of us together, our bodies entwined in passion and lust, my heart aching with a desire he'll never feel.

Covering my eyes with my hand, I sigh. Why didn't I *think* before I kissed him? Why couldn't I have been stronger? I've held out this long ... "I'm sorry," I mumble. I am, oh God, I'm sorry, in ways I never

thought I'd be. "Jack, please—"

"It's okay," he says gruffly.

But it's *not* okay, it'll *never* be okay, not again. He clears his throat and I want to ask him what he's thinking—maybe he *is* too drunk to remember this moment, maybe things will be okay in the morning, even if they aren't right now. Before I can ask, I hear a horn and the crunch of tires over gravel. Ralph is back.

Damn it.

Jack's hand on my wrist is warm and friendly and nothing else, nothing more. "Come on, Donnie. They're here."

"I'm sorry," I say again. I can't say it enough.

"I know." Jack tugs at my wrist, but the playfulness is gone from his eyes, and he's no longer laughing. "Let's go back to the ship, okay? Please?"

I watch the ground as I follow him to the Jeep. In the back seat I stare out at the road as we drive back to the harbor, ignoring Chuck's drunken snores beside me and Ralph's questioning gaze in the rear-view mirror. I stare out at the night passing by and don't look at Jack at all, even though he's watching me in the passenger side mirror. I don't want to look up and see the remnants of our friendship in his eyes, dying from one stupid little kiss.

* * * *

When the bells ring out reveille the next morning, my head is cloudy with the drink and the memory of the kiss. God, I hope Jack doesn't remember. I hope he somehow managed to sleep off the taste of my lips and forget the press of my body against his, even though my skin burns where we touched. I hope he doesn't remember and I hope that things are still all right between us, because he's my best friend and I can't imagine how I'll ever make it through these next few years in the service without him by my side.

Please forget that moment of weakness, I pray as I roll out of my hammock.

His own hammock is empty beneath mine, which means he's already up and probably already eating on the mess deck, and it also means he remembers because he always waits for me.

Always.

And the fact that he hasn't can only mean that he remembers the kiss and hates me for it. God, I hate myself for the way it turns me on to remember it, even though it shouldn't—even though I know it meant nothing to him, it still means the world to me.

I get dressed in my blue denim dungarees and chambray work shirt, my cap squashing down waves of hair I need to get cut again but I'm on leave until tomorrow, so I can wait until Monday to see the barber.

Chuck's the only other sailor still asleep, and I can tell by his light snores that he's passed out from whatever he drank last night.

But because Jack didn't wait for me this morning, I feel a mood coming on, so I tip Chuck's hammock as I pass, spilling his sleeping ass onto the deck. "Wha—?" he sputters, rubbing the shock of hair on his head and blinking the sleep from his eyes.

"Get up, Boehringer." I straighten my uniform one final time before heading up to the galley.

With a sleepy yawn, he mumbles, "It's Sunday."

As if I don't know. He blinks at me blearily before climbing back into his hammock. Pulling his blanket over his skivvies, he buries his head into the pillow and begins to snore again.

Yeah, it's Sunday, and Jack and I were going to go into Honolulu again today, get in some Christmas shopping, just little knick-knacks to send home to our folks. But as I trudge up the metal stairs, my shoes ringing on the steel, I wonder if he'll still want to go into town with me.

I shouldn't have kissed him, I know this, but damn if it didn't feel more wonderful than I ever thought it could.

Lord knows I'd thought about it a lot, lying awake at night, wondering how he would taste on my tongue and what he'd feel like in my arms and how he'd sound when we made love. Last night he looked at me as if he wondered those same things, and I wanted to show him how good it could be, how perfect we were together, how much he meant to me and how I wanted him to mean so much more. When our lips touched, I felt as if the world had stopped—nothing else mattered in that instant, not the war on the European front, not the rumors trickling in about the Japanese attacking America, nothing else but him and me and the kiss.

Then he pushed me away.

With my hand on the handle to the galley door, I take a deep breath, steeling myself for whatever I'll see in his eyes today.

Inside the galley, the tables are already crowded with sailors in dungarees, their trays filled with eggs and potatoes and toast. I fake a half-hearted grin when Ralph waves, and Jack looks at me briefly before turning back to his food. No smile, just a naked wariness I put on his features, and I'm not hungry anymore. I just go through the motions of getting a tray and letting the cook fill it up.

Jack hates me.

I sit down beside Ralph; across the table, Jack looks up at me and I have to choke back a sudden sob that burns my throat. "Hey," he says softly.

"Hey." I toy with the food on my tray, mashing the eggs with my fork and trying not to watch his jaw as he chews. "Chuck's still asleep, lazy ass."

Ralph laughs. "He's still passed out, you mean," he says, finishing off his own eggs. "You guys shouldn't drink so much. I ain't dragging you back to the ship again. Next time, I'll just leave you there. You can explain to the OD why you didn't make it back."

Jack smiles and even though it's not at me, my heart still rises to see the curve of his lips. "You wouldn't do that."

He's right—Ralph isn't the type to leave his friends. He's threatened it before but always gets us back safe.

"Just watch me," Ralph warns. "You never know. Just you wait and see."

An uneasy silence falls around us, despite the talk at other tables. I manage to get a forkful of eggs into my mouth, but they taste soggy and bland and it's all I can do to swallow them down. I want to tell Jack I'm sorry again, I want to apologize until he has to forgive me, he just *has* to, but I don't want to say anything with Ralph right here because then he'll want to know what I'm sorry for, and I know Jack wouldn't want me to say. I'm sure he'd just rather forget, or pretend the whole thing never happened, and I wonder if he still tastes my lips on his. I want to ask him that, I want to know...

Ralph's voice startles me. "What's wrong, Don?"

I grimace at my tray and don't know how I'm going to finish this food—I don't feel like eating now. From across the table, Jack glances at me with a slight frown on his face, a worried look that silences me. *Don't tell*, that look says.

When I don't answer him, Ralph adds, "You look like you just lost your best friend. And you're on *leave*, boy. Cheer the hell up, already."

Well, Ralph, I did lose my best friend. For one little kiss, I threw everything we had away.

What the hell was I thinking? I wasn't that drunk, I *wasn't*.

But I'm not going to say that, and he's waiting for an answer, and Jack is watching me closely, waiting to see what I'll say, so I just shrug and shovel more tasteless food into my mouth so I don't have to reply.

It's easier this way. Maybe I'll just pretend it didn't happen. Maybe then it won't have happened, except for in my mind, and Jack can still laugh and joke with me and never know how I really feel about him.

But his pale gaze weighs on me like an anchor, dragging me down, and I know I can't pretend, I know it won't go away. I'm going to have to tell him I'm sorry and just hope that there's time enough to mend what we had before I tore it to shreds last night.

"I'm fine," I mumble, eating my eggs and keeping my eyes down so I don't have to look at Jack. I don't want to see those pinked lips that I now know taste like peaches in summer or that pale skin I know feels softer than anything else I've ever touched before. I choke down the eggs and the potatoes and the stale toast and wonder how I'll ever find the words to tell him I'm not sorry for kissing him but I'm sorry for how it made him feel.

* * * *

Chuck sets his tray down across from me as I finish eating. "Hey guys," he says, his voice still thick with sleep. It's a good thing this is Sunday and he's on leave, because his hair sticks out everywhere and his uniform is so wrinkled, he'd catch hell with the Officer of the Day otherwise. As he sits down next to Jack, he nudges him with one elbow and asks, "You two still heading into town this morning?"

I wait for Jack's answer because I'm wondering the same thing. We haven't spoke two words to each other since last night, and I don't know how we'll make it through the day if we go into Honolulu as planned, but I don't want to lose him as a friend. I want him, any part of him I can have in my life. So when he shrugs and glances at me, I hold my breath, waiting. "I don't know," he says.

I want to cry. That means no, and it's all my fault.

Chuck laughs as if it's the funniest answer he's heard in a long time. "You don't know?" He winks at me and adds, "What about you, Donnie? You still going or don't you know, either?"

"We were going to go together—"

Jack pushes away from the table and stands up, anger clouding his face. "You can go if you want. Don't let me keep you here in Pearl. I just don't know if I feel like going or not."

With that, he turns and stalks out of the galley.

"Jack—"

I sigh and push my tray away. Damn. There he goes, walking out the door, out of my life, I just know it, and I'm too damn sorry and too damn weak to follow him.

Quietly, Chuck asks, "What happened between you two?"

Even Ralph is looking at me, waiting for an answer.

"I don't know," I mutter, because I can't tell them, I just can't. How would they even begin to understand? "I don't fucking know anymore."

Elbowing me in the arm, Ralph says, "Well, I suggest you go find out."

The look in his eyes strengthens my resolve and when he elbows me again, I stand up, my tray in my hands. Sure, I'll find out. I'll follow Jack and talk to him and tell him I'm sorry and I want him back as a friend and if he can just forget the kiss then I can pretend I don't want him that way and things can be okay between us again. I can do that.

Ralph stops me with a hand on my tray. "We'll take this up," he says. "Just find out what's wrong with him."

"Thanks." Leaving my tray on the table, I push through the door Jack just exited and catch a glimpse of his retreating back down a nearby stairwell. "Jack," I call out, taking the narrow steps two at a time in my haste to catch up.

He goes down the next set of stairs and glances back at me. "Donnie, please," he says, and the pain in his voice almost makes me stumble. "I don't want to talk right now."

"I really think we should." I turn the corner and hurry down the next flight of stairs, keeping him in my sights. I don't know where he's headed, since we've already passed the deck housing the barracks, but we're going to talk. I have to tell him. "Jack, I'm sorry."

"You said that last night," he says, ducking into an open doorway.

I follow right behind him. "I know, but I am. I really am. Please listen to me."

"I'm listening," Jack says, but he doesn't turn and it's hard to talk to the back of his head. It's hard to follow him and watch the way his denim dungarees pull at his shoulders and butt and try to tell him I'm sorry when all I want to do is catch him in a strong embrace and kiss him silly.

Ahead of us is the battleship's boiler room—it's hot down here, humid and damp, and I know once he ducks through that door he'll use the twists and turns to lose me, and I don't want that, we need to talk about this, we need to...

"Jack, stop." I stop myself, and he takes another step before he realizes I'm no longer following so he halts, too. At least he still respects me enough to listen. "Look at me."

Slowly, he turns around. I see the pain in his eyes, pain I put there, and I want to cry. I want to fall to my knees and hug his legs and tell him over and over again I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I didn't mean it to be this way, I thought it would be different and it's not and I'm sorry.

But the words choke in my throat and he shoves his hands deep into the pockets of his pants while he waits for me to say something else. Finally he asks, "What, Donnie?"

Rubbing my forehead with one hand, I sigh. "Can we just talk? Please?"

"So talk," he says, as if it's that easy.

Behind me I hear footsteps on the metal stairs. It's still very early in the morning, a good half hour until we have to be on deck for morning quarters, and the sailors coming down are probably relieving those in the boiler room. We can't talk here, not where they can find us, not given what all I have to say. Pointing back the way we came, I say, "Not here. Come on."

At first he doesn't move. But at the stairway I look back and he sighs, running a hand through his hair and pushing his hat off in the process. Picking the cap up from the ground, he steps back into the hall and looks at me with eyes that seem to say, *Well? I'm here. What more do you want?*

Jack, if only I could tell you. If only I could somehow find the courage to say the words, but how can I when just a little kiss frightened you so?

Glancing up at the sailors coming around the corner on the deck above us, he asks, "Donnie, where—"

"Here," I say, turning the hatch on a cleaning locker. I pull the metal door back and wait as he steps inside, flicking on the overhead lights as he enters. I follow him in and pull the door closed, turning the hatch to seal it shut.

Now that we're alone, I don't know what to say or how to begin. I still don't have the words I need, and I'm wondering if I'll ever find them at all. I look nervously around the narrow locker—it's mostly empty, just a bucket and swab in the corner, a shelving unit along one bulk head, a few assorted tools scattered here and there. Not the most used room on the ship.

"Donnie," Jack says with another sigh. He eyes the small space around us, then looks at me, as if gauging the distance between us. "I don't think this is a good idea. We'll be late for morning quarters."

"Give me five minutes," I say with a frown. When I look at him and see the anguish looking back, I add softly, "I'm sorry, Jack."

"You keep saying that." He looks around the room, at the shelves, the bulk heads, the swab, everywhere but me.

"I am." God, I am. "I'm sorry, Jack, really. If there was any way I could turn back time and take it back,

believe me, I would. I don't know what got into me last night, I don't know what the fuck I was thinking. I'm so sorry—"

Jack frowns. "Stop saying that."

Now that I've started, I can't stop. I want him to know how much I want back what I crushed in that brief kiss. "Jack, I am—"

His voice takes on a hard edge. "Donnie, stop it. Now."

For a moment, neither of us speak. Muffled voices and the ring of shoes on metal steps beyond the sealed door echo around us, distant and muted. Finally he looks at me, tears shining unshed in his eyes like rain threatening to fall from cloudy skies. I bite my lip to keep from apologizing again. "Just stop it," he tells me. "Please stop saying you're sorry. I know it was a mistake, okay? You don't have to keep driving the point home."

"It wasn't..." I frown, confused. Daring a step closer, I reach out to touch his arm, but he shrugs away. "Jack, it wasn't a *mistake*. I mean, it was, but it wasn't ... it's not how you think."

"Well," he says, taking a deep breath to steady himself, "tell me then, Donnie. Tell me how it is."

I don't answer immediately. Does he really want to know I think of him constantly? That in my mind I make sweet love to him on sandy beaches beneath starry skies, that I hold him tightly and never let him go, that my kisses warm him at night and my hands roam his body? Does he really want to know *that*? And if he does, sweet God above, do I dare admit it? When one little kiss brought us to *this*?

A steady drone buzzes somewhere above the ship, miles away it seems, planes coming into the base for refueling or supplies, maybe, even though it's still early. What is it now, close to eight o'clock? Jack and I are supposed to be in town already, not here in some locker below deck trying to sort things out. This is my fault.

"Donnie?" Jack asks. He's waiting for an answer.

"I don't know how it is," I whisper. No, I do, but I can't tell him. I can't risk losing any more of him; I may have already lost too much. "Jack—"

A sudden scream pierces the air, the windy whistle of incoming artillery. I look up, as if I can see through the decks above us and see what's making that infernal screech. Beneath our feet the deck shakes, the bulk heads twist away, the shelves launch at us, the swab and the tools and the bucket take flight and fling themselves our way.

I duck into Jack as he bends down over me, his hands on my waist in a protective gesture that makes my throat close up because he doesn't realize he's doing it, he's just going on instinct now, and his rough touch tells me a million things words could never say. It tells me things aren't ruined between us; it tells me there's still hope.

Around us the ship rocks as we cower on the ground in each others' arms, and then a horrendous tearing fills the air, a sound so low and dull it makes my head pound and my teeth ache to hear it, the telltale scrape of iron peeling away from the hull. Screams rise in pitch, an endless wail that never stops as the world falls beneath us.

That damn screaming fills my ears until I'm deaf and my throat aches because it's not bombs or shells anymore, it's me, it's me screaming, and as the bulk heads fold in on us and the door buckles and the room spins, I don't think I'll ever stop.

* * * *

It's dark.

God, I open my eyes and it's still dark.

I hear faint screams and the rush of water and the wail of bombs, the rat-tat stutter of sixteen-inch guns, each explosion shaking through me. I feel warm arms clutching me close, I hear the rapid thud of a heartbeat against my cheek, and when I smell Jack's aftershave I wonder if I'm dead and this is heaven, this closed space, these tight arms. I raise my hand to my face and feel damp tears on my cheeks—I hope it's tears and not blood, though my fingers find a tender spot on my forehead that I think is bleeding. I cup my hand in front of my eyes and blink, feeling the flutter of lashes against my palm, so I know my eyes are open, it's just too dark to see anything.

When I sit up, Jack's arms tighten around me reflexively. "Donnie?" His voice is a whisper in the darkness.

"I'm okay," I say, an automatic response because I don't know if I am or not. I don't know how badly my head is cut, and I feel achy and sore all over. I push the swab off me and kick away the bucket it was in. "What about you?"

"Fine," he says, his voice shaky. His hands stay on my arm, as if he's afraid to lose me in this tiny room, this sudden darkness. "What the hell happened?"

"I don't know."

I hear shouts somewhere below us, echoing through the ship's pipes. I hear water rushing through the bulk heads around us, and I wonder how much we've taken on, how we were even *hit*, but mostly how much water the ship has in her now and how long we have until she goes down.

We have to get out.

The power's out or the alarm would be sounding, calling all hands to their battle stations. Something happened, an air raid, a sudden attack, *something*, and we have to get out *now*.

As I stand up on weak legs, Jack holds onto my hand with both of his. "Where are you going?"

"I don't know." I have this vision in my mind of the shallow harbor, and I can swim but not if I'm trapped in here, not if I'm stuck in the ship. "We have to get out."

Jack pulls himself up beside me. "I know," he says, his voice calmer than it should be. Doesn't he see? We have to get out *now*. I head for the door and he holds me back. "Donnie, wait—"

"We have to get out," I say again.

There's a hint of hysteria in my voice that I don't like, not one bit. I swallow it down and try to tell myself this is Jack, he knows we have to get out, he's holding onto me and we'll get out together, if he just holds onto my hand we'll get out of this, I know we will. I stumble in the darkness and reach out only to find the

bulk head at an odd angle, and my feet kick at a metal hump in the deck. Bending down, I feel the wire casing that houses the light fixture. What's it doing down here? I pick at it but it's stuck, soldered to the metal overhead.

Suddenly my knees buckle and I sit down, I sit down on the *overhead*, the ship's upside down and there's no *way* we're going to get out of this, we're trapped and it's my fault because I wanted to talk to Jack about that stupid little kiss and it's my fault we're stuck here in this metal coffin and the bulk heads are so close, the air is stale and I have to get out, we have to get out we have to—

Then Jack's arms are around me again, his hands pressing my face into his chest, and he's telling me, "It's going to be okay, it's going to be fine, just calm down, just calm down, just please, for the love of God, calm down, Donnie, please."

I grab fistfuls of his shirt and try to breathe slowly, smelling his scent and his closeness and listening to him say everything's going to be all right. When I hear metal creak below us and the ship shifts as it settles, I whisper, "This is all my fault, Jack. I'm sorry."

"Hush," he says, hugging me tight. "If we were up on deck we might have been killed instantly."

I sniffle and dry my eyes on his shirt. "We should've been on shore," I point out. "We should've been in town, miles away and *safe* —"

"The town might be gone." His deep voice is quiet, making his words ring true. He's right, the town *might* be gone. The whole island might be gone, for all we know. Maybe we're the only ones alive anymore. Maybe we're the only ones who survived.

"Just calm down," he tells me.

I nod, yes, I can do that.

"Calm down and let's just think this through, okay?"

"Okay." But I can't think, my mind is numb. I just cling to him and try not to imagine the ship sinking lower and lower, taking us with it to the bottom of the harbor.

* * * *

I don't know how long it's been since the lights went out. Ten minutes, maybe ten hours. In the dark time drifts away like a life preserver just out of reach and bobbing further out with each wave. The metal deck—which is really the overhead, because we're upside down, but I'm not going to think about that, Jack said not to think about it but we're upside down and sinking but I'm not thinking about that at *all* —the deck I'm sitting on is cold through my dungarees and I can hear water rushing through the bulk head behind me, filling up the ship, bogging us down, but I don't think about that.

Instead I think about how close Jack sits beside me, the warmth where his shoulder rests against mine, the press of his thigh on my leg, and I hug my knees to my chest and close my eyes and see his gray eyes behind mine, his sweet smile, the way his hair sticks up from his forehead in the morning and the way his lips turn a pinkish red when he eats and the way he smells. I can smell him now, his aftershave a sharp undercurrent beneath the sharp brine and steel and smoke. Below us the ship shifts again, and my voice shakes when I whisper, "We're sinking."

"No shit," Jack says, his voice barely audible. He clears his throat and adds, "Just don't think about it."

"I'm not." That's a lie. "We should get out of here."

"I know that," Jack replies. So calm. So sure. So cool.

How the hell can he just act as if nothing is wrong? I wish I knew. I want some of his strength, I need it right now, I need something to hold me down and keep me here because parts of me are disappearing, in this darkness. I can feel them fade away.

My legs, for one—they're gone, numb from the cold metal and the position I'm in, I can't feel my toes anymore and I think I'm being erased, piece by piece. Next it'll be my waist, then my chest, my arms, my neck, until all that's left is my head and that will disappear too, that will vanish and I'll be gone.

But if Jack keeps talking to me maybe his voice can anchor me here, keep me alive, keep me sane. "We're sinking," I say again, just because I know he'll reply and I want to hear him speak.

"Donnie," he sighs, exasperated, but at least he's talking. At least I still exist for him. "I know that. Just calm down."

"I am calm," I've never been more calm in my life. Never. "We should get out of here."

Jack snaps, "Donnie, please."

I bite my lip because now I've made him mad. "I'm sorry."

Once the words are out, I realize just how sorry I am and I can't stop the flood that pours from me. "I'm so sorry, Jack, for everything, really I am. I'm sorry about last night, and I'm sorry about this morning, and I'm sorry that I chased you away and locked you in here with me and now the ship's sinking and I'm sorry, it's all my fault, I'm so sorry—"

"Stop it." Jack touches my arm, a comforting gesture in the dark. "If you say you're sorry again, I'm going to have to kick your ass."

I hear the smile in his voice and it's on the tip of my tongue to apologize again when I realize what he's saying and I laugh. It's a scary laugh, and for a minute I think I won't stop, but it makes me feel a little better, at least. "Okay." Then I ask, "Do you think we can swim for it?"

Now *he* laughs. "Where would we go?"

I shrug, my shoulder brushing against his in the darkness. "We can swim up the staircase." The hatches were open between decks before we sank, so they should still be open, right? "Just follow the stairs up to the main deck and then swim up to the surface."

It could work. I know it could.

Jack sighs. "What if the stairs are blocked?"

The hope blossoming in my chest is blown apart like a dandelion gone to seed. "Well, we can at least *try*." It's better than sitting here, doing nothing. It's better than just accepting this, better than being trapped here.

"And if we can't find a way to the main deck?" Jack asks.

Damn him and his voice of reason. I want to cry now—can't we even just *try* it, just *see* if we can escape?

"What if we can't find the way out," he reasons, his voice godlike in the darkness, "and we get lost and can't find our way back? Then what, Donnie?"

When I don't answer, he says, "Then we drown. I don't want to take that chance."

"Me, either," I whisper, mostly because I don't want to leave if he's not coming with me. I feel myself pouting in the darkness, and the deck beneath me has grown colder, damp and chilly, and when I touch the metal, my hand comes away wet.

Wet.

Fuck.

I raise my hand, reaching out in the dark to where Jack is, and I touch his warm cheek with my damp palm. "We're leaking," I breathe. Damn it all to hell, we're *leaking*. "Jack?"

"Shit," he sighs. Then he scrambles over me, his body warm and heavy in the darkness, his hands searching the deck and bulk heads. "Help me find the spot."

I scoot away from the water seeping into my pants and hold onto his shoulders, not wanting to lose this intimate closeness.

"I found it." Relief floods his voice.

My own fingers find his in the darkness, pressed against a small tear in the seam of the bulk head. Tepid water pumps through the tiny hole, splashing our fingers. People didn't drown in water like this ... did they?

I tug off my cap and shove it into the hole. It won't hold for long but it's something, at least. "We're going to die," I whisper, leaning back against the bulk head.

Jack is above me, close in the darkness, and I swallow thickly because I want to kiss him again. We're going to die and I want to kiss him now more than ever.

He rests his forehead on my knees and sighs. "We're not going to die," he says, but there is no conviction in his voice anymore. He knows the truth. He's just lying to make it easier for me, and I swear to myself that I'll kiss him again, just before we die. I promise I will.

And this time there will be no apology.

* * * *

We move to the far side of the room, away from the pool of icy water slowly gathering near the door. I can hear the insidious trickle seeping through the soaked fabric of my hat and I think maybe the hole in the hull has gotten wider. It's only a matter of time now before the water reaches us, lapping over our shoes and around our ankles and dragging us down with the ship. But I can hear Jack's faint breath beside me and as long as he's here I think maybe I can ignore the water and the creeping death slowly

approaching and the fact that we're just sitting here and still *sinking* ... I can try to ignore that as long as he stays here, right here beside me.

Tentatively, I reach out and touch his leg, my hand resting on his knee like it did last night at the bar, and he doesn't shy away. My voice is just a small sound in the vast darkness surrounding us. "Jack?"

His fingers fold into my palm and he squeezes my hand tightly. "I'm right here," he says. "We're going to be okay, Donnie."

How can he promise that? I want to ask him but he's making such a valiant effort, trying to be strong for me, trying to be hopeful and positive, and I love him for it.

Who am I kidding? I love him for that and a hundred other things. I always have.

"About last night..." I start. I have to tell him now, or I may never get the chance.

"Donnie, it's alright," he says, cutting me off.

"No," I say with a frown he can't see. "You don't understand."

Jack sighs. "I do," he whispers. "You were drunk, we were *both* drunk. That's all."

I bite my lower lip and tighten my hand in his. "That's *not* all. I wasn't that drunk. I..."

I sigh. Why is this so damn hard? Despite the darkness, I swear I feel his gaze on me, though I can't see it. "I wanted to kiss you," I admit. My stomach flutters once the words are free, and I can't stop myself from adding, "I've always wanted to."

He takes a deep breath and envelopes my hand in both of his. "Why?"

I wish it wasn't dark—I want to see his face right now, I want to see what lies behind those pale eyes and then I'll know why his voice sounds so strained, like he's angry or upset. If only I could see his face.

I shrug. What am I supposed to say? That I've been in love with him since we met, all those years ago back in high school? That the slightest touch from him numbs my mind and makes me ache for more? That I've dreamed of kissing him and holding him and loving him, and I can't imagine my life without him, he's that much a part of me?

"I love you," I whisper.

Because it's the truth, it sounds like I'm shouting it from the top of my lungs, I can hear it louder than the water rushing around us and the creaking beams and the ghostly knocks echoing through the pipes.

Jack's hand crushes mine in a sudden grip and I know he's hating me but now that the words are out I can't take them back, so I say them again. "I love you, Jack. I can't help it, I'm sorry, but I do."

Long minutes drip away between us, and his palm grows damp in mine, his breath steady and even. I'd give anything to see him right now, to see his expression and to know what he's thinking. "Jack?" I ask, scared. "Say something, please."

His deep voice is a relief in the darkness. "I told you to stop apologizing," he says softly. He's so

close—when did he move this close? His breath fans my cheek and my fingers clench his to keep from reaching for his face. Then his nose nudges against mine, a gentle caress in the darkness, and his lips find my mouth, covering it in a breathless kiss.

I sob, a faint sound lost in the moan that escapes my throat when his tongue slips between my lips. He tastes as sweet as I remember, sweeter even, and I cradle his face in my hands and pull him closer as his hands encircle my waist, hugging me tight. I want him, I want him so badly, I can't believe he's kissing me now, he's kissing *me*. And I don't care that we're sinking anymore, I don't care that we're stuck and we're going to die, because now he's kissing me.

* * * *

It's easier with his arms around me, holding me tight, my head on his shoulder. I sit between his legs, lying back into his embrace, and it's easier to breathe like this, easier to stay calm when I realize the ship is sinking and our friends and shipmates must be dead or dying. His arms keep the desperation at bay.

I wonder if anything is left from the attack. I wonder if it was just Pearl that was hit or if the bogies went after the cities, too. There's no way we're not getting into this war now. We've been dragged, kicking and screaming, into the fray.

But I'm not screaming anymore. I'm calm. I can handle this. I can become just another statistic, a memory to my family and a rallying cry to our troops. I can forgive whoever did this and die here in this steel tomb because Jack is here with me, and he's holding me, and he's whispering into my ear how much he's always loved me, how much he's wanted me and how he's been so afraid to even hint at the way he felt because he thought I'd never love him back.

I want to laugh at that, ha! How could I not?

His breath is soft on my cheek, his lips warm and damp behind my ear, where he's kissing me and murmuring gentle words I've always dreamed of hearing in his voice.

When the water licks my shoes we stand up and he hugs me against him, afraid to let go now that we've finally found each other. Our fingers are entwined and I feel his heart beat against my back, I feel his body press to mine with a promise and an ache that we can't give into, not now, but he's holding me and that's all I want. That's all I need. I can handle this as long as he holds on and never lets me go.

The echoes through the pipes have taken on a hollow ring, the sounds of other men trapped as we are, beating out a steady stutter of Morse code, an S.O.S. haunting the darkness like a restless spirit. Before I would've cried, shouted at them to stop it, stop banging, stop it, it's useless, it's all in vain, no one hears us, no one knows we're here. But Jack's kisses burn my lips and maybe all's not lost yet, maybe someone knows, maybe there's still hope for us. In his arms I think maybe there's still a chance we'll get out of this alive.

Even if we don't, at least we'll be together.

* * * *

At first it's just another sound in the never-ending night, a whirr of white noise that rattles the fillings in my teeth. Then I realize it's the bulk head behind us, resonating at such a high frequency that I think my eyes are going to shake loose and tumble to the water circling our legs. The cold water has risen to our knees already, and the only warmth is where Jack's body hugs mine, his arms around my back, my arms around his waist. He leans his head on my shoulder and sighs as the vibrations shatter through us.

"We're sinking," It's just the ship settling in the sandy shoal, the masts snapping off in the shallow silt, the decks grinding into the bed of the harbor. That's all it is. We're settling into our final resting place now. It's just a matter of time.

Jack fists his hands into the back of my shirt, grabbing the fabric in a reflexive gesture. "No," he whispers, hugging me tight. "I think that's outside. Above us. Listen."

So I listen. I can hear muffled shouts, the echo of shoes on steel, the far-off buzz of torches and jackhammers ... sweet *Jesus* could it be that someone *knows* we're down here? That the attack is over? It sounds like someone is up on the hull now, God Himself even, pounding away with a dozen hammers made of the hardest titanium and cutting through the steel siding with a horde of blow torches as fiery as the pits of Hell.

"Jack, is that..." I let my voice trail off because I don't know quite *what* it is and I don't dare hope. "You don't think—"

His kiss quiets me, and the room rings with the sounds from above, glorious music like angels' voices reverberating through golden cathedral bells, pealing out salvation with each thud that shakes the ship.

* * * *

I remember sunlight, a shaft piercing the darkness and blinding us both. I remember rough hands, pulling me up, out of the tomb, out of the ship, away from Jack. I cry his name but am too damn weak to fight the strong hands supporting me, leading me away. At the hospital nurses circle me like hungry seagulls looking to land, and all around me men lie dying, bleeding and burned, their moans and sighs and screams more horrible than the faint echoes I heard in the belly of the Oklahoma.

They tell me Japanese fighters struck at dawn, all but eradicating Battleship Row. Seven of America's finest ships, destroyed. Hundreds of Americans, dead. There's no way we can stay out of the conflict now. The scent of war hangs heavy in the air, cloying and bitter like the salts the nurses use to revive the unconscious wounded.

They keep me in a bunk for observation—the gash in my head has healed but they stitch it up a bit anyway, just to be sure. I lie on the starched sheets and listen to the labored breathing around me and wonder where Jack is. I want him here with me now. I want him here by my side.

In the darkness he whispered he loved me, needed me, wanted to hold me forever and kiss me breathless and love me like I've always dreamed he would. He promised long nights in his arms, and I know it wasn't just words spoken in a moment of desperation. I felt it in his kiss, his lips still tingling on my own. I felt it in the way his breath curled around my cheek, the way his mouth sucked on my ear, the way his fingers roamed through my hair and brushed the dampness from my brow. I will never forget that.

Hours later I wake from a restless sleep to find him sitting on the edge of my bed, my hand in both of his. He's smiling down at me with those eyes and those lips I never thought I'd see again. "Jack," I sigh, hugging him close. My heart is in my throat when I press my lips to his ear and breathe, "I love you."

His quick kiss on my cheek is all the answer I need to know he hasn't forgotten either, he *won't* forget, and he loves me too.

THE END

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