

~ Tomahawk'd ~

by DS Bauden

Chapter One

1985 - The Northwoods Island City

Hearing the crunch of car tires on the pebbled drive alerted two excited eyes to appear in the cabin window. One blue and one greenish-brown eye watched the small blue Toyota pull into a parking space. The skinny dark-haired girl observed as a family emerged slowly from the vehicle.

Turning from the window, Jackson Thomas shouted to her aunt, "Jackie, they're here! They're here!"

Approaching her niece, Jacqueline Thomas looked out the window at her newest guests, while patting the girl's shoulders.

Her niece looked on patiently, resting her hands on the windowsill, as a man and woman stepped out of the car, closed their doors and walked toward the now open trunk. She was about to look away when the rear door opened revealing a blonde-haired girl, about her age, getting out of the backseat. Sighing unknowingly, she watched closely as the girl's parents handed her a Teddy Bear suitcase and a pillow.

Chuckling at her niece's excitement, Jackie said, "Looks like you'll have someone to play with after all, Jack."

Smiling up at the older version of herself, she nodded enthusiastically then turned her attention back to her potential new playmate.

The girl smiled up at her father and started to look around the property. Mystified by all the tall trees, young Erin Hawkins' feet moved slowly in a circle as her head was tilted back as far as humanly possible.

"Erin, honey, be careful. Watch where you're going," Erin's mother warned.

"Yeah, peanut, you look like a Pez dispenser gone wrong."

"Daddy!" Erin cried, swinging her head down, towards her father. Looking to her mother for assistance, she drawled out, "Mooooommmmm!"

Stifling a laugh, her mother, Katie, swatted her father's arm. "Joe, be nice; we just got here. God knows after 6 hours in the car, the last thing she needs is more ribbing from you."

"Sorry, peanut," he apologized, tweaking her nose with his fingertip. Looking to his wife, he continued, "Let's check in and find our cabin."

The family grabbed the rest of their things and headed towards the main cabin. Nothing but footsteps could be heard as they traversed the wooded path, leading them to the main office of The Northwoods Island City.

The walk to the main cabin was not far from the parking lot. The Hawkins took in the scenery reverently, not wanting to disturb any part of the gorgeous landscape and nature surrounding them. Approaching the cabin first, Joe, not finding a doorbell, knocked on the screen door.

Jacqueline opened the door with a large smile. "Mr. and Mrs. Hawkins?" she greeted.

Joe and Katie smiled at their host and nodded. Katie spoke up first, "Yes, I'm Katie Hawkins and this is my husband, Joe and our..." she looked back to find that Erin had found a bird's nest in one of the trees close to the cabin, transfixing the girl's attention. Smiling, she continued, "That's Erin, our daughter."

Jacqueline extended her hand to them, "I'm Jackie Thomas, nice to meet you all. Welcome to the Island City. I hope you guys enjoy your stay. You picked a great time to visit." Joe's eyes sparkled with curiosity, "Oh yeah? Why's that?"

Jackie continued, "It's still too early to be considered fall, but late enough that the seasonal tourists aren't hanging around. You'll have a lot of the lake to yourselves, but there are a ton of water shows still happening this week," she explained as Jackson inched her way to the door.

Joe smiled at Jackie and looked down to see mismatched eyes looking back at him. "And who are you, little lady?" He was amused by her cut off jean shorts and dirty knees.

Standing up proudly, Jackson outstretched her hand, mimicking her aunt. "I am Jackson Thomas, sir. It's nice to meet you," she smiled broadly, making Joe grin. She repeated her actions with Katie, causing the woman to mirror her husband's expression.

"Well, Jackson, it's nice to meet you as well." Joe looked to Jackie and smiled. "Your daughter?" he asked.

"No, thank God!" she kidded. After receiving an outraged look, she patted her niece's head. "Jack's my niece."

Both sets of eyebrows raised in tandem. Katie said, "Oh, I would've thought you were her mother, you look so much alike." A look of sadness passed over Jackie's face but was quickly masked.

"I get that a lot. Her mom and I were identical twins," she explained softly, watching as Jackson eyed the smaller girl in pink overall shorts still enthralled with the bird's nest.

Catching the past tense in her statement, Katie replied, "Oh, I'm sorry."

"Thank you."

Silence arrived like an unwanted guest and both parties felt the comfort level drop. Before it got out of hand, Jackie smiled and suggested she show them to their cabin. Nodding gratefully, the pair grabbed their bags and moved out of the way as Jackie and Jackson came outside.

"You'll be in cabin six. It's one of our only cabins with air conditioning units. After the scorchers we've been having, I'm sure it'll be a welcome addition. Even being this close to the lake, the days have been awful and the nights not much better."

Joe nodded in agreement and appreciation. Turning to his daughter, he called out, "Hey, Erin, come on! We're gonna find our cabin."

Jackson turned to him and said with a charming smile, "I'll show her where it is, sir."

Grinning at her niece, Jackie chimed in, "She's a regular eleven year old welcome wagon. She knows this place better than I do."

Agreeing, Joe called to his daughter, "Ok, Erin. Listen to Jackson, ok?" He picked up her discarded suitcase and pillow.

Erin shouted out from the nest and answered, "Ok, Dad." She turned to look at Jackson for the first time and noticed her eyes immediately. "Wow!" she exclaimed.

Looking around her, Jackson was confused. "What? What is it?"

Lightly reaching for the taller girl's hands, Erin replied, "Your eyes! How did you do that?" she asked in an awe-filled voice staring shamelessly into them.

Chuckling to themselves, Erin's parents turned to follow as Jackie led the way to their home for the next month.

Jackson grinned and rolled her eyes at the smaller girl. "Oh, them. Well," she began the story her aunt had told her, "I was laying down one day on the grass over there," she stopped, pointing to the direction of the land in front of the lake. "And I fell asleep on my side. But, while I was sleeping, this eye turned into the color of the sky above it," she said pointing to her right eye, "and this one turned into the color of the ground below it." At the girl's amazed expression, Jackson laughed.

Erin's face continued its look of wonder as she studied the orbs in front of her. "Like magic!"

"Yeah, something like that." She grinned at the younger girl. "So, you're Erin?"

Erin realized she hadn't introduced herself yet to her new friend. Finally letting go of Jackson's hands, she said, "Yep, my name is Erin, what's yours again?"

"Jackson."

"What kinda name is that for a girl?" Erin asked.

Jack sighed and put her arm around the girl's shoulders. "It's a long story, shrimp. Let's go find your cabin and I'll tell you some other time."

"Hey!" Erin cried, ducking away from the taller girl's arm. "I'm not a shrimp! You're just a... a big tree!" Erin crossed her arms over her chest, a pouting lip forming on her face.

Hiding her amusement at the flummoxed young girl, Jack replied, "Ok, so what should I call you then, if you aren't a shrimp?"

Looking confused, Erin replied, "Call me Erin."

Touching her chin in thought, Jackson replied, "You don't look like an Erin. What's your last name?" "Haw...Hawkins?" she stuttered, not understanding how she didn't look like an Erin. She *was* Erin.

"How about I call you Hawk? We've got some cool hawks that fly around here sometimes. I think they're really neat."

Standing taller, Erin decided with a smile that she liked the name her new friend would call her. "I like Hawk." She bit her lip in thought. "Can I call you Jackie?"

"Um, no, that's my aunt's name. How about..." "How about Jack?" she tried again.

"Sure, shri... Hawk," she quickly amended, seeing the hurt look on Erin's face. Once she corrected the moniker, she was graced with a beautiful smile from her younger companion. Seeing that face light up convinced Jackson she would spend the whole month making Erin smile as much as possible. "Let's go find your folks." She put her arm back on Erin's shoulders, only to have the girl grab her hand, pull it to her side and entwine their fingers as they skipped along towards cabin six.

Jackson was named after her grandfather, Jackson Thomas, Sr.. While pregnant, Jackson's birth mother, Emma, had told her father that she was having a boy and would name the baby after him. Emma gave birth to a baby girl, but didn't live long enough to see her. The baby's name was never changed, and Jackson Emma Thomas made her way into the world.

"So where do you live?" Jack asked her smaller companion.

"I live at 252 Forest Way, Paldeer, Illinois." Erin smiled, being able to recite her address so quickly.

"I live here," Jack offered, gesturing around them with her free hand.

"Wow, do you still have to go to school?" Erin asked, looking at the lake. "This is vacation!"

Laughing with a snort, Jack replied, "Of course, Hawk. I gotta learn stuff other than how to catch fish!"

Eyes wide, the blonde headed girl asked, "Can you teach me how to catch fish, too?"

"Nothin' to it." Jackson's confidence assured Erin that she would indeed, much to her excitement, learn how to fish this summer.

The smaller girl squeezed the hand she held, anticipating a fun filled vacation with her new friend.

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Joe and Katie Hawkins enjoyed the brief jaunt to cabin six with their host. Jacqueline Thomas was very proud of her resort and didn't mind talking about it to new visitors. They walked along the waterfront briefly before they reached their destination, with Jackie showing them the boathouse, fish-house, and sand pit area.

"My grandfather opened this resort over fifty years ago. I can't remember a time when I didn't love this place," Jackie shared with her guests.

Katie smiled. "It's quite obvious that you love it very much. It's so serene and just... breathtaking... I can't believe it took us this long to get here."

Joe smiled and nodded. "If the fishing is half as good as I've heard, I'll never want to go back to work."

Jackie looked sympathetically at Katie. "I'll just apologize now then if he quits his job."

"Oh dear Lord, he can't quit, he's the boss!" Katie exclaimed, laughing.

Chuckling along with Katie, Jackie said, "Well then I hope you've got good people working for you while you're here."

"Actually, we close the shop for a month at this time of year. It gives everyone a nice breather. Our clients know our schedule so any pressing needs are taken care of before we shut down. It really works for everyone." Joe closed his eyes and inhaled the fresh air. His lungs seemed grateful of the reprieve from the city's polluted air. "Everyone comes back refreshed and ready to work hard. It's a system my dad instated when he opened our doors for the first time. It just works. Our employee turnover is low because of it as well."

Jackie listened thoughtfully and regarded her new guests. Joe had begun to lose his brown hair; he had wonderfully warm green eyes, had a tiny bulge in his midsection, average height and seemed to be very kind. Katie, his wife, had strawberry blond hair, pale blue eyes, was very thin and also seemed kind. They were charming and witty and Jackie thought they were very likeable,

indeed. "I wish everyone had policies like that. I think people would be much happier. Kinda like that kindergarten nap rule. Or three months off for summer vacation. Some things should just carry over into adulthood!"

"Right on!" Katie chimed, laughing with her husband at this friendly and hospitable woman. Jackie led them to the front door, opened it and ushered them inside. The couple walked through the space and smiled at the cool air coming from the air conditioner and the classic charm of the cottage. Avocado green and mustard yellow tones were everywhere in the small square kitchen. An old yellow range oven stood proudly in the center of the small counter with a window above it. The green refrigerator and kitchen sink completed the L contour. Red, black and green plaid carpet ran throughout the cabin. Curtains that matched the green in the carpet hung on rods over every window. Joe sat on the gold couch and bounced a little to check for bad springs. Katie was shown the bathroom, which had a shower, toilet, and sink with exposed pipes that led into the wall and floor.

Finally, Jackie led Katie into the main bedroom. Katie threw her bags onto the bed and called for Joe to bring in the others.

"This is just charming, Jackie. We're going to have a great time here."
Joe walked in with the rest of their belongings and handed all but Erin's things to his wife.
"Yeah, this place is great. I think the TV even has cable!"

Katie rolled her eyes at Jackie who smiled a knowing smile at her. Turning to Joe she replied, "Yes, it's an upgrade of the resort. There aren't that many channels through our provider yet, but they've said they'll have over 100 channels by the end of the year. Next year, we should have a huge line up for you." She grinned at his wide-eyed expression.

"Well, I'm sure I can guess your schedule this month, honey. Fishing all day and crashing on the couch in front of the television set at night." She smirked and balled her hands on her tiny waist. "Am I close?"

Joe blushed at his wife's ability to read him so well. "Uh... uh..."

"Mhmm... that's what I thought," Katie cut his stuttering off.

Laughing out loud at the banter, Jackie announced her departure, "Well folks, if you need anything, pick up the phone and dial pound, or just come on over to the office. Please enjoy your stay."

Jackie turned to leave but remembered a detail she'd not mentioned, "Oh and Joe? Your boat is docked in slip number four. It's the white and blue nineteen-foot Harbercraft. It's got a one hundred and fifty horsepower engine, so you'll be able to fish *and* ski if you want. We've also got a giant tube if you want to take Erin out on it. Jack can't get enough of tubing." Hearing her niece's footfalls, she opened the door to greet the girls.

"Well, speak of the devil."

Jackson grinned at her aunt. "Never speak of the devil, Jackie, he'll getcha when you're not lookin'."

Disregarding her niece's quip, she noticed the girls' entwined fingers. Raising her brow, she asked, "So what do you think so far, Erin? Has Jack scared you with her mice and bear stories?"

Erin's eyes shot wide open. "Wha... what mice and bear stories?" she cried looking to Jackson then her parents for confirmation of this awful possibility. Her parents shook their heads from inside the cabin looking like they were going to say something.

"Jackie!" the dark haired girl yelled, then looked to Erin. "She's pulling your leg. We don't have those things here." She narrowed her eyes at her aunt. "*Do* we, Aunt Jackie?"

Sensing what Jackson was trying to tell her, she replied, 'Ah, no, Erin, we don't have them here. Jack sometimes makes those stories up to entertain herself. I just wanted to make sure she wasn't telling tales."

Jackson squeezed Erin's shoulder for reassurance. "If I'm not scared of this place living here all the time, you can be here for a month and not be scared, right, Hawk?"

Erin looked at Jackson and puffed out her chest with confidence she didn't feel. "Nnn... no, I won't be scared." Her saucered eyes gave as much credibility to her statement as if she had said water wasn't wet.

"Come on, Hawk, let's go find your room." Jackson walked past her aunt and smiled at Erin's parents. She walked inside with Erin and stopped as she collected her bag and pillow from her father.

Erin's parents looked at each other and both mouthed, *Hawk?*

"First bedroom on the right, peanut," Joe said. Jackie waved and left to tend to some things at the main office.

Erin and Jackson entered her new bedroom and Erin's eyes took on a look of awe. There was a large double bed in the center of the room, with a large dresser and closet. "My room at home isn't this big!" she gushed.

Giggling at her companion, Jackson added, "Usually more than one person stays in here, but not now. It's all yours."

Erin threw her things on the bed, sat down and opened up the Teddy Bear suitcase to began sorting through her things. "So what grade are you in, Hawk?" the older girl asked, sitting on the bed next to Erin.

"I'm going into fourth. What about you?"

"Sixth. Next year is junior high; it's gonna be rad." Erin smiled and pulled some things out of her suitcase. First thing Jackson noticed was a large pad of paper and colored pencils. "So what's that

stuff for?" she asked.

"I like to doodle. My mom thought I'd have lots to draw when we came here," Erin explained. Remembering the bird's nest she saw earlier, she knew her mom was right.

Jackson regarded Erin's statement and knew the perfect place for the girl to sit and draw. "So do you want me to show you around? Or do your folks need you?"

"Let me go ask. I wanna see more birds!" Jackson grinned at her enthusiasm.

"Well, let's go!"

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The girls got up and went into the living room to ask permission to go exploring. Receiving nods from both parents after a promise to be back by dinnertime, Erin and Jackson raced to the waterfront.

"Come on! Let's go sit on the pier. You can see the fish swimming really close." Jackson tugged on Erin's overall strap and the two raced to sit on the chairs that were on the large T-shaped dock. Erin held her pad of paper tightly and kept her pencils in her pocket.

Boats went by on the lake with Jackson waving to a few people she knew through her aunt. A big smile graced her face when one boat swung towards the shore and back to create a large wake of water. The waves that came at them were high and when they met the pier, the spray that was emitted hit the screeching girls while they tried to run away. Droplets of water raced down their joy filled faces as they ran off of the dock. Erin pushed her hair out of her eyes as she tried to get the water off of her face. The bubbling laughter brought a warmth throughout Jackson as she listened. A large toothy smile lit up her face and she knew from this point on that Erin would make a great playmate while she was here.

"I got soaked!" Erin cried out. "I'm glad my paper didn't get too wet." She started to leaf through her pages to make sure.

"Oh, I'm sorry, Hawk. I forgot about that." She watched Erin turn each page and noticed the drawings. "Hey, those are cool. Is that your tree house?" she asked, referring to one of the drawings.

"Yeah, my dad built it for me. He said I would be closer to God in it." Jackson rolled her eyes. "You can't get closer to God unless you die." She folded her arms across her chest.

Looking at the mismatched eyes of her new friend, Erin nodded fiercely. "Yes, you can! The higher you are, the closer you are to Heaven and the closer you are to God. My daddy said so!" Erin was close to tears and Jackson sighed and backed off some.

"Hawk, you can believe what you want, okay, but God took my mom away before I even met

her. I've climbed every hill, every tree, every *thing* to get closer to her and it doesn't work." She took a deep breath and paused to look up into the sky, willing her own tears away. "I stopped trying," she finished quietly.

Erin looked at her for a long time letting what she'd said sink in. *Her mommy died.*

A small hand on her forearm brought her back to the ground. Erin whispered, "I'm sorry God took your mom, Jack."

A small smile found its way to Jackson's mouth. "Thanks, Hawk. Jackie says she watches over me now." Erin kept her hand on Jackson's arm as they shared a warm connection. After brief contemplation, Jackson asked, "Wanna see my favorite place on this whole resort?"

Intrigued, Erin replied, "Sure!"

"Come on, then, let's go."

Jackson led Erin around the resort, away from the cabins and towards the boathouse. Lifting her sneaker covered feet so the branches on the ground wouldn't trip her, Erin tried to keep pace with her taller friend. The boathouse docked four boats inside. When the two walked in, the first thing Erin smelled was fish.

"Ew, it's stinky in here."

Smiling, Jackson replied, "Yeah, but you get used to it. Besides, we're not gonna stay in here. Come on," she instructed, "but watch your step," and cautioned. "I don't wanna have to tell your folks I let you fall in the lake." They exchanged smiles and continued walking around the wooden planked floor.

Jackson led them carefully to a ladder that went up to the loft of the boathouse. Erin looked at her sketchbook and realized she'd have to leave it to hold onto the rungs of the ladder. Looking down at Erin from the third rung, Jackson saw her friend putting her pad down.

"You can bring it; just stuff it in your shorts."

Erin looked doubtfully at her, but undid one of her straps to accommodate the pad and much to her disbelief, the sketchbook fit inside her overall shorts. "Thanks!" She grabbed onto the ladder after securing her strap and followed Jackson up to the loft.

Looking around Erin said, "Wow, it's cool up here." She looked out the window to see the clear blue sky above the calm lake. She saw birds flying around a bridge off in the distance. She started to unclasp her shorts strap to remove her sketchpad only to have warm fingers touch her arm.

"Not yet. We're still going up."

Eyebrows raised, Erin questioned, "We're going higher?" She swallowed. "How high are we going up?"

"Look over here." Jackson walked over to the wall, traversed a small set of steps and opened a large latched shutter. Once the shutter was opened, another ladder appeared on the outside of the boathouse. "Now watch me."

Jackson reached up to grab hold of a wooden grip above the opening, stepped forward and swung around onto the ladder. Erin's eyes went wide for the umpteenth time since she'd met Jackson and watched as her friend maneuvered her body onto the ladder.

"Jack, I can't do that! I'm gonna fall."

Jackson swung easily back into the loft. "No you're not, Hawk. It's easy. I'll let you go first and I'll be right behind you to make sure you don't fall. Ok?"

Erin looked uncertainly at Jackson. The dark haired girl asked, "Do you trust me?" Looking into the clashing eyes, she saw confidence and certainty. She nodded her blonde head.

"Ok, first thing you're gonna do is come up these steps and hold onto the grip up here." Erin followed her instruction and held onto the grip with one hand. Jackson held her other hand and guided it to the outer rung of the ladder. Once Erin realized she had a firm grip, she lifted her front leg to wrap around the wood of the ladder and landed a foot solidly on the bottom rung. Smiling confidently, she swung her small frame around to fully face the ladder. She brought her other foot and hand to the ladder and held on tightly.

Jackson kept some of her personal belongings inside the loft for these types of adventures. She grabbed a blanket, draped it over her shoulder then picked up a wooden box, which went inside her pocket, then grabbed onto the grip.

Looking up, Erin saw the boathouse roof. She looked down into Jackson's patient eyes. "Are we going onto the roof?" she asked before climbing.

"Yep, just keep going until you reach the top. It's flat so you won't fall off."

"K"

The two used their strength to climb up the ladder and reached the top without trouble. The roof was blacktopped and smooth. The heat coming off was seen in waves in the air. Jackson put down the blanket so they could sit without being burned.

"I did it, Jack! I climbed all the way." Erin was extremely proud of herself.

"Yep, I knew you could. Good job." Taking Erin's shoulders, Jackson turned the girl to face the water. "Now look at it."

The air left her lungs in a long, slow, reverent breath. "Wow, this... this is so pretty up here." She looked at her companion. "I can see why this is your favorite place."

Looking around her, Erin saw they had a canopy of trees around them. The sun was beating off the water creating a portrait in her mind she'd only seen in books and movies. Unclasping her strap, she removed her sketchpad and put it on the outspread blanket. She reached into her pocket and pulled out the box of colored pencils. She sat down and continued to look around in awe of this magical place. Jackson removed the wooden box from her pocket and sat down next to her. Placing the box away from Erin, she closed her eyes and took in a long deep breath.

"I always feel so much better when I'm up here. Doesn't matter if I'm happy or sad. I always just feel better." She shrugged and smiled at Erin's grinning freckled face. "Just don't come up here when it rains. That ladder is slipperier than grease when it's wet." She blushed at the memory of having to explain why she was "swimming" fully clothed in the lake during a rainstorm to her aunt. "I found that out the hard way."

"Did you fall?"

"Yeup. Big ol' splash." She smirked. "I'm lucky I didn't hit anything on the way down," she continued.

Giggling, Erin opened up her sketchbook to a blank page. "I wish I coulda seen that. I bet it was funny." Looking at her friend's outraged expression, she amended, "Only because you didn't get hurt."

"Riiight. Well don't expect me to save your sorry butt if you fall off, now."

Selecting a gray pencil, Erin began to draw the scene in front of her. Jackson watched as her hand moved around the page. Considering Erin was only nine years old, the talent was very evident in the girl's strokes. The shape of the bridge was well constructed, followed by the rippling water around it. Birds soon joined in the medley, then slowly shorelines and branches were drawn. As she drew, Erin's eyes scoped all around her, trying to see every little thing possible.

Jackson watched the girl delve into her work so intently that she almost forgot about her own special gift. She reached next to her and opened the wooden box to reveal a black recorder. Putting the small pieces together, she inhaled, put the mouthpiece to her lips and gently exhaled.

Music suddenly coming from her right startled Erin. Once she saw Jackson playing, she broadly smiled at her. Jackson winked at her and continued to play. The tune she played was wistful in nature and crept inside of Erin instantly. She found herself closing her eyes to listen more intently. Jackson's eyes closed as well as she let the music wash over her.

When the song came to an end, Erin opened her eyes and looked at Jackson. "That was really pretty."

Blushing softly at the welcome praise, Jackson replied, "Thanks. I sit up here a lot and just play." She held the recorder out for Erin to see. "This was my mom's. My aunt said she used to sit up

here and play all the time. Once I learned how to use it properly, Jackie gave it to me. I use it almost everyday."

"Well, you're really good at it. I've never played any instrument."

"Have you ever tried?"

Shaking her head, Erin responded, "Nah, I like to draw." She shrugged. "I like to listen to music, but I don't want to play it."

"Just like I like to look at pictures, I just don't want to draw them."

"Exactly! You're smart, Jack."

"Nah, I'm just good at faking it."

The girls talked, played and continued to use their respective talents over the next few days. Erin drew her pictures while Jackson played her recorder as she watched the talented hands draw their masterpieces. The two had felt the instant bond between them. Small glances or touches made that bond grow every day. They weren't sure exactly what that feeling was between them, they just knew they couldn't wait to see the other and feel it again.

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Erin's parents were thrilled she had found such a good friend in Jackson. With Erin out playing most of the day, they were able to spend many hours just reconnecting with each other. Joe had taken the boat out many times with Katie along for the ride. He'd tried to teach her how to cast a fishing rod, only to find himself untying many knots in his reel. Realizing she wasn't going to win any fishing awards, Katie resigned herself to using the bamboo pole they had purchased for Erin. *No muss, no fuss*. Joe thought, relieved he wouldn't have to worry about his gear anymore.

Today they were going to hook the big inner tube up to the boat for Erin and her friend, Jackson. They had told the girls after breakfast that they were going to get it ready. Erin was very excited as she'd never done anything like that before. Jackson assured her it would be "totally awesome." With Erin believing anything and everything Jackson told her, she knew, without question, it would be.

Chapter Two

1986 - Paldeer, IL - Letter to Erin from Jackson

January 7, 1986

Dear Hawk,

Happy New Year! Can you believe it's 1986? I totally can't! Thanks for your last letter. Sorry it's

taken me such a long time to write back. Christmas was very cool, how was yours? I wish it didn't cost so much money to talk on the phone. I'd much rather talk to you than right write these stupid letters. Well, they're not stupid, but you know what I mean J Aunt Jackie said to tell you hi. I think she really likes you.

Thanks for the birthday card! It made my birthday extra special, Hawk. You even got me Snoopy! That was totally cool.

I can't wait till the end of the summer when we can hang out again. I miss you, buddy. I'm glad your folks are bringing you back up north!

You know, I never taught you how to fish last time. I promise to make it up you this year, ok? I think it was because we couldn't get you off that tube! Ha Ha. You really cooked across the water. Probably because you weigh like next to nothing. I'm saying like a lot. My friends at school say it like all the time. It's driving my aunt crazy. Sometimes I say it on purpose. J Sh! Don't tell her I said that!

Hey guess what? I played a solo in front of the whole school on my recorder before Christmas break. I was so scared I almost peed my pants! We had an end of term show. All the band members played something. One of my classmates plays the paino piano really well. She was my accompanymint accompaniment for the song. Sorry for all the scratches, Hawk. I try to spell words right so you don't think I'm an idiot. After I wrote them, I looked in the dictionary and saw they were wrong. OOOOPS! J

We got a new girl in class. Her name is Jennifer. I like hanging out with her. She's from California. Her hair is like white it's so blonde. She's really cool. I think you'd like her. She likes to play sports and she's tall too so I guess we'll get a new girl on the basketball team!

We've got so much snow I can't believe it. The trees are pretty though. I think you could draw them perfectly. It's weird that you never see this place in winter. But it's kinda boring since you can't really go anywhere since it's so cold out.

Anyway, tell me how your art project went in the fair. You sounded really excited about it when you wrote. I hope you won first place! You're really talented, Hawk. Never stop drawing or your biggest fan will be really sad.

I'll write better next time, I promise.

Friends 4 Ever,
Jack

1986 - Island City - Letter to Jackson from Erin

February 9, 1986

Dear Jack,

Thanks for the letter. Do you know I keep all of your letters in a shoebox? My mom says I shouldn't keep so much clutter, but I keep it hidden in my closet so she won't see. Happy New Year to you too. My Christmas was a-ok. I got some cool art supplies. My dad said he found the best ones since I take such good care of them. I got a big art pail to keep the pencils and pastels separate. I got so much paper too. It's totally awesome. J

I'm glad you liked your birthday card. You said Joe Cool was rad, so I sent him. Wow, twelve years old. You're almost a teenager. I'll be eleven in September though, that will be rad, too.

I won first place in my art fair, Jack! I used that first picture I drew from the roof. Everyone said I captured the water perfectly. You were right! I don't think I could stop drawing ever. I love it too much. J So don't worry, ok? I have so many pictures from last summer. Remember how mad you got when you saw that I drew you? You shouldn't be mad. It just shows you are special. J I don't draw everyone. I bet I can draw you better by the summer.

You're not an idiot, Jack. You're one of the smartest people I know. You are talented too. You play your recorder so good. I can't believe you had to play in front of everybody! I would have peed for sure. J

We have some snow here too. I bet you have more. Yeah, I probably won't see your home in the winter. That kinda makes me sad. But you haven't seen my house either. I can't wait to see you too. I'm glad my dad found your place. We wouldn't be friends if he didn't. Do you think we'll be friends 4 ever? I hope so. I like using the 4 instead of spelling it out. That's really cool. See, you're smart. Ha Ha!

You can teach me to fish this summer. Maybe my dad will let us go on the boat with him. He said I would have more fun doing the tube anyway. I did like that a lot. You cooked on the water too! I still remember how hard it was to hang on with the turns. I'll be stronger this summer so I don't fall off so much.

Ok, my mom is calling me to eat dinner. Yuck, pot roast and brockly.

Write again soon.

Friends 4 ever,

Hawk

PS. Tell your aunt Jackie I said hi.

PPS I like her too! J

PPSS I won't tell her you say like on purpose!

1986 - Island City - Letter to Jackson from Erin

July 24, 1986

Dear Jack,

I'm coming in a week to see you! I am so excited. I like that my dad's shop closes in August. We get a whole month to play. He says he needs the break as much as his workers do. The car ride is going to be so long. That's the only part I don't like. I hate having to wait to stop to pee. When you gotta go, you gotta go! J

My mom said I could bring my art supplies again since I drew so many pictures last time. My art teacher said that my strokes are improving and that I have a great style! She said she couldn't wait to see my pictures from this summer when we start school. It was so awesome she said that in front of the whole class on the last day of school.

My summer has been ok, but I'm really excited to come to Wisconsin again. Paldeer is cool and everything, but I miss my best friend, Jack. L

I told my neighbor Ricky that I was going there for vacation again and he called you a cheese head. What does that mean? He's just a big jerk anyway, I only play with him because my mom told me to. I don't like him at all. I'm glad we don't go to the same school.

I gotta clean my room to pay for all the stamps I'm using. My mom said you should earn things you want. I guess that makes sense.

OK, Jack. I'll see you really soon. You don't have to write back if you don't want to.

Friends 4 ever,
Hawk

PS My dad got me a super cool fishing pole!

PPS So you better show me how to fish this year.

1986 - Paldeer, IL - Letter to Erin from Jackson

July 28, 1986

Dear Hawk,

You might not even get this letter before you get here. But if you do, I'm really excited to see you in a couple days.

If you don't get this letter and read it after you get back home. It was totally awesome to see you

and I miss you already! J

SSS (sorry so short) I got a lot to do before you get here!

Friends 4 Ever,

Jack

PS Tell Ricky to come to Wisconsin and say that! I'll squash him.

Chapter Three

Present Day - Chicago

Erin Hughes walked back and forth with the telephone glued to her ear, eyes scanning the ceiling, hand pulling her hair as she paced. She couldn't believe the words she was hearing. She held the device away from her head, flipped it off with her middle finger then squeezed and shook it with both hands. Her face scrunched up while silently screaming towards the phone. Bringing it back to her ear, the voice continued to annoy her.

"Jeremy, just stop it! If we have to go over this one more time I'm going to do something I won't be responsible for," she threatened. "I've been through enough, don't you think?"

The voice on the other line chimed again, "Look, Erin, I want this more than you do. Just settle, dammit."

Grinding her teeth, Erin answered sharply, "Of course you want it more! If you and that... that woman want your freedom, I have a solution. I. Want. My. House. It's just that simple. I picked it out, I paid for most of it and I furnished it. It's not my fault you knocked her up. You should've kept your pecker in your pants!" she screamed.

Silence was his only response. After a few moments, he spoke softly. "Er... please. We can't do this anymore. Our marriage wasn't perfect; you know that. We both made mistakes. I just..." "You just went to another woman instead of coming to me," Erin cut him off. Exasperated with the conversation, she continued, "Had you come to me first and told me you weren't happy, I'd have so much more respect for you right now. But no, you had to cheat first and wait to get caught. If you aren't willing to give me the *one* thing I've asked for, you can have your lawyer contact mine, and *then* you'll have to pay up the ass." Erin took a deep breath. "I don't want you calling me anymore unless you can be practical, Jeremy."

Erin's husband seemed to consider her words as he took a long time in answering. When she thought he'd hung up, she heard, "Fine. Let's just do this."

"Fine, I'll call my lawyer. I'll have mine contact yours so this can be over." She sighed, running her fingers through her hair, pulling a few strands behind her ear. "I don't want to fight anymore."

"Sweetheart, I don't either."

"Don't call me that; you don't get to be a nice guy anymore. Just promise me that when you get the papers, you'll sign them. Please, Jeremy?" she almost pleaded.

"I promise."

Wanting to add, *just like our vows, you son of a bitch?* but not wanting to continue the conversation, Erin just said, "Thank you, I appreciate it."

"Take care of yourself, Erin."

"I always do." With that, she hung up the phone, ending their conversation. Sitting on her couch, Erin put her face in her hands and cried once more at her situation; more upset she didn't even see the affair coming than the actual marriage dissolving.

I know I didn't love him like I should have. I should have been the one to leave. I was comfortable and it made my folks happy to see me with him, especially mother. This is my own damn fault. Those niggling facts were always in the back of her mind.

Jeremy was a nice man, good looking, generous, but there was just something lacking in their relationship. The passion, the flip-flops in her belly, the ache that was supposed to come when she was away from him; she just didn't feel that way. About him.

Now at twenty-six years old, she would be divorced and, once again, single. Rubbing her eyes with her fists, she sighed and looked around her home. "At least I get to keep you."

"Mrrrow," A small mew was heard from the study doorway. Erin's eyes brightened as the small orange tabby walked towards her. She scooped up the cat and held her as she began to purr. "I get to keep you, too, little Grace." The rumbling against her chest brought a watery smile to her face. "You've always been here for me, haven't you?" The cat continued to purr and rub noses with her owner.

Walking out of her study, Erin traversed the hallway, up the stairs and into her studio. She studied the landscapes and seascapes on the walls that she had created, absently petting the animal in her arms. Some were from memory, others formed from within her mind. They spanned from the time she was a small girl to her adult self. She was proud of what she'd accomplished in such a short time.

When she was around twenty, a friend of hers knew Kimberly Parks, the owner of an art gallery in town and got her a job there. On a whim, she'd asked if she could put up some of her artwork when they were having a slow period. Much to her surprise and delight, her boss agreed and gave her a small corner of the gallery to display her work. The drawings and paintings sold quickly with requests for more of the same. It was said by an admirer of her work that "she brought a childlike spirit to her outdoor visions that Thomas Kinkade could only dream of doing."

Erin clung to those words like a lifeline. It gave her the inspiration to keep going, since her true muse was no longer in her life.

"Jack."

It was said as a whisper as she continued to look at her memories on the walls. Because of Jackson, Erin had kept working on her craft until she had found her niche. One aspect of her work was never made public, to Jeremy or anyone other than her subject. The "Serenity" collection, as she called it, was her private and most heart-filled work. They were all black and white pencil or charcoal drawings, but they captured more colorful memories than any of her other works combined.

Maybe one day she'd open that grouping of collected works for sale, but for now, she had them in her closet, stored in several boxes, away from eyes that weren't worthy. It had been a few years since she'd even looked at them. Sometimes the curiosity overwhelmed her to the point of picking up the phone.

Then words from her memory would come back to haunt her and she'd put the receiver down. *"Please don't call or write to me anymore, Jack. It'll be too hard."*

Jack had respected her request for almost seven years and hadn't called her. They hadn't corresponded at all. Not even a birthday card. The emptiness she felt without Jack in her life led her to Jeremy. He had been at one of her shows and couldn't stop gushing about her talent. One meeting turned into several, then six months down the road, with her mother's enthusiastic approval, they were married. At twenty-one, Erin had a husband, a successful career, a beautiful home and any amenity she could ever want. The only thing lacking was the joy she used to feel. The smile on her face was for show only and rarely did it reach her eyes. She'd learned to play the part so well, no one ever realized it was just an act.

She slowly slid open the closet door that held her treasures. Putting the little cat down, Erin pushed aside rows of hanging clothes and reached towards the side where the storage cubbyhole kept her boxes. The first one she grabbed contained her most favorite drawings.

As she opened the box, her heart began to hammer in her chest. Wisps of dark shaded windblown hair appeared as she slowly pulled out the first drawing. The profile soon appeared and Erin's eyes filled with new tears once it was completely removed from the box.

"Oh, Jack."

The picture showed the profile of Jackson with her eyes closed as she played her recorder. Erin remembered that day so vividly. The blue sky, the calm waters and the serenity she felt while being with her best friend. She trailed her fingertip over the image on the canvas. Her heart breaking all over again. Putting the drawing down, she slumped against the wall, reached inside her button down shirt and caressed the pigmented skin above her left breast. "I'm so sorry."

Erin stayed in that position for almost an hour. Grace had crawled into her lap and contentedly fell asleep. Erin let memories plague her already tortured soul as she idly stroked the cat's fur. With Jeremy soon out of her life, she would have no one. *Well, no one but Kim.*

Uggh, the gallery!

"Come on, Gracie. I gotta get this stuff together or Kim will have my hide."

Erin got up and started to collect some of her works for an upcoming show at the art gallery. Since Kimberly, had given her the opportunity she needed, Erin vowed to use her gallery as her hub. Kimberly was very grateful of her young protégé and felt so lucky to have watched her grow as an artist and as a young woman.

Between Erin and the Parks Gallery, they had done well with Erin's works and had people calling in from all over asking where they could find more of her paintings. Commissions came all the time and Erin fulfilled what she could. Sometimes the images came clearly and other times she'd have to turn down requests. If her heart couldn't see it, the creativity just wouldn't come.

~*~*~*~*~*

Present Day - The Island City

Jackson Thomas reviewed her lesson plans for the next week and tucked her paperwork inside her brown leather briefcase. Relaxing in her recliner, she closed her eyes and smiled in the knowledge that summer vacation would begin in a few weeks. She was a music teacher for the gifted middle school children in town. All the children loved her and the faculty didn't know how they functioned before her.

She'd been teaching about five years after getting her certification. Once she figured out what she wanted to do when she grew up, it was easy. She taught music to kids during the school year and helped her aunt run The Island City Resort. There was always something to do there. Cabins needed upgrading, boats needed winterizing, the landscape needed tending, but all in all it was a wonderful place to be. *All too soon it'll just be me.*

Jackson heard the small bell ring, slowly blinked her eyes and walked to her aunt's bedroom. The sickly woman was in bed, covers tucked tightly around her with an oxygen mask placed over her mouth. Jackson put on her happy face to see what her aunt needed.

"Hey, Jackie. What can I get you?" she asked, running her fingers through the thinning hair of her aunt. "Do you need something to drink?"

With a small nod, Jackie rasped through the mask, "Yes, please. My throat is dry."

Jackson removed the mask, grabbed the glass from the bedside table, held the straw to parched lips and allowed her aunt a few good gulps of water before putting the mask back in place. It broke Jackson's heart to see her aunt hooked up to so many devices. Several machines directed

medicine into the frail woman's body through intravenous tubes. Jackie's hands were bruised from the needles being inserted and removed. "Thank you," Jackie whispered.

As Jackson sat on the bed, a light knock was heard from the hallway. Jackie's night nurse, Cindy had arrived for her shift.

"How's my girl doing today?" she asked brightly, bringing a smile to the faces of both women.

Jackie gave Cindy an "OK" sign with her bruised hand. A string of harsh coughs suddenly erupted from her body. Jackson jumped off the bed so Cindy could raise it to try and ease her patient. After a few unbearable moments, the coughing subsided and Jackie was breathing more comfortably.

Cindy and Jackson exchanged a worried look, then returned their glances to the woman in bed. Jackson gently held Jackie's hand and started humming to her. The familiar tunes were a comfort to both women. Songs Jackie had taught her niece were ones she and her sister knew when they were kids. Jackson brushed the hair on her aunt's head with her fingers as she drifted off to sleep. Feeling the grip on her hand lessen, Jackson knew she'd finally fallen into a deep sleep.

Caring for the woman who raised her had been an easy decision for Jackson to make. She wanted Jackie at home instead of a hospital knowing quite well her aunt would not want to leave this world from any other place. The Island City had been her home almost her entire life. When her parents left it to her in their will, she had been more than willing to keep the resort going. Jackie had raised her to love and respect nature, but in doing so, she'd learned to love the resort just as much. No one else would be running The Island City but her until she found someone to run it with her. Or perhaps like Willy Wonka, she would have a child, so she too, could raise them to respect and love this place as much as her family had. *However, I don't think osmosis can produce a child for my future.*

With Jackie asleep, Cindy ushered Jackson out of her room and closed the door. A worrisome line etched her face. "The pneumonia has gotten worse really quickly, Jack. I want to be honest with you and not sugar coat it."

Jackson nodded. "Go on. How much time do we have?" Knowing that's where Cindy was headed, she braced herself.

"Unless a miracle happens, I don't think she has more than a couple weeks." She paused. "If that."

The news, as dire as it was, wasn't surprising to Jackson. She'd seen the health of her aunt plummet after the chemotherapy treatments. The colorectal cancer she was fighting wasn't even going to be the disease to kill her. Jackie's immune system shut down as a side effect to her treatments and she soon developed pneumonia. Up until six months ago, Jackson saw her aunt as the picture of health. Now she was as weak as a newborn kitten with Jackson unable to fix her. Cindy and Janet, the day nurse, both loved Jackie from day one. They would do anything for her. All they could do was pray that the medicines would treat the pneumonia so the rest of her body

could rebuild its strength.

"So what do we do next?" Jackson asked.

"Just keep her as comfortable as possible. Janet and I will do our part as will her doctor. It's up to her and God now."

Jackson nodded, not wanting to debate her feelings of God with Cindy. She hadn't known Him to play fair with the people in her life, but didn't want to upset anyone else. "I'm heading outside for a bit. When she wakes up, let me know, ok? I'm gonna make sure everyone has everything they need."

"Ok, Jack." She put her hand on her shoulder. "You're doing the best you can for her. Never doubt that."

"Thanks, Cindy."

Jackson left the main cabin with one destination in mind. She climbed the ladder leading to the roof of the boathouse. When she reached the top, she let the tears come. She couldn't believe how many times she had cried up there. Anytime she was riddled with sadness, she would come up there and unleash it into the wind. She sat down with her denim legs hanging over the side. Looking down, she could see small schools of fish swimming happily in the water. Closing her eyes, the tears came in earnest.

"I think this is it. I don't think she can beat this anymore." As she continued to sob, her tears fell off of her face and into the water below. "I hate doing this alone!" she cried.

Jackson had a few girlfriends over the years, but none held her heart the way Erin had. She contemplated settling on one girl, Marcie, but knew it wouldn't be fair to her, or to Marcie. It was the closest Jackson had come with someone in wanting more than a just a physical relationship. But when her eyes opened in the mornings and she met the brown eyes of her lover, her heart just couldn't do it. She bid her farewell and had been alone since. That was over a year ago. With Jackie becoming ill, she had no time to give to a girlfriend anyway.

She leaned back on her side and rested her head in her hand. Unconsciously, her free hand found its way under her v-neck sweater to caress the pigmented skin above her right breast. "Hawk, I miss you so much." The thought of Erin brought on a new wave of tears and a broken heart that had never healed. Jackson knew things would be better if Erin were with her.

Jackson remained on the roof of the boathouse for over an hour. The sun began to set upon the water and it always took her breath away to watch. When the last of the color dipped into the horizon, she made her way down the ladder to check on her guests. After making sure everyone had enough linens and shooing the kids out of the fish-house, she went back home.

When she arrived, Cindy was sitting in a rocking chair in the family room. She smiled when she heard Jackson return. "Hey, did you have a nice walk?"

"As good as can be expected." They shared a sad smile. "Did she wake up?"

Nodding, Cindy said, "Only for a few minutes then she fell back asleep. She should wake up soon, though."

Jackson nodded at the information and sat on the couch. Releasing a long breath, she raked her fingers through her hair. She leaned back on the couch and closed her eyes.

"Jack?"

Opening them slowly, Jackson looked at Cindy. "Hmm?"

"Who's Erin?"

If she were to imagine what it looked like to have the color leaving her face, it wouldn't have been close to the pain that Cindy witnessed with the sound of that one name.

It startled Cindy to an almost panic. "Jack! Are you ok? You look like you've seen a ghost."

Mustering up some saliva in her mouth, she swallowed to speak. "How do you know about Erin?" Barely managing to get the words out, Jackson closed her eyes again, this time in pain.

"Jackie mentioned her when she woke up. Something about her needing you to call her," she explained, not understanding what was going on.

Jackson opened her eyes and shot up off the couch. "I can't!" Her eyes were wide like a scared child's. "Why would she need me to call her?" She began to pace like a caged animal. Cindy just watched as the normally stoic woman came apart at the seams. "She told me not to call her, Jackie knows that!" She crumbled onto the couch and put her head in her hands, grasping her hair tightly. "I can't," she strangled the words out, sounding to Cindy like the most painful ones she'd ever spoken.

The tiny ring of a bell was heard and both women went to Jackie's room. She had woken from her nap and wanted a little water. Seeing her niece's red eyes, she knew she'd been crying. After Jackson gave her aunt some water, she turned to put the glass on the side table. Jackie reached up to touch her hand. The younger woman looked down at beseeching eyes, put the glass down and knelt on the floor.

"What is it, Jackie? Are you in pain?"

Swallowing excess saliva in her mouth, Jackie looked to Cindy. "Could you leave us for a little?" She breathed a few times. "I want to talk to her."

Cindy, understanding the need for privacy, nodded her head and closed the door as she left.

"Jackson... what's on your mind?" she paused. "And don't tell me nothing or I'll get out of this bed and tell you myself."

Chuckling at her aunt's "threat", Jackson knew they needed to talk about the Erin situation. "You know I can't call Erin, Jackie. Why did you tell Cindy to tell me that?"

Rolling her eyes at the stubbornness of her niece, Jackie said, "I... I'd like to see her."

Eyes wide, Jackson wasn't sure what to say at that moment. "Jackie... I... I don't know if I can after all this time. It's been seven years..."

"Seven years you'll never get back." Understanding reached the mismatched eyes.

"I know."

"Honey, I've watched you live your life since Erin left." She paused. "I've seen you go through the motions, but not once have I seen the happiness in your eyes like I used to. I know what her mother did to you guys was wrong, but sometimes you have to fight to get the girl."

"But..." "Don't make the same mistake I did."

Not understanding her aunt at first, but when Jackson reached into her memory, a tall woman with red hair came into view. A woman she knew for only a short time. Realization hit her like a ton of bricks. "Sandra?"

Jackie nodded slowly. "Don't let the love of your life walk away from you. If I could go back... and change that error in my judgment... I would do it in a second. I should've fought harder."

"I always wondered what happened, you never told me," Jackson's voice was rough with emotion.

"You were going through so much that summer dealing with your own sexuality. Besides, I didn't think it would be right to tell you all of that anyway. But, it was really hard for me."

"But... you've always seemed so happy." She never knew her aunt was missing someone so precious to her.

Jackie reached up and cupped her, sometimes naïve, niece's cheek. "My little Jack...that's because I had you." A tear ran down her cheek, but Jackson stopped it before it went into her ear. "I couldn't have loved you anymore... even if I were your real mother."

Tears ran endlessly down the young woman's face at this declaration. "You *are* my real mother. I love you."

"I love you too, baby."

The two women embraced as far as the technology around them would allow. Jackson couldn't remember a time she felt so much loss. She never knew her grandparents enough to mourn them. Jackie always told her stories, though, and a slew of photographs were always at the ready, just

in case.

Jackie was quite worn out after their exchange and asked to be left to rest, but not without Jackson promising her that she'd make the phone call of a lifetime. She had no idea why she agreed to the request, except for the simple fact that Jackie wanted it. And right now, Jackie would get anything and everything she wanted, no matter what.

After letting Cindy know that Jackie was asleep, Jackson went into her room and closed the door. She flopped wordlessly onto her bed, reached into her top drawer of her night table and grabbed her address book. She flipped the pages over and over until she landed on the tab with the letter "H" on it. Seeing the woman's name again, brought on a slew of emotions she had no earthly idea what to do with. She just hoped, for Jackie's sake, she still lived there.

With shaking hands, she picked up the phone and began to dial. Once it started to ring, her heartbeat sped up immediately.

"Hello?" the all too familiar voice answered.

"Mrs. Hawkins?"

"Yes?"

She swallowed. "This is Jackson Thomas."

"Jackson, how are you, dear?" *Dear? You condescending little...* "It's been a long, long time."

Yeah, no kidding, lady. "Yes it has." *Here goes...* "Um... I'm calling to see if you can give me Erin's contact information."

"I see." Jackson didn't miss the change in tone of Erin's mother's voice.

"My Aunt Jackie is terminally ill and would really like to see her," she explained, trying to stop this narrow-minded and bigoted woman's thought process.

"Oh." Jackson succeeded and heard the change in Katie's voice. "I'm so sorry. What's wrong with her?"

"Well to make a long story short, she has cancer and the chemo knocked out her immune system and she developed pneumonia. Unfortunately, her team doesn't think she has much time left."

"Oh no, that's terrible. I really liked her." Jackson snarled, knowing exactly how she felt about her aunt Jackie. *God, you haven't changed a bit.* "I know Joe, God rest his soul, really enjoyed her company when we vacationed up there."

"Oh," Jackson's voice dropped in sympathy. She'd always thought the world of Erin's dad. "I'm sorry. I didn't realize Mr. Hawkins had passed away." She truly felt sadness from this loss. Erin probably could've used an ear or a shoulder to cry on. She knew their relationship was so important to Erin. *Poor Hawk, I wish she would've called me.*

"Yes, back in ninety-seven. He, too, had cancer. We didn't know how bad cigarettes were for us

when we were younger. They made them sound so good for you. Even though he'd quit a long time ago, the effects were still inside his body," she explained. "The Lord will take good care of him, though. Don't you worry."

"Well, again, I'm very sorry." She paused trying to not to sound like she wanted off the call as much as she did. "Would you have Erin's phone number or address that I could contact her... for Jackie?" she added for good measure.

"Of course. She and her husband, Jeremy, are still in the city. They're so happy and doing so well that they're trying for a grandbaby for me. Let me get my book. I always get her number confused."

Her husband... a grandbaby? Could this get any worse? I'm gonna throw up. Knowing she missed something Katie had said, Jackson asked, "I'm sorry?"

"I said do you have a pen ready?"

"Yes, go ahead." She clicked her pen and wrote down the information in her address book.

After some uncomfortable small talk, Jackson thanked Katie for her help and wished her well. Hanging up the phone, Jackson's head hit her pillow quickly trying to squash the nausea threatening to overwhelm her.

"She's married and is making babies?" she whispered to herself. As much as it didn't surprise her considering what had happened, it still didn't sit well.

"Ah, crap, if I don't do this now, I'm never gonna do it." She blew out a huge breath, wiped her sweaty palms on her jeans and picked up the phone. Heart racing, she dialed the Illinois number and waited to hear that sweet voice again.

Chapter Four

1990 - The Northwoods Island City

Erin jumped out of the car as soon as it stopped. The car ride was unbearable. Six long hours with her mother was enough to give her a headache, especially with her "ragging on her." Katie wanted Erin to spend more time drawing than doing most of the things she usually did with Jackson. She didn't think that Erin playing in boathouses at almost fifteen was very ladylike. As much as Erin didn't necessarily agree with her mom's ideas, this was one thing she wouldn't compromise on. If Jackson wanted her wanted to play in a puddle of slime, she was gonna do it. *We're best friends!*

A tall lean girl met the Hawkins' car with a big smile lighting her face. Eyes shaded by sunglasses, Jackson waved at Erin's parents as they exited the car. Running towards Jackson, Erin collided with her taller, yet equally excited best friend. The embrace shared was warm and regenerating for both girls.

"Hey!" they both said in unison, pulling back to look at each other.

"Look at you! You've gotten so tall!" Erin said, admiring the five foot eight inch frame of her friend. Pinching her side, she added, "You need to eat a Snickers bar or something though. You're so thin!"

"Yow!" she shrieked at the pinch. "It's not my fault you got hit with the short branch. Besides, I don't see you being too fat either." Jackson looked her up and down, Erin was blossoming into a beautiful young woman and she liked very much what she saw.

Erin blushed hotly at the open appraisal. "I started training for the high school track team, so I've been running this summer. If you'd bothered to read my letters..." "Hey! I read every one of them." She paused and looked guilty. "I'm just not a good pen pal these days. I'm sorry, Hawk."

Erin locked their hands together, just like she had during their first meeting. She hated knowing her mother would lecture her again about keeping her friendship with Jackson in perspective and acting like a girl supposedly should. Katie wanted to send Erin to cheerleading camp instead of coming to the Island City this summer, only to be told by Erin that it was not an option to go elsewhere. With every letter that arrived from Jackson to Erin, Katie would plead with her daughter to spend more time with her classmates and pay less attention to her tomboyish friend.

Not caring about anything now that they were together, Erin assuaged Jackson's guilt. "I know you're busy helping Jackie, it's alright." She put her hand on her forearm and Jackson nodded, relief flooding her. Unwilling to tell her the real truth about her lack of letters, Jackson just grinned.

Joe and Katie Hawkins walked up to the girls. Katie watched as Erin intertwined their fingers and scowled. Putting on a polite face, she took Jackson in a small embrace, as did Joe.

"It's good to see you again, Jackson," he greeted. "You're almost all grown up."

"You too, sir. Yeah, I'm working on it. I'm so happy you all like it enough to keep coming back."

"Like Erin would let us vacation anywhere else now," Katie semi-joked.

"No way!" Erin chimed. "That's *not* an option." Jackson looked between Erin and her mother, feeling extreme tension.

"Well it's a good thing your aunt charges us cheap rates or we'd have to go someplace else," Joe kidded.

"Dad! You know you said the fishing here was better than anywhere else." She looked at Jackson's smiling face. "He just likes to push my buttons."

"It appears he's gotten good at it." She winked at Joe who laughed. Erin lightly backhanded

Jackson in the belly, giving her a fake scowl. "Ok, ok I take it back!"

The girls shared a smile and felt the warmth radiate between them. It felt good for them to be back together. Erin's mother watched the exchange with a growing unease, but was pulled away by Joe asking for assistance with unloading the car.

After the car was emptied and pleasantries were shared, Jackson told them they'd be in their regular cottage, cabin six. "I'll let Jackie know you're here. Go on ahead to the cottage, the door's open." When they started to walk, Jackson's voice stopped them. "And let me know what you think. We renovated the kitchen this year." A beautiful smile illuminated her face and Erin was completely fixated on her.

Katie replied, "Oh, how exciting. I can't wait to see what you've done to it." Her fake enthusiasm was evident only to Joe and as soon as she looked away, her skeptical demeanor returned.

"See you girls, later." Joe waved. "Oh and Erin, same rules apply like home." "I know, I know, home before dinner," she grouched.

"You got it." He waved again, then led Katie through the grounds to their cottage.

Alone at last, Jackson asked, "Wanna come and say hi to Jackie? I know she'd love to see you."

Erin's head nodded quickly. "Absolutely! I'm sure she's sick to death of you. I bet she could use another face to look at." Erin laughed and turned to go.

"Oh, um." Jackson put her hand on Erin's shoulder as she started to walk away. "I wanted to tell you something."

Stopping to face her fully, Erin replied, "So tell me."

"There's someone else staying our house."

Erin's stomach jumped for a few seconds. "Who?" "My um... well I know you probably won't care, but um... well, Jackie is a lesbian and her..." "She is?" Erin blurted out, eyes big from the unveiling of this information. "I've never met one before!"

"It's not a big deal, really. You don't even realize she is until someone tells you," she started to explain. "Her girlfriend, Sandra is staying with us."

"How long is she staying with you?" she asked.

Shrugging her shoulders, Jackson answered, "I'm not sure. I just know that I've never seen Jackie so happy. So, she can stay forever as far as I'm concerned."

Seeing a darkness cloud Erin's eyes, Jackson squeezed her shoulder. "What's wrong?"

Erin took a deep breath and felt she needed to make a confession. "Jack, you can't tell my mom about Jackie. She would really flip out." Her eyes penetrated Jackson's. "I've heard her talk about gays in a really bad way. I don't want her talking like that about your aunt." Jackson looked into the caring blue eyes of her small friend.

"Thanks for telling me that, Erin. I appreciate it."

"Erin? Since when do you call me that?" she asked, a red eyebrow shooting up to her forehead.

"Well, we were talking about something serious, so I thought I should use your real name," she explained. "Well, don't. You are the only friend I have who doesn't call me that and I really like that fact. So, please, call me Hawk, ok?" she asked with a small smile.

"You got it." She brought Erin in for another hug. "It's so good to see you, Hawk. I really missed you." Burying her face into the fresh clean smell of her tall companion, Erin reveled at the incredible feelings of being with Jackson again. "I missed you too, Jack."

Jackson pulled away and made an observation. "Your hair has gotten really dark, Hawk, almost red." Smiling, Erin replied, "I know. I used to be a total towhead, but it's changing. I kinda like it, though, so it's cool."

"Let's go say hi to Jackie." She picked up Erin's bags and the two walked over to the main cabin.

Jackson grabbed hold of the screen door and shouted, "You better be decent, we got a VIP guest coming in!"

Jackie flew from her bedroom, hair slightly tousled and looked at her niece like she wanted to say something nasty. With one look at the guest in her house, her face completely lit up. "Erin! It's so great to see you!" she cried, rushing to the teenager and put her arms around her.

"Hi, Jackie. It's great to see you too," Erin professed, pulling out of the embrace. "My dad and mom have already gone to settle in. I wanted to say hi before this one takes me all over the place." She smiled warmly at Jackson who returned one in kind.

From the hallway, an attractive and tall redheaded woman watched the interaction of the girls, which brought a smile to her face. She figured she should announce herself and with a clearing of her throat, she did just that.

Jackie turned around quickly and let the smile she felt, blossom on her lips. "Erin, I want you to meet my um, my fri..." "It's, Ok... I told her Jackie." Jackson and her aunt studied each other for a few seconds.

When Jackie realized that Erin would be okay with her introduction, she continued, "This is my girlfriend, Sandra. Sandra, this is one of my favorites and definitely Jack's favorite guest." Erin didn't fail to notice the red that scorched Jackson's face and neck, following that admission.

Sandra walked over to Erin and outstretched her hand. "Hi Erin, it's nice to meet you. I've heard

so much about you from this one over here," she said, pointing to a still blushing Jackson. "I feel like I already know you."

"It's really nice to meet you, Sandra. I hope we see more of each other this summer." Sandra smiled at this young girl, feeling as if Erin were older than Jackson had led on.

"Such a nice polite girl you are. What are you doing hanging with the likes of her?" She pointed again to a gaping mouthed, Jackson.

"Close your mouth, Jack. You look like a wide mouthed bass my dad would catch," Erin chimed in, earning a huge laugh from Jackie and Sandra.

"Oh, I like this one. Let's keep her and toss this one back." Sandra continued to laugh. "Alright, that's enough! Is it pick on Jack day or something?" she said, arms crossed over her black Guns N' Roses shirt.

"No, we all love you, Jack. We can't help it if you're easy to tease," her aunt tried to placate Jackson while her burying her tongue in her cheek.

"That's it. Hawk, we're outta here." Jackson leaned over and kissed her aunt on the cheek. "I *might* be home later, *if* anyone cares."

"Hey, before I forget, your friend Molly called while you were out." Sandra handed her the message she wrote.

A strange look passed over Jackson's face. Erin catching it immediately, asked, "Do you want to call her back before we head out?"

"Uh, no. That's ok. I'll call her back later. Thanks." She crumpled the note and put it in her jean shorts pocket. "Come on, Hawk. Let's go say hello to the lake. It missed you." Jackson put her arm around Erin's shoulders and the girl returned with an arm around the slim waist. With a slight pull, they separated and headed out the door.

Sandra and Jackie shared a knowing glance at their retreating figures. "Oh, boy. Do you think they have any idea?" Sandra asked her partner.

"I think so. Jack came out to me right before her sixteenth birthday, but I'm not supposed to tell you that. I don't know about Erin, but I do know about Molly and Jackson, but I'm not supposed to tell you that, either." "Yeah, I was gonna ask you about them next."

"Ooo boy, I have a feeling this summer is not gonna be pretty. My little Jackson has bitten off much more than I think even *she* can chew." Jackie laced her fingers with Sandra's.

"She does have a big appetite, though."

"Mmmm, must run in the family," Jackie saucily said, arms wrapping around the tall redhead's neck.

Leaning in for a small kiss, Sandra whispered, "Lucky me." She ran her fingers up and down the slightly smaller woman's back.

"Lucky us," the dark haired woman corrected. They leaned in once more and shared a much deeper kiss filled with every ounce of love they felt for each other.

Pulling apart, Sandra rested her forehead against Jackie's shoulder. "I wish I could take you to bed." She kissed the side of Jackie's head.

Heart beating wildly from arousal, Jackie managed, "God, I want you, too. I'll show you how much later."

"Uggh," Sandra groaned and buried her face in Jackie's sweet smelling hair. They swayed in each other's arms for a long while, relishing the feel of the other's body against her own. "Come on let's find something *non* sexual to do around here. I need to breathe some fresh air."

"Let's go play shuffleboard. That's the least sexual thing we can do without actually working."

Giggling at her partner, Sandra answered, "You're on. I get to be black this time, though."

Releasing her hold on Sandra's hand, Jackie opened the door. "You can have black if you can beat me to the playing field."

"Ok, you're on. On the count of three."

Together they started to count, "One, Two, Th..." Jackie fled out of the house before "three" was even counted. Sandra chased after her cheating girlfriend and easily beat her to the board, much to Jackie's shock and dismay.

Grabbing the black slide, Sandra smiled in triumph. She walked to her side of the playing field after handing the red slide to a grumbling Jackie. "Shuffleboard anyone?"

Putting on her competitive hat, Jackie sneered and growled, "Puck you."

"Oh, that was bad, even for you." Jackie grinned then watched as Sandra's black puck slid effortlessly into the scoring zone.

Grin fading quickly, she mumbled, "I should've gone down to the lake with the girls."

~*~*~*~*~*

Erin kept her eyes closed as she breathed in the fresh air coming off the lake. The girls had stopped at the cottage to drop off Erin's bags and went down to the waterfront. Jackson had kept a hand on her shoulder as they walked down the pier. Erin thought it felt like the most natural thing in the world. Reaching for Jackson's hand, she gave it a squeeze before releasing it.

"It's *so* good to be back here." The smile never left her face. "I feel so differently when I'm here. It's like this place calls to me." Her face blushed a little. "I guess that sounds pretty dumb, huh?"

Eyes twinkling under her sunglasses, Jackson shook her head. "No it's not dumb at all. Some people don't understand the beauty of this place. But for some, you know - people like us, the love and respect for the nature around here is a gift. Whether you accept that gift is another thing. The fact that you have, says a lot about you, Hawk."

"My gosh, Jack, you speak so worldly now."

Laughing softly, she replied, "No, I'm just so happy you feel that way about this place. I don't have many friends that love it like you do," she explained. "Oh, sure, they love coming down here to water ski and that sort of thing, but the rest of it is so foreign to them."

"Well I'm not just any friend, you know," Erin said, grabbing Jackson's hand again to give it a light squeeze.

Don't I know it. Jackson looked into the warm eyes that reflected the sky and wished she could fully open her heart to her. "No, you're my *best* friend," she emphasized. She looked out over the water, keeping Erin's hand in hers, idly caressing it with her thumb. "I could live here, err, I *hope* to live here, the rest of my life. I want to find someone to run the resort with me when my aunt can't any longer. I don't think it'll be as easy as it sounds."

"Sure it will, Jack. Who wouldn't want to spend their life here with you?" *If it wouldn't make my mom go into a tizzy fit, I'd do it in a heartbeat.*

"You never know, Hawk. You never know." They shared a warm smile then Jackson offered a suggestion, "You wanna go down to the boathouse? You can grab some of your art supplies and I can play you a soothing tune on my recorder while you draw. Actually, I'm playing the oboe now too, so I could let you hear that. It has a totally different sound. Whaddya say?" Jackson was so hopeful to spend more time alone with Erin; she could hardly deal with the emotions coursing through her.

Jackson didn't know it, but Erin felt exactly the same way. She was so filled by this endearing girl that any time spent away from her felt like a lifetime. Excited by Jackson's new talent, she agreed enthusiastically. "Let me go get my supplies and I'll meet you up there?" Erin knew her mother was going to be annoyed and didn't want Jackson to have to deal with that.

Not really understanding why she wouldn't go with Erin, she just nodded. "Alright, I'll see you in a little while." She felt the bulge in her pocket and knew she had to call Molly soon anyway. "I'll give my friend a call back and meet you up there. Cool?"

Grateful for not having to explain her solo route, Erin gave Jackson her most winning smile. "Cool. Let's say 15 minutes?"

"Done."

The girls parted ways and went to their respective homes. Jackson walked inside her house after

seeing Jackie and Sandra on the shuffleboard field. They were yelling fake obscenities at each other and drawing quite a crowd of onlookers with their comedic banter. She loved the way they played and egged each other on. The love she felt coming off of them was palpable and for that she was grateful. Jackie had been alone for a while before Sandra, and she seemed to make her aunt very happy. Jackson simply wished she had that to look forward to in her own future.

Picking up the phone, Jackson dialed Molly's number.

"Hello?" Molly answered.

"Hey, you."

"Hey, I thought you forgot about me," Molly said with fake sadness.

"Never. My best friend from Chicago is here." Not hearing a response, she continued, "You know, Erin? I know I told you about her. We've been best friends since we were kids."

Blowing out a breath, Molly answered, "Yeah, I just forgot she was coming today. I thought we could spend some time together. Maybe go swimming or um," her voice dropped lower, "go up to the boathouse loft?"

The insinuation went right to the southern regions of Jackson's body. Her face sporting a rose tinge, she said, "Uh, no, I don't think that would be a good idea. Erin doesn't know about me and I really don't want to tell her yet, ok?"

Feigning hurt, Molly said, "What kind of best friend is that? If she was your best friend, she'd accept you any way you were. So am I not supposed to see you for the next month? Is that it?" her voice was starting to raise.

"No!" her voice matched Molly's then softened, "No, it's not that. Just don't expect me to, you know, do stuff while she's here. I wouldn't feel right."

"You'll just have to come over to my house, then. I know I won't be able to not touch you for an entire month."

"That's fine. I'm sure Jackie will let me take my car when I have to go to your house."

"Have to?" she questioned.

"Need to," Jackson corrected, dropping her voice to soothe any possible waves Molly wanted to make.

"Mmm, that's better. I need you now." Molly tried to work to get her way.

"Sorry, I can't right now. I promised Erin that we'd sit on the roof so she could do some drawing. You should see her art, Mol, she's *so* talented."

"Really," Molly's voice was dripping with sarcasm.

Not taking the bait, Jackson continued, "Yeah, she is and I promised, so we'll get together another day, ok? How's tomorrow? I'd like you two to meet."

Oh goody. "Sure Jack, I'll come by in the afternoon." Jackson's face lit up. "Great! We'll have a lot of fun, I swear."

~*~*~*~*~*

Erin's decision to go alone had been a good one. Once her mother saw her leaving with her backpack, she immediately questioned where she was going.

"Are you going to that filthy boathouse again?" Her mother asked, not very kindly.

Rolling her eyes, Erin answered, "Yes, mother, I'm going to do some drawing. That's the best place to draw here." She tried to keep the daggers from her eyes. Their relationship had become strained with the months leading up to their vacation. "You said you wanted me to draw, so I'm drawing. But I get to draw on my own terms or it won't come out right."

"Fine, just don't go getting yourself dirty. I think your father wants to take us out to Bosaki's for dinner tonight."

"Cool, can Jack come, too?" Erin asked, hopeful but knew the answer.

"Can't you be away from her for two seconds and just be with us for one night?" her mother asked incredulously.

"I spend twelve months a year with you, mother. I haven't seen Jack *in* a year. Can't I be happy to spend time with my best friend?"

"You know, I was *never* that happy to see *my* best friends. I just don't understand it."

"Well, mother, then maybe you never had a friend as good as Jack because I miss her *all* the time when we're apart."

Her mother looked at her as if she'd sprouted two heads and repeated, "I just don't understand you."

"Well that goes both ways." She slung her backpack over her shoulder. "Can I go now? I'll be back before dinner." Her eyes took on a condescending stare. "I won't get *dirty*, either."

"Who's getting dirty, peanut?" Joe walked in from the bedroom to feel the usual tension in the air between his wife and daughter.

"No one, as I have told mom. She thinks I'm eight years old and am gonna get all dirty in the

boathouse." Rolling his eyes at his wife, Joe tried to placate her, "Honey, she hasn't come back dirty from that place since our first time here. Just let her have some fun this summer before she starts high school, ok?"

"Fine, just go," she grouched and went into the kitchen.

"Have fun, peanut, ok?"

"I don't get it, daddy. She's always riding me now. I can't breathe one word about Jack without her ragging on me. I would think she'd want me to have someone to hang with while we're here. What did Jack ever do to her?" she asked, tears forming in her eyes.

Opening his arms, Erin fell instantly into his warmth. Joe embraced his daughter and patted the sack on her back. "Don't you worry about her. Just have some fun. Paint me a sunset, ok? You know they're my favorite." His chin rested on her head.

Nodding into the clean smell of her father's shirt, Erin gave him one last cuddle. "Ok, daddy. I am getting pretty good with the pastels now. I'll try one for you."

"That's my girl." He brushed her cheek with his callused thumb. "Go have fun."

"Is it true you're taking us to Bosaki's for dinner?"

"Yep, so don't be late."

Nodding, Erin answered back, "You got it."

~*~*~*~*

Erin climbed up to the boathouse roof, following the sweet new sounds coming from Jackson's oboe. Reaching the top rung of the ladder, she watched as Jackson played, unaware of her arrival. Her eyes were still covered by sunglasses, but Erin knew without question, they were closed and lost in the melody she was playing. When the last note ended, Jackson rested the oboe across her lap.

"You can come up now, sneaky pants." Jackson's words startled Erin.

"I didn't think you heard me. I could've sworn you were someplace else while you were playing," she managed to get out while bringing her body over the ladder.

"I always know when you're near." She shrugged. "I always have."

Erin's smile was contagious and Jackson found herself smiling back. Pulling her pad of paper from the waistband of her shorts, Erin realized something aloud, "You know, ever since that first time up here, I always tuck my sketchbook in my pants if I need both hands for something. I can't help it!"

Jackson laughed at her admission. "Well I'm glad my advice has stuck with you for so long. I don't know many people who've listened to me and remembered what they'd heard."

"Well, like I told you before, I'm not just anybody."

Erin took a seat next to Jackson on the blanket of the rooftop. Looking over the water, the awe Erin felt washed over her once again. "It never fails. Every time I look out there, I'm just speechless. It's so... breathtaking."

Looking into Jackson's lap, she saw the new instrument and was instantly curious. "So, when did you start playing this? I know you were fiddling around with flute and piccolo, but isn't this like a clarinet?"

"Excellent question, Ms. Hawkins. It just so happens that the flute, piccolo, clarinet, saxophone, recorder *and* oboe are all in the same family." Erin marveled again at how much Jackson had grown up over the years. Even though she was only sixteen, she knew so much about music.

"You should teach music, Jack. You know so much about it." Scrunching up her face, Jackson replied, "Yeah, but I don't know if I could do the teaching thing. Knowing what I know about kids, they're assholes, and I don't think I could handle not being able to smack them if they got out of line in my class."

Laughing at her normally calm friend, Erin replied, "Oh you would be fine and you know it. Once you get into something, you get everyone around you so hyped on it." Erin remembered an example. "Do you remember how crazy you were over that stupid potato salad from that convenient store across the lake? Soon after your outburst, my parents, your aunt and everyone else at the resort were cruising on their boats, to get some from that store! You could've written a prize winning essay on it."

Laughing at the memory, Jackson acquiesced, "You're right. I can get pretty nuts over something I love." She turned to look at Erin and the air seemed to stop moving altogether. Erin felt the shift and swallowed hard. Neither of them heard the footfalls on the ladder.

"Well isn't this cozy?" Molly's jealous laden voice instantly broke the connection.

Jackson's head whirled around and met the cocky smirk of her girlfriend.

"Molly! What are you doing here?" Jackson blurted out, her face flaming from surprise and instant nausea.

"Well you sounded like you really wanted me to meet the infamous Erin, so here I am." Turning to look at the pretty reddish blonde headed girl with the sky blue eyes, she extended her hand once she reached the top. "It's nice to finally meet you." Erin, feeling the tension radiating from Jackson's body, extended her hand carefully. She regarded this small attractive blonde in an unfamiliar manner. A little jealousy was seeping into her heart at the brashness in the brown

eyes. "It's nice to meet you too, Molly."

The air crackled with anxiety from Jackson not knowing how to calm her racing heart. Trying to get herself under control, Jackson pointed to the side next to her. "Have a seat. Erin was just going to do some drawing and I was going to um," She lifted her oboe and continued, "practice for awhile."

Erin's eyes went wide while she listened to Jackson stumble over her words. *Erin? What is going on with her?*

"You know, Erin, the way Jackson talks about you, I would've thought you were much older. You're just a kid," she stated, hoping to wipe the smile off of Jackson's face. It worked... but not to her advantage.

"Hey! She's starting high school in the fall. She's not that much younger than I am. Or is being a senior this year making you forget that you have freshman walking down the same hallways with you everyday?"

"Jack, it's okay," Erin's small voice stopped her rant. Molly looked on with interest. "She doesn't know me yet. Perhaps by the end of the summer she'll change her mind." Erin smiled sweetly at Molly.

"Yes, Jack, maybe I'll change my mind," she repeated with ice dripping from her smile.

"So what are you playing? Are you working on that little thing you wrote? What was it called, 'Hawks in Flight' or something?" Jackson's cheeks flamed with Molly's words.

Erin's face lit up like a Christmas tree. "You wrote a song?" Clearing her throat for emphasis. "About a *hawk* in flight?"

Jackson just wanted to jump off the roof of that boathouse right then and there.

"It's really good, she should play it for you sometime," Molly added, touching Jackson's bare knee. Jackson jumped up into a standing position and pretended to stretch. Molly looked at her with angry eyes and stood as well. "What's wrong, Jack? Don't you want to play it for her?"

Erin watched the strange interaction and wondered why Jackson would bother being friends with someone like her. *She's really bossy.* Starting to feel in the way, she stood with the other girls and started to say something when Molly opened her mouth, again.

"Jack, look at me." Molly reached up and took off her sunglasses. Smiling when she saw two blue eyes looking at her. "Ahh, there are the blue eyes I know."

Erin's brow furrowed hearing those words. Jackson turned to look at her and noticed her stiff posture. With eyes wide, Erin cried, "What happened to your eyes?"

Before Jackson could answer, Molly piped up, "Colored contact lens. Doesn't she look so much

better? Those different colored eyes really freaked me out."

Erin's anger at this girl was almost overwhelming her. Her voice was calm regardless of the maelstrom burning in her belly. "Actually, no I don't think she does. Sorry Jack, but I really loved your eyes before. They were so unique and special." The "loved" slipped out before she could stop it.

Jackson was tired of being talked about like she wasn't in the vicinity. She grabbed her sunglasses and put them back on her head, trying not to drop her oboe. "Look, Molly please don't talk about me like I'm not even here. I can speak for myself." Turning to Erin she said, "It was a surprise. I didn't tell you so I could show you myself. I wanted to see what it was like to have two of the same colored eyes. Like everyone else." *But you're NOT everyone else; you're unique and special!* "Well, if you like them than that's good. I do like your eyes the way they were though." Feigning tardiness, Erin looked at her watch. "I gotta get going anyway. My mom has some stuff for me to do before dinner." Turning back to Molly she spoke politely, "It was nice to meet you, Molly. I hope we see each other before I leave."

"I'm sure we will." Molly waved and smiled a saccharine smile that made Jackson's stomach roil.

"I'll see you after dinner?" Jackson asked with hope in her voice.

"Sure," Erin responded, trying hard to smile. She picked up her pack, slung it over her shoulders and walked down the ladder. She walked down to the loft window and heard Molly's whispered, *"They're so unique and special,"* she mocked. "I told you she was a kid." And Jackson's, "Knock it off, Molly, the show's over."

Trying to keep her emotions in check, she swung into the loft and down to the main boathouse. Realizing she'd left her pad of paper on the roof, she debated whether or not to go back up there. "Screw that," she said, knowing Jackson would take care of them, and walked the small path that would lead her back to the grounds.

Up on the roof, Molly and Jackson were still having a strong debate on what had transpired a few moments ago.

"You owe her an apology, Molly. She didn't do anything to you and you attacked her like a jungle cat. What the hell is wrong with you?"

Eyes softening, realizing she'd hit a nerve, she tried a peace offering, "I'm sorry, Jack. When I saw you two up there I got really jealous and my mouth kind of took over."

"You have nothing to be jealous of," Jackson lied. "We've been friends since we were like knee high and every summer she and her folks come to stay with us. I love her like a sister and would really appreciate it if you were nicer to her next time."

"Ok, Jack. Again, I'm really sorry." She tried to reach up to give Jackson a kiss only to have the taller girl back away.

"Don't! I told you I didn't want to do that stuff while she was here."

"I don't see her anywhere, Jack, do you?" Blowing out a breath, she continued to rant, "This was just a bad idea. I'm going home. I'll see you tomorrow." She turned to step on the ladder and stopped. "Unless that's no good for you either."

"It's fine, Mol. Just come tomorrow. We'll go skiing or something. Erin's never skied before, so I'm sure she'd like to try something other than the tube."

"Great!" she snapped. "I can't wait to do everything Erin wants to do. See you later, Jack." Molly flew down the ladder and left Jackson to ungracefully plop down on the roof, oboe in hand. Shaking her head she looked onto the roof and noticed Erin's sketchbook, then out over the water.

Oh, this isn't gonna be good, at all.

Chapter Five

A few hours later found Erin sitting on the dock. Her stomach was upset after the afternoon she shared with Jack. Eating greasy fried fish for dinner didn't help her situation at all. With the sun starting to set, her fingers began to work in earnest. The colors coming off the water tonight were incredible. Purples and pinks with a hard line of red on the horizon; it was just beautiful. Her pastel sticks were bringing out the colors as well as her current mood.

What happened between Jack and Molly was hurtful if not a little unsettling. They definitely had a history, but of which she knew nothing. Jack hadn't ever mentioned Molly and when she'd found out that Molly knew of her, the troubling thoughts continued.

Why would she hide that from me? It's obvious Molly doesn't like me for whatever reason. I just hope Jack will tell me what's going on. I don't like this one bit.

Hearing footsteps on the dock, her heart sped up immediately. *Speak of the devil.* She didn't need to turn around to know who was approaching. Jackson sat down in the chair next to her and didn't say a word. Erin used her peripheral vision to watch her while she pretended to draw. Jackson sat quietly while watching the sunset.

"So what's up with Molly? Any idea why she hates me so much?" Erin asked flat out. *And why didn't you tell me about her?*

Jackson didn't answer right away. She was battling with so many emotions that she wasn't sure which ones she wanted to face. "Molly is a spoiled brat sometimes, Hawk. She can be the nicest person, but like today, she showed fangs I'm not too fond of."

"What's up with you not calling me Hawk around her? I feel like there is so much you haven't told me. I think you stopped writing to me because of her." Erin continued to finish her drawing before the sun went behind the horizon.

If you only knew how much I haven't told you. "You're right. I just was hanging out with Molly this summer and before I knew it, August was here and then so were you. I'm really sorry about that, you know how much I love your letters," Jackson confessed. "I'm so sorry about today. I really hated the whole thing." She ventured to put her hand on Erin's shoulders.

Erin's eyes met hers for the first time and she noticed the contact lens had been removed. Trying to hide her smile, she replied, "Well I didn't hate all of it. It was really nice before she showed up." She reached up and squeezed the hand on her shoulder, then brought it back down to work her magic on the page. "Although, I don't think you should hang out with a person who wants you to change yourself." She pointed to her eyes. "Your eyes *are* unique and are a part of the awesome person you are. Don't let her take that from you. No one should be allowed to do that."

Jackson started to dispute that argument, but Erin put her fingers on her mouth. "You know I'm right." Jackson smiled, unable to fight with her.

Jackson moved closer to look over Erin's shoulder. From the edge of the shore, Katie stood and watched the girls interact and couldn't help the discontent she felt inside. The closer Erin and Jackson got, the more unease she felt. She knew there was more to come from their friendship, it was a sinking feeling, but she would not allow it to happen if she could help it. *No daughter of mine will act that way.* She shouted towards Erin, "Erin, make sure you come in at dark!"

Erin, nearly jumping off her chair, turned around to face her mother on the waterfront. "Can I stay out until at least ten, mom? I'm working on a great picture for dad."

Trying not to be completely unreasonable, she compromised, "Ten o'clock, but no later."

Smiling with a brief wave, Erin replied, "Thanks!"

"Good night, Mrs. Hawkins!" Jackson bid Erin's mom, not knowing the angst the woman felt for her.

"Good night, Jackson," she returned semi-coldly, and then went back to her cottage.

"Hawk, what's up with you and your mom? She never used to give you a curfew while you were here."

Taking a deep breath, she stilled her fingers. "Jack, I wish I knew. She has been such a... God I don't even want to say it! Do you know she tried to get me to go to Cheerleading camp instead of coming here this summer? I couldn't believe it. Like there was *any* way I'd choose not to come and see you if I could."

Jackson was at a loss as to what to tell Erin about her mother. "I don't know, Hawk. What does your dad say about it?"

"He says not to mind her, but I do mind, though. It's like she doesn't want me to be friends with you or something. What the heck made her feel that way? You're my best friend in the world, how can she not want me to be around you?"

Jackson's arm went fully around Erin's shoulders, bringing their bodies close. "I don't know, Hawk. I'll just try to be extra charming so she isn't so hard on you." Without thought, she kissed the top of Erin's head. Eyes closing, Erin let her head fall against the broad shoulder beside her.

"I love you, you know," Erin whispered.

Pressing her lips against her head again, Jackson replied, "I love you, too, Hawk."

"Promise me something?" Erin continued to keep her voice low.

"Anything."

"Tell me about Molly when you're ready, ok?"

Not really wanting to think about her at the moment, Jackson agreed, "I will. I am sorry I didn't tell you about her. It might have been a much more evenly matched afternoon. She came out swinging, man. I didn't think she'd be so jealous of our friendship."

Feeling her face redden a little, Erin confessed, "I was a little jealous of her too. She was acting like you were her possession. I did *not* like that one bit."

Jackson bit off her smile at the admission; grateful Erin was so different than Molly. There was no comparison. If there was a reason Jackson would have to choose between the two, Erin would win hands down. For right now, she would relish in the idea of having her girlfriend and her best friend in the same place. She felt extremely lucky, indeed.

"Do you want to try water skiing tomorrow?"

A sudden fear washed over Erin. "I... I don't know. I'm kinda scared about it, really. Maybe I should just stick to tubing."

"Well, you can if you want. I think we're gonna take the boat out tomorrow and go skiing. You're always welcome to try, but we'll hitch up the tube to the boat if you'd rather do that." "You wouldn't care?" Erin was feeling like the kid Molly said she was. "I feel stupid."

"There is no reason for you to feel stupid because something scares you. If you don't want to do it, just go tubing and have a good time." Jackson's calm voice burred in her ear making Erin feel more loved and content than she'd ever felt. Erin breathed a small relaxed sigh.

Breaking the warmth before it broke her resolve, Jackson asked, "So how's that picture coming? It's gonna be dark soon."

"Oh! I almost forgot about it." Her face blushed hotly. She brought the picture into view. The sunset was captured almost perfectly.

"Wow, Hawk. That's really beautiful. You've gotten so good with your work. People are gonna be paying you oodles of dollars just to own your pieces. Mark my words." Erin blushed a deeper

red under the praise.

"Thanks, Jack. You've always been in my corner when it came to my artwork. I can't tell you how much I appreciate that."

Smiling softly, "You're welcome. I'll always be your biggest fan."

"Speaking of fans, will you play me the song you wrote? I'd really love to hear it."

Jackson nodded her head. "Of course I will. I did name it after you because of your love of this place... and well our friendship. It means so much to me." Jackson hoped the look in her eyes didn't show too much of her heart. The last thing she wanted was for Erin to be unnerved by the amount of love she had for her. "I never told Molly I called you that and well, it's none of her business. I don't think she would like it very much since I know she'd put the two things together. The least amount of ammunition she has, the better for all of us."

Shaking her head, Erin just couldn't understand why Jackson would be friends with someone like that. It wasn't her place to say who Jackson could be friends with, so she said nothing.

"Come on, let's put this away and go hang out at my house. Jackie and Sandra are gonna watch *Ghost* tonight. I've never seen it so if you'd like to come over, we could go watch it with them. Sandra makes a mean cheese popcorn with Velveeta. Really messy, but *really* good." Jackson hoped she would come.

Erin nodded, happy to be on better ground with her friend again. "Sure, I wanted to see that, too. Let's go."

The girls walked to Jackson's house and once inside, they were greeted with a very friendly kiss being shared by Jackie and Sandra. Jackson immediately cleared her throat after hearing a small gasp from Erin's mouth.

"Get a room, you two!" Jackson shouted, not fazed in the slightest at this normal behavior.

Pulling apart quickly, the older women were clearly embarrassed having been seen by Erin, who was certainly not used to seeing two women show affection. The red on her cheeks spoke volumes of the swirling tides in her stomach.

"Are you okay, Erin?" Jackie saw the deer in the headlights expression and wanted to make sure she had enough air. "I'm sorry if that freaked you out somewhat."

"Nn... no, no. I'm fine, really. It's just um... wow." She nervously laughed. "I ah, don't see a lot of that from regular people... well... not to say you aren't regular," she started stammering to the amusement of everyone in the room. "I'm just gonna sit over here and not say a word." She went and sat on the sofa.

"Awww, Hawk, I'm sorry you had to see that." Jackson thinned her lips and stared narrowly at her aunt. Sandra had the sense to leave the room already, much to Jackie's chagrin. Jackson sat

down next to her. "You want something to drink? It might bring down the color of your face." Erin's hands immediately went to her cheeks. She couldn't say anything with the images of the heated kiss flowing through her brain. *Incredible*. "Yeah, maybe some water would be good," she managed to squeak.

"I'll get it." Jackson jumped up and went into the kitchen, silently flagging her aunt to follow her.

Once in the kitchen a heated round of whispers took place. "Jackie how can you do that in the front room! Anyone could've seen you!"

Jackie took on a defensive tone. "Excuse me, but this is my house and if I want to kiss my girlfriend, I'm damn well going to!"

Feeling hurt, Jackson countered, "You *knew* I was going to bring her back here, though. I told you I was going to the dock to get her."

Nodding her head, Jackie began to apologize, "You're right, Jack. And I'm sorry Erin had to see that. But hell, the more people see it, the more natural it'll become. God, I can't even touch Sandra when we're with her family. I just can't stand to do that in my own house. I'll go in there and apologize again."

"I'm sorry I overreacted. You know that *I* don't care if you kiss her; I see it all the time. This is just very new to her and I don't want her to be freaked every time she comes to the door."

"Have you told her about you and Molly yet?" Jackie asked.

Jackson's eyes went wide and she stealthily looked around the corner to see what Erin was doing. Seeing that she hadn't moved, Jackson went back to her aunt and shook her head, "No, and I don't think I'm ready to. I think she'd be okay with me being a lesbo, but I don't think she'd be fond of me being one with Molly. They kinda met today and it wasn't pretty."

"Ooh, I want to hear that story after she leaves."

"Only if Sandra makes cheese corn." The deal in place, the two women walked back into the family room, Jackson carrying a glass of water for Erin. Jackie went to tell Sandra that she needed to make the best damn cheese corn to make it up to Jackson and her friend.

"How you doin'?" Jackson asked, handing Erin the glass of water.

"You know, I'm fine," Erin said truthfully. "After the initial shock of it being, you know, two girls, well it was pretty okay. You can tell they really care for each other," she whispered the last part, making Jackson smile.

"Yeah, they do."

Sandra and Jackie walked back into the family room and Sandra announced she would be popping corn for the film. "Go ahead and start the movie, I've seen it a few times already. I'll

have this corn made in about ten minutes. And Erin, it'll be the best damn popcorn you've ever had!" She winked, causing the teenager's cheeks to flush.

"Thanks, I'm looking forward to it. Jack says it's really really good."

"You'd better believe it's good," Jackie chimed in.

The three women sat on the couch and Jackie started the film. When the popcorn was finished, Sandra inched her way to the floor by Jackie's feet. Erin's eyes closed in extreme pleasure with the taste of the first kernel. Jackson's mouth watered as she watched Erin lick the cheese from her fingers. She knew at that point with the way her hormones were acting, she needed to pay close attention to the movie.

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The following afternoon was, in a word, perfect. The scorching heat had cooled down to a very pleasant eighty-two degrees. It was the ideal day to spend on the water.

At one o'clock sharp, Molly arrived wearing next to nothing of a bikini. Erin watched as she approached the two girls, Jackson hugged Molly when she got out of her car. She noticed Jackson's eyes close and wondered what Molly could've said to garner that response.

The hug lasted longer than Jackson had wanted, but didn't want to start Molly's jealous tirade any sooner than necessary. The feel of her body was so good against her own, she closed her eyes and sighed. "So are you ready to ski?" Jackson asked her girlfriend.

"Sure, or I can just lay on the pier and watch you do your magic on the water." Jackson blushed slightly at the compliment then noticed Erin's approach to the gravel drive.

"Hi, there," Erin greeted. "Nice to see you." Molly barely acknowledged her.

Shorts covered Erin's bikini bottoms but her upper body showed off a revealing top and a strong but feminine torso. She kept her tank top tucked in the waistband of her shorts. Jackson's eyes were glued to the strong outline of Erin's shoulders and the swell of her breasts. Molly saw Jackson's unfocused look and lightly pinched her side.

With a shake of her head towards Molly, she tried to change the subject. "Are you guys ready? The water is so perfect today. I can't wait to pound the waves."

Both girls latched onto Jackson's incredible energy and silently agreed for the moment to be civil. Molly added, "My brother got us some beer if you want to bring it on the boat."

Erin's eyes were wide, but Jackson answered with a shake of her head, "You know I won't drive the boat if I drink. If you want to drink that's fine, but Jackie's only been letting me drive it this summer and last. I don't want to crash it."

"That's fine. It's in a cooler, so we can drink it later." She looked back and forth between both girls. "Is that cool?"

Both girls nodded, although Erin had never had more than a couple of beers before, so she was less than comfortable. Jackson could tell she was having second thoughts and reassured her, "It's ok if you don't want to drink, buddy, you can just hang out."

Jackson always had a way of making Erin feel so good. Even if a situation was making her feel less than comfortable, Jackson was always there to say just the right thing. Molly discretely rolled her eyes and started walking to the lake.

They made their way to the boat slips and took out the Mastercraft ski boat. It was a twenty-five foot "dream boat" as Jackson described it. With almost three hundred horsepower, it could pull anyone through the water behind the floating fiberglass.

Molly quite easily jumped into the boat, making herself at home. Being that she was a year older than Jackson, the angle of Jackie not having to get in the boat every time Jackson wanted to ski, made her agreeable to letting Molly drive the watercraft. With a promise to be very careful, Molly graciously thanked Jackie for her trust.

Jackson was bringing the life jackets out of the boathouse with Erin in tow carrying the water tube. Erin cheerfully waved to her dad as he and a few cabin friends were pulling out to go fishing.

"Have fun, peanut," he called out. "Don't forget to hold on!"

"Ha Ha! Don't forget to bait your hook!" she shot back to the amusement of his friends.

Jackson looked back at her. "I'm so glad he's caught some fish. He may not have come all the way back here each summer."

"I know! I almost want to put some big fish in his cooler to make sure he keeps *wanting* to come back."

"Ah, I think the trap was set a long time ago, Hawk. I can tell he has a lot of fun while he's here." She paused. "Your mom on the other hand..."

"Don't go there, I'm just waiting for her to suggest a trip to Disneyland next year," Erin said, only half joking.

"Hey, come on you too! The sun is calling my name!" Molly yelled from the boat.

"I wonder what the sun called her," Erin quipped, earning her a small chuckle from her taller friend.

Jackson ran back to the boathouse to get the skis and towrope. Molly and Erin put on their life vests and waited for her to return. Jackson had checked the gas levels, attached the towrope and put the skis on in minutes. She was more than a little excited to wedge through the water.

Molly was at the helm with Erin next to her on lookout. When the rope was just taught enough, she gunned the engine pulling Jackson up easily. The smile on her face grew exponentially as her turns and wave jumping increased. Molly steered the boat easily through the lake while Erin watched Jackson fly effortlessly through the water. When they got close to shore, Jackson dropped her left ski and tucked her left foot into the rear binding of the ski.

Side to side Jackson rushed through the water with Erin looking on in awe. Molly added a little more gas making Jackson's adrenaline soar. She watched Erin wave every once in awhile, but could tell she was having a great time, the smile never left her face. After her last trip around the lake she motioned to Erin to tell Molly to go to shore. With Erin doing just that, they slowly made their way to the pier.

As the boat slowed, Jackson dropped the towrope and skied until she sunk to the bottom of the shallow lakeshore waters. She pulled her feet from their bindings and walked up onto the waterfront. Ski in hand, she walked around to the other side of the pier to pick up the other ski that was floating towards the shore.

"That was so friggin awesome!" she shouted, feeling like she could walk on this very lake.

"You were incredible, Jack! You've gotten so good!" Erin gushed, much to the ire of Molly.

Putting on her happy face for Jack, she jumped onto the admiration bus, and added her twist. "Sweetie, you were fantastic out there. Nothing was gonna touch you." She smiled sweetly and Jackson smiled back while raising an eyebrow.

She slicked the hair back from her face and shook her head. "Man, what a rush!" She laughed happily. "Mol, you wanna go next?"

"Sure, will you help me with the skis? Your feet are bigger than mine.

"Yep, let's just secure the boat real quick so it doesn't go anywhere."

Sweetie? Erin didn't understand Molly's possessive thing, but she wanted it to stop. She wasn't a threat to their relationship, especially living four hundred miles away. *Molly needs to get over it.*

Molly and Jackson resized the skis to fit her smaller feet. When they were ready, Jackson jumped into the boat. She untied the dock lines from the cleats and started the boat engine once it was deep enough.

Erin smiled at the carefree expression on Jackson's face. It was a smile that melted her heart completely. This was her home, this was her calling and outside of mother not being with her, she looked to Erin like the happiest person alive.

Erin watched as Molly set herself up in the water. Balancing behind her skis, she positioned the rope between them. Jackson looked back and waited for the line to be taught. Molly gave her the thumbs up when she was ready and off they went. Jackson gunned the boat as Erin, once again,

took the lookout position.

After halfway around the lake, they encountered some choppy water. When Molly tried to compensate for the fresh waves, she went fell down into the water.

"She's down!" Erin yelled, watching her fall.

Jackson steered the boat in a slow circle towards Molly so they could get her the rope. When they reached her, Molly was less than happy. "God damn waves." She spit water out as she bobbed in the water with her vest. "The tip of my ski dropped under one of them and I bit it, hard."

"Are you ok to keep going?" Jackson asked, idling the engine.

"Yeah, just need to straighten out."

Erin looked at her with a smile. "You were doing great until you went down, though," she said sincerely, although Molly took it completely in the opposite.

"It's not as easy as it looks, but you wouldn't know that, would you."

Fear being replaced by anger, Erin replied, "Not yet, but when you're done, I'm gonna try." Jackson turned and put her hand on her shoulder. "Are you sure? You don't have to do that. You know she's just baiting you."

Staring back into the shaded eyes of her best friend, she said, "I'm doing it."

Shaking her head with a laugh. "You're the boss." Looking back to Molly she was just about ready.

Molly gave Erin the thumbs up, or it could've been her middle finger, Erin wasn't sure from that distance. "I think she wants to go!" she yelled to Jackson.

Turning back to make sure, Jackson got a, "Go already!" from a wet and pissed off Molly.

Jackson gunned the engine and Molly stood right up, a smile back on her face. Erin looked over to Jackson who was steering with an enormous smile. She had pushed her sunglasses on her head to keep her hair out of her eyes. Jackson noticed she was staring and looked over, winked and continued to drive.

Molly made it around the lake a couple times and signaled, as Jackson had, to come in.

When the boat was at shore, Erin jumped onto the pier and went down to where Molly was removing the skis. Showing Erin how to adjust the skis, Molly helped her get the equipment on.

"Now just make sure you keep your knees bent and your arms straight. Lean back, but in a

crouched position, so you aren't dragging your butt in the water," Jackson coached from the boat. "I'm gonna pull away slowly until the rope is tight. When I start to pull you a little, give Molly a thumbs up when you're ready, and we'll hit it." Erin gave a nervous nod and Jackson asked one last time, "Are you sure you're ready?"

Looking at Molly's cocky stance with her arms crossed, Erin's chin raised somewhat and she met Jackson's eyes. "Yea, let's do this!"

"That's my girl!" Jackson cheered, earning her a hateful glare from Molly. Jackson put her arms out wide in disbelief of the jealous nature of her girlfriend. "I'm just encouraging her, Jesus!" She sat behind the wheel not wanting Molly to drive and drag her too fast. "Tell me when she's ready." Molly moved right next to Jackson on the bench, facing the rear of the boat.

Erin was settling back in the water, trying to get a feel for the skis, keeping the tips up. "You can do this, Erin. You can do this," she coached herself. "If that scrawny wench can do it, so can I." Her words surprised even her, but looking at the smirk as she sat close to Jackson, hardened Erin's resolve even more. Raising a shaky hand, she gave a thumbs up and hung onto the towrope with all her might.

Jackson, getting the go ahead from Molly, gunned the engine. After a few seconds of battling her own balance, Erin stood on the skis and adrenaline shot through her. The smile on her face felt like it was the size of Lake Tomahawk. Her heart was racing, but she was still standing and having a ball. She went over to the right side of the boat as it turned left, picking up her speed. She bent her knees, using her legs as shock absorbers. to battle the waves.

"How's she doing?" Jackson yelled at Molly.

"She's doing great! She's bouncing off the waves like a pro." Molly was not pleased. *Another point for the great Erin.*

"Fantastic!" Jackson briefly looked back to see Erin's smiling face as she battled the water around her.

Molly decided to play with Jackson since Erin wasn't paying attention to anything but her skiing.

Erin was having the time of her life. *Who needs tubing when you can do this?*

When the boat slowed on its next turn, the slack on the rope was increasing and Erin found herself slipping backwards, very close to the water. As Jackson gunned the engine, Erin was jolted forwards once the rope tightened again. The handle flew from her hands, wrapped around her right leg and got caught on her binding. The action caused her to fall onto her back. "Oh, shit!" With the rope caught on her ski, the boat continued to pull her, dragging her under the water.

Molly watched her go down and smiled. She figured she could let her bob around out there for a while. She leaned over and kissed Jackson's cheek and stuck her tongue in her ear. Jackson playfully batted her hand away, completely unaware of Erin's situation.

Erin held her breath as she was being drug below the surface. *Help me! Stop the boat!* Panic had set in a long few seconds ago. Erin's chest was starting to burn, then everything went black.

When Molly looked back, waiting to see Erin bobbing far from the boat, she noticed that the rope was not bouncing off the water, but held a ski with a body still attached to it. Realizing she'd made a fatal mistake, her conscience finally kicked in and she screamed, "Oh, shit, Jack, she's down, she's caught, stop!"

Jackson immediately killed the engine and looked back at Erin's motionless body, still being pulled by the boat. The lack of speed and the buoyancy of her vest, brought Erin above the water.

Eyes in total shock, she screamed, "Erin!" Looking at Molly, she yelled, "Take the wheel but don't turn on the engines."

She threw off her sunglasses, stepped one foot on the back end of the boat and launched herself towards Erin. Diving into the water, Jackson swam as fast as she possibly could to her best friend. When she reached her, Erin's face was pale. She grabbed and pulled the ski off her foot and tugged on her vest.

"Hawk? Hawk, honey, can you hear me?" She felt for her neck as she floated, not finding a pulse. "She's not breathing!" she screamed to Molly. She grabbed Erin by the vest, keeping her head above water and dragged her back to the boat. "Hold her!" she yelled to the blonde as she climbed small ladder rungs to get aboard. "On three, we lift her in and lay her down. We need to do CPR on her now! One... two... three!" Both girls held onto Erin and pulled with all their might to get her over the side of the boat. Erin was flopped gracelessly to the boat floor with Jackson immediately undoing her vest. She quickly began CPR.

She tilted Erin's head back, pinched her nose and leaned down to breathe twice into her mouth while watching her chest rise. She put her palm down in the middle of her chest, between her breasts, covered it with her other hand, and began to pump. "Come on, Hawk, breathe! Breathe God dammit!" She breathed again into her mouth twice and began to pump. Molly watched on with frightened eyes knowing that her jealousy and stupidity could've cost this girl her life.

On the fourth attempt with Jackson pumping on her chest, Erin's mouth filled with water and she coughed and spat it out. As another huge water-filled cough erupted, she finally took a lungful of air much to the relief of everyone present. Jackson gently rolled her to her side.

"Hawk?" Jackson whispered through her tears, not knowing when she'd begun to cry. Erin's eyes opened then shut when another round of coughing violently burst forth from her body. A little more water was released from her lungs and she took another few uneasy breaths.

Erin opened her eyes successfully this time, not knowing where she was right away. Jackson leaned on her side to face her. "Hawk, can you hear me?" She pushed the wet hair out of Erin's eyes.

Blinking and glossily staring into the mismatched eyes she loved so much, Erin finally answered,

"Jack, is that really you?" Her eyes welled with tears, and she began to cry. Jackson immediately grabbed and held her as they both wept from their fear and facing their mortality for the first time in their young lives. Jackson and Erin clung to each other for several moments while Molly sat and watched in disbelief of all that had just happened in such a short period of time.

"It's me, honey, it's me. I gotcha, you're going to be okay," she choked out between sobs. Jackson began to rock Erin back and forth as their hearts slowed to a normal hammering. "I'm right here..."

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The boat ride back to shore was, thankfully, uneventful. As they pulled into the slip, Jackson saw her aunt and Erin's mother on the pier waiting. Cursing silently, she knew they must have seen somewhat of the scene that happened from shore. She slowly docked the boat, killed the engine and tied off the cleats.

Erin's mother immediately ran to Erin as she unsteadily exited the boat. "Honey! Are you ok?" She held Erin out at arm's length to look her over. Outside of red-rimmed eyes, her daughter seemed fine, physically.

Erin nodded solemnly and leaned against her mother briefly before walking slowly down the pier. She sat heavily on one of the chairs and just stared out into the water.

Katie walked over to Jackson as she got the last of the equipment out of the boat. "This is *your* fault! My daughter could have died out there! How reckless and stupid are you?" she shouted inches from Jackson's astonished face.

"Mrs. Hawkins, I wasn't..." she began.

"Don't you dare tell me what you were and were not doing. I saw her go down and I saw YOU dragging her without stopping!" she screamed.

"Katie, please. I'm sure it didn't happen that way. Jack is very responsible," Jackie tried to diffuse the situation, hoping she was right about her niece.

"Oh really? And just how did it look to you?" She shot daggers at Jackie. "Clearly she *isn't* responsible or this wouldn't have happened. Do you always let her go boating unsupervised like this?"

"Ma'am? It was my fault," Molly's soft voice interrupted from behind Jackson's nervously shaking body.

Her eyes shifted between Jackson and Molly. "Who are you?"

"Mm...Molly. I was on lookout and I didn't see her fall right away," she lied. "I told Jackson as soon as I realized she'd gone down. Jack stopped the boat immediately. I'm terribly sorry." She looked into unreadable eyes. "Jack saved her life, please believe that." Molly wasn't sure why she was saying all of this. Perhaps her guilt was winning out or maybe she just wanted Jackson to hear her defending her.

Katie looked between the two girls then looked across the pier to Erin who watched with wide horrified eyes as her mother made an ass out of herself. "Is that what happened, Erin?"

Erin looked at Jackson and knew without question she had saved her life. "Yes, mother. Jack saved my life. If she didn't give me mouth to mouth, I wouldn't be here right now." She started to get angry. "Please stop shouting at her like she did something wrong. I don't know what your problem is with her, but she's done... nothing! Leave her alone!" she shouted and ran off the pier to her cottage.

Face red with embarrassment, Katie looked at everyone around her. "I'm sorry." Looking to Jackson, she said a quick "thank you" and very briskly left the pier.

When she was out of an earshot, Molly said, "What a bitch!"

Jackie whirled around to face her. "She saw her daughter almost drown. How else do you think a mother would react?" Jackie looked to Jackson and put her hand out. "I want the keys for awhile." Jackson nodded sadly and handed the boat keys to her aunt. She didn't want to touch them anytime soon anyway. Jackie took the keys and stormed off to the main house, thanking everything Holy that Erin wasn't hurt or killed.

Jackson, not being able to say much, turned to Molly. "Look, um, I don't think I'm gonna be very good company right now. You can go if you want."

Molly, not letting Jackson get rid of her that easily said, "No way, Jack. You need me right now. You've had a huge scare. Let *me* be the one you lean on now." The insinuation of her not being Erin wasn't lost on Jackson. She looked doubtfully at Molly, but her emotional state won out and she nodded.

"I think I need to just relax and sit for awhile, if that's ok." Jackson adjusted the skiing equipment in her arms. "Let's go put this stuff away and we can go sit up on the roof. Ok?"

"Sounds good. I want to be here for you." Molly put her arm around Jackson's shoulder as they walked down the pier towards the boathouse.

Jackson noticed the unused inner tube and felt a wave of emotion flow through her. She motioned to Molly. "Will you roll that in for me?" She clenched her teeth, desperately aware of how close she was to losing it.

Clueless of Jackson's dilemma, she squeezed her shoulder and smiled. "Of course."

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When Joe arrived back from his fishing adventure with his friends, he rested his poles on the side of cabin six and walked inside. The first thing he noticed was Erin, wrapped in a blanket, on one side of the couch crying with his wife on the other end looking very angry.

"What did I miss?" his voice wafted into Erin's ears, making her look up.

"Oh, dad!" She flew off the couch and into his body. He immediately wrapped his arms around her and looked to Katie. She glared at the girl in his arms and his eyebrows raised in question.

"We're not coming back next year, Joe. Erin almost died out on the water today," she said, not explaining herself fully.

Joe looked astonished at this revelation, but wanted more information. "Ok, slow down." He pulled Erin away from him so he could look at her. "What happened, peanut?"

"She got in..." Katie began only to have him stop her.

"Katie, please. I'd like to hear it from Erin, she's the one who seems upset here." "Oh and I'm not upset? You know, maybe if you spent a little more time with her, this could have been prevented," Katie lashed out, not sure of exactly where to release her anger. "I'll be in the kitchen fixing dinner." With that, she got up off the couch and stomped into the other room.

"Come on, peanut, let's sit down and you can tell me all about it."

The two moved as one as they made their way to the couch to sit. Erin leaned against her father's strong shoulder as his arm wrapped around her. "We went water skiing and there was an accident." Staying calm, he let her continue, "I was doing really great, I got up and everything, dad," she said proudly. When she finished telling him what she remembered of the accident, he wrapped his arms tightly around her, and kissed the top of her head.

"So your friend Jack is a hero, then."

"Not to mom. She thinks she's the devil herself," she spat looking towards the kitchen. "Daddy, I just don't get her. Jack is my best friend. Yeah, we had something bad happen today, but she saved my life and still mom was mean to her."

Working his jaw muscles, Joe warred with his emotions. Katie had become unreasonable when it came to his little girl's friendship with Jackson. Anytime her name came up, Katie bristled and either said something rude or changed the subject. He was going to get to the bottom of it before the night was over. Her little tirades were getting very old.

"How are you feeling now? Are you having any trouble breathing? Should we have you looked at?" Joe asked.

"No, daddy, I'm fine. I'm just wiped out. I think I'm gonna go to my room and take a nap."

He kissed her head again and nodded. "That's a good idea. You'll feel better after a little shut eye." Erin stood. "I love you, peanut. I'm glad you're ok."

"Love you, too, daddy," she said, walking to her room and quietly closing the door.

Joe got up and stood outside of the kitchen after giving himself a pep talk. *No good will come of this if I just lay into her.* From the doorway, he saw Katie chopping vegetables for dinner with a butcher knife. *On second thought, maybe now isn't such a good time.* Taking a deep breath, he entered the kitchen. Katie hearing her husband arrive, turned and put her hand on her hip.

"I want to leave," she said firmly.

"No."

"No?" she asked incredulously.

"No. Dammit, Katie, we're paid through the month, we're already here and quite frankly you're overreacting as per your usual." "Overreact..." "Yes! Ok, so there was an accident. Yes, but that's what it was, an accident. From what Erin told me, Jackson saved her life." With that girl's name being brought up, her body clearly stiffened. Joe lowered his voice, "What is your problem with her? She's done absolutely nothing but befriend our little girl. Hell, they've been friends since they were kids! Tell me! What is your damn problem?"

"She's not normal, Joe, okay? I've seen the way she is with Erin. It's not right!" His expression took on the look of disbelief at what he was hearing. "What in God's name are you talking about?"

"She's a queer, I know it," she hissed. "The way she touches Erin's arm or some part of her when she talks to her. Last night, she had her arm around her on the pier. Oh, but silly me, Erin said she was simply drawing *you* a sunset."

"She did, Katie. It's on the table over there. That was the truth."

"That's not the point!"

Backing up and crossing his arms, he leaned against the counter. "Then tell me what is the point of this?"

"Didn't you hear me? I think she's a lesbian!" the last word came out as a whisper.

"So what, Katie? So what if she is. How does *Jackson* being a lesbian hurt our daughter? Did you see her force Erin to *kiss* her? Did you see her *force* Erin to do *anything*? She has done nothing to Erin but be her best friend. Nothing, Katie!"

Katie knew she was not going to win this fight, but she'd be damned if she wasn't going to protect her daughter. "Not yet, Joe, but it's coming. You mark my words."

"You're crazy, you know that? Sometimes you just push too damned far!" He pushed off from the counter. "You and Erin have been at each other's throats for the last year and I'm really growing tired of the way you're treating her." He started to walk out of the kitchen, but stopped

and turned to his wife. "And if you think I'm leaving here because you have your head screwed on wrong, you are even more deluded. I came up here for some peace and relaxation, and I'll be damned if your ridiculous imagination takes that from me. If you don't want to stay, then I suggest you rent a car, because we're not leaving." "We?"

"Yes. You don't think I'm gonna let you take Erin home, do you? Katie, she loves it here. The only time she doesn't talk about this place is when we're actually here. Jesus, would you lighten up?"

"No, Joe, I won't lighten up. If you want to see your little girl become the prey of a predator that's not okay with me. It's not right or natural, what they do. It's not."

"But verbally abusing your daughter *is* right? Don't you see that you are alienating yourself from your daughter? I swear to you, Katie." He took a deep breath before voicing his thoughts. "You need to change the way you treat her or we're going to be making a much bigger decision than where to vacation in the summer."

"Is that a threat?" her voice lowered menacingly.

"No, Katie it's just a fact. I will not be able to live with a woman who voluntarily tries to demean her daughter on a daily basis, especially because of some ridiculous notion she has stuck in her brain!" Deciding to throw fire into the mix, Joe added, "Let me ask you this, Katie. What if Erin *did* come out and say she was a lesbian one day? What would you do? Would you continue to crucify her? Would you throw her to the wolves? Or would you be supportive and comfort her while she was going through a horribly confusing time of discovery in her life? Ask yourself that and you let me know if my 'threat' is out of line." He walked into the living room leaving a slack jawed Katie to digest her husband's surprising and angry words.

Chapter Six

1990 - The Northwoods Island City

Jackson and Molly were tucked on the roof sitting on a blanket. Jackson had been extremely quiet since they arrived up there. A couple hours had passed with Molly trying to make small chit chat just so she would talk to her. They had gone to get some dinner earlier when Molly got hungry. Jackson brooded in the car the entire trip and only said what she'd wanted in the drive thru lane. Other than that, Molly had done all the talking, much to Jackson's aggravation.

Molly had tried to get Jackson to play her recorder or something to take her mind off of what happened. Jackson didn't want anything to do with anything at that moment.

"What are you feeling? Talk to me, sweetie." Molly stroked Jackson's back with her fingertips.

Jackson sighed for the millionth time, not wanting to talk to Molly. She was dying to talk to Erin about the accident. Wanted to know how she was. Something. The fear of Katie Hawkins had

kept her away from cabin six. She felt numb and wanted the hurt she was feeling to go away.

"Look, I told you hours ago that I wasn't going to be good company. I really don't feel like talking." *To you.*

"I know, Jack, but you'll feel better."

Sighing out of annoyance, Jackson said, "Hey, you've got that cooler in your trunk. What I'd really like is a cold beer. That just *might* make me feel better."

Finally having something to make her girlfriend happy, Molly jumped up to retrieve the small cooler from her car. Jackson watched her walk down the ladder and looked over the water. The sun had set awhile ago and she just wanted the peace that she knew would come from sitting up there. Jackson's thoughts were filled with the memories of seeing Erin's lifeless body in the boat. Images that would stay with her forever. It was the worst experience she'd ever had in her short life and one she didn't want to encounter ever again. The only thing setting her mind at ease was that it was she who had saved Erin's life. All of the lifeguard and CPR training her aunt made her go through had paid off. After many lectures of liability with the resort, Jackson finally acquiesced to the training and now was so glad she had. Erin was alive and well. The alternative was something she couldn't even imagine. Nor did she want to.

Hearing Molly's footsteps on the ladder brought Jackson back to the present. *A cold beer. That is definitely going to hit the spot.* When Molly brought up the twelve pack out of the cooler, Jackson's eyes lit up and she voiced her thoughts immediately.

Molly plopped the wet cardboard box down between them. "The ice had melted and got this all soaked. I just grabbed this to make the climb easier. She pulled out a bottle and gave it to Jackson. She immediately twisted the cap off and downed a significant amount in one swallow.

"Ahh, that's the stuff right there," she said, then belched loudly to her own amusement.

"Oh gross, Jack. You sound like my dad."

Jackson continued to laugh and drank her beer in a matter of minutes, looking for another. She pulled out and opened a second bottle, planning to drink it slower than the first. Molly was only half way done with her first.

Jackson took a deep calming breath, feeling better than she had in hours. She took a long look over the water. "It is so beautiful here."

Molly scooted closer to her and draped an arm around her. "Yes it is."

"Thanks for bringing the beer. I didn't think I was gonna want it, but I'm really glad it was here now." She leaned over and lightly kissed Molly's lips. "I'm sorry for being so moody."

Molly's insides swirled at the tone of Jackson's voice. She knew the alcohol was mellowing her

out and she'd soon be pliable. Molly had never met anyone, especially not a girl, who could kiss like Jackson. She couldn't wait to taste those lips again.

~*`~*`~*`~*`

Erin had been laying in bed after her nap for several minutes. Her eyes adjusted slowly, realizing that night had fallen. Her father had come in a couple hours prior asking if she'd wanted dinner. Shaking her head in the negative she opted to sleep more instead. The boating accident had really scared her and as much as she wanted to see Jackson to talk about it, she knew it would just bring up more problems with her mother.

Flashes of her accident stormed her dreams. She had woken with a start after the last one and decided to stay awake. She watched the movement of the shadows on her bedroom wall. There was a slight breeze moving the tree branches outside of her room. A full moon was shining brightly through the open window. The temperature, like the day, was perfect; not too hot and not too cool. Her bladder decided her next move and she got up to use the bathroom. When she opened the door, she saw her dad sleeping on the couch in front of the television. Thinking that her mother had gone to bed, she continued to the bathroom.

As she approached the door, her mother came out of the bedroom. "Hi, honey. How are you feeling?"

"A little draggy, but much better. Sleep did wonders for me."

Katie touched her hair, gently tucking it behind an ear. "I'm so glad you weren't hurt today."

A small smile made its way to Erin's mouth. She was waiting for the snakes to appear in her mother's hair. They never came. "Thanks, Mom."

"I thought I heard you out here, so I wanted to say good-night."

"I think I'm gonna walk out on the pier. The moon is full tonight and I really want to sketch it." Seeing the disapproval on her mother's face, she appeased, "I'm not going to see Jack, mom, I promise. I just want to sketch and take some of the awful imagery out of my head."

Feeling badly, Katie nodded. "Just be careful and don't stay out too late, alright?"

"Sure, Mom. Wake dad though, he's starting to snore out there." They shared a smile and Erin bid her mother goodnight.

After using the facilities, Erin brushed her teeth and hair to rid herself of sleep. She wanted to sketch the moonlight on the water and didn't want to miss a thing due to tiredness.

She walked into her room and grabbed her pack of supplies and her sketchbook. She watched as her mom ushered her dad off the couch. "G'night, Dad." "Where you off to, Peanut?" he asked in a sleep-garbled voice.

"Just to the pier to do some drawing. I won't be out late." She walked over and gave him a kiss on his cheek. "See you in the morning."

"Night, Peanut."

Erin left the cabin and walked to the pier. Grabbing one of the chairs, she positioned herself directly in front of the full moon. She marveled at its glory. It was huge this night. Larger than she could remember seeing a moon. She grabbed her sketchbook and a pencil and began to draw.

~*`~*`~*`~*`

Molly finished her second beer while Jackson was already on her fifth. She was feeling a little wasted, but knew Jackson was way beyond that. She had been kissing her passionately since the fourth bottle had been consumed. Molly pulled back from the force of her mouth the last time. Jackson's passion was so consuming tonight, it was overwhelming her.

Trying to dilute some of Jackson's intensity, Molly suggested, "Jack, what do you say we go skinny dipping? No one's out here. The water will feel great against our bodies, don't you think?" She waggled her eyebrows at an intoxicated Jackson.

"Naked, water, and you? Hell yeah, let's go!" Jackson jumped up and began to climb down the ladder, swinging her body into the loft. Molly was on her heels and soon in the loft with her. Jackson pulled her close and kissed her again. "I can't wait to feel you naked against me," she panted.

"Me too," Molly replied.

They climbed down the second ladder and started removing their clothes. Jackson watched as Molly slowly removed her sleeveless top. She reached around and unclasped her bra, letting it fall to the floor. Jackson drank in the sight of her bare breasts. Molly pushed the rest of her clothing off of her body, presenting herself to Jackson's appreciative eyes.

Jackson unceremoniously took her clothes off in a half a second. Her tall, lean frame was illuminated by the moonlight, Molly swore she'd never seen anything more beautiful. Extending her hand to Jackson, Molly walked closer to the naked loveliness that was her girlfriend. "God, you are gorgeous, Jack," she couldn't help but say. "Come on, let's get in the water."

Jackson took her hand and they walked to the edge of the boat docks. She knew the water was very shallow so she stepped in. Molly followed with a tiny gasp as the cool water touched her skin.

"Come on, this feels fantastic," Jackson said with a huge smile. She started to trot out into the water and when it was deep enough, she dove under. She swam a few strokes then broke the plane of the water. Molly swam after her, giggling all the while. They splashed and laughed and were soon chasing each other. Jackson knew she probably shouldn't be swimming while buzzed, but at that moment, she didn't care. She wasn't feeling badly about today right now. Right now

was about Molly, and her nakedness, and her wanting to feel it against her.

She ducked under the water and sprouted up in front of a surprised Molly. "Boo!"

Molly shrieked and lightly splashed Jackson for scaring her. Jackson grabbed her splashing hand and brought it behind her neck. "Come here."

Jackson kissed Molly, earning her a deep moan from the blonde. She brought her arms around Molly and when their bodies met, she knew nothing else but the sensations flowing through her core.

~*`~*`~*`~*`

Erin's pencil was flying across her page. Her hands had found an incredible rhythm and her moon on the water, had begun to take amazing shape. She'd been sitting out there for over an hour, but the breeze and her surroundings kept her glued to her seat. She closed her eyes and just breathed in the clean fresh air.

She watched as a few boats had gone under the bridge and onto their destinations. The crickets were chirping and she'd even heard a bullfrog. Off in the distance she heard a fish jump out of the water with a big splash. Wishing her dad was next to her with his fishing pole, she smiled and continued with her near complete drawing.

Another splash was heard, this time closer. She looked to her right, to see if she could see the fish. She focused around the boathouse as she thought that was the direction she'd heard the splashing. She had, though it wasn't a fish. It was a very loud and a very naked woman running through the water. She watched her run through the water, only to be joined by another. *Oh, my, they're skinny dipping!* She smiled, a little stunned, and tried not to watch. The smile soon left her face when she heard Jackson's voice. Her head shot up, stomach in knots, and it didn't take her long to figure out who she was with. She ducked beside the chair next to her, trying not to be seen.

She watched as Jackson and Molly frolicked happily through the lake. *I can't believe they're naked!* She watched Jackson dive under the water. Molly was closer to her but her back was turned. Jackson popped up in front of Molly with a playful "Boo!" She watched and heard Molly scream and she began to splash Jackson. As the next action played out, her mind rolled it in slow motion. Jackson grabbed a splashing hand and placed it behind her neck and brought Molly's mouth to hers in a passionate kiss. Not believing her eyes, she rubbed them with curled fists. Blinking rapidly, she couldn't mistake the sounds of desire coming from the two naked girls. A wave of emotion struck her, confusion.

Jack's a...a lesbian? Like Jackie?

Erin didn't know what to think. Some of the pieces of Jack's omissions were starting to fall into place. Anger at the lack of truth from her best friend was resonating through her head. *Why didn't she tell me? I'm her best friend. We're supposed to tell each other everything!*

She watched as Jackson took possession of Molly's mouth, cradling her face with her hands, bringing her impossibly closer. A shot of arousal flared through her body as well as a jolt of jealous anger. She debated whether to leave while they were locked in their kiss, or just wait it out.

Patience won out as she tried not to watch the scene unfold in front of her. Jackson pulled away from Molly and motioned to the boathouse. With a nod, Molly followed Jackson back. As they were headed back to the boathouse, Erin decided to also take her leave. When she got up off the pier floor, her foot knocked into the chair, created a slight scuffing sound. Quickly she collected her things and as quietly as she could, ran off the pier to go home. Molly turned, hearing the scuff of the chair against the dock and watched Erin's figure leaving the pier in a big hurry. She smiled victoriously, knowing that Erin must have seen an eyeful.

Jackson was feeling no pain. Things were starting to blur a little, but that was fine with her. The more she wasn't reminded of things, the better. Sharing wet passionate kisses with Molly had driven all thought from her mind. She just wanted to feel the glorious oblivion that came from orgasm.

The two naked women collected their discarded clothes and brought them back to the loft. Jackson laid down the blanket and Molly was soon sprawled across it. The tall brunette instantly laid her naked body on top of Molly and positioned one of her legs between her own. Jackson groaned at the contact and soon began to grind against Molly's thigh. Her addled mind was in full force. She looked down upon the body that was giving her pleasure. Molly's eyes were shut as she ground her body against Jackson's. Jackson closed her eyes and moved back and forth against Molly. When she opened her eyes, she didn't see Molly, but saw only Erin. Erin was giving her this pleasure. Erin was receiving the same from her. Her body's movements became quicker and stronger. Jackson could feel the beginnings of her orgasm. Putting her elbows on either side of Erin's head she began to thrust in earnest.

"God, you feel good." She thrust again until she felt the warmth begin to spread throughout her body. "Oh, Hawk, yes, yessss..." Her climax washed over her and her hips took on a blinding speed.

When her body slowed down she tried to calm her racing heart. She lifted her head to look into baby blue eyes only to find angry brown ones staring back at her.

Trying to catch her breath, Jackson rasped, "What's wrong?"

"Get off," Molly spat, pushing Jackson's limp body off of hers.

"Molly, honey, what's wrong?" She clearly had no idea.

"Oh, now you remember my name?" Molly stood and started to put her clothing on.

"What are you talking about?" Jackson demanded, adjusting to a seated position.

"What I'm *talking* about is that I don't appreciate hearing your little friend's name coming out of

your mouth when I'm the one having sex with you!" she cried out.

Jackson frantically tried to remember saying Erin's name, but had no idea if she had or hadn't. "I..." she began, not really knowing what to say.

"You're a piece of work, Jackson Thomas," she said angrily, putting on the rest of her clothes.

"Molly, I'm sorry!" she blurted. "I had no idea."

Exasperated, Molly ran her fingers through her hair. "That's your problem, Jack. You are just CLUELESS! It's so obvious that you're in love with her. Even I could see it and I've only been around you two for a day!" she exclaimed.

"I..." she began. *I am in love with her. Ah crap.* Jack slumped her head in defeat.

"Go to hell, Jack." Molly stormed down the ladder, leaving her alone to stew in her drunken nakedness.

Laying back onto the blanket, Jackson threw her arm over her eyes, grumbling a litany of curses to the wind.

~*~*~*~*~*

Back inside her room, Erin let the tears she'd been holding back, fall. Her cheeks were soaking wet by the time she'd landed on her bed. The image of a naked Jackson kissing Molly was haunting her mind. She couldn't understand why Jackson hadn't told her about that aspect of her life. She flipped onto her stomach and let the sobbing continue into her pillow. *She lied to me.*

That thought made her question almost every facet of their relationship. They had been friends since 1985, but yet, even though Erin shared every miniscule thing of her life to Jackson, she hadn't done the same. *Was she writing me letters because she felt she had to? Does she hang out with me because she thinks she has to? Am I more than just a guest to her? Even Jackie introduced me to Sandra as Jackson's favorite guest and not her friend. But Jack told me I was her best friend. God, I really am just the kid Molly said I was.* The conjuring thought of Molly and Jackson making fun of her made her stomach ache. She remembered Jackson telling her that she hung out with Molly all summer, which is why she didn't write. *Bull. She just didn't want to tell me that she and Molly were girlfriends. Jack even let her change her eye color because she didn't like her eyes! Yuck. What did she even see in her?*

Erin's mind was racing over every detail of the day. Jackson always seemed to make her question her decisions, just like a little kid. She'd asked if she was sure she wanted to water ski, she'd said she didn't have to drink if she didn't want to. In the same breath, Jackson defended her whenever Molly would be rude to her. *God, what do I think? Ok - Jack is a lesbian. I think I could be okay with that. She and Molly are obviously girlfriends. Ugh, dammit, Jack, why didn't you just tell me?*

Deciding she needed to get this out, she took out her sketchbook and began to draw in earnest. Objects and figures began to take shape and matched the imagery in her head. Time ticked on and after some intense drawing and shading, Erin's picture was finished. She stared at her creation and marveled at its likeness. With a final scribble at the bottom, she rolled up the drawing and fished in her pack for a rubber band to put around it.

With a glance at the clock, she was surprised at how well into the early morning it was. Sleep did not come to her at all. The sun would be out in an hour, so she would wait to watch the sun come up and pray the day would go better than yesterday. The niggling question was how was she going to handle seeing Jackson again after last night? Jackson had no idea that Erin saw her with Molly. Erin wondered if she could possibly pretend that nothing happened and everything was great and normal. She wasn't confident that she could pull it off, but she had over three more weeks at the Island City, so she had to make the best of the time.

Erin laid in bed until the sun began to lighten her room. She got up and quietly left the cabin to watch the sunrise from the dock. The colors that came were so incredible. She watched as life began its new day around her. It completely filled her with awe. She wished she could see this everyday, but sadly, after last night, she wasn't even sure if she wanted to be here any longer.

As she sat on the pier, she heard some cars pulling into the pebbled drive of the resort and turned in her seat. She saw two cars pull up and watched as a man got out and walked towards her cabin. Her mother answered the door, fully clothed and spoke with the gentleman briefly, before shaking his hand. He gave her some papers then left in the second automobile.

"I wonder what that's all about." Erin walked back to the waterfront cabin and stepped inside. Her mother's bags were packed and were sitting by the door. Confused, Erin asked, "Mom, what's going on?"

Surprised by her daughter's arrival, she questioned, "Where did you come from? You haven't been out all night have you?" her voice took on an edge.

Rolling her eyes, Erin answered, "No, mom, I couldn't sleep and I watched the sunrise from the pier. I got in hours ago. I was awake from my big nap yesterday so I spent the time drawing." Looking back at the bags, she gestured to them and repeated, "So what's going on?"

"I'm leaving," she said simply. Eyes wide, Erin responded, "Why? Where's dad?"

"He's still in bed." Not sure how to explain, her mother tried to gloss over the fight she'd had with Joe the day before. "Your father and I had a strong discussion about some things yesterday. I wanted us to leave after the accident. I just don't think this place is the best for us anymore. Your father didn't want to leave since he enjoys fishing up here so much, and I knew not to ask you since I *know* all too well how you feel about this place. Your father will bring you home." She paused. "I rented a car from a man who runs a dealership in town, which was who that man was. I'm driving home today."

God, could this be so easy? Looking at her mother, she said, "Well, honestly, mom, I'm not

feeling that great, with the accident and all," she lied. "It... it wouldn't be a bad thing for me to go back with you, would it? I mean, I can stay if you want um..."

Katie's eyes lit up like a brush fire across a mountain top. She didn't believe what she was hearing, so she confirmed it. "You want to leave? I thought you loved it here."

Head down, Erin responded, "I do... but um... yesterday was a really bad day, mom. I don't know if I want to be here right now." That was a semi-truth, but she knew her mother would be over the moon with her decision.

"Well, let's get you packed and we can be out of here before traffic even starts to be an issue."

Erin got her things together relatively fast, it wasn't even seven o'clock yet. She wrote a brief letter to her dad explaining she wasn't feeling well and opted to go home with her mother. She wished him well and signed off. She laid it on top of the moonlight picture she drew on the pier last night.

They packed the car and were just about to leave when Erin remembered her rolled drawing from last night. Looking to her mother, she asked, "Mom, I drew something for Jack, but I don't want to wake her to say good-bye. I'm just gonna run to the boathouse and leave it for her there. I know she'll get it. Okay?"

Ecstatic her daughter was going to leave with her, she would've let her do anything at the moment. "Just hurry up, if we leave now we can be home by early afternoon."

"Thanks, mom." Erin raced back into her room in the cabin and grabbed the rolled picture she'd left on the dresser. Running back to the boathouse she had to calm her hammering heart. This place, after last night, made her feel a little queasy. It could've been from her lack of sleep, but she wasn't too sure. She climbed up the ladder and noticed the blanket laid out with empty beer bottles littered around. Not wanting to imagine anymore than she already had, she laid the drawing on top of the blanket. With one final look through the window at the water, she descended down the ladder and rushed to meet her mother.

Exhaustion hit her as soon as she sat inside the rental car. Her mother pulled out of the drive and made their way to the highway, heading for home. With the motion of the car, Erin felt her eyelids close. "Mom, I'm sorry, but I think I'm gonna pass out. I didn't sleep last night."

Smiling and giving her a brief glance, Katie touched her daughter's knee. "Go ahead and rest honey. We've got six hours ahead of us, you may as well sleep through it."

Not wanting to really spend the time talking to her mother anyway, she agreed wholeheartedly. "Thanks," she said softly, falling into a deep dreamless sleep.

~*~*~*~*~*

Joe woke up to silence. He didn't hear any noise inside the cabin. Getting out of bed he traversed his way into an empty family room. Opening Erin's door, he noticed her bed was made and her ever-present backpack missing. *She must have gone out to draw.*

He went to the bathroom to clean up and start his day. Walking into the kitchen he noticed that Katie had left some bagels and cream cheese for him in the refrigerator. *She must have gone into town.* He grabbed the carton of orange juice and sneaked several sips out of the container then put it back on the shelf.

Grabbing the bagels and spread, he walked to the kitchen table to find a drawing Erin had made of a large moon on the water with a note attached to it. He smiled softly until he read the note, which read:

Dear Dad,

I'm sorry you and mom had a fight. She didn't tell me what it was about. She just said she wanted to leave. She rented a car this morning and after my scare yesterday, I really didn't want to stay here either. I'm not feeling too great, so I think it will be best if I go back home. Mom said it was okay, so I decided to leave with her.

Have fun with your fishing buddies, I hope you catch "the big one." I'll call you when I get home. See you in a few weeks.

I love you,
Peanut

PS - Please tell Jack I left something for her in the boathouse.

"Damn you, Katie." Joe crumpled up his daughter's note and stalked into his room to get dressed.

~*~*~*~*

Jackson awoke to pounding outside, but soon realized the pounding was inside her skull. Opening her eyes, she immediately slammed her lids shut against the brightness of the morning sun. As she slowly returned to full consciousness, the memories of the previous day hit her like a Mack truck. The almost drowning, the confrontation with Erin's mom, the drunken skinny dipping with Molly. Then she visualized the sexual act that brought on Molly's anger and quick departure.

"Ughh," she moaned aloud, thinking of the situation with Molly.

She remembered what Molly had said right before storming out and telling her to go to hell. *It's so obvious that you're in love with her. Even I could see it and I've only been around you two for a day!*

"Oh, god," she grunted, throwing both arms over her head. "Hawk," she whispered. "How do I tell you that I'm in love with you?"

Jackson slowly got up, showered, muttered some indecipherable words to Jackie and left her house in search of Erin. She walked down to the pier hoping to find her drawing or something.

Not finding her, she thought she'd take the chance she'd be in the cabin. Walking up to the door she braced herself for another confrontation with Katie Hawkins.

"Here goes..." she whispered, then knocked lightly on the cabin door.

After a few minutes, Joe answered. Smiling brightly, he greeted, "Hey, Jackson, good morning to you."

"Good morning to you, too, sir."

Joe stopped her with his hand. "Jackson, how many times do I need to tell you? Call me, Joe. I appreciate the "sir" and everything, but I'm just Joe, okay?" His smile was so much like Erin's her heart melted as she nodded.

"Alright then, Joe. Please call me Jack, then. I insist." She chuckled along with him.

"Fair enough."

"I was wondering if Erin was here? I didn't see her on the docks this morning."

His face fell, realizing Erin hadn't told her she was leaving. "She must not have told you."

Jackson's heart started to pound. "Told me? Told me what?"

"She and her mother rented a car and drove home today. After the boating scare, it really shook her up. She and her mother left before the birds got up."

"Oh, I see," she barely got out, her stomach in knots. Not knowing what else to say she started to leave. "Ok, um, I'll see you around then."

"Hey, Jack?" he said, making her turn around. "I almost forgot to tell you. Erin said she left you something in the boathouse."

Her eyes lit up instantly. "She did?"

"I have no idea what it is, but she said it was up there for you."

Smiling a little wider, Jackson replied, "Thanks, Joe. See ya 'round."

"Bye."

Jackson ran like the wind to the boathouse. She could smell the stale beer from the ground floor and it made her stomach churn. She quickly climbed the stairs and jumped onto the loft. Looking over the scattered beer bottles she'd left, she noticed a rolled up sketchbook page resting on the blanket.

She reached down and picked it up with shaky fingers, slowly rolling down the rubber band. When she unrolled the page, her heart sank to her stomach. A vivid picture was created of Jackson holding Molly's face in a passionate kiss. There was no mistake of who these two people were. Tears welling in her eyes, she scanned down to the bottom of the drawing where one word resided boldly.

WHY?

That one word asked a million questions Jackson was nowhere near ready to answer. Her heart was pounding so fast she thought she was going to have a heart attack on the spot. She had tried to keep this a secret only to have her best friend catch her in the act. Anger at herself for not simply telling Erin about her newfound sexuality, bubbled to the surface. Anger at Molly's games when Erin was around echoed through her mind.

Jackson was filled with so much anger; she opened her mouth and screamed, "FUUUUCK!" The birds in the surrounding trees scattered at the sound. With wracking sobs, Jackson crumpled onto the blanket and cried until she passed out from exhaustion.

~*~*~*~*~*

When Jackson awoke, it was mid-afternoon. Her eyes were swollen from crying and her head felt heavy. The emotional turmoil around her was deafening. She wanted to run away from it all, find a place where it didn't hurt so much. *God, I'm so sorry, Hawk. So, so sorry.*

She walked down from the loft and into the boathouse completely on autopilot. Jackson's brain was so out of sorts she had no idea what she was doing. She aimlessly found her house and entered. Jackie seeing the lost and damaged look in her niece's eyes, she immediately went to her.

"Honey, what is it? You look like... I don't know what you look like, but it's not good. What happened?"

Jackson looked up and met the blue eyes of her aunt and instantly fell into her arms. "She's gone... it's my fault... now she's gone..." her weeping came in huge wracking sobs.

Not understanding the situation, Jackie held her niece tightly until she could figure out what she was talking about. Jackie brought them over to the couch so Jackson could lay her head in her lap. Sandra poked her head in from the kitchen to find out what was going on. Jackie shook her head with a look that said, "Ask me later, I don't know yet."

Jackie continued to rock Jackson on the couch as she cried out her heart's pain. Jackie repeatedly thanked everything Holy that she didn't have to be a teenager again. There is just way too much that goes on for them to handle things gracefully. New responsibility, major peer pressure, hormones raging; throw in discovering you're a lesbian and you have a nice breakdown sandwich. Jackson was the meat and right now, Jackie was the comforting bread.

The sobs finally began to slow into small whimpers, which eventually calmed altogether. Jackson's breathing had slowed and her heart returned to a normal cadence. She wasn't sure how much she wanted to tell Jackie. She figured, collapsing on her aunt's lap, though, might warrant a brief explanation. Jackie let her stay on her lap, knowing whatever happened must have been bad to stir this kind of emotion out of Jackson. She held Jackie's knee as her head rested on her thigh.

"Is being gay always this hard, Jackie?" she whispered. "What do you mean, honey?" Jackie asked gently.

"When people find out, do they always leave you?" A slight shake of her body began and small cries were whimpered.

"Oh, Jack, no, not always. Sometimes, but not always." She ran her fingers through Jackson's sweat dampened hair, trying to soothe the poor distraught girl. "Is that what happened? Does Erin know you're gay?"

A small nod of her head answered the question for Jackie. She tilted her head back and leaned it against the couch cushion, breathing out a slow breath. *Damn.*

"She left today and went home."

Head moving upright, Jackie questioned, "What do you mean she left? I saw Joe down on the docks today." She was confused.

Jackson shrugged. "Joe stayed here, but Hawk left with her mom and they went home." She sighed and slowly sat up with her aunt's assistance. She hung her head and put her face in her hands. Scrubbing her face, Jackson took a deep breath while her aunt rubbed her back. "I really gotta figure some stuff out." She leaned back and gave her aunt a kiss on her cheek. "Thanks for listening." Jackson got up and walked slowly to her room, closing the door behind her. Sandra heard her leave and entered the living room. "What's going on?" she whispered.

"It looks like Erin found out about Jack. Evidently something happened, I have no idea what, but Erin left with her mother today."

Sandra's eyes went wide with surprise. "Really?" She shook her head. "I thought she'd be okay with Jack being gay, I really did."

Nodding in agreement, Jackie said, "I agree. I think there's more to it than that. I'm sure little Miss Molly had something to do with it."

"Bitch," Sandra whispered. "What does Jack see in her?"

Shrugging her shoulders, "You know how it is when you're that age. You find that one other person that's just like you and somehow you connect. I don't see them lasting long anyway." She winked at Sandra. "At least I hope not." "Amen, sister." She kissed her temple. "You're such a good mom to her, you know that?"

Smiling warmly, Jackie responded, "Thank you, that's probably the nicest thing you've ever said to me. I know my sister would've loved to have seen her little girl grow up. I don't know how she would've dealt with the gay thing, but who knows. I'm just glad I'm here for Jack. I love her like she was my own."

"And it shows." The two women shared another small kiss. "It really does."

~*~*~*~*~*

Jackson went to her bed and laid down, hands behind her head in deep thought. *OK, I have to figure out a way to make this right. I owe Hawk an explanation. She wouldn't even stay long enough to say good-bye. I can't really blame her, though.* "I know!" she sat up. "I'll call her and tell her..." she blew out an exasperated breath. "What could I possibly say to her to make this all better?" She laid back down with a thud. *Oh, I know. Hi Hawk, it's your lesbo friend, Jack. I'm sorry I didn't tell you I liked chicks, but I do and you're at the top of my list... Yeah, that'll work. NOT!* Rolling her eyes at her own idiocy, Jackson cleared her mind to concentrate.

When nothing came to her, Jackson got up, grabbed her oboe case, and went to go to the boathouse. *Maybe playing some music will help.* Climbing up the ladder, she stopped in the loft and looked around at the mess. Shaking her head, she went up the second ladder only to find more bottles up there. "Jesus!"

She picked up all the garbage and put it in what was left of the cardboard box the beer came in. Bringing it down the stairs, she walked to the big dumpster and trashed the beer box. She walked back to the loft, went to grab her oboe, but stopped, trying hard not to look at the drawing of Molly and herself that Erin had drawn. Feeling anger swell in her belly, she picked up the drawing and ripped it into shreds. Taking the torn paper and stuffing it in her shorts pocket, she grabbed her oboe and went to the roof.

After she assembled her instrument, she hung her legs over the side and began to play. The tune started out slow and sad, like her mood. She began to think about Erin and all they'd shared since they'd become friends. Before she knew it, she was playing the song she'd written for her, *Hawks in Flight*. Eyes closed, the melody washed over her like a warm blanket. Serenity almost followed. Almost.

Her thoughts began to swirl in earnest and built in their intensity. She was imagining her life without Erin in it and she couldn't do it. Erin was such a large part of her life she knew she had to figure out a way to apologize and hopefully get Erin to trust her again. That would be the hardest part. Once you've lost trust, it was nearly impossible to gain it back. She would just have to show Erin how far she was willing to go to get her back in her life.

"That's it." She stopped playing. "I'll show her how much she means to me. I don't care what her mother thinks. She's my best friend and I'm going to get her back."

~*~*~*~*~*

Jackson's mind was plotting her next move. She knew her plan was extreme, but she was desperate. Jackie was going to be less than pleased with her once she realized what she was doing, but Jackson knew she had to do something drastic. She grabbed her wallet and shoved it into her pants pocket. She finished her note to Jackie and quietly walked to the kitchen table, then left it for her to read in the morning. Taking the keys off the coffee table, Jackson tucked her directions in her pocket from the motor club and left the house as quiet as a mouse.

Walking to her car, she realized Jackie was going to have a fit and would probably take her car away, but at this point, she didn't care. She would find Erin, tell her everything and hope she would understand. Climbing into the small gray Honda, Jackson closed her door and put on her seatbelt. Looking at her gas gauge, she knew she'd have to stop to fuel up before making serious mileage into Illinois. Turning over the engine, she put the car into reverse, backed up slowly, turned the wheel towards the exit, found first gear then left the resort.

Once she reached the small two-lane highway, she put in *Indigo Girls* CD and flew down to the local Amoco. She filled up the car, grabbed a couple of sodas for the road and she was off to see the wizard. She flew down Highway 51, hoping to God she wouldn't get a speeding ticket. Her speedometer was showing 87 miles an hour. Changing the CD to *Melissa Etheridge*, she laughed at the absurdity of music listened to by a lesbian. *Could I get anymore stereotypical?* Laughing to herself she belted out the songs as they played through her speakers.

She'd downed her first soda shortly into her third hour on the road and knew she'd have to stop to relieve herself soon. Knowing she should be dead on her feet at four in the morning, she was strangely wide- awake. She let the music keep her going as she changed lanes on the highway. She'd been on I90 for over one hundred miles and knew she'd be at Erin's within the hour.

As she got closer to Erin's house, she accepted the brutal knowledge that she hadn't thought about how to get past Katie Hawkins to talk to Erin once she arrived. *I'll just have to get creative. I'm not turning back now. God, I hope this wasn't a mistake.*

~*~*~*~*~*~*

Paldeer, Illinois - 5:02 a.m.

"198... 200... 212...236...252! There you are," Jackson spoke to herself, finding Erin's pale yellow ranch house. Pulling the car up to the curb of the house before Erin's, she lifted her break, shifted into first gear and turned off the engine. She looked slowly around the nice neighborhood. It was extremely quiet and the sun had yet to make an entrance into the day. She released the clutch, grabbed her keys and quietly opened and closed the car door. Walking around to the side of Erin's house, she was grateful of the bright moon. Full last night, but its rays continued to light her way.

Jackson walked outside her house, looking in every window to find Erin's bedroom. A sharp noise to her right made her flip around to face a strange man hauling his garbage to the curb. He noticed her walking around the Hawkins' home and, deciding she wasn't going to be much of a

threat, approached.

"Hey! What are you doing out here?" he asked semi-loudly.

Heart racing, Jackson was trying to think of a reason she'd be snooping outside Erin's house at five in the morning.

"Hi, I'm sorry to scare you," she whispered. "I'm a good friend of Erin's, you know, next door?"

"OK?" he said, still wary of this girl.

"Well, I live in Wisconsin and I don't get to see her much, but um... her birthday is today and I wanted to surprise her by taking her out to breakfast." *Way to go, Jack!*

"Oh!" The man smiled. "That's very kind of you. You wouldn't be Jack would you?"

Her eyes widened with fear. Perhaps Katie Hawkins put out a neighborhood watch on her. Answering slowly, she replied, "Yes, I am."

"Oh, little Erin talks about you all the time! All we ever hear about is her friend Jack who lives in an island city or something."

Jackson couldn't help but smile with relief. "The Island City is our resort and my aunt and I live there." "Well, I think it's great you've come to surprise her." He pointed to the house. "But you're looking at the wrong end for her room. That's her mother's room on this side, Erin's room faces the rear of the house in the basement. Here, I'll show you." He started to usher Jackson to his backyard.

Could this be so easy? Unless this joker is going to kill me with no witnesses around. She tightened the grip on her keys just in case the latter was true.

"Just be quiet. God knows you don't want to wake Katie up." *Well, well, well, Katie has quite a reputation, doesn't she?* Smiling to herself she followed the neighbor to his yard. Directing her through the shrubs, he pointed to a large double window in the basement. A small light was coming through the glass.

"I see it, thank you...?"

"Richard, Richard Henderson. My boy Ricky is friends with Erin." A light bulb went off in her head and a memory flashed before her eyes.

I told my neighbor Ricky that I was going there for vacation again and he called you a cheese head.

"Ricky?" "Yep, has Erin mentioned him to you?" He hoped that Erin would, one day, date his son. "Once in a letter, apparently he called me a cheese head." She smiled. "Tell him that the cheese head said hello."

He shook his head and chuckled with this charming young girl. "I will. Have fun and wish Erin a happy birthday for us." "Will do." *When it's her birthday, I'll mention I saw you.*

Jackson walked stealthily towards Erin's window. Crouching down, she looked inside and on her bedside table, saw a small reading lamp on. Erin's full-sized bed was in the center of the back wall and she was sleeping in the middle of it; a book laying next to her. Taking a deep breath, she raised her hand to knock. "Here goes..." With a light tap on the glass, she saw Erin stir but not wake. Tapping a little louder, she roused Erin from sleep.

A sleepy head raised off her pillow and slowly looked around. Looking at the window, she had to stop herself from screaming at the silhouette she saw. When Jackson saw Erin look her way, she immediately began to wave to try and prevent her fear. As Erin's vision cleared, she wondered if she was dreaming or if Jackson was really outside her window. Getting up out of bed, she walked slowly towards the apparition. Turning on a light, her suspicions were confirmed seeing her friend outside of her house.

Sliding open the pane, she breathed in the fresh air coming in through the screen. "Jack, what are you doing here?" she whispered, not sure of which emotion she was feeling. Confusion, joy, anger, surprise, she just wasn't sure.

"I had to see you," Jackson whispered. "I couldn't leave things like that between us without talking to you first."

"You can't come in here! My mother will kill you! I'm not kidding Jack, I don't know what her deal is with you, but it won't be a good thing if she finds you here," Erin desperately tried to explain the severity of her mother's ire.

"Then don't let her find me. Come on, Hawk, I need to try and explain. I *know* you're hurt and angry, but I have to try." She stared into blue eyes and hoped she was right about her trip. "Please?"

Erin looked into the pleading eyes that made her heart hammer and knew she was lost. She pressed the latch on her screen and slid it open. She helped Jackson through the small opening and guided her feet to the floor. Closing the window, Erin turned to find a very nervous and fidgety Jackson standing in her bedroom. *Unbelievable.*

"Can I um... use your bathroom first? I've had to pee for over two hours. I just didn't want to stop."

Still in shock, Erin nodded dumbly and pointed to the door connecting her room to the bath.

Erin sat on her bed as Jackson went to relieve herself. She unconsciously started to smooth down her sleep tussled hair, and to her horror, knew she must have awful morning mouth. Quickly reaching into the drawer of her bedside table, she grabbed a container of breath mints and threw a couple in her mouth for good measure. Hearing the toilet flush, she knew Jackson would be

emerging soon. *Oh, God...*

Oh, God... Jackson looked at her disheveled appearance in the mirror. Taking a deep breath, she realized her breath was less than stellar. Seeing the toothpaste on the vanity counter, she dabbed a small amount on her finger and lightly rubbed it on her teeth and tongue. She rinsed her mouth and spat the paste down the drain. Taking a few swallows of water, she knew that this was going to be a very scary conversation and one she hoped would go her way. Grabbing the doorknob with more confidence than she had, pulled it open to face Erin.

Sharing a nervous smile between them, Erin motioned for Jackson to sit next to her on the bed. Jackson automatically went to that spot and sat down. Her hands were folded tightly together. She looked over to Erin, who hadn't looked over at her. She noticed her jaw muscles working.

"Before I say anything else, Hawk, I want to apologize for the way you found out about me. It was wrong and I'm sorry I didn't tell you."

Erin turned at this remark. "Why didn't you?" she asked softly.

"I was terrified. I knew that I was different than the other girls for so long, but only this year did I actually understand what that difference was. God, the girls in my school are so awful. If you don't have the right shoes with the right skirt with the right shirt and hang with the right people, you are just scum to them. I refuse to be scum for anyone," she started to explain. "High school is a lot different than grade school. You're gonna find that out this year. It's bigger, there's more kids and the decisions you make could change your whole life." She paused to see that Erin was paying rapt attention. "I don't know about you, but I wasn't ready to make decisions about my life this young. It's really kind of thrown me. My counselors at school all want to know where I want to go to college, and what I want to be when I grow up. You know what I wanted to know?" "What?" Erin asked.

"I wanted to understand why I didn't like boys the way I should and why my heart raced when I saw certain girls. They don't really have that type of answer in our curriculum or the advisor's office. So it was a really hard thing to deal with." "But why didn't you tell *me*? I thought we were supposed to be best friends? That means we tell each other everything. I've told you every stupid thing I've ever done since we met and I don't feel like you've done the same."

Shaking her head, Jackson agreed, "No, I haven't. I wish I could tell you something other than I wasn't ready, but that's the truth of it. I knew, for whatever reason, you and Molly wouldn't get along. And yeah, Molly probably wasn't the best person to be with, but she was like me and she liked me, so we just clicked, you know? I had a feeling that if you knew about us it would be harder to deal with than just knowing about me." She paused. "Does that make any sense?"

Nodding, Erin said, "It does and I guess I understand, but Jack, you really hurt my feelings. I had so many thoughts going through my head, thoughts that you didn't really think of me as your friend, but as a guest you felt obligated to play with when I came up there with my parents. You made me feel so insecure about our friendship." Shaking her head rapidly, Jackson said, "No, Hawk. I *never* felt like I was obligated to hang with you." She put her hand on Erin's back, happy when Erin allowed the contact. "I chose to be with you because you *are* my best friend. I just

haven't acted like it lately and for that I am so damn sorry. You have no reason to doubt what we've shared, I promise."

Letting Jackson's admission settle, she understood a little more of where she was coming from. She knew it couldn't have been easy for Jackson to realize she was a lesbian. A question formed in her mind that she voiced aloud. "Does Jackie know? That you're um... gay?"

Nodding, Jackson replied, "Yeah. I told her right before my sixteenth birthday. She kinda knew already, but I told her not to tell Sandra. She probably already knows too, but I wasn't ready to tell her yet."

Another question formed in Erin's mind. "Jack?"

"Hmm?" She looked into blue eyes and felt her heart speed up.

"How did you know which room was mine? I've only lived in the basement a short time."

Chuckling softly, she answered, "Mr. Henderson told me."

"What?" she cried, covering her mouth.

They stopped talking and listened for a while to make sure they hadn't woken Erin's mother up. When they heard nothing, they continued their conversation.

"I was outside your house and he busted me. I made up a lie about it being your birthday and me taking you to breakfast. He was more than happy to help." "God, I would've peed if I were you." She smiled. "Trust me, I wasn't that far off, especially with the full bladder I was carrying."

"That was really quick thinking on your part," Erin complimented.

"Thanks," Jackson replied softly, a soft blush reaching her cheeks.

When silence enveloped the girls, Erin felt the nervous tension return slightly. "Jack?"

Jackson turned to her. "Yeah?"

"What do we do now? I mean, where does all of this leave us?"

"Well, I hope you can forgive me for lying to you and I pray you can learn to trust me again."

Erin looked into her eyes and saw the warm, wonderful girl she'd grown to love very much. "I do forgive you. I was just so angry and when I found out my mom was leaving, I just jumped ship."

"Yeah, what's up with that? Why did your mom leave?"

"God, it's a long story and I don't even know the half of it."

"I was upset that you left, but I understood why. That picture said a thousand words. Words I really didn't want to hear you yell at me."

Erin blushed slightly, forgetting about the drawing. "Oh, um... sorry about that. It was the only

way I could tell you how I felt without actually um... telling you."

"It's ok. I think we both did some things we wish we hadn't last night."

"Yeah we did." They smiled at each other. Jackson didn't think that it would be prudent to tell Erin *everything* she'd done wrong.

"Does Jackie know you came here?" Erin asked.

"Oh, um... not really. I left her a note."

"What is it with us and notes? I left one to my dad before we left," Erin said with a chuckle.

"I dunno, must be that pen pal thing we developed at a young age."
Nodding, Erin said, "Must be."

"I'm probably going to get in a lot of trouble when I get back, but... you were worth the risk."

"Thank you for driving so far to show me that."

"You're welcome." Jackson noticed the time on the clock was after six. The sun had come up and the day was beginning. Erin noticed the red rimming around Jackson's eyes and knew she needed to sleep.

"Stand up." Jackson did as she was told and Erin pulled the bedcovers down. "Get in." Jackson's eyes went wide from surprise. "You need sleep and I need sleep. I don't know about you, but I'm exhausted and haven't slept much in the last two days."

"You read my mind, but what about your mom?"

Erin walked over to her door and turned the lock on the handle. "This is one of the reasons I wanted to have my room down here. She doesn't have a key to this door and I'm safely tucked in here away from her."

"Won't she come down to check on you or something?"

"No, she was so excited I came home, I could ask for gold right now and she'd give it to me. I think she'll give me some space for awhile." She looked sincerely at Jackson. "I'm so sorry she has it out for you. I just wish I knew why."

"Me too, Hawk. Me too."

She shut off both lights, leaving only the coming days light to illuminate her room. Both girls climbed into the full-sized bed and pulled the covers up. They stared at the ceiling not really sure what to do. Jackson's sleepiness was suddenly gone as realization set in that she was in bed with Erin. Erin must have sensed the same thing as she continued to stiffly stare at the ceiling.

"Hawk?"

"Hmm?"

"Does it make you uncomfortable? You know, knowing that I'm gay?"

Erin slowly turned to face her bedmate. She reached out and took Jackson's closest hand in hers. "No, it doesn't. I promise you I will never act differently around you just because you're a lesbian. You're not just a lesbian to me, that's only a small part of who you are. You're just... my Jack, and I love you."

My Jack. The words were floating like a fluffy cloud through Jackson's mind. It warmed and soothed her more than she thought possible. "Thank you, Hawk. That means so much to me." Tears formed in Jackson's eyes and she couldn't fight them. Erin saw them glisten and held tightly to her hand with one hand and brushed the tears away with the other. Erin soon fell asleep on her side, holding Jackson's hand on her pillow. When Jackson looked over and saw Erin asleep, she leaned over to kiss their entwined fingers and whispered, "I love you, too, Hawk. More than you'll ever know."

Chapter Seven

1990 - Paldeer, Illinois 11:30 am

A knocking on her bedroom door, jolted Erin awake. When she looked over to see Jackson still asleep in her bed, her eyes went wide with the realization of who was on the other side of that door.

"Erin, honey? Are you still asleep?" Katie called, jiggling the handle. "Why is your door locked?"

Jackson heard the voice and instantly sat up in a panic. Eyes wide, she looked at Erin who had placed her finger over her mouth, shushing her.

"Yeah, mom. I was really beat." She paused. "I must have locked it by mistake last night. I don't wanna get up to open it, though. Did you need something?"

Erin could hear her mother sigh. "I am going to the store since we emptied the house before we left for vacation, so I need to shop. I was gonna ask you if you wanted to come, but since you're still in bed, I'll go alone," Katie explained.

"Ok, mom. Have fun."

"Did you want anything special from the grocery?" she asked while Jackson kept mouthing *GO AWAY* with Erin trying hard not to laugh.

"No, mom, I'll be fine with whatever you pick. I'm gonna rest for a while more."

"Ok, honey. I'll be back in a couple hours."

Jackson pumped her fist. "K, mom. Bye."

The girls didn't make a sound until they'd heard the front door close. They both released a huge sigh and nervously laughed once the coast was clear.

"Man, that was a close one. I gotta pee!" Jackson exclaimed and ducked into the bathroom, closing the door behind her.

Erin leaned back in bed and laughed. She closed her eyes and opened them wide when she heard a knock on her outside window. Her mother stopped on the way to the detached garage in the backyard.

"Honey?" she shouted through the closed glass.

Erin leapt off her bed and answered loudly, "Yes, mom? Why are you OUTSIDE MY WINDOW?" she hoped Jackson heard her so she'd stay put in the bathroom.

Motioning for Erin to open her window, Erin did, only to have her mother yell, "What's your screen doing open? Anyone could just climb in your room!"

Thinking quickly, Erin supplied, "I locked myself out of the house before we left for Wisconsin. I guess I forgot to put it back. Don't worry, I always keep my window locked, mom."

"You'd better. That isn't safe, honey." "Mom, if someone wants to get in, they're gonna get in regardless of a screen."

Katie smiled. "You're so smart, dear. That's probably very true. I didn't mean to wake you. Go back to bed and I'll see you in a little bit."

Erin smiled, hoping the sweat she felt pouring down her body wasn't visible. "See ya later, mom."

Erin watched her mother walk into the side garage door, and saw the door open. Her mother got in the car, pulled out and closed the door. Her mother's burgundy Nissan backed slowly down the drive out of Erin's view. She quickly opened her door, raced upstairs to watch through the bay window in the living room as her mother drove off down the street.

"Oh, thank God!"

Jackson stealthily came up behind her and grabbed her sides. "BOO!"

"HEY!" Erin whipped around. "You've had the chance to pee, I haven't! I'd prefer not to do it on my living room floor." They laughed and Erin ran into the powder room before she lost control.

Jackson took the opportunity to look at Erin's house for the first time. The house was very very

neat. Everything around was neatly arranged, from the sofas to the grandfather clock, to the large potted plants on oriental carpets. All in all it was a very nicely decorated house.

Erin came out of the powder room and made a loud sigh of relief. "Aahhhh, so much better."

Jackson laughed. "I'm sure! God, I'm so glad you spoke up when you did, I was ready to come out of the bathroom." "Oh my God! I thought I was going to die from fear! I forgot to slide the screen back into place and *of course* she saw it and had to ask me about it. I just hope she doesn't remember that you can only unlock the screen from the inside! I told her I always kept my window locked, but then how would I have gotten inside? Uggh, I think it worked, though." Jackson nodded. "I think so too or she wouldn't have left until she had you under the lights." She changed her voice and raised her hands up like she was holding lamps. "Where were you the night the screen was opened? What are you hiding?"

Erin laughed, and slapped her hands away. "She's been so crazy this year. I just don't get it. She has this ridiculous idea of what she wants me to be and it's not even close to what I want."

Sighing, Jackson said, "I know, Hawk. She just has this huge picture in her head of you going to school, graduating from the best college, finding the perfect man and settling down to have grandchildren... for her." She shook her head. "This is what *she* wants. Just stick to your guns and live the life you want."

Smiling at her friend, she replied, "I'll do my best. It's so hard around her though. I don't think I've ever felt like I wasn't a disappointment. My dad on the other hand just wants what you want and that's for me to be happy. He's really a great dad." Jackson smiled. "I can see that. I see the way his eyes light up when you're around. That's one thing I missed, not having a dad that I knew."

"You've never told me about that."

"There's nothing to tell, Hawk. My mom got pregnant when she wasn't married. I was the "oops" and the guy that did it was nowhere to be found."

Softening her voice, Erin asked. "Does that bother you at all?"

Thinking a little she replied, "Mmm, some, but Jackie has been a great mom and I don't think I could ask for a better life."

"True." Erin smiled. "You do seem very happy."

"I am for the most part." "Ok, enough of this. I need some breakfast or something. I am so hungry!" Erin exclaimed.

"Come back with me," Jackson blurted suddenly.

"What?" Erin wasn't sure if she'd heard right.

"Come back to Wisconsin with me."

"Jack..." "Hawk, your dad is up there so it's not like you don't have a place to stay or a ride home. The only obstacle would be..." "My mother." "Your mother," they said in unison.

"That's a pretty big obstacle, Jack."

"Yeah, but she won't be home for a couple hours. We could be a third of the way back by then."

Thoughts raced through Erin's mind. *God, she'd kill me. Although, daddy is still up there. God, she'd kill me... Still, I only get a month a year with Jack... She'll get over it.*

"Let's do it!" she exclaimed, knowing she would be grounded until next year, but she didn't really care. "I get one month out of the year to see you and we've only gotten a few days."

"Are you sure, Hawk? I'm just being selfish and want to spend more time with you, but I don't want you to deal with the wrath of your mom, either." "I haven't even unpacked my suitcase! I just need to shower, change my clothes and grab my art stuff. We can eat on the road!"

"So you're serious?" Jack could hardly contain her excitement. "You'll really come back with me?"

"Yeah... let's get going before my mom decides to come home sooner." She ran to the kitchen and opened drawers looking for paper. Jackson watched on amused and really happy and excited. "I just need to write her..." "A NOTE!" they both yelled and laughed. Erin wrote her mom a note with an apology and a promise to call when she got back to the resort.

"She's gonna have a major cow, but I won't be here for it and I *know* she won't drive back to get me with my dad already there." "Rock and roll! Get going, girl!"

Erin smiled a huge toothy smile at Jackson and ran downstairs to get showered and get her stuff together.

Jackson chuckled at her friend's excitement and hoped that Jackie would allow her a few last moments with Erin before she killed her.

~*~*~*~*~*

The music was blaring from the car windows as the two teenagers sped their way up I90. They were getting close to Madison and Jackson knew she'd have to watch for her turn soon. Erin was bopping to *Madonna's Like A Prayer* CD in the player. She was singing loudly and badly, much to the amusement of her riding buddy. *Keep it Together* was playing and the two girls began to sing it together.

"Keep people together! Yeah, mom!" Erin shouted, making Jackson laugh. They'd been having a great time in the car. They were both so relieved that the tension between them was gone and they could simply enjoy the company and closeness that was unique in their lives. Both knew the their maternal figures were going to be less than pleased, but somehow the punishment for their

crime didn't seem to be as bad as it would've been to have not committed the offense at all. For Jackson, having Erin around was like having a new supply of oxygen. Everything seemed clearer, more vivid and her heart couldn't have been more full. With Erin agreeing to come back with her, Jackson was truly a happy girl.

Erin's head was bopping as the end of the CD was coming to an end. She saw that Jackson got in the far right lane to get onto Rte 39. Jackson had only been driving a little less than a year, but Erin thought she was doing a fantastic job.

"Hey Jack? How'd you find out how to get to my house?"

Jackson pulled the trip ticket out of her pocket and held it out for Erin to see. "Jackie's a member of the motor club and they tell you exactly how to get to places. I looked you up a long time ago and just kept them in case I ever wanted to pop in and surprise you." She gave Erin a toothy grin, making Erin giggle.

"Yeah, I'm sure my mom would've loved that."

Thinking about her mother, Erin was certain that she would've been home by now. She knew that she would be beyond angry at her decision to get in the car with Jackson and drive all the way back to The Island City. As she thought about her mother's punishment, she quickly thought about spending three more weeks with just her dad. They'd never had a vacation alone before and Erin knew she'd have a great time with him. *He is always so much more relaxed when mom's not around.*

"We're halfway there, Hawk. God, the ride down to you seemed so much longer. Time is just flying!"

"This is so awesome! Woouooooo!" she screamed out the car window. Jackson laughed at her antics. Sitting back down Erin put her arm out the window and let the wind take her hand up and down depending on the angle she kept it. With Jackson by her side driving to their favorite place, this was by far one of the best days of her life and she was going to milk every minute of it.

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1990 - Paldeer, Illinois

Katie Hawkins pulled her car up the drive and hit the button on her garage door opener. The door opened and she pulled the car inside. Hitting her trunk opener, she slowly exited the vehicle and walked around to the back of the trunk. She pulled out a couple bags of groceries and walked to the back door of her home. Opening the door, she walked into the kitchen and put the bags down on the counter.

"Erin!" she shouted. "I'm back! Give me a hand with the rest of the bags, will you?" She started emptying one bag and realized Erin had not answered her. She shouted again, "Erin! Come up here and help me!"

She walked to the edge of the stairs. "Erin? Are you home?" Sighing indignantly, she traversed the stairs into the Erin's empty room. Her bed was made, her sleep clothes were on the floor, but nothing else seemed amiss. "Erin?" She looked into bathroom finding no one.

Where the hell has she gone now?

Angrily, Katie made her way up the stairs and went back outside to retrieve the rest of her groceries. She began her meticulous task of putting away the groceries. Martha Stewart had nothing on Katie Hawkins when it came to order. Every shelf had a label, shelf paper, and cans were faced forward. Once all the groceries were put away, she grabbed all the plastic bags and wadded them up to recycle later. She opened the door to her pantry and put the bags away. Looking down she noticed the garbage can was empty without a new bag inside of it. Realizing it was garbage day, she was happy that Erin had, at least, remembered to do that. Opening the cabinet under the sink, she grabbed a new trash liner and put it in the garbage can then closed the door.

Feeling a little hungry after leaving the house without lunch, Katie began to make herself an opened face sandwich. She fluffed her lunchmeat just so, added a dollop of mustard, put it on a plate and poured a glass of water. She sat down at the kitchen table and took a drink of water. Noticing a piece of paper with Erin's handwriting on it, she picked it up and began to read. Water flew out of her mouth and she began to cough wildly.

Dear Mom,

Don't be mad! Jackson came down from Wisconsin and paid me a visit. We had a bit of a misunderstanding, which is the truth of why I left there in the first place. We talked and made up and she offered to take me back up to the resort to spend the rest of the time with dad. I figured since you were already leaving there without me, this wouldn't be too big of a deal.

I'm sorry we won't have any "our time" but I'll make it up to you when we get back. I'll give you a call when I arrive so you don't worry too much.

Love,
Erin

Katie slapped the kitchen table so hard and witlessly, that she hit the side of the plate with her hand and her sandwich flew into her lap. She screamed in uncontrolled anger. She reached to grab a towel from the kitchen sink to wipe off the mess she'd made.

"Damn you, Jackson Thomas, damn you straight to hell!"

Running to her address book, she flipped the pages until she got to the tab with "N" and found Northwoods Island City resort number. She picked up her phone and dialed.

"Hello, Northwoods Island City, can I help you?" Jackie innocently answered.

"Miss Thomas, this is Katie Hawkins."

Jackie swallowed hard, knowing this was about Jackson and her jaunt into Illinois. "Yes, Katie?"

"Do you have any idea where Jackson is?"

"Well, she told me..." "Let me answer that for you. Jackson is in the car right now with *my daughter* heading back to Wisconsin!"

"Really? Well, at least they're alright."

"Alright? How is two teenagers driving six hours in a car by themselves considered all right?"

"Katie, I think you're overreacting. Jackson is a responsible driver." "There's that word again. Tell me, Jacqueline, do you always use the word *responsible* when your daughter is caught doing something wrong? Or is it just when she's caught doing something to endanger my daughter?"

"Now, look here, Katie. That boating accident was *not* Jackson's fault. As you know my niece *saved* Erin's life. I find that extremely responsible. As far as this impulsive drive to Illinois, well it was definitely not one of her better ideas, but that's for me to deal with when she gets back home."

Katie was pacing her kitchen. "Well I suggest you put a leash on her if you expect her to listen to what she's told." "That was uncalled for! Jackson has done nothing to warrant such hateful remarks from you."

"Your niece is unnatural and I don't want her anywhere near my daughter!"

Jackie became angry. "Excuse me?" "Your sweet *responsible* Jackson is unnatural and a queer. I can see it when she looks at and touches Erin. Those are not natural thoughts from one girl to another!"

"So what you are telling me is that not only are you overreacting about all of this, but you are a bigoted fool as well?"

"How dare you!" Katie screamed. "How dare I? You're the one accusing my niece of... of God knows what when all she's done to Erin is be a friend to her for over five years. I think you are the one who is a little unnatural if that's the only aspect of their friendship you have been conjuring up. Tell me, Katie, how much time, really, do you spend on how Jackson touches Erin? Doesn't that sound a little unnatural to you?"

"You're no better than she is! A charmer with teeth like a viper. Snakes, that's what you all are." Jackie couldn't help but laugh at this ridiculous woman. "You know what, Katie? You're right, we *are* snakes. But you know what? We really like to eat rats so you'd better be careful, because you'll be what's next on the menu." Jackie abruptly ended the call.

Katie hung up and threw the telephone, screaming out her rage once more.

~*~*~*~*~*

1990 - Northwoods Island City

Jackie paced endlessly, trying to get rid of the residual anger felt towards Katie Hawkins. Sandra watched her go back and forth for a short while before feeling a little sick from dizziness.

"Jackie, calm down. You know that woman isn't balanced," Sandra said.

"I know, but damn, I wanted to reach through that phone line and strangle her! She's got a lot of nerve, that one." She mumbled a few choice words that made Sandra a little uncomfortable.

"I'm sorry to say that my mom isn't really any better. You know she would freak out about us if she knew."

Jackie stopped and stared at her. "So what exactly does she think of our *friendship*?" *Uh oh, bad timing, Sandra.* "She knows we're really close friends," she evaded.

"What does she think of us living together?" Jackie's ire was starting to turn towards Sandra.

Head suddenly falling in shame, Sandra answered, "She thinks I'm helping you this summer with the resort."

"Are you serious?" Jackie asked, unbelieving the words being spoken. "So she has no idea about us?"

Shaking her head, Sandra answered, "No, she doesn't. Honey, she would make it so hard for us. I don't want to tell her." "Are you ashamed of who you are?" Jackie's stare was intense and making Sandra completely uncomfortable. "No, I'm not. I just don't want to hurt her and *this* would hurt her." She paused. "Jackie, you know she's older and wouldn't understand."

Jackie looked out the window and saw Jackson and Erin getting out of Jackson's Honda. "We'll talk more about this later. Jackson just got back and we are going to have a nice long talk."

"OK. I'm gonna make myself scarce for awhile." She walked up to Jackie, lightly kissing her lips. "I'll give you some time alone."

Jackie gave her a wan smile and nodded. "Thanks."

Jackson and Erin walked up the path to the main house with big smiles on their faces. When the house was in sight, Jackie came out of the door with her arms crossed. *Uh oh. Good feelings gone.* "Jackson Emma Thomas, you get your ass in this house immediately."

"I'll see you later, Erin." Jackson gave her an apologetic look, which was returned. "I'm gonna go look for my dad."

"K, see you later," Jackson said.

"Jackson!" Jackie shouted.

"Maybe," Jackson added with a whisper and large round eyes.

Erin walked away in search of Joe to tell him she was back.

When Jackson approached her, Jackie grabbed her earlobe and dragged her into the house. "Ow! Jackie come on, you haven't done that to me since I was nine!"

"Well you behaved like a child last night. What the hell were you thinking? Driving into Illinois in the middle of the night? Did you even think once, what would happen to you if something went wrong with your car? What would have happened if you ran out of gas or had a flat tire? Just who do you think would help a young girl on the side of the road in the middle of the night? Some knight in shining armor or some sicko with teenaged girls on his mind?" "Jackie..." "No! You put yourself in extreme danger with this stunt, Jackson and I'm very disappointed in you."

Those words cut Jackson badly. She absolutely hated disappointing her aunt. "I'm sorry, Jackie."

"Yeah, me too." She held her hand out. "You know this drill all too well these days. Give me your keys."

"Wha...? Aw come on, Jackie, nothing happened!" "Keys!"

Shaking her head in disbelief, she handed over the keys to her car.

"You'll get these back after I think of something else to do to you. You have NO idea what you've done, do you?"

Not understanding, Jackson asked, "What are you talking about?"

"I got a nasty phone call from Erin's mother." Jackson's eyes went wide. "Yeah, it was *not* pretty. Seems as though she thinks you are an unnatural snake with eyes for her daughter."

"You've got to be kidding me!" Jackson couldn't believe Katie Hawkins had the nerve to call her aunt. *On second thought, who are we talking about here?* "Erin knew she'd be mad, but God, I can't believe she called you."

"Why wouldn't she call me? You're *my* responsibility, Jack. Erin got in the car with you and you two drove six hours to Wisconsin, all by yourselves! Why does this surprise you at all?"

"I dunno, Jackie." Jackson sat heavily on the couch. After several long minutes of silence, Jackson whispered, "I had to go."

Jackie slowly calming down, sat next to her niece and tried to understand what happened that made her niece jump in the car in the middle of the night. "Tell me why."

Jackson looked up into her aunt's eyes and told her the whole sordid story about Molly. She didn't gloss over anything, just so Jackie would understand the full impact all of that had had on

her.

"So you went to Paldeer to get your friend to forgive you?"

"Well, when you say it like that, it certainly doesn't sound as dire as it felt. Jackie I was dying inside!" she cried, tears starting to form.

"Shh, ok, ok, don't cry. Because nothing happened to you *or* to Erin, I'm not going to chop your head off. Just realize that it wasn't a very smart thing to do, especially at that hour. Had you told me all of that, I would've let you go during the day. Of course I would've made you stop and call me every hour, but I would've let you go." She started to rub Jackson's back. "Don't do anything like that again." "I won't, I promise. I just couldn't lose her, Jackie. She means too much to me." "I know, honey, I know." After a few moments, she asked, "Does she know how you feel about her?"

Jackson shook her head. "No, she doesn't, but that's ok. She doesn't need to know. She's not gay so it isn't important. What is important is that she knows I am and she still wants to be around me and be my best friend."

Smiling at her niece, she said, "You know, Jack, sometimes you are wise beyond your years. I think it's great that Erin knows about you and still loves you for who you are. Just do me a favor? Next time just pick up the damn phone and call her!"

Chuckling softly, Jackson replied, "I will, but I was so afraid her mom would answer and not let me talk to her." "Mmm, true. She's a pip, that one. I really hope the fight we had today doesn't affect Erin visiting."

Jackson's face frowned. "Crap, I didn't think about that."

"I'll go find Joe later on and talk to him. I'll tell him the situation. He could probably use the information to gear up for the call I'm sure he's going to get from her."

"Ugh, why does he stay with that woman?"

Laughing, Jackie said, "You know... it wasn't too long ago that we were saying the same thing about Molly."

"Ha ha, very funny." They bumped shoulders and leaned their heads together.

"So am I grounded?" Jackson asked, not really wanting to hear the answer. "Yes, until Christmas."

Jackson whipped around to face Jackie. "What?"

"You can't possibly think you'd get off the hook by just forking over your keys, did you?"

"No, but Jackie... Christmas?"

"You'll have a nice New Year's resolution, now won't you." Jackson let out a sad sigh. "But you

aren't grounded until Erin goes home." Her face lit up immediately and she hugged her aunt. "Thank you, Jackie. Christmas is just fine."

~*~*~*~*~*

Erin walked down to cabin six, hauling her suitcase and backpack. Pulling open the screen door, she pushed the big door open and walked inside.

"Dad?" she called out, unsure if he would answer.

Erin walked into her bedroom and put her stuff down. She walked into her parent's room to find it empty. *Hm... he must be out fishing.*

She turned around only to run smack dab into her father.

"Daddy!" she screamed, to his amusement and confusion. She threw her arms around him.

"Hey, peanut. What are you doing here? When you called me yesterday I thought you were home." They separated and looked at each other with smiles.

"I was daddy, but Jack came and got me." Joe's eyes widened at this revelation.

"Jack came down to Paldeer?"

"Yep." "And what did your mother say about all of this?" he asked knowing full well she came without her mother's blessing.

Erin blushed a deep red. "Um... I kind of didn't ask her."

"Uh huh, so what did you do?"

"I ah... left her a note and then we left."

Joe shook his head, not liking the next phone call he would be receiving from his wife. "You do realize your mother is going to have a cow." Erin nodded. "I kinda thought the same thing. But daddy, she was leaving without me anyway! Why is it a big deal?"

"Peanut, it's a big deal because you left without asking her and you left with Jack; you know how she feels about her." Erin started to pace. "Honey, whether or not you realize this, you put yourself in danger." She turned to regard him with a shocked expression. "Daddy, not you too! Jack is not trying to hurt me!" "No, no, I didn't mean it like that. Come here and sit down." They walked over and sat on the couch. "What I meant was, were you prepared to handle an emergency situation on the road?" When Erin's face blanked he continued, "What would've happened if you got a flat, or the car broke down in the middle of nowhere. There are so many patches of dead highway on the way up here. Anyone could've found you and Jack stranded and I don't want to think about what would've happened if the *wrong* person had found you."

Understanding of what her dad was explaining finally hit home. Erin's head hung a little. "I didn't think about that part. I just wanted to come back here." She paused and decided to tell her dad some of the truth. "Jack and I had a fight the night before I left. I didn't want to face her the next day and when I saw that mom was leaving, I decided to take the easy way out."

"I see." Joe nodded, listening to his fourteen year old daughter. "You do realize that there are consequences for things like this, though, don't you?"

Erin's eyes welled somewhat. "Don't take me back home, daddy, please." "Oh, I'm gonna take you back home, alright." Erin's eyes widened. "But not for another three weeks." He paused. "Your mother is going to be furious and I think I'd rather keep four hundred miles between us for awhile, thank you very much." He coughed and laughed.

Erin regarded him seriously. "Are you guys ok, daddy?"

Joe hugged his daughter. "Don't you worry about us, peanut. Your mom and I are just having a disagreement about something. We'll get past it." "Hmm... she said the same thing." She pulled back from the hug. "I guess that means to mind my own beeswax then?" Joe laughed at his little girl. "Something like that." He ruffled her hair. "Let's see if Jack wants to go to Bosaki's with us for dinner.

"Oh um... I don't know about that. I think she's in trouble with Jackie." He gave her a look that said, *See, this wasn't such a great idea for either of you.* "But I'll go and ask."

The phone rang, interrupting their talk. Joe looked at the phone and back to Erin. "Three guesses who that is and the first two don't count."

"I'm sorry, daddy."

"It's ok, peanut, we'll get through this." He patted her knee got up to answer the phone on the fourth ring.

"Hello?"

"Hello, Joe." "Katie, we were just talking about you." "So I guess that Erin has arrived? Let me speak to her."

"Katie, if you're not going to be calm about this, I'm not putting her on the phone. I had a long talk with her about the dangerous trip she took and she understands that it was wrong."

Katie snarled. "Oh, well doesn't that make you father of the year! She left without even asking permission!"

"Is that what you're so upset about or is it who she left with?" Joe put a hand behind his neck. Erin sat very still on the couch with her hands on her legs watching him.

"Joe, she could've been killed!" Katie snapped, "Jackson is only sixteen. There could've been an accident."

"Yes, but there wasn't. Erin is fine, Jackson is fine," Joe tried to placate his wife. "I don't give a

damn about Jackson. She could've hurt Erin."

"Alright, that's what I'm talking about. You need to calm down. Nothing happened. If you keep obsessing about things that *might happen* you're going to go insane and drive all of us there with you!"

"Joseph, I am not obsessing." "Yes, you are, *Katherine*. You've got to stop this before it tears this family apart. You were already out the door before Erin even asked to go with you, so what has you so angry about her being here with me? Am I going to harm our daughter now?" Joe switched the conversation around. "What? Now you're just talking crazy." Katie was completely flustered.

"Then I guess I'm starting to talk like you." Joe scrunched up his face, knowing that wasn't the smartest thing to say.

"I think you've said quite enough. Tell Erin she's grounded until I say differently. I will not back down from that." "I think a grounding is very fair for this escapade. I think she's quite aware that she will be punished when we return home."

"She'd better, because she is not getting off scot-free this time." Katie put her foot down.

"I'll let her know." "You do that." Katie hung up the phone loudly in Joe's ear.

"Well, that went well." Joe hung up the receiver and exhaled deeply.

Erin got up and went to her father. "Daddy, I'm really sorry about this. I'll call mom later and take the heat. I deserve it."

Not wanting to comment to his daughter about what we thought about her mother, Joe just took her in his arms. "It'll be ok. I think after she's had some time to calm down, she'd appreciate that call."

"I'll call her after dinner."

Joe pulled back from the hug. "Go see if Jack wants to come with us and I'll grab a shower and a shave."

"I wasn't gonna say anything, but you stink like fish!"

"See what happens when I'm left on my own for a day?" Erin laughed.

"Well, I'm here now, so you'd better wash up." "Go on, I'll meet you back here."

"K"

Erin dashed out the door in search of Jackson feeling lighter than she had in days. The summer was going to end much better than it had started and for that, she was very grateful.

Chapter Eight

1990 - Paldeer, IL - Letter to Erin from Jackson

September 12, 1990

Dear Hawk,

See, I told you I'd write. It just takes me a little longer than you. How's the grounding going? I'm sure Jackie's been a lot easier on me than your mom has been on you. I'm just glad she didn't come up and get you. That would've been a really awful scene. Your dad is a really cool guy. I'm so glad I got to spend some time with him. It was really cool to go fishing with someone who actually knew what he was doing! J I'm sorry again about that bluegill smacking you in the face. I really tried to get the net down.

How is High School? Are you totally freaking out? You know you can call me anytime if you need to talk. I know how scary it was for me to be a freshman in a new school. Just remember to breathe! I don't want to hear about you passing out in the halls! J School is chugging along for me. I'm taking some pretty cool classes this semester. My music teacher hooked me up with a fantastic instructor. She is really making me work. I've gotten really good with my flute and piccolo in just a couple weeks with her. I can't wait to see how I sound at the end of the year!

Hawk, I was asked to the Homecoming Dance! It's not until October! Can you believe it? This poor guy just doesn't get it. Oh well, I told him if he wanted to go as friends, I'd go with him, but not to expect any fireworks from me. I think Jerry is going to think about it before he commits! HA HA.

I hope things with your mom are going ok. I really hate the way she treats you sometimes, Hawk. I don't mean any disrespect against your mother, but damn she can be mean! *insert hug here*

Jackie and Sandra have been at each other's throats lately. I have no idea what's going on but I don't think it's good. I'll let you know more, I know you liked Sandra. Well, except when she accidentally knocked you off the dock and into the water. That really was a mistake, Hawk. She didn't mean it.

Anyway, I have a huge test in Biology and I have to study. I hate this class the most out of all of them so I really have to dig in.

Let me know if there are any jerks I gotta drive down to defend your honor to. I know how to get there now, so tell them to watch out! J

Friends 4 Ever.

Love, Jack

1990 - Island City - Letter to Jackson from Erin

October 14, 1990

Dear Jack,

I am SO sorry I haven't written all month. I don't think I could have any more homework. High school is going okay so far, but man, it's been a lot of work. My art classes, as I'm sure you can guess, are my favorite classes. I have two really fantastic teachers and they seem really available to us. My friend, Tom and I spend a lot of extra time in the art room after school. He's really talented, Jack, you'd like him. He can make the most incredible cartoons! He made this one about dead people that your sick sense of humor would appreciate. It was like all the dead people had their own community and would initiate the "new" people. It's so damn funny. I'll see if he'll give me a copy of one so I can send it to you.

Ughh, don't get me started about my mom. She has been a bear to be around. I know she means well and just wants what's best for me, but sometimes she wants too much. I tried to tell her I didn't want to be a cheerleader, but she made me feel bad so I'm going to tryouts. I guess a couple girls left the squad, and they need to fill them, so I'm gonna try out tomorrow afternoon. My dad said not to worry about it and if I didn't make it I could just tell her that I tried. Sometimes I think she wants me to do all the things she never did.

I'm really excited to hear about your new flute instructor. Is she cute? Ha ha, I'm kidding. I'm glad she's working your butt off. You have so much talent you better not waste it or I'll come up to the Northwoods and kick your butt myself!

I'm sorry to hear about Jackie and Sandra. I hope they stay together, Jack. I can tell how much Jackie loves her. Give her a hug for me. Your aunt is the best and I'm so glad she's the one who raised you. She done good with you. J

My birthday was cool. Thanks so much for calling me, it was a HUGE surprise! It was better than any card, so don't feel badly about not sending one. I preferred to hear you sing me the happy birthday song to any Hallmark version. You're the best.

OK, that's all the time I can spare. I have so much homework tonight I'm going to drown in textbooks! AH!

I miss you, Jack. Take care of yourself.

Friends 4 Ever.

Hawk

1991 - Paldeer, IL - Letter from Jackson to Erin

March 23, 1991

Dear Hawk,

How's it going? Things are getting crazy with spring break coming soon. I have one major test before we are let out. Yep, you guessed it, Biology, so wish me luck. I'm at least keeping a B-average, so Jackie isn't riding me too hard.

I have some news that is really great, but it makes me really sad to tell you. My flute instructor told me about a great music camp in Michigan. It's a really hard core music camp, not like the kind when we were kids. The camp provides you with some of the best teachers from across the country to help you with your craft. Everything about it is great, except for when it is. It meets for the entire summer, Hawk, which would mean we wouldn't see each other this year. I can feel your disappointment from here, believe me, I feel it too. But you've always told me to keep going with my music and Jackie said I could go, so I'm gonna do it.

Please tell me what's going on in your head. I know you, Hawk, you're a thinker (but not a stinker) J Seriously, it was a really hard decision for me to make, but I guess I do have to start thinking about my future sometime.

Please write me back as soon as you can. Or call me if you want, if your mom will let you. I wanna hear from you soon, ok?

Friends 4 Ever - I mean it!

Love, Jack

1991 - Island City - Letter to Jackson from Erin

April 5, 1991

Dear Jack,

Wow, that was some letter. As you can see it took me a little while to digest everything. Even though I'm incredibly sad I won't see you, I'm that much more excited that you're going to be working on your music this summer. Just like with you and my artwork, I always want you to work at your music. You've been given a great opportunity and you have take it. I'll always be here, but something like this won't be. I'm really glad you decided to go.

I told my parents that you wouldn't be up there this summer, but my dad still wants to come up. I'll have to see if I want to go with you not being there. I think it'll be too weird. But maybe I'll go just to see Jackie and she can tell me all the dirt you've been holding out on me. J We'll see, I have a few months to decide.

I can't believe I have about a month and a half left of my first year of High School. It hasn't been too bad, actually. I've made some friends, but we are the "art nerds" and people always look at us funny. We just look at them and cross our eyes or something and they totally look away. Tom and I have gotten really good at making faces at the girls in the "Barbie" crowd. They are just so lame. Tom is really a cool guy. He's so gifted, Jack. Sometimes his creations make me just go... WOW, look at what you've done! He has a couple of tattoos, one he even gave to himself. They're really cool and colorful. He's gonna show me how to use the needle with inks. Who knows, it might be a skill I can fall back on. Maybe I'll tattoo a donkey on my mom's face while she's asleep so everyone can see what a pain in the ASS she is. J Seriously, though, I think I might like Tom. Do you think I should ask him out on a date? Girls do that right? I'm not really good at the dating thing, so help me out, Romeo. J

Don't worry about me, Jack. I'll keep my fingers crossed for you that something good will come of this camp. Who knows, maybe you're meant to run it one day. J

I've enclosed a self pic I had to draw for class so you can see what I look like now. My hair is totally red now and way past my shoulders. I think I like it, though. We'll see.

Anyway, I'm so proud of you, Jack. Knock 'em dead in Michigan. You'd better write me while you're there.

Friends 4 Ever - I know you mean it!

Love, Hawk

1992 - Island City - Letter to Jackson from Erin

May 31, 1992

Dear Jack,

I know you won't get this on the right day, but I wanted to tell you how proud I am of you. A high school graduate on her way to Indiana University. I read up on them, Jack and they have one of the best music programs in the country. Good for you! I can't believe you got a scholarship too! I told you your music would take you far. I have missed you so much, but I know how busy you've been. School is ending in a couple weeks here as well, so I understand. I appreciate the calls when you don't have time to write. It's always so great to hear your voice.

Tom and I are still dating, but something is just off between us. I think maybe we should just stay friends. I think my mother would have a heart attack if I broke up with him. I swear she wants me to marry him, I'm not even seventeen yet! She's been nagging me about him nonstop since the first night he picked me up to go to the movies. Only time will tell right?

I didn't want this to be a super long letter, I just wanted to drop you a note to tell you how proud

I am of you. You've accomplished so much in your eighteen years. I hope I can say the same thing when I'm done with high school. I'm sorry you couldn't get a ticket for me for your graduation. My mom probably wouldn't have let me go anyway. Just know I was with you in spirit. I love you, Jack and I'm so glad you're my best friend. You're just the best.

I'll miss you, but it's a huge honor to have been asked back to the Interlochen camp. You've obviously made an impression with them. But who can blame them, you've always made a huge impression on me. I'm going up to the Northwoods with my parents this year. It wasn't the same last year. When I sit on the boathouse roof and draw my sunsets over Lake Tomahawk, I'll think of you.

Friends 4 Ever,

Hawk

1994 - Paldeer, IL - Letter to Erin from Jackson

June 4, 1994

Dear Hawk,

I can't tell you how long I've been waiting to write this letter. **HAPPY HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION!** You did it! I'm sure it seemed like the longest journey of your life, but you did it and did it well! You didn't have to call to apologize, Hawk, I know your mom wouldn't let me step foot in that auditorium. Just know that at 2:30 I was cheering for you from the Northwoods. I think the trees shook!

You and I have been best friends for almost ten years and Hawk, they've been the best years I could image living. You've given me so much to be thankful for. Your incredible gift has made me appreciate art in a way I never would've on my own. Your perspective on certain things has made me pause when I encounter situations I'm not familiar with. I usually ask myself how you'd handle a situation and I can actually hear your answer. It's usually the right one, too. You have a such of love of life even though your mother has made that nearly impossible for you. I can't tell you how angry I was with that whole Tom situation. That poor guy didn't even see it coming did he? Hell, if I were him and my girlfriend's mother told me to give her a ring, I don't know if I would've had the guts to actually give it to her. It would've made me think that she was a nut job and did I really want her as a mother-in-law. I think you handled it the best, though, as usual. He'll find a girlfriend in school next year. I know you said you didn't feel *that* kind of love for him, so I think you're both better off.

I only have one more summer up in Interlochen. It really makes me kind of sad. I've grown to love everyone so much. Every year there are new kids with such dreams in their eyes. I loved being able to teach to them and watch them develop their talents. You're going to see some amazing music coming from these kids in a few years. You mark my words. J This place has really given me an amazing feeling of accomplishment I don't know that I would've had if I

hadn't come here. I'm literally feeling high all the time. It's so incredible. Maybe you were right. Maybe teaching is the way to go for me. Time will tell, right?

We need to make sure that we see each other next summer. It's been far too long since we've gotten to hang out. I really miss you, Hawk. Everyone is sick of hearing me talk about you. I kept your self pic up in my room at school and at camp. Everyone always asked who it was. When I told them the model was my best friend, they all said I was full of it. Everyone's full of something, though, right? J

I am so incredibly proud of you, Hawk. You're going to knock them dead at the art institute. I know it! I know you wanted to get away from your mom, but hell, it's still in the city away from her and you don't have to stay at home. That's good right? Your dad seemed pretty jazzed for you when I called. I'm so glad he's been such a positive person in your life. He really is the best dad around.

Ok, Hawk, I gotta get to my next session, but know that I love you and I'm always thinking about you.

You are my friend 4 life.
Love, Jack

Chapter Nine

Present - Chicago

Erin was bustling around, gathering her artwork for the show in the gallery the following week. Kimberly was very meticulous about setting up for Erin's artwork. Erin's was the most successful work in her gallery and she spared no cost to make that night sparkle. Several canvases were taken from her studio and down to the main level. Erin lined them up in her study.

Hearing the phone ring, she put the last of the pictures down and answered it. *It's probably Kim freaking out again.*

"Hello?" she answered.

"Hello, dear," Katie greeted, to Erin's disgust.

"Hello, mother, what can I do for you?"

"Is that any way to treat your mother? My gosh, I'm the only parent you have."

Erin's anger began to flare. "Mother, yes, I know, I was there when daddy died, remember?" she breathed to try and calm herself. "I have an event at the gallery that is hosting my work. I have a lot to do before then." "You didn't mention it to me," Katie pretended to sound hurt.

There is a reason for that. "No, I didn't, mother, because you rarely want to go to these things.

Except, of course, when the mayor is expected, then you're there with bells on."

"Oh, honey, it's not like that and you know it." *Whatever.* "So how's Jeremy? When am I gonna hear some good news?"

"Mother, you know damn well, Jeremy and I are getting divorced. The only good news that will come from this will be my own after the judge deems me a single woman." Katie's condescending voice chimed again, "You know that goes against the church, Erin. I can't believe you aren't sticking it out to fight for your marriage."

"Fight for a marriage with a man who has fathered a baby with another woman? Gee, mother, you're right. I should stand and fight with both fists. I should go the full ten rounds!" Erin paced grasping her forehead to ward off the inevitable migraine from talking to her mother.

"Don't you talk to me like that, young lady." Katie's haughty voice was making Erin nauseous and she knew she needed to get off the phone.

"Was there a real reason you called or did you just want to push some of my buttons? I really have a lot to do, mother, so if you don't mind, I need to go."

"I wish you'd reconsider about Jeremy. All's not lost, I'm sure he still loves you. I'm sure if you..."

"Mother, I don't love him, don't you get that? Never mind, this is like talking to a damn brick wall." She breathed out. "I'm getting off the phone now. Good-bye, Mother." Erin hung up the phone without hearing her mother's anger laced goodbye.

"God! What is wrong with me? Why don't I move to Guam? She'd never call me there."

She began to arrange her work and once again the phone rang and broke her concentration. Angrily, Erin picked up the phone. "Mother, you need to stop calling me, I'm really busy right now."

"Well, it's good to see that some things never change. Your mom still giving you a hard time, Hawk?" Hearing Jack's voice melted Erin's soul.

Flopping down onto her couch, Erin sighed. "Jack? Is... is that really you?"

Tears formed in both women's eyes. "Yeah, it's me. How... um... God, I don't even know what to say."

They both shared a nervous laugh. "I know. I'm... I'm just stunned to hear your voice. How did you get my number?" Erin gripped the phone tightly.

"Dearest Katie gave it to me."

A light bulb went off in her head. *No wonder she was pushing the Jeremy envelope so hard tonight. God, she's something else.*

"I'm just gonna apologize now for anything she might have said then. Nothing's changed with her. She's always gotta say something negative about someone, sorry to say," Erin said with a sad smile. She wiped her eyes.

"How've you been, Hawk? Your mom told me about your dad. God, I'm so sorry. I know how much he meant to you. I really wish I could've been there for you." *So do I Jack, you have no idea.* "Thanks, Jack, that means so much. It was a really horrible time for all of us. He got sick so fast; less than eighteen months. Then before we knew it, he was gone."

Jack let the tears roll down her cheek. She knew all too well how that felt. She cleared her throat. "Well, I'm really sorry. He was a wonderful man. I feel very privileged to have known him." "He loved you like crazy, Jack. You made him laugh all the time with your fishing quote unquote tips." They shared more laughter. "Even he noticed a difference in the resort when you were in Michigan at camp."

"Yeah, it was hard knowing you all were there and I wasn't."

"I'm sure." Erin stopped the conversation before it went in a direction she wasn't ready to go. "So how are things with you? Are you happy and healthy? Did you get your teaching certificate?"

Jackson smiled, knowing Erin's thoughts always went from her well being to her music. "I'm doing pretty well. Yes, I'm a music teacher for the gifted kids in the area. It's a really great program and I'm truly loving what I'm doing." She smiled. "Not many people can say that about their jobs." Nodding, Erin agreed, "You're right about that. I think we both got lucky in that respect."

"Oh, Hawk, I haven't even asked you about your work. How is the life of a well known painter appealing to you? I've seen your work in some shops up here. I... um..." She blushed into the phone. "I even bought one."

"Shut up! You did not!" They laughed.

"Yes, I'm afraid I did. It was a sunset that I *know* was taken off of Lake Tomahawk. Made me think it came from a memory of yours from on top of the boathouse roof."

"It probably did. Thank you for supporting my work, Jack. You've always been..." "Your biggest fan." "My biggest fan." They said together and laughed again.

"God knows Jackie was tired of coming to get us off that damn roof when it was too dark to see anything."

"Yeah, she did." Jackson swallowed back her tide of emotion that was creeping up her throat.

"How is Jackie? Is she doing well?"

Silence came through the line. "Um... that's why I'm calling, Hawk. Jackie's sick. Really sick,

actually," she corrected.

"Oh, no!" Erin's voice dripped with sadness. "What's wrong?"

"Cancer, believe it or not. What are the odds, huh?" Erin shook her head as more tears came. "I'm so sorry, honey." The endearment slipped out so naturally. "Is there anything I can do?"

A sad smile came to Jack's face. *Aw, Hawk, you've always had such a big heart.* "Actually, yes. Jackie asked me tonight to find you because she'd really like to see you... um... before..." the final words weren't necessary. The two women knew the awful result of this illness.

"When should I come? I'll come tomorrow if I have to. I have a show coming up, but I don't need to be there." She immediately started making plans in her head. "Hell, I'll come tonight!"

"Whoa, whoa, Hawk, slow down. Tonight isn't necessary. I'm sure you have to do some things before you can leave town. The sooner the better, obviously, with this type of thing." Erin's heart dropped. "How long does she have?"

"According to her team, she has about two weeks. Maybe."

Erin's head fell back to the couch cushion and she closed her eyes. "God, this is awful. Just awful..."

Jack nodded, voicing Jackie's prognosis aloud, made her stomach clench. "I know."

"Ok, I think I can wrap things up here by tomorrow afternoon, so I could be there by late evening. Would that be ok? I'm sure I can find a hotel or something." "Don't be ridiculous, you can stay here." Silence was Erin's response, so Jackson clarified. "We have some open cabins since it's still off-season. You have a place to stay. We actually have a new condo we can set you up in, if you'd like to try it." Erin's heart was racing. She couldn't imagine staying under the same roof with Jackson after everything that had happened between them and how much time had passed. She was relieved when Jackson clarified what she'd meant. "A cabin would be great. I'll bring my sketchpads and supplies like old times. Well, kinda."

Jackson understood what she meant. "I'll tell Jackie that you're coming. She is really going to be happy to see you, Hawk."

What about you, Jack? Will you be?

"Just be warned. She's hooked up to a lot of machines and wires. I just don't want you to expect too much when you see her, okay? It'll probably bring back some bad memories for you, too. But I'll be right there if you need me." *Like always.*

Like always. "Thank you, Jack. I'm so glad you called. I'm sorry I didn't do the same when my dad died. I've felt bad about that for awhile," she confessed.

"Hawk, don't, ok? I know how hard it was for you not to, believe me I do. I'm glad he had you looking over him during his last days."

Christ, I can't stop crying! "Thanks, Jack." They paused, not really wanting to hang up, having so much more to say, but knowing they ought to. "Well I should get going. I have a lot to do before tomorrow."

"Thank you for coming, Hawk."

"I'll see you tomorrow."

"Can't wait. Drive safely, ok?" Jackson cautioned.

"I will. Talk to you soon."

"Bye."

Erin hung up the phone and held it reverently, not really believing she'd not dreamt that call. *Poor Jackie. Jack was right. What are the odds of both of the people we loved most getting cancer? Life just isn't very fair.*

Knowing Kimberly was going to be a little miffed at her departure before the art show, she needed to call and sort things out. Once she told her the situation, Erin knew she'd calm down and understand. Kim knew the entire drama revolving around Erin and Jackson. She wouldn't dare stand in the way of Erin going to the aid of someone so precious to Jackson.

~*~*~*~*~

Present - The Island City

When the phone hung up, Jackson leaned back on her bed and sighed a huge relieving breath. *Hawk is coming tomorrow.* She closed her eyes and smiled. Realization washed over her and she shot out of bed. "Oh my God! Hawk is coming tomorrow!" *I'm gonna be sick.*

Jackson left her room to tell Jackie about her successful phone call. Cindy was in with her, changing an IV bag. Jackie saw Jackson enter and saw the immediate change in her niece's face. "She's coming isn't she?"

Jackson furrowed her brow. "How did you know that's what I was going to tell you?"

"Jack, you've been living with me your whole life... How could I not see the difference in your eyes? I could tell as soon as you walked in here that you'd talked to her."

Cindy snickered. "She's got you pegged, doesn't she?"

"Enough out of you, Nurse Ratchet," Jackson teased.

"Hey! I resemble that remark."

The two women laughed at their easy banter. Jackson sat down next to Jackie and took her hand. "She'll be here tomorrow. She's really excited to see you."

"Does she know?" Jackie asked regarding her illness.

"Well, yeah. Why else would I have called her?"

Nodding, Jackie agreed, "You're right. How are you feeling about seeing her again?"

"Nervous, sick, excited, sick, terrified, sick..." Jackson continued her litany until Jackie put her hand on Jackson's arm.

"I get the picture. How did she sound?"

Looking into concerned eyes, Jackson replied, "She sounded good. According to our favorite mother, Katie says she's happily married and ready to pop out some puppies."

Jackie's eyes widened. "Really?" "Does that really surprise you? Especially with her mother?" A dark sadness washed over her. "No, I guess it doesn't." She looked up into Jackson's unique eyes. "How is dear Katie anyway?"

"Oh, her normal, crotchety old self. Man, I could feel the tides shift after she realized it was me calling to get Erin's contact information."

Jackie chuckled. "I bet. She's had it in for you since you were sixteen."

"I guess I can't blame her," Jackson said in a self-deprecating manner.

"Yes you can, Jackson!" Jackie spoke harshly which erupted a coughing fit. Luckily, it didn't last long. She took a deep breath and continued, "You cannot believe that... She judged you because of what was in your heart... What kind of person would do that to you? Anyone who knows you, can tell there's nothing but love in there."

"You're right, Jackie, and that's all in the past. I don't want to bring all of that up again. I don't think my heart could take it."

"Do you have a lot to do before she gets here?"

"Mm, I just have to prepare a cabin for her, make sure all the linens and stuff are clean for her. I'm gonna give her cabin two, it's right on the lake. It's still a little cool at night, but there's a fireplace in that one. I'll make sure there's plenty of wood for her to burn."

"You're a good person filled with kindness, Jack."

"I just learned what I was taught." She leaned down and kissed the top of Jackie's head. "Sweet talker."

"That's me." Jackson smiled down at her aunt. "I'm gonna get to bed I think. Tomorrow is going to be a huge day and I really think I need to be rested."

"Ok, honey. Sleep well." "You too, Jackie."

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Erin paced back and forth as she listened to the disappointment coming from the other end of the telephone. "Erin, you have to know how much better these shows are when the artist is *actually* there."

"Kim, I do realize that, but this is an emergency. Would you rather I cancel? I know you've already put so much work into this that it wouldn't seem right. This is Jackie, you know how much Jack and Jackie meant to me when I was growing up. I have to go," she explained.

Kim could empathize, but it still didn't sit well. She knew more paintings sold when Erin attended. Being that it wasn't her first show, though and the circumstances surrounding her departure, she understood and would let her go with her blessing. "Erin, honey, just be careful. I know all too well what Jackson meant to you. I don't want you getting hurt while you're up there saying your goodbyes."

"Kim, it's gonna be painful regardless of what either of us want. I know I don't wanna be hurt, but Jackie's dying. It's gonna hurt to see her that way."

Kim shook her head and replied, "You know that's not what I'm talking about."

"I know," Erin said softly. "It'll be ok. We were best friends for ten years. We have a connection, I felt it just being on the phone with her for ten minutes. I'll be around Jackie and doing what I can for her. The last thing I'm gonna do is dredge up the past." She shook her head knowing she couldn't go down that road again.

"So, can I help with anything else?"

"Can you come over and feed Gracie and maybe pet her a little everyday?" she asked, hope filling her voice.

"Uggh, I knew you were gonna ask for cat duty!" She exhaled. "Fine, just know you *really* owe me for this."

"I love you, Kimba. Thank you."

"Yeah yeah, good luck and drive safely."

"Ok, I'll call you when I get there." She smiled. "Thank you for everything. All the pieces will be

in my study. Have a good show."

Erin hung up and finished the last of the sorting for her art show. She was certain that Kimberly would be pleased with the work she was including. There were several different pieces with different drawing and painting techniques. With a final nod, Erin placed the pieces of her work around her study in the order in which they should be displayed. She wrote notes about each piece for Kimberly so she'd have information in case people inquired. She looked at the prices she'd chosen, but knew Kimberly would change them to a higher figure. She didn't mind as it allowed her to live a very comfortable life. A life Jeremy would no longer have the privilege of sharing with her. *Jerk.*

Erin went upstairs, hauled her suitcase from her closet then threw it on her bed. She started going through clothes in her closet - pants, jeans, sweaters, blouses, T-shirts and sweatshirts. None of which were jumping at her to be packed. Her brain started to swirl making her a little dizzy and a lot frantic.

"What am I going to wear!" she screamed in a panic.

~*~*~*~*~*

After a long night of packing, a short night of sleeping and a small plate of brunch, Erin was on the road and halfway to the Northwoods Island City. Knowing the way by heart, she traveled the highways without event and knew if she wanted, she could get there while blindfolded. So many thoughts whirred around in her head regarding seeing Jackson again. *What will she look like after so long? What will she think of me? Is she harboring bitter feelings? Will she ever forgive me for my cowardice?*

Erin knew none of those answers, but would find out soon enough. As terrified as she was of seeing Jackson again, a part of her heart, that had been dormant for so long, had woken up after that one phone call. Yes, she was frightened of all the feelings she knew that would come back to haunt her; yes, she knew there was a chance that Jackson held some resentment towards her; yes, Jackie probably knew the situation and wouldn't be too happy with her, but her mother no longer dictated her life and wouldn't be able to interfere with her choices this time. She was going to do what she could to help Jackie, and to help Jackson with the heaviness that comes with losing someone you love.

She pulled out her cell phone and dialed the resort. After a few rings, she recognized Jackson's voice on the machine. *Hello, you've reached the Northwoods Island City Resort. We're unable to take your call but it is important to us, so please leave us a detailed message and we'll call you back. If this is an emergency, please page Jackson Thomas at 715-555-1968. Have a great day. Beep.* Erin got lost in the sound of Jackson's voice, she almost forgot to leave a message.

"Hi, Jack, it's Erin, err Hawk..." She shook her head. "um, I left Chicago sooner than I thought, so I'll be getting into the resort in the late afternoon or maybe around six-ish. I just wanted to give you a heads up. Um... I'm really looking forward to seeing the old place again. Talk to you soon. If you want, you can call me in the car, 773-555-5225. Bye."

Erin closed her phone and exhaled slowly and wiped her palms on her jeans. "God, even just talking to her machine gets me all crazy. I really have to calm down." She threw the phone onto the passenger seat of her Acura. She tried to do some breathing exercises to control herself before she hyperventilated. When that didn't work, she grabbed a CD from her glove box and put it in her player. Soon the soothing sounds of *Loreena McKennitt's, The Mask & The Mirror* were coming through her speakers.

"That's better."

The music eased Erin's frazzled mind and let her relax and enjoy the picturesque drive. Halfway through the CD her phone chirped. Not taking her eyes off the road, she pawed at the seat in search of the phone. Grabbing the antenna with her teeth, she opened the phone to speak. "Erin Hawkins," she answered. "My, my, my, we're so professional now." Jackson's throaty and amused voice crept through the phone lines and into Erin's ear.

Erin laughed. "I never know who's calling me. I gotta be prepared."

"Just like the girl scout you never were," Jackson teased.

"It was your brilliant idea that I even joined them. I told you I wasn't scout material."

"I could throw in a really bad line about lesbians eating brownies, but I won't." Jackson laughed at her own joke. Hearing Jackson laughing, after so many years without that sound, was a salve to her soul.

"Yeah, you're such a comic, Jack. And a pig!"

"Guilty." The two realized how easy it was for them to fall back into place after so many years apart. It was as if no time had passed at all. "So you're invading a little early?"

"Invading? I do believe I was invited," Erin teased back.

"Invade, invite... what's a few letters between friends." Jackson laughed, thinking how ironic that statement was.

"Ha ha, But yes, I'll be there around 5:30 I'm gonna guess. I've made really good time."

"Good to hear. We'll have dinner ready for you." Jackson hoped she wasn't presuming too much.

"You guys were always so hospitable. I'll be glad to join you for dinner." "Fantastic!" she exclaimed. "I hope fish is ok, that's all there is," she whispered jokingly.

"As long as it's breaded and fried and really bad for me, I'm in."

"Got it. Bad food while you're here. Check." They shared a small chuckle. "Well, I'll let you get

back to it. I'll see you in..." she checked her watch. "wow, in about two hours."
"Yep, told you I was cruising. I'll be there before you know it."

Yes, you will. "Alright, Hawk, be careful. I know how you like to daydream."

"Ha ha. See you soon." "Bye."

When the connection was broken, Erin still felt the warmth brought on by the voice that had stayed within her mind and heart for years.

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Erin pulled up onto the pebbled drive of the Island City resort. As soon as the buildings came into view, her heart sped up to a sickening pace. Her hands were already shaking and she'd not even turned the car off yet. She took several deep calming breaths, turned her engine off and popped her trunk. Walking around to the back of the car, she pulled her suitcase from the trunk and closed it. Reaching in the still open car, she grabbed her purse and closed the door. With a press of her keychain, the beeping of her alarm being set was heard.

Jackson saw her pull up and her stomach did an incredible amount of flip-flops. She knew it would be hard to see Erin, but she was nowhere near ready to face all the emotions that went along with it.

"My god, she's beautiful," Jackson whispered while watching her exit her car from the window. "Damn, Hawk, how can you be even more beautiful than you already were." *I'm gonna be sick.* Jackson put on her best smile, smoothed down her beige Henley shirt and blue jeans and went outside to greet her guest.

Erin watched as Jackson came out of the main house and her breath hitched. *Oh my God... she is just... wow...* Jackson's long dark hair was blowing in the breeze, a lovely smile etched on her face. Erin couldn't see them yet, but she was sure those eyes would be the warmest mismatched colored eyes she'd ever seen. Her face changed into a huge smile the closer Jackson came. She couldn't help the tears that welled in her eyes.

"Hey," she managed to force out. "Hey, back." Jackson saw the tears in Erin's blue eyes. Her heart simply melted from seeing her again.

Erin couldn't help her next move. She unceremoniously dropped her suitcase and purse and rushed to embrace Jackson in a huge hug that took them both by surprise. Jackson wrapped her arms around Erin as tightly as she could without robbing the air from her lungs. Holding her Hawk again was better than any dream she'd had since their separation. She could feel Erin's tremors as she let her tears come.

"Sshhh, don't cry, Hawk. It's ok. I'm right here." Jackson held her close. She pulled Erin even closer so Erin's head was pressed firmly against her wildly beating heart. She could feel her own tears well and was helpless to fight them. She bent her head and smelled the fragrance that was

so unique to Erin. Her hair smelled the same to Jackson as she kissed the top of her head. She threaded her fingers through Erin's hair so they rested at the base of her neck. She stroked the skin lightly, trying to calm her smaller friend.

After several moments, Erin pulled back and wiped her eyes. "I'm sorry, Jack. I... I had no idea I'd have..." She breathed deeply. "Such a strong reaction to seeing you again."

Jackson reached out and wiped an errant tear away from Erin's cheek. "It's ok. I'm sure you heard my heart ready to hammer its way out of my chest. We're even."

We're hardly even and you know it, Jack. "You look wonderful, Jack. You are even more beautiful than I had remembered." Erin graced her with a watery smile.

"So are you, Hawk. So are you." They stood and reveled in the bond that they'd missed more than they knew possible. "Do you want to settle in, or would you like to see Jackie first? Or..."

Shaking her head, Erin replied, "It doesn't matter to me. Sure, let's dump my bags, then you can take me to see Jackie." She looked up at Jackson. "I'm very nervous to see her." *For so many reasons.*

"You'll be fine, Hawk. I promise. If it gets too hard, you can take a breather. Jackie knows how hard this is going to be for you to see her this way after so long." "I'm sure. Especially after you told her about my dad and his own cancer."

Jackson looked down and shuffled a loose rock with her foot. "I um... didn't tell her about your dad." "Why not?" Erin asked.

"I didn't know if it was me being afraid of reminding her about her inevitable death with the cancer, or what, but I just didn't want to say anything."

Erin touched her arm. "You always think of everyone else, Jack. I've never met anyone quite like you in my entire life."

"I think that's probably a good thing." She kidded, but Erin took her seriously. "Yes it is. It allows me to appreciate you even more. Reminds me just how special you really are."

Jackson swallowed a large lump in her throat and quickly changed the subject before she said something she'd regret later. "Let's get over to your cabin. I put you in cabin two on the water because it has a fireplace and it still gets a little chilly here at night." Erin smiled. "That sounds great. Lead on."

As they walked, Jackson and Erin both snuck small glances at each other. The link between them still so strong. Jackson led her up the small steps to her new home for the time being. As she opened the door, a little musty smell welcomed them. Jackson went to the window and immediately opened it to let some fresh air in.

"Damn, I knew there was something I forgot to do. Sorry about that. The air should smell better

in a little while." She pointed towards Erin's bedroom. "Your bedroom is in there so feel free to dump your bags or unpack or whatever you'd like to do. I'm gonna head back home to make sure I don't burn dinner!"

"What are we having?" Erin asked with a bright smile.

"Like I said, fish. But as requested, it's breaded, battered and fried. Just the way you like your walleye." "Oh, wow, walleye." Erin felt her mouth start to water. "It's been ages since I had Tomahawk walleye. Thank you, Jack. I can't believe you remembered that."

I remembered everything about you, Hawk, but don't get me started.

"Yeah well, this brain is good for something other than musical notes."

"It's good for many things, Jack. You're one of the smartest people I know."

"You need to get out more, Hawk." She winked. "But I really do have to run. Come up to the house when you're ready."

"It really is great to see you, Jack." "You, too."

They shared another few moments smiling at each other, then Jackson ran out to save their dinner.

Erin took the time to unpack, call Kim and sit down in the recliner in the front room. She breathed heavily trying to sort out her scattered emotions that were all bubbling within her core. She needed to prepare herself to see Jackie in the state she'd seen her father in several years ago. The memories were still fresh in her mind and she knew she'd have to try to keep her tears in check; Jackie didn't need her to cry for her. Jackie would want her to make sure Jackson would be ok once she was gone. Erin knew she'd do anything for Jackson when that time came.

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Erin knocked lightly on the main house door. Jackson soon came and looked at her with a huge smile on her face. "You don't have to knock, silly, get in here." Erin walked in with Jackson holding the screen door for her.

Erin instantly smelled the combination of fried fish with the sterile smell of a hospital. All in all, not the best she could imagine. Cindy stood up from the couch and approached her with a large smile. Jackson immediately introduced them. "Cindy, this is my longtime friend, Erin Hawkins. Erin, this is Cindy Appleton, Jackie's nurse."

Erin shook her hand with a big smile on her face. "It is very nice to meet you." "You too, Erin. The way these two talk about you, I feel like I already know you," she said with a wink to Jackson, causing a blush to run down her face and throat.

"And she was just leaving..." Jackson nudged her with her shoulder in play. Erin caught the familiarity between them and wondered if there was anything more to their relationship.

Jack didn't mention a girlfriend. Oh, this could be awkward. "Can I go see Jackie or..." Cindy chimed in, "Actually she's resting right now. I'd let her sleep a little bit before we get her all excited. She's been coughing pretty badly today."

Erin nodded in sympathy. "Ok, I'll eat Jackson's poison and go in after dinner."
"Hey! I'll have you know I'm a great cook! I can fry anything with fins," she stated proudly.

"I just bet you can, Jacques Cousteau," Cindy ribbed.

"Enough out of you, Nurse Ratchet." "That line's getting old, Jack. You need to find some new material."

Erin watched these two like a tennis match in play. It was very fun and she enjoyed the banter instantly. She looked at Jackson who'd started to go back into the kitchen. "Can I help with anything?" she offered.

"Yeah, find something to gag that one with, will ya?" she joked, pointing her cooking tongs at Cindy.

"I meant with dinner," Erin clarified, sending a smirk to Cindy, which made her shake her head.

"Oh, that - nah, I got it. Take a seat at the table. Food'll be done shortly."

Erin did as she was told and sat down at the perfectly set small wooden round table. Red placemats were on the table under each plate and silverware was neatly placed next to them. A fluffed cloth napkin resided next to the forks. To finish off the setting, a fresh glass of water was at the top.

"This is great, Jack. You've turned into quite the hostess."

"Only the best for friends, Hawk." She winked and pulled the last of the fish out of the fryer.

Jackson grabbed their plates and began filling them with fish, fresh steamed broccoli and some wild rice. When the plates were returned to the table, Erin took a deep breath, inhaling all the wonderful smells before her.

"This looks fantastic. Thank you so much for cooking me dinner." Jackson couldn't help but smile. "Don't thank me yet, you haven't tasted it."

"True." Erin cut a piece of fish and blew at it when the steam poured out. "Here goes nothing..." She put it in her mouth and chewed.

Her eyes suddenly closed and she made a sound that hit Jackson right in her southern parts. *God,*

please don't do that again. You're a married woman, you're a married woman...

Erin's eyes opened and she swallowed. "This is better than Bosaki's, Jack. Damn, that's really fantastic!" She held up her water glass. "To the chef," she toasted.

"To me!" Jackson said happily, clinking their glasses together.

They ate their dinner quietly while sharing some small talk about their professions. When the plates were emptied, Erin offered to clean the kitchen. Jackson immediately stopped her. "No way, Hawk. I haven't seen you in ages and I'm certainly not gonna let you spend the time here cleaning my kitchen. You're my guest. I'll get it before I go to bed." With Erin's doubtful glance, she reassured her, "Really, it's not a big deal." Erin acquiesced gracefully and went into the front room to sit.

Cindy came in from Jackie's room to announce that she was awake and wanted to see Erin. Erin swallowed and smiled at Cindy while she got up off the couch. "Great." She looked to Jackson. "Are you coming?"

Jackson shook her head. "I'll let you have a moment of privacy with her if you'd like."

Erin was grateful. "Thank you."

Cindy and Erin walked into Jackie's room. With a barely audible gasp, Erin saw Jackie. Tubes were in most of her orifices and machines scattered her room. A small clear mask rested over her face, but her eyes were shining and looking right at her. With a raise of her hand, she called Erin over to her.

Erin smiled wide, very happy to see her. A soft, *Hey, stranger.* was heard by Erin. She walked closer to the bed and took Jackie's hand before sitting down next to her. "Hi, Jackie." Erin tried to push the memories of her father out of her mind. It was a very difficult task, but she was able to do it. "How are you feeling?"

Jackie whispered, "I'm feeling pretty good today... I'm so glad you could come, honey. It's so good to see your pretty face again."

Erin couldn't help the tears that started to well in her eyes. "I wish..." Erin swallowed and had to take a deep breath. "I wish..."

Jackie stopped her by squeezing her hand. "I know, Erin. You were going through a hard time with your mother... Believe me, we all were." They shared a chuckle, breaking the tension a little bit.

"She's a peach, that one. If I could turn back the hands of time, Jackie..."

"Don't do that to yourself, kid. You'll make yourself crazy... Trust me... I used those same words with Jack the other day."

Erin shook her head. "I'm so sorry you're sick, Jackie. If I could fix it, God I'd die trying."

Jackie looked sternly at her. "No, Jack needs you more than me right now." "Jackie, you are her, well, basically her mother. How can you say that?"

"Because I've watched her live the last several years and without you in her life, her eyes don't sparkle anymore... When she came in last night after talking to you, that sparkle was back... I wouldn't have her lose that for anything in the world." Jackie smiled at Erin, but soon frowned when a small coughing fit began, then Erin let Cindy take over, who came in as soon as she'd heard her patient.

Erin watched as Cindy gently maneuvered the bed so it was upright then double checked Jackie's oxygen flow. When everything checked out and Jackie was calm again, Erin went back to her seat. "Are you ok? I can come back tomorrow after you've rested," Erin offered.

"God, I don't want to sleep anymore. That's all I've been doing. I just wish my body listened to me more. I can nod off in the middle of a sentence these days."

"I understand." Erin gave her a small smile, thinking about her father.

"So tell me about things... how's your dad?"

A look of sadness washed over Erin before she could censor it. When Jackie saw it she knew she had to fill her in. "My dad died several years ago. Lung cancer."

Jackie's eyes welled. "I wondered why Joe had stopped coming up here... Erin, I'm so sorry. I know how much you two meant to each other."

"Thanks. He was one of the good ones." *Like you.* "So I guess Billy Joel was right after all."

Jackie nodded, understanding the reference. "So seeing me like this can't be too easy for you, can it... You didn't have to come, honey..." "Yes, I did. God, for so many reasons." She sniffed back more tears. "I know I hurt Jack and I've tried to think of a way to call her to apologize for things that happened so long ago. I was the one who asked her not to call me, so how could I possibly just call her? I wanted to believe she'd moved on with her life and was happy. I had to believe that." Erin's tears streamed down her face. "I knew she'd tell you about us and the thought of disappointing you both has been killing me, Jackie. You were my family away from home. I've loved you forever and you have to know how sorry I am... for everything..." Erin began to cry in earnest.

"Come here..." Jackie pulled Erin's head down to her chest and she rested her hand on top of it, stroking the red hair gently while she let her cry. "It's ok, I forgive you. But most of all, you have to know that Jack will too. Just make sure you explain everything to her. I know your mother must have put some serious curse on you to walk away like you did. Just tell her."

Erin nodded against the cloth of Jackie's nightgown. "I will, I promise I will."

They stayed that way until Erin heard the deep breathing associated with sleep. When she looked

up, she saw Jackie's eyes closed. She gently held the hand from her head and sat up. She placed a soft kiss on Jackie's bruises, put her hand under the covers, took one last look at the frail and pallid woman in the bed, then got up and quietly left the room.

~*~*~*~*~*

When Erin entered the family room, she was met by two sets of compassionate eyes. Cindy stood up and Erin said, "She's gone back to sleep. She seems to be comfortable though." Jackson stood up from her recliner and Cindy went into Jackie's room to check on her. When Erin and Jackson's eyes met, Jackson saw how red and puffy Erin's were and she immediately opened her arms. Erin practically ran to her and fell easily into the widespread invitation. She wept for the pain she knew Jackson was feeling; she wept for Jackie being so sick; she wept for all the wrongs that could've been prevented by her... if she'd just been strong enough. The tears were endless, but Jackson kept her in a warm, comforting embrace and gently kissed the top of her head. When Erin pulled back, Jackson cupped her face and gently wiped her tears with her thumbs.

"Are you okay? I know that must have been so hard for you." Erin's head bobbed up and down. "It was, but I'm so so glad I came." She reached up and held both of Jackson's hands. "Thank you so much for calling me."

"You're welcome."

"Do you think you're up for a walk outside? I haven't been here in so long, I just want to visit it again." Erin's eyes were filled with hope.

"Sure, it's kinda chilly out, do you want a sweatshirt?" Jackson offered.

"Sure, that would be great."

When Jackson returned from getting her sweatshirt, Erin pulled it over her head and breathed in Jackson's scent. The delicate balance of Jackson's lotion, laundry soap and Jackson herself, was overwhelming Erin's senses. She took a deep breath and smiled. "Thanks."

Jackson walked into Jackie's room and told Cindy they were stepping out, but would return shortly. Walking towards the front door, she held open the screen door for Erin, then followed her outside.

Since Erin had been there last, they had added several outdoor lights to the grounds. She looked around and noticed several of the cabins had been upgraded or rebuilt completely. "You guys must be doing well. I don't remember that big cabin over there." She pointed to the lakefront, which sported a large duplex.

"Things have been pretty good. Word is starting to spread about this place. I guess that huge ad you took out in the national paper is finally paying off. Thanks, by the way, you shouldn't have." She nudged Erin's shoulder, surprised not to feel the smaller woman nudge back. The ease

between them was unmistakable even though so much was still left unsaid. Jackson would be patient as she knew her friend wouldn't be able to keep it in forever. That's just not the person she was. Especially not with her.

Erin turned abruptly to face Jackson. "Why are you being so nice to me?"

Taken aback, Jackson asked her to repeat herself. "Excuse me?"

"I said, why are you being so nice to me? You should be throwing me into the lake, Jack, not coddling me." Erin's emotions were high.

"Hawk, honey, look..." Jackson, not really knowing how far she wanted this to go, took a deep breath and gently held Erin's shoulders. "I know there's a lot we need to talk about, but I also know that you're hurting inside. Until we're ready to hash all of that out, let's just focus on Jackie, okay? If you let me care for you and try to help you through this, it'll help me as well, I swear." When Erin looked at her dumbly, she added, "Please?"

Erin exhaled, exasperated at the never ending compassion of this woman. "You really are one in a million, Jack." She paused and gazed into the warm eyes of her best friend. "I promise you, before I leave here, I'll tell you everything."

"I can live with that."

The two walked around for nearly an hour with Jackson telling her all about Jackie's infirmity; when they'd discovered the cancer down to the present. Erin cried off and on while throwing in a few memories of her father and his own suffering. Jackson was deeply saddened listening to Erin recount Joe's illness, knowing the last years had been extremely hard on her as well.

Chapter Ten

1995 - The Northwoods Island City

Jackson sat on top of the boathouse roof playing her recorder. Eyes closed, she let the tones of her instrument carry her into a zone of complete peace. It had been a wonderful summer for her being back at the resort. Jackson missed Michigan, but this was her home and she'd rather spend her time here. She'd gotten letters from the kids she'd taught and those who she'd just bonded with. The connection they shared through their talents would always be there. Of that she was certain.

Lilting melodies were flowing through the polished wood, and fingers moved gracefully into different positions, creating her own special kind of magic. As she played, she heard the footsteps of her dearest friend, who she'd not seen for four years, bringing a small smile to her lips. The footfalls got louder and soon the top of a red head could be seen.

"That wouldn't be the famous painter, Erin Hawkins coming up my ladder would it?" Jackson

stood to greet her friend.

As Erin climbed over the rung of the ladder, her breath caught at the sight of the woman before her. Jackson, the skinny teenaged girl was nowhere to be found, Erin saw a beautiful woman who had filled into her body, perfectly. Jackson was having similar thoughts as she took in the beautiful woman Erin had become.

Both girls realized they were staring and started to talk at the same time.

"Look at you!" Erin exclaimed. "You look fantastic!" Jackson cried out.

Finally, they just did what came naturally for them and went to each other for a nice warm embrace. They both sighed softly at the renewed connection that had been missing for several summers.

Pulling back, Erin looked up into different colored eyes and smiled widely. "Heterochromia."

"Gesundheit," Jackson joked.

Erin eyed her accusingly. "Do you know how long it took me to figure out that the story you told me about your eyes was a tall tale?" she said, while pointing at Jackson's eyes. "Until I took Biology, I was telling everyone about the magical eyes of my best friend, Jackson Thomas. All she did was go to sleep and they magically changed colors. They'd read about it one day, she'd be so famous!"

Jackson laughed heartily.

"Then all of my dreams were shattered when I learned that it can happen from a trauma in the womb. Man... I was played. And at such an impressionable age too! You should be ashamed of yourself."

Jackson put out her wrists. "Dear lady, I am ready when you are for my punishment." "Bend over, this one will cost you."

Jackson did as she was told and accepted the smack on her ass gladly. "Thank you, ma'am, can I have another?"

"Oh you!" Erin cried out good-naturedly.

Jackson rose from her bent position and pouted. "I get one? That's it?" "When you rate another one, I'll let you know."

Jackson bounced and clapped. "I'll be on pins and needles waiting."

Erin changed the subject quickly. "I heard you playing. You have gotten incredibly good, Jack. I'm so proud of you."

Jackson blushed under the praise. "Thanks, Hawk. It really means a lot coming from you." She motioned down to the blanket. "Have a seat. Tell me how you've been, since I know you look amazing." Erin bumped her shoulder with her own.

"Things are really great. I'm really looking forward to my second year at the Art Institute. I have to leave a week early though to move into my dorm room. I'm kinda sad about that, but I promised myself that we'd just have to make three weeks feel like forever."

Jackson agreed. "I can definitely help with that. I'll make sure to fill your days with witty repartee and exciting adventures that will make you want to run to Chicago by the time I'm all finished."

Erin laughed. "The best part is, I get to live away from home for most of the year. I didn't realize I'd love it so much. I didn't want to come home, not even for the holidays! My mother is close to driving me to drink. She is so crazy, Jack. I wonder where she gets the things she says sometimes. She tried everything to get dad *not* to come up this summer because you'd be back."

Jackson grimaced. "I know she hasn't been the best mother for you, Hawk. At least your dad can balance it out for you some." She put her arm around Erin's shoulder. Erin's head rested against the strong body for a few moments.

"Yeah, he's really wonderful. After mom has one of her tirades, he always calls and we talk about it. He's a great listener. I'm just so glad I haven't disappointed him, too."

"Oh, Hawk, the only reason your mom makes you feel like you've disappointed her is because you're not becoming the woman she wants you to be. You're being who *you* want. And that's what's important. Your dad can see that, she just can't. She's blind to everything around her except what she wants to see." Erin looked up at Jackson in wonder. "You have really grown up, Jack. Sometimes I just listen to you speak and I'm in awe at how much you've changed over the years. For the better, mind you. Not that anything was *wrong* with you per se..."

"Oh, well that makes me feel better," Jackson chimed in, seeing Erin get flustered. "I'm teasing. I appreciate what you've said. I know I've matured a lot over the last few years. I guess change of environment and mindset will do that to you. Catching fish and water skiing in the summer aren't the end all anymore."

"Uggh, I'll never water ski again."

Jackson's arm tightened around her. "I bet not. That was really scary. For all of us. God. Sometimes I still have nightmares about that."

"You do? I thought it was just me. I guess when you have a near death experience, it tends to stay with you for a while." Erin grinned mirthlessly.

"Well, yeah. When you have to do just the right thing to make sure your best friend doesn't die in

front of your eyes, it also kinda sticks with you for some time. That day scared the living shit out of me, Hawk. I was scared witless about telling your mom I'd killed you."

"Oh sure! You were more worried about my mother, not that I'd be dead." Erin laughed.

"Well, there was that, too."

"Oh, thanks for that consolation," she said sarcastically.

"My pleasure." She gave Erin her most endearing smile.

The two stayed up there for a couple of hours, catching up on life stories. The bond between them crackling with energy and alive once again.

~*~*~*~*~*

As the days progressed, Erin and Jackson found their groove and were once again, running and playing all over the grounds. Erin's mother tried time and time again to get Erin to stay in a night or two, but much to her chagrin, her husband would remind her that they were on vacation and urged her to *lighten up*.

With a begrudging attitude, Katie continued to try to get Erin to go shopping with her, or walk the trails with her. Anything to get her away from that Jackson. *I will not lose this fight, Erin. That woman is not good for you to be around.*

Katie had not crossed paths with Jackie since she'd called to berate and insult her niece on that fateful day almost exactly five years ago. Katie felt that Jackie owed *her* the apology for her rude comments and much to Joe's disappointment, wouldn't back down. Joe had continued his relationship with Jackie and Jackson. He found them to be lovely people and was honored to be able to spend time with them. Jackson was a wonderful girl and made him smile with her wit and appealing charm. It was so clear that Erin adored her friend and Joe was glad she could share such a close bond with her.

Joe left their cabin after another round with his wife. He was growing tired of the constant nagging and complaining she was doing regarding their daughter. He had suggested she stay in Paldeer while Erin and he vacationed together, but she adamantly refused to sit back while that "snake" put her fangs in her daughter.

"You have really lost it, you know that, right?" he commented.

"And you are so blind to what is in front of your eyes." The same old argument went back and forth, neither willing to change their opinions.

He went in search of Erin and Jackson to see if they wanted to fish with him. That was always a good time for them. When he found them, Jackson was swinging from a rope tied to a tree and falling into the lake. When her head popped up, she motioned and shouted for Erin to grab the

rope while it was coming her way. Erin grabbed on with both hands.

"I'm coming in, so watch out!" she yelled back at Jackson. Backing up as far as she could, holding the rope tightly, she ran towards the edge of the of grounds and jumped with a piercing shriek. The rope swung her out over a deeper part of the lake. When she was at the farthest stretch of rope, she let go and noisily fell into the water. "Whoa!"

Jackson watched on as Erin broke through the surface of the water with a face-splitting smile. "That was awesome! How come we never did that when we were kids?"

Jackson laughed as she tread water. "Probably because we would've killed ourselves doing that as kids!"

Spitting water that had gone in her mouth, she agreed. "You're right. Let's go again! I'll grab the rope and hand it to you."

"Cool."

They swam back to shore and Jackson got out, accepting the rope from Erin. When Joe appeared, Jackson smiled at him. "You want to try this, old man? Think your ticker could take it?"

"Who you callin' old?" Joe loved the easy teasing between them. He put his fishing poles down and walked up to Jackson.

Erin saw her father approaching the rope and called out. "Dad, you can't be serious! You don't even have your..."

Joe had already begun to run with the rope in hand and was quickly approaching the water. "...suit on," Erin finished.

When Joe's semi-bald head popped up, Erin howled in laughter. "I cannot believe you did that! Mom is going to kill you!"

"That was really fun!" He laughed with his daughter as he swam back to shore. "Nah, by the time I come in from the boat, I'll be dry." He slowly made his way out of the water and smirked at Jackson who was standing there with her hands on her hips and a *I can't believe you actually did that. Good for you.* look about her.

"Nicely done. I think I liked the girly scream at the end the best." Jackson ran after her remark as Joe came after her like a tiger.

Erin laughed as she watched her father run after Jackson with no chance of catching the faster woman. She tied the rope around the tree trunk and gathered her dad's poles then put them in his boat. Jackson ran towards her with Joe walking behind, coughing and catching his breath. When he reached them, he gave Jackson a full body hug from behind, chilling her already wet body with his soaking clothing.

"Thanks," she drawled.

"You girls want to go fishing? Your mother seems to want to do nothing but read today, so I'm on my own."

"Sure, dad, let me just get my shorts and top. Jack you wanna come?" Erin asked.

"Sounds good to me. I'll go grab some sodas from the fridge and tell Jackie we'll be out on the boat."

When Jackson left, Erin looked at her dad with such love in her eyes. "I'm so glad you and Jack get along so well." "She's a wonderful person, peanut. I enjoy people who enjoy life so much. It's really addictive."

Erin smiled at this declaration. "I agree. I just wish mom did, too."

He shook his head in sympathy. "Peanut, sometimes you just can't change someone's point of view, as twisted and crazy as it may seem to you. Your mother has a problem with Jack and evidently her aunt as well. I don't want anything to do with all of that so I just continue to live like I want, whether or not she approves."

"I wish I could do that. She's just so relentless, dad." Erin's expression was one of defeat. "It's always something with her, but God, when it's regarding Jack, I can't do anything!"

"One day, peanut, one day you're gonna live without your mother's constant disapproval. I fear it'll be an ugly day in our house, but you'll feel better. Just be happy, peanut. That's all I'll ever want for you."

Erin hugged her father. "Thanks, dad. I love you." they pulled apart and shared a grin. "Lemme get my stuff and I'll be right back."

He watched her dash to the edge of the water to grab her belongings. Anger welled inside of him then soon dissipated knowing nothing he could do would change the way his wife reacted to Jackson. He knew something was going to have to change or Katie and their marriage would be in trouble.

Jackson soon appeared with a small cooler and jumped into the boat. Erin followed shortly after her and cautiously climbed aboard the craft. The day was a perfect one, temperature in the mid eighties, blue sky and a slight breeze. The trio untied the cleats and soon embarked on a good day of fishing.

~*~*~*~*

With only a couple days left of vacation, Erin was beginning to feel some sadness. The time she'd spent with Jackson had been fantastic. They'd had great adventure-filled days and spent a lot of nights just sitting on the boathouse roof talking about anything and everything. The nights

that it would rain, would keep them in the loft, with a candle or two shining low and illuminating shadows of all shapes and sizes throughout the boathouse. This was Erin's Wonderland and now that Jackson was back, she didn't want to leave. Knowing that Jackson still had a year left of school and would also be leaving shortly, had helped her mind ease her heart. She would be back next summer, and the next, until her parents didn't want to return. By then she would just drive herself up here and vacation alone.

Erin had taken her art supplies up to the loft while Jackie had Jackson doing some errands for her. The sun had almost completely gone down, so she lit the few candles they kept in the loft. Her teenage years would be over by next month and she wanted to do something to commemorate that time which was spent with Jackson. Pulling out a small box from her knapsack, Erin placed it on the blanket. She had only done this a few times with some friends at school, and never to herself. She took off her shirt and bikini top from her body. Grabbing some rubbing alcohol from her bag, she rubbed some on her skin. Pulling open the box, she grabbed the needle and opened the bottle of black ink. With the flick of her thumb on a lighter, she ran the needed over the flame. Picking up the hot needle, she dipped it inside the ink. Taking a deep breath, Erin began to rapidly and rhythmically press the needle into her skin. The initial sting was intense, but she was determined to do this. On occasion she would wipe the bloodied surface with a cloth and admire her work. When the blade took shape, a smile as wide as the Grand Canyon appeared.

Jackson saw the faint light in the loft from the ground floor of the boathouse and headed up. When she climbed to the loft her eyes nearly bugged out of her head.

"Hawk, what are you doing to yourself!" she exclaimed. Freaked at not only at the sight of Erin's bare breast, but at what she was doing with her breast.

Erin looked up and smiled. "Hang on, I'm almost done." She dipped the needle one last time and began the rapid stabbing until she was satisfied. Jackson had sat down in front of her and paid rapt attention.

"Where did you learn to do that?" Jackson's question held some amazement in her voice.

"Remember my friend, Tom, from high school?" Jackson nodded. "Well he taught me how to tattoo using just inks and needles. I did it to some of my floor mates last year, but..." she paused to wipe the blood away. She looked at her work with approval. "I never did it to myself until now." She covered up her work and looked at Jackson. "I've known you throughout my entire teenage years. And they've been the best years I can ever imagine, Jack. I wanted to commemorate that and always remember this place and the time we spent as kids." She revealed her creation.

On her left breast sat a small black tomahawk. Jackson's eyes went wide and then a delighted smile reached her face.

"Hawk, that is probably the coolest thing I've ever seen you do." "What? You've seen me draw plenty of art that was far better than this little thing," she defended.

"No, Hawk. God, this small representation on your skin has so much meaning wrapped in it." Erin could understand that and acknowledged Jackson with a warm smile. "Obviously for anyone who sees it, it may just appear that you have a thing for Indians, but for me, I see our lives."

"That's exactly it, it's our lives, and even though I do have a huge respect for Indians, I wouldn't call it 'a thing'."

"I was kidding."

"Man, my endorphins kicked in, my body is just... wow. Alive!" Erin laughed.

"Did it hurt?" Jackson asked, eyeing the small weapon.

"Oh yeah, initially it hurts a lot. It's piercing your skin, Jack," she explained. "It'll be sensitive for a day or so probably, too." She reached down for some alcohol and rubbed some on her skin, hissing as the cloth made contact. Jackson winced in sympathy.

The two just stared at the image now forever branded on Erin's skin. Erin was so pleased with her work she couldn't stop looking at it.

Jackson suddenly announced, "I want one too."

Erin looked up, her eyes wide. "Seriously?" "Yeah, sign me up. What do I have to do?"

Erin's heart began to beat wildly with excitement. It would be very fitting for Jackson to have the same tattoo. *Yeah, this is a really great idea.*

"Well, with most of my friends, they usually got high or took a shot or three of alcohol. It just depends on how well you do with needles. You're not gonna pass out on me are you? It's ok if you do, we just need to lay you down first. Then I can really drill you." She smiled evilly causing Jackson to momentarily question her judgment.

"I don't like needles and I'm a real wuss when it comes to pain, so I should probably do something before I let you stick me." A thought came to her mind. "I um... smoke a little pot now and again and keep some up here. Do you mind if I do that?"

"Jack, I had no idea you smoked dope!" she cried, amazed she didn't know this part of Jackson's life. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"Eh, it's no big deal, I don't do it very often. Just when I want to really get into my music or I can't sleep. Stuff like that. You're an artist, you can't tell me you haven't dabbled in the ganja." Erin smiled guiltily. "I have done it a few times. I'm just always paranoid my mother will find things to prosecute me with, so I never kept any at the house. She'd turn me over the cops without question."

"Well, you can have some if you want, I have enough." She smiled. "God, we could've done this before tonight had I known. This will be so fun!"

"Sure, I'm game, but I'll do your tat before I do otherwise you might get something like my mother's face with an axe through it." She giggled.

Jackson's eyes perked up. "Really you could do that? I want two of those!" She got up retrieved her stash and sat back down.

"Jack!" "Fine, I'll just stick with the tomahawk... Party pooper..." she pretended to pout, then opened a small wooden box she kept in a corner of the loft. She opened it and fingered the clear baggy, pulling out an unused joint.

She pointed to Erin's lighter and asked, "May I?" Erin handed over the lighter and watched as Jackson lit the marijuana cigarette. Jackson inhaled and held it in her lungs for a few moments then exhaled the sweet smelling smoke.

"That smells good," Erin commented, watching Jackson inhale the now lit joint. Jackson took a few more hits off of the cigarette, then stubbed it out.

Erin realized that she still hadn't put her shirt back on due the tenderness of her skin, so she asked, "Jack, do you mind if I keep my shirt off? It's still really sore." "Sure, it's already out there and all." She winked at Erin, referring to her bare breast. Her easy answer put her at ease.

After a few moments, she looked at Erin with hooded eyelids and a goofy smile. "I'm feeling no pain. Let's do this."

Erin smiled at her willing participant. "One thing left." Jackson looked confused. "What?"

"You gotta take your shirt off, so I can work on your skin."

"Oh." Jackson blushed a little then lifted her shirt off. Her bra still covered the skin Erin needed to work on. *Screw it.* She unlatched her bra, letting fall into her lap, baring her breasts to Erin for the first time.

A small burn started in Erin's groin. She was familiar with these feelings, the ones regarding Jackson were fairly new this summer, but not unwelcome.

Erin looked Jackson in the eye. "Are you ok? You sure you want to do this? Once it's on it's on."

Jackson bounced her head in the affirmative. "Yeah, let's do it."

Erin smiled at how many ways she could play on those words, but decided in Jackson's condition she probably shouldn't. She inched closer to Jackson, but couldn't get a comfortable spot with their knees in the way.

"Jack, I can't get a good position. Um... do you think I could bring my legs over yours if you stretched them out?" she asked warily, not wanting to breach any barriers.

"You mean like, straddle my legs?" Jackson asked looking down at her legs.

You're so pliable in this state, aren't you? "Yeah, that way I can get a better angle and I won't stab you worse than I have to." "Sure, climb aboard."

Erin scooted back and let Jackson extend her legs and opened them somewhat, forming a V. Erin moved closer to Jackson's body and brought her legs over Jackson's. Both women realized what an intimate position they were in, but knew it was the best to carry out their plan. Jackson could feel Erin's breath on her exposed skin and couldn't help the goosebumps that started. Erin noticed right away as Jackson's nipples hardened.

"If you want to wrap your shirt around you, that's fine." "No, I'm good, let's do this before I lose my nerve." The effects of the marijuana were helping that nerve along well. Erin wiped some rubbing alcohol on Jackson's chest, then picked up the needle and dipped it in ink.

"Alright, now try not to move too much, ok?" "K." Jackson bit her lip and tensed up.

"Jack, I haven't even touched you yet. Relax, okay? Once your endorphins kick in, you'll feel a rush like you won't believe."

"Ok, on three. One... two... OW!" Jackson winced at the first pricking of the needle to her skin, but didn't move. Erin's warm hands on her chest were almost worse for her than the needle that was moving impossibly faster into her flesh.

"You're doing great, Jack. Just breathe and relax."

Jackson did as she was told and just kept her eyes locked on Erin's, which were in deep concentration. She noticed the dark outline of blue around the lighter shade coloring her eyes. She fought the temptation of brushing her knuckles down Erin's cheek. She did, however, sweep some hair out of her eyes, that had, coincidentally, fallen as she was watching her. She reached up and lightly tucked the strands behind her ear.

"Thanks," Erin said without looking up from her canvas. When she did look up, she did a double take when she saw the love coming from Jackson's eyes. Love that went beyond a simple friendship. Something was being said with that one glance. Her heart instantly sped up and she had to try to calm her now shaking hands. *OK, that was intense. What's going on with me?*

"You're welcome," Jackson's voice fell to a whisper.

Erin continued to pierce Jackson's skin and wiped away any excess blood that dripped down. Pressing against Jackson's chest, she could feel her heart beating quickly. She cast another glance into those mesmerizing eyes, which were boring into her own. She swallowed nervously, not

believing the tide swirling in her belly.

Trying to break the tension she said, "Stop looking at me like that, you're making me nervous." She chuckled trying to hide the tremor in her voice.

Jackson replied, "Sorry. I think those endorphins kicked in and I'm feeling really good right now. I mean, *really* good."

"Just keep still, I'm just about finished." Erin continued her work for a while until, with one final swipe of the cloth, her masterpiece was finished. She put down the needle and dabbed some alcohol on the cloth to wipe on Jackson's chest.

"Now, this is going to sting, so hold onto something."

When Erin placed the alcohol soaked cloth on Jackson's skin, Jackson reached up and grasped Erin's face in her hands, lowered her head and kissed her. The kiss left Erin initially feeling shocked, but soon found herself lost in the sensations of Jackson's lips against her own. When she responded to the kiss, Jackson let out a whimper that traveled down Erin's stomach into her groin. She reached up and put her arms around Jackson, pulling their naked torsos together. They both moaned at the contact, which intensified their kiss. Erin wrapped her legs around Jackson tightly, until her core met Jackson's solid stomach. Jackson gently probed her mouth with her tongue and felt her eyes roll into her head when Erin's met it with just as much eagerness. Erin's hands were wrapped in Jackson's hair, gently massaging her already invigorated scalp. With another squeezing of their bodies, Erin grimaced at the tenderness of her newly punctured skin. Slowly the bodies pulled apart, lips slowly separated. She noticed a little blood on both of their bodies and wiped it with the cloth.

After a few heartbeats, Erin looked up into hungry eyes and felt Jackson's stare down to her toes. She had to look away.

She took a breath. "Why did you do that?"

"You said to hold onto something. Your face was the nearest thing I could grasp."

"I'm serious, Jack." Erin's voice brought a solemn look to Jackson's face.

"Because I've been wanting to do that for a long time and I just couldn't stop myself, anymore."
"How long?" Erin was confused.

"My whole life." Jackson's smile was warm and genuine.

"Wow... well it definitely felt like that." Erin still hadn't looked back at Jackson.

Jackson gently reached under Erin's chin and moved it up so she could look her in the eye. "What are you thinking?"

"I'm thinking that was some good weed!" she laughed, trying to break the intensity in the room. She didn't know what to do with all the emotions running amok inside of her.

"Hawk, come on. Talk to me. If I just damaged something between us, I need to know, but I felt something shift between us over the last few weeks, especially tonight, and I don't think I'm wrong."

Erin tried to look away, but Jackson wouldn't let her. "You're not." She swallowed. "I just don't know what to do about it. You've had much longer to handle being attracted to girls. I didn't know I was until I saw you 18 days ago," she said in a whisper. "I'm really confused."

Jackson caressed her face with the back of her knuckles. "It's ok, we can go at your pace. Fast, slow, it doesn't matter to me. I don't want you doing something you don't *want* to do."

"Thank you, Jack. I mean that." She tentatively reached up and stopped. "Can I hug...?"
"Come here." Erin reached up and held Jackson tightly, feeling more connected to her than she'd felt with anyone in her life before. They stayed that way for a long time, just relishing in their closeness. Their breathing slowed and the intense grasp they held on each other changed into the gentle warm embrace they both were very familiar with.

They pulled out of their hug and realized that they were still naked from the waist up. Erin's blush was matched by Jackson's and soon they were covering up their chests as much as they could without it being painful.

"I'll take a hit off that now, if you don't mind." Erin pointed to the stubbed out joint on the box.

"Sure, I may help you with that." They both finished the joint off together and soon were giggling at each other. Erin put her supplies away and Jackson put her stash away. They sat down with their backs against the wall, underneath the window. They leaned lightly against each other, trying to piece together in their addled minds what had happened tonight. They'd each look down every now and again at their new tattoos and smile at its meaning. They would have that forever, just like they'd always have each other.

After a time of soft words and gentle touches, the girls realized they'd better head back down. They carefully dressed, blew out the candles and went down to the ground floor of the boathouse. They made their way through docked areas and out onto the grounds. As they walked over to the pier, the moon glistened brightly over the water, catching their attention. They sat in the chairs on the dock and silently watched the water ripple from tiny waves coming into shore. The night was as peaceful as either of them had ever known.

When Erin looked at her watch, she noticed it was approaching midnight and knew if she didn't get home before then her mother would come out looking for her.

"Jack, I gotta get going. It's getting late and I really don't want my mom coming out here."
Jackson agreed.

"You're right. Well, we still have a couple days together before you go, so let's do something just for us tomorrow, ok?"

"I have no idea what that could be, but yes, let's do that."

They got up and walked hand in hand down the pier. Jackson walked Erin to her cabin to bid her goodnight. "Sleep well, Hawk. And thank you for my new tomahawk. I absolutely love it. Every time I touch it or look at it, I'll always think of you."

Erin looked at Jackson in such a different light after their kiss. The attraction she was feeling was growing with each minute they were together. As much as she didn't want their evening to end, she knew it must. She turned to walk up the steps to the cottage then stopped. She turned, walked back to Jackson, pulled her around the corner out of sight of the door. She reached up and slowly pulled the dark head down so their lips could meet one more time. The kiss was very passionate and filled with so much love, Erin was loath to break the contact. She pulled away softly, adding several kisses, each more chaste than the last until they parted. Jackson heavily leaned her forehead against Erin's.

"Wow," Jackson breathed.

"Yeah, me too," she agreed. "Goodnight, Jack." Erin backed up not sure if her legs would work. With a final touch to Jackson's hand, Erin rounded the corner and went up the stairs of the cottage.

"Goodnight, Hawk," Jackson said into the air and on shaky legs, made them work to take her home.

Once inside the cabin, Erin's mother was waiting on the couch for her. "Where in God's name were you? It's almost midnight, Erin!" she nearly screamed.

"Mother, calm down, I was just in the boathouse with Jack." "Of course you were. I should've figured you'd be with..." She stopped noticing a spot of blood on Erin's blouse. "What the hell happened?" She pointed to her chest.

"Oh, that, it's nothing." "The hell it isn't. Pull your shirt up, now."

"Mother..." she argued futilely.

"Now!"

When Erin pulled up her shirt, her mother saw the tattoo above her bikini top and began to yell. "That had better not be what I think it is. Now you're desecrating your body? What the hell is wrong with you, Erin? Did *she* make you do this? Was this *her* idea?" she nearly spat her words at Erin making her cringe and blink wildly.

"No, Mother, I did this myself." "Why would you do something like this to your body? You can't get those things off," Katie explained uselessly. "I don't want it off, mother. I put it there,

because I wanted it there."

"Erin, why must you continually and intentionally do things that make me uncomfortable! I am so sick of your attitude, young lady. You are just doing this to make me angry and upset, but you know what, it's working!"

Joe walked into the family room, being awakened by the shouting. "What is going on out here? I don't think they heard us in Chicago, yet, but let's keep trying!" he yelled at Katie. "What could she have possibly done to warrant this, Katie?"

"Show him." She pointed at Erin's breast. "She's branded herself with a... tomahawk!"

"You're about to bust a blood vessel because she got a tattoo?"

Shaking her head wildly. "No, Joe, she did this *herself!*"

Joe looked at Erin and shook his head like *Why do you do this to yourself, you know she's going to yell at you.* "Peanut, why did you give yourself a tattoo?" Erin was letting her tears come now. "I did it so I could remember all of my childhood up here. You both know how special this place is to me. It always will be. So when I thought about it, it seemed perfect, and then Jack saw it and wanted one too." "Jackson saw your naked breast? What else aren't you telling me?" she snarled.

"Nothing, mother," she lied. "We just wanted to commemorate our time on Lake Tomahawk. It's not a damn crime!" she shouted, very upset at the way this night had shifted.

"I don't believe you!" she yelled.

"Katie! That is enough!" Joe shouted. He lowered his voice. "This conversation is over. There is nothing that can be done about it now. It's midnight and I don't want to spend the rest of this night screaming at you." He turned to Erin. "Peanut, I know you wanted to do something for you guys, but it might have been a little excessive. Perhaps if you'd asked, it would've been less of a shock to your mother and I." Erin's tears fell harder, knowing she'd disappointed her father.

"Now, I want you to go to bed and Katie, I want you to as well. I'm going to sleep on the couch because I am far too angry to share such a close proximity with you right now."

Erin ran into her bedroom and closed the door. Katie stormed off and slammed the door to her room. Joe sat heavily down on the couch, head in his hands and sighed. "Something's gotta give here." He laid down and pulled the afghan from the top of the couch down across his body. With a final sigh, he closed his eyes and fell into a restless sleep.

Chapter Eleven

Present - The Northwoods Island City

Erin stood on the dock in the morning sun, rubbing the tattoo she'd created years ago. Thinking back to that day was very bitter sweet for her. Her mother, stating it was a desecration of her body, countered all the love and symbolism that went into it. Erin wished she could take back that summer and do things over again. This time, she'd have the strength to stand up to her mother and all of her bigotry.

She felt Jackson approach before she saw her and turned to greet her. "Good morning. It's so beautiful here, Jack. God, I can't believe how much I've missed this." Jackson was very pleased that Erin's love of this place hadn't changed. "Morning. Yeah, I don't think I'll ever get tired of this view, either. It's so much a part of me, I can't imagine living without it." She looked right at Erin and the two didn't miss the double entendre snuck in there.

"That would be like a fish out of water, Jack. If that happened, you'd be miserable, and I'd be miserable for you." The metaphor game was one Erin didn't want to play, but they weren't ready to talk yet. "So how's Jackie this morning?"

Jackson's face fell. "She's not doing to well, Hawk. Her doctor is in with her now. She doesn't feel optimistic at all." Jackson's eyes began to well and Erin instantly put her arms around her.

"I'm so sorry, Jack." Erin could feel the tremors from Jackson's body. The tears were falling freely down Jackson's face. She finally had someone to lean on that she trusted. Even after all this time, Erin would be the one to get her through this terrible time. "Shh, you just let it out, honey. I'm right here." *Finally.*

Jackson cried for a while, unwilling to completely unleash her sadness before now. She sat heavily into the metal chair and stared out over the water. Erin wanted to do something to make her friend feel better, but wasn't sure what she could do. She knew times like these made your body want to shut down, and the only thing you had energy for was to make more tears. Some times there was no consolation. *But I can try.* An idea came into her head and she went with it.

"Are the keys to the boat, still in the boathouse?" she asked, trying to mask her excitement.

"Yeah, why?" Jackson was confused.

"I'll be right back." "Wait, grab the keys off the far right hook. You can take the good boat."

"You mean we." Erin smiled secretively. "I'll be right back." Erin ran to the boathouse, but once inside, her mind reminded her what had happened when she was there last. Shaking away the memories, she went to the key rack, and grabbed the last set of keys. Returning quickly to Jackson, she dangled them in front of her.

"Wanna go for a ride, little girl?" she asked playfully.

Jackson gave her a tiny grin and got up off the chair. "Sure. You gonna tell me where we're going?"

"Nope, but I'm sure you can guess once we get there." "Ha ha. You're no fun." "Ah, but that's where you're wrong." She started the engines once the boat was untied and began to slowly pull away from the dock. "Hang on!"

She pushed up the lever on the side of the wheel and the boat picked up amazing speed in very little time. "Whoa!" Erin cried, not expecting such power.

Jackson was holding onto the side of the boat. "Have you ever driven one of these before?" her voice held a little panic.

"No! But how hard can it be?" she argued. Jackson acknowledged that she was right and sat back to enjoy the ride. The boat effortlessly ran through the water of Lake Tomahawk, carrying along two of its favorite people.

As they got closer to Erin's destination, Jackson's face lit up like a child in a toy store. "You're taking me to get potato salad!"

Erin's smile was electric. "Yes ma'am!" She watched on as Jackson's energy level increased dramatically. They pulled up to the docks and Jackson waved to an old friend who'd worked that dock since she'd been a child.

"Hey, Roy! How's it going today?"

"Well if it isn't young Jackson Thomas. Where have you been girlie girl?" he smiled brightly at her.

"I haven't been around much, sorry for that." They tied the boat up so they could head to the convenience store that held Jackson's gold mine. Roy gave them a hand up and both women stood on the docks. "My aunt Jackie has cancer, Roy, so I've been taking care of her." His face fell with the news. Knowing all of the Thomas's for quite sometime, Roy felt a wave of sadness well inside of him. "I am so sorry. She's a wonderful lady. Please give her my best, won't you Jack?"

She lightly touched his arm. "I will. It was nice to see you. We'll just be a few minutes. I don't know if you remember my friend Erin?" she asked, bringing Erin to her side.

"Of course. My you sure grew up from that tiny towhead I used to know. It's nice to see you again, Erin."

Erin smiled at this sweet man. "Nice to see you too. I took this one out to get some of her favorite..." "Don't tell me. That darn potato salad?" He guessed, making the girls laugh.

"You guessed it. I figured it could do some good since she loves that stuff almost more than air." Jackson watched the conversation float between Erin and Roy and jumped in. "Hey! Hello, I'm standing right here." *I have really missed her.*

Erin smiled and looked her up and down. "Why yes you are." Jackson rolled her eyes.

"Ok you girls. I'll keep watch of your vessel in the meanwhile. Enjoy your time shopping."

The girls waved. "Thanks!" they said in unison.

Jackson picked out a two-pound container and had the deli woman fill it with her favorite side dish. When it was handed to her, Jackson asked for a plastic fork. She immediately opened the container and put a huge forkful of the salad in her mouth. Eyes closing in absolute pleasure, she moaned loudly.

Erin walked up and paid the patient woman behind the counter, and apologized, "Sorry, can't take her anywhere."

"Dankoo," Jackson mumbled through her full mouth and waved her fork at the amused woman as they exited.

The women thanked Roy for watching the boat and he helped launch them back on their way.

"I actually thought you'd wait to eat that with lunch. Silly me," Erin joked, putting the key into the ignition.

Jackson swallowed. "This is the breakfast of champions, Hawk! It has been so long since I came over here. I didn't realize till I saw Roy that it's been at least a year since I've had this stuff." She smiled happily into her plastic container. Erin drove the boat much slower this time and just enjoyed the feeling of being on the water again.

"You've been a little busy."

Jackson's head bobbed. "Yeah, I guess I have." She looked to Erin with so much gratitude.

"Thank you for being here, Hawk. Not just the potato salad, but coming to see Jackie. I know it meant so much to her."

"You're welcome, Jack. I wanted to come. I'll do everything I can to help you through this. Whatever you need, it's yours. You know that, right?" Erin looked over at Jackson who was staring out into the water. Her hair was blowing wildly from the wind on the boat, but Erin thought she'd never seen anything more beautiful. Jackson turned her head and their eyes met. Even now, the love they felt for each other was still so evident.

"I do." She reached over and touched Erin's shoulder. "I really appreciate it."

The rest of the trip was spent in silence as the two let their thoughts carry them most of the way home.

~*~*~*~*~*

After the boat was tucked safely back in its slip, Jackson carried her booty into the house with Erin right by her side. Janet, the day nurse greeted them. She outstretched her hand to Erin. "Hi, I'm Janet, Jackie's day nurse, I don't think we've met."

Erin smiled at the plump, black haired woman. "I'm Erin, nice to meet you. Jack speaks the world of Jackie's team."

"Well, that goes both ways. We love these ladies." She smiled warmly at Jackson. "We'd just wished we'd met them in different circumstances."

"Thank you, Janet. I couldn't imagine better people taking care of Jackie for me." Jackson was very touched by her words.

"She's awake right now. Her doctor just left, but I suspect you know the substance of her findings."

Jackson nodded solemnly. "I do. I just want to make sure she's not in any pain for her last days." Janet put a reassuring hand on Jackson's forearm. "Don't worry, she will go peacefully, I promise."

Jackson looked at Erin. "Wanna go say good morning?"

"Sure." Jackson gently touched the small of Erin's back, leading them into Jackie's room.

A light beeping noise was heard from a new heart monitor that had been brought in with her doctor. Jackie's pallor had worsened since Erin had seen her last night. She knew from the looks of her, it wouldn't be long before Jackie took her leave from this world.

"Hello, sunshine!" Jackson greeted cheerfully, bringing a small twinkle to Jackie's eyes. "How are you feeling today?"

Jackie shrugged a little, not able to bring words forth just yet.

"Jackie, look what Hawk got me!" She showed her the plastic container she hadn't put down since its purchase. This brought a slight sound from Jackie and a small smile. "Ah ha! I knew that'd getcha." Jack looked around, and not seeing Janet, she pulled the mask off of Jackie to put a small liquid smear of the salad into her aunt's mouth then quickly put the mask back on."

A light smacking of Jackie's lips and a low hum of approval was her response. Jackson laughed at her aunt, knowing she was as much of a sucker for this stuff as she was.

Erin watched on as Jackson proved once again the amazing compassion she had in her heart. She knew Jackson thought of Jackie as her mother and knew all too well how awful it was to lose a parent you loved. The tenderness that Jackson showed Jackie was almost painful for her to watch. The memories were so tangible as she watched the two interact.

"I'm hogging all of your stage time and poor Hawk traveled so far to see you. Let me go fill up your water jug and I'll be right back."

Erin sat where Jackson was and grasped one of Jackie's hands lightly. "Hey, lady." Jackie gripped her hand a little. She saw a book on her nightstand and asked, "Do you want me to read to you a little?" Jackie blinked slowly with a slight squeeze of her hand. Erin picked up the book and smiled at the title. *Moby Dick*. "Jack always did want to catch the big one, didn't she?" Jackie's eyes sparkled and Erin turned to the first page. "Call me Ishmael..."

Erin began to read the classic to Jackie. When Jackson reentered with the full water jug, she quietly put it down and sat in a corner chair to listen; potato salad safely stored in the refrigerator for later. She closed her eyes and let the sound of Erin's voice soothe her wounded soul. The more she listened, the more she heard Erin's voice from the past letting her go and realized that she needed to know the whole story. She'd thought that she wanted to wait, but she wanted all of her pain at once and didn't want one only to be followed by the other. *I just want this hurt to go away.*

After an hour of reading, Erin quietly rose and put the book down when she realized that Jackie had fallen asleep. When she turned to talk to Jackson, she too, had nodded off. She silently walked over to Jackson, grabbed a light blanket draped over the armrest and covered her. She stirred only a little, but easily went back to visit her dreams.

Once she left Jackie's room, Erin saw Janet, who was sitting on the couch, doing some needlepoint. Looking up, Janet noticed Erin's presence. "Hi, how's our girl doing?"

"Well, *both* of our girls are sleeping right now. I started reading to Jackie and they both went out just like that." She snapped her fingers.

"That does it every time. Maybe Jack was read to as a child, but I know whenever I read to Jackie while she's in there, she goes out faster than Jackie!"

"You know, I'll have to ask Jack that when she wakes up to see if there is some Pavlovian effect going on there." Janet smiled warmly at the charming woman. "It's a beautiful Saturday out there, so I think I'm gonna take my sketchbook and head on out to the pier." "That sounds like a fantastic idea. I'll let them know where you've scurried off to."

Nodding Erin thanked her. "I appreciate it. It was nice to meet you Janet. Hopefully Jackie's pain will be over soon."

"I feel the same way."

~*~*~*~*~*~*

Erin sat on the pier happily drawing another landscape. Her fingers were chalky from the pastels she was using. An older man was fishing on the pier with his grandson and she'd asked if they wouldn't mind being her subjects for a while.

"We'd be happy to, young lady. After all, unless you got a fish on your hook, we'd just be sitting here waiting anyway."

Erin laughed at his answer and completely lost herself in her work. When she was making the final touches to her picture, a shadow was cast on her paper and she looked up, shading her eyes. Jackson had woken from her nap and went looking for her. She sat down next to Erin on the wood of the pier and remained quiet. Occasionally she'd look at Erin and when she was caught, she'd look away. This happened several times before Erin finally stopped and said, "Is there something on your mind? You're like a little kid waiting for me to ask you to speak."

"I just don't know if I want the answer." "What's the question?" she asked quietly.

"Will you tell me what happened?" she didn't have to expand. They both knew exactly what she meant.

Erin stared at her for a few moments. "Are you sure you want to do this now? I thought you wanted..." "I know what I thought, but having you here and not knowing is about to drive me crazy," Jackson gently cut her off.

Erin thought for a moment. "Can you wait until tonight? I need to make a call to my event host, Kim. I just want to make sure she doesn't have any questions about the pieces for the show and whatnot."

Jackson agreed. "Sure. I'll meet you after dinner. Can we talk on the roof? That's always been a good place for us to communicate."

Erin swallowed nervously then answered, "Of course we can meet there. I haven't been up there since I got here, so I hope I can still get up the ladder." She laughed, trying to break the intensity from Jackson.

"Oh, please, if I can still get up there, I know you can."

"Alright, then. I'll meet you later."

Jackson got up and walked away. Erin was so full of emotion she wasn't sure what to do with it all. This was a surprise to her and she'd thought she'd have a few more days to prepare what she wanted to say. If Jackson wanted to know, then she was going to get an earful.

She finished with her drawing, signed the bottom and pulled it out of her book. She stood and collected her things and walked to the other side of the pier where her subjects were. The older man looked up and the friendly red haired painter. When she gave him the drawing, his eyes became wide.

"This is just beautiful! May I have it for my grandson?" he asked, excitement clearly in his voice.

"Yes, please. Enjoy it." With a final wave, she left the man on the dock unaware of the price tag that an original Erin Hawkins picture would receive if sold in any gallery.

She walked into her cottage, put her supplies down and sat on the couch pondering her evening ahead.

"Oh, boy, here we go..." she whispered and closed her eyes, not looking forward to reliving that time.

Chapter Twelve

1995 - The Northwoods Island City

When Erin awoke the next day, not only did her eyes burn from crying, but the etching on her chest burned. She slowly got out of bed, opened her bag and pulled out the alcohol. Lifting her shirt over her head, she began to apply the stinging solution to the tattoo. *I wonder if Jack's is feeling like this too?* The memory of Jackson from last night came crashing down on her.

"Oh my God," she breathed. "Jack."

Memories of their bared chests while she created, Jackson's eyes blazing into her own and then Jackson's mouth on hers. She could feel a slow inferno building in her stomach. Thinking about their naked torsos touching was sending all sorts of warmth throughout her body. Her next thoughts, unfortunately returned to the shouting match that occurred when she walked into the cottage. Katie had been out of control and Erin was actually a little afraid. Her mother had been irrational before, but last night was different. She was just grateful her father walked in when he did. Knowing that her father was disappointed in her, was an awful feeling for Erin. She'd always been a great daughter in his eyes and to have that image marred was troubling. One thing she knew, she could always talk to him and she would surely do that today.

Putting her shirt back on, she opened her door and went to use the bathroom. Looking around, she saw the couch was empty, but her mother's door was still closed. *He must have gotten up early and gone out fishing.* She walked in the bathroom and closed the door. Looking at her image in the mirror, Erin lifted her shirt to view her design in a different perspective. When the tomahawk came into view, she couldn't help the smile that appeared on her face. She was very proud of her creation, regardless of what her mother thought.

She used the facilities and turned on the shower. Testing the water, Erin got into the shower and sighed as the water trickled down her body. She began to hum after thoughts of Jackson entered her mind. She unconsciously smiled and soaped up her body. The tattoo stung a little, but was soon rinsed of all detergents. When she grabbed the bottle of shampoo, she heard the door to the bathroom open. Her heart raced when she saw her mother's silhouette on the other side of the shower curtain.

"Mother, I'm taking a shower. Can't you wait?"

When no answer came, she began hearing the strains of the string arrangement from the movie *Psycho* in her mind. Without another second going by, the curtain was unceremoniously pulled

open, baring her naked form to her mother's angry eyes.

"What else has she marked on you?" Her mother began pawing at her like a crazy person. "Show me!"

"Mother stop it! What is the matter with you!" she began to scream.

"I don't want you near that girl! She is the devil's work!"

Erin, not wanting to deal with this another second, pushed her hard and pointed the showerhead at her; the water drenching her.

"Get out of here! I can't believe you would come in here and do this!" Erin screamed. "Look at yourself, Mother!" When her mother didn't move, she yelled again. "GET OUT!"

Her mother gave her a very angry glance, then left the bathroom. Erin quickly jumped out of the shower, locked the bathroom door and began to cry. She sat her wet body onto the toilet and wept into her hands. "Jesus Christ."

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When Erin finished her shower, she walked out of the bathroom and quickly entered her bedroom. She closed the door and began to dress herself briskly to prevent another examination from her mother. The disbelief in what her mother had done was still racing through her mind. When she was dressed, she dragged a comb through her wet hair, slipped on her thongs, grabbed her pack and opened her door. She saw her mother sitting at the kitchen table, unmoving. The anger she was feeling was building inside of her. She desperately wanted to lash out at her mother for such an invasion of her privacy. The cowardice in her won and she opted not to say a word. She shouldered her backpack on her right shoulder and turned towards the door.

"I'm serious Erin, I don't want you around her anymore," The icy voice intoned.

Erin turned to face her mother. "I'm going to hang out with Jack until I leave, mother. If she hasn't cast an evil spell on me in the last three weeks, one more day isn't going to kill me."

They stared at each other for a long time before her mother looked away. "You'd better be home before ten tonight if you know what's good for you."

"Mother, I'm going to be twenty in about three weeks. I'm a little old for a curfew. I'll be home before midnight as usual. I'll confer with dad when I see him on the docks."

"I'm sure you will," she said sarcastically.

Erin angrily turned and left her mother alone in their cottage. As soon as her feet hit the grass, she saw Jackson on the dock talking and laughing with her father. Her mood instantly brightened and her step remarkably lightened. Erin's stomach did a little flip at the sight of Jackson wearing only shorts and a bikini top.

When she came into view, the two of them waved at Erin, and she immediately smiled and waved back. Jackson instantly ran down the pier to greet her.

"Hey, you," she called, adding a discreet wink, causing a small blush to color Erin's cheeks.

"Hey, back." Jackson noticed the red rimming around Erin's eyes and questioned it.

"Hawk, what's wrong?" Erin shook her head.

"Not in front of my dad, ok?" she whispered. "I'll tell you later."

Jackson nodded and turned to Erin's father. "Your dad wants to take us fishing since it's your last full day here. You up for that?"

"Yeah, peanut. Let's catch that elusive Muskie today, whaddy say?" His exuberance was addictive and she couldn't help but agree to go.

"Well, what are we waiting for then? Let's go get it!"

The afternoon was spent in the warm sun and after an hour of fishing, the girls put their poles down and went to the tip of the boat to lay in the sun. Their bodies were side by side and their smiles towards each other were warmhearted. Joe couldn't help but notice the shift in their demeanor. Their heads were closer when they spoke, the tone of their voices was softer and as they bathed in the sun, he didn't miss the brief squeeze Erin gave Jackson's hand. He turned and continued to fish while his mind absorbed all of this new information. It wasn't a surprise for Joe, it is just different to think something than to see it outright.

The dinner hour had arrived and Joe as per his usual, took his family to Bosaki's for dinner. Katie absolutely refused to have Jackson sit at their dinner table for another meal. After the shower incident, Erin was not going to go to battle with her mother about her. Dinner was a quiet affair, but in Erin's eyes, it was the most peaceful time she'd shared with her mother in days.

When they returned home, Erin grabbed her sack and went towards the door. She turned to her father who was sitting on the couch. "I'll see you before midnight, dad," she said, not addressing her mother at all.

"Ok, peanut. Have fun." They shared a smile and without sparing her mother a glance, she left the cottage.

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Jackson was waiting for Erin in the loft of the boathouse. When she heard Erin's footsteps get closer, she couldn't help the hammering that was going on inside of her chest. Erin's red head appeared as did a large smile for Jackson.

"Hey," Erin greeted.

"I've been waiting for you forever," Jackson said with a pout.

"What for?" she asked, puzzled.

"So I could do this." Jackson pulled Erin to her and kissed her very passionately. Their lips fused together instantly and soon their tongues followed suit. A moan left Erin's throat, which ratcheted up Jackson's already insatiable desire for Erin. They stayed that way for several moments, simply reacquainting their mouths. They pulled away slowly and Erin was the one to breathe out in wonder.

"Wow. My God, you're good at that." She giggled. "Why don't you have a girlfriend, again? They don't know what they're missing." "I've been waiting for you," she said seriously. Erin met her eyes and knew she wasn't teasing.

"Wow."

Jackson smiled. "Your vocabulary seems to be stunted when you're kissed properly. I'll take that as a huge compliment." Erin lightly slapped her arm and Jackson added, "Oh, hurt me, baby."

Erin's face couldn't have been any redder, but she couldn't stop laughing. "Jack, stop!" Jackson loved to tease Erin and now she had a whole other arsenal to bring into it: Sexual discovery.

Erin moved away from Jackson's grasp to sit down on the blanket. Jackson plopped down across from her, laying on her side with her hand holding her head. When Erin looked at her, her mind began to paint. Jackson had been the subject of many pictures, but this one, could be her most favorite.

"Jack, will you let me draw you like that?" Jackson's eyebrow raised.

"You want to draw me like this?" It was more of a statement than a question.

"Yes, with the light coming in through the window and the candles you lit, you look... simply beautiful." Jackson blushed red hot at the compliment. "What do you need me to do?" she whispered with a heaviness to her voice.

"Just stay put as long as you can and I'll tell you what happened this morning with my mother."

Jackson took a deep breath. "Alright, Picasso, let's get this show on the road before my hand falls asleep. I might need it to knock your mother's block off." "Ha ha." Erin's look went from playful to serious. "You won't like what she did though."

"I'm listening."

As Erin drew her subject, her fingers flew across the page with grace and passion. She told Jackson about the incident in the shower and almost had to restrain her from going after her.

"Jack, it's ok, I'm fine. Lay down, so I can finish." Jackson's anger made her cheeks flush brightly. Erin didn't comment, but it did add a nice color for her picture.

"Erin if she ever lays a hand on you, I... I just won't be responsible for my actions, how's that?"
"Thank you for coming to my defense, it means everything to me." She shook her head. "She's really over the edge these days. I have no idea what pushed her over, but she's just... gone."
"Maybe she needs to see someone and I dunno get on some medication. An antipsychotic or something." "Maybe?"

"Ok, she does." They shared a laugh.

When Erin was finished, she turned her sketchbook around so Jackson could see the finished product. What she saw made her eyes well. Erin obviously saw her in a way she never did.

"Wow, Hawk, this is just... breathtaking. And the picture is nice too," she joked, trying to clear the tears from her eyes.

Erin had already seen her reaction and was extremely pleased. "This is how I see you, Jack. You *are* breathtaking to me. Sometimes when I look at you, my heart just... hurts."

Jackson looked deeply into her eyes and replied, "I know that feeling all too well."

Erin pulled out the drawing and gave it to Jackson.

"Thank you. Now I can say I knew you when..." Jackson teased.

Erin smiled, put her sketchbook away and looked at her ever-present watch. Noticing it was after ten o'clock, her heart sank knowing this was their last night together. She pulled some wet naps from her bag and wiped the ink from her fingers. Jackson watched on in amusement.

"Such a tidy young woman you are."

After a couple of heartbeats, Erin looked squarely into Jackson's eyes. It was unnerving for the women at first, but they soon lost their shyness and felt the emotions radiate from one another.

"Jack... I have something else I want to give you." Erin swallowed nervously.

"Oh, yay, I love presents." Jackson sat straight up. "Gimme."

"It's right here," Erin said softly.

Jackson's heart began to beat wildly. *Did she just say what I think she said?* She swallowed and spoke to clarify, "Where is it?"

Erin pushed down the tiny strap of her shirt off her left shoulder, and repeated the action on her

right. Jackson moved closer and cupped Erin's face.

"Are you sure you want to do this?"

With a simple nod of her head, Erin leaned forward and captured Jackson's lips in a very tender kiss. "I'm very sure."

Jackson returned the kiss, the gentleness of her lips caused Erin to sigh. As they both leaned forward in their seated position, Jackson slowly rose to her knees with Erin following suit. Jackson gently cupped Erin's face, kissing her with incredible tenderness. She reverently placed kisses on her lips, cheeks, eyelids then back to her mouth. Erin felt like she was being worshiped and her body was responding amazingly. She could feel the dampness between her legs and she was only *kissing* Jackson. She wasn't sure if she could handle anything more.

Jackson used her weight to pull Erin towards her. "Come here, let's lay down." Jackson's hands were shaking. Erin noticed them and looked into Jackson's eyes.

"I'm so glad you're nervous too." "I am. I'm still waiting to wake up."

Erin kissed her gently. "I promise I'm not a dream." Erin laid down on her back and looked up at Jackson. Jackson's eyes were smoldering. "You are to me." Jackson returned the kiss and moved to lay on top of Erin's body. Erin's hands found their way into Jackson's hair and grasped onto it gently. Jackson pulled up and stared down into her blue eyes. "I love you, Hawk... more than I can ever say."

"Then show me," Erin whispered and Jackson was soon possessing her mouth with her lips and tongue.

Their bodies were on fire. Jackson's hands were everywhere at once, causing Erin to whimper with desire. Jack slowly raised Erin's shirt and gently traced lines on her stomach with her fingertips. Erin's stomach reflexively shook with fervent tremors. She grasped onto Jackson when she felt the first tentative touch to her breast. Both women sighed loudly.

Jackson lifted Erin's shirt as high as she could, until Erin offered to remove it all together. When Erin took off her watch, shirt and bra, Jackson did the same then pressed their bodies together. The intimate contact made them both exhale loudly and press more tightly together. Jackson opened her eyes to see Erin's closed in rapture and couldn't imagine a more beautiful sight. Looking down she noticed their tattoos were touching and made Erin aware of it.

"Look, they touch when our bodies are together. This completely bonds us, Hawk."

Erin smiled at the sentiment and reached up to caress Jackson's soft cheek. "I love you, Jack." Putting her hand behind Jackson's neck, she pulled her down to kiss her with all the love in her heart. The passion took Jackson by surprise and she moaned into Erin's mouth. Jackson's kisses moved down her jaw line to Erin's throat. She blazed a trail of hot kisses down her throat to the swell of her left breast. She reverently kissed the colored skin, then moved lower to pull Erin's

nipple into her mouth. She moaned at the texture of the pebbled flesh against her tongue. Erin's body began to move against Jackson's; her underpants wet with desire.

Jackson moved her hand down to Erin's shorts then further to her thigh and back up. She left her hand at the apex of Erin's legs and added a little pressure with the heel of her palm. Erin moved against the hand and couldn't contain the throaty moans escaping her mouth. Erin grasped onto Jackson's upper back, wanting to feel her against her body. Jackson ground her hips onto Erin's thigh, causing her own moan to slip from her lips. The pressure that was building was almost too great for Erin to bear.

With a flick of her hand, Jackson had opened the button on Erin's shorts and gently reached her hand inside. She was immediately greeted with sodden underpants, making her smile at Erin's arousal for her. Reaching under them, she found the flesh she'd been craving for so many years; wet and waiting for her. *For me*. Jackson stroked the engorged flesh with her fingers, lightly touching the area around Erin's entrance. Erin's body jerked up, trying to meet the exploring fingers. Her fingers were relentless with their teasing and Erin soon found herself begging Jackson to make contact. "Please, Jack, please... touch me."

Without pause, Jackson moved her fingers to Erin's enlarged clitoris and began to lightly stroke all around it. Jackson's eyes felt as if they had rolled into the back of her head, this feeling was so intense. Never in her life did she imagine she'd make love to Erin, regardless of how much she wanted it to happen. Erin's passionate moans made her realize just how real this was. Jackson's fingers concentrated on the inflamed flesh beneath them and soon felt the beginnings of Erin's orgasm. Erin's body began to squirm uncontrollably and her panting became louder. As the pinnacle of her release hit its zenith, Erin's body shook against Jackson and she held onto her arm as it continued to control her every move.

Jackson moved up to kiss Erin and smooth the damp hair from her eyes. The touch against Erin's skin became feather light and soon she simply palmed her hand against the wet flesh.

Jackson and Erin were so engrossed in their lovemaking, neither heard the footsteps up the ladder, the intake of breath and the quick retreat of their observer. They continued to kiss and revel in the aftermath of one of the most beautiful experiences of their young lives. Erin kissed Jackson passionately, but soon couldn't catch her breath.

"Wow," she breathed into a twinkle-eyed Jackson. "That was wonderful, Jack. I always knew you'd be a passionate lover to whomever was lucky enough to love you."

"Are you feeling lucky, punk?" Jackson tried her best *Dirty Harry* impersonation.

"I am *your* lucky punk." She wiped the sweaty brow above her.

"Yes, you are." Jackson traced Erin's eyebrows, cheekbones, anything she could get her hands on.

"I don't mean to do this, but what time is it?"

Jackson reached over them and grabbed Erin's watch and instantly grimaced. "Oh, shit." Erin sat up abruptly. Jackson showed her the watch that shined fifteen minutes past midnight. "Shit, Jack, I gotta get back before my mother comes looking for me. I know she will."

"Ok, ok... let's get dressed and I'll take you back." "No, I gotta run." Erin looked at her harried expression and she kissed her to try and soften it. "I'm so sorry for leaving without um... you know." She blushed and looked down.

"Don't worry about me, I think I did already anyway." It was her turn to blush.

"Without me actually..." she gestured with her hands towards Jackson's body. "Wow..." "I love that you are so tongue tied, Hawk. Come on, you gotta get out of here." Erin quickly put her clothes and watch back on, gathered her sack, and quickly kissed Jackson goodbye. She flew down the ladder and ran out of the boathouse. Jackson was quickly behind her and hightailed it home after a quick wave to Erin.

She ran past the pier only to hear, *hey, peanut* from the dock chairs. She looked around quickly, a flash of panic raced through her body. Once she realized where the voice had come from, she breathed a sigh of semi-relief. *What is he doing out here?*

"Dad? What are you doing out here?" she questioned.

"Looking for you. Come here for a minute." His voice held a tone she wasn't familiar with and it worried her.

Walking up the pier, she reached her father and sat in the chair next to him. He was silent for a few minutes. "Your mother was ready to come out searching for you she was so angry you'd stayed out later than you promised." He turned to face her. "I'm so glad it was me instead of her that saw you with Jackson in the loft."

Erin's cheeks flared red and her heart rate picked up rapidly. "When were you in the loft?" Erin hoped against all hope it wasn't when she thought it was. "At the worst time a father could ever walk in on his daughter."

Erin's eyes welled with tears. "Oh, dad..." She buried her face in her hands and cried. "I'm so sorry," she choked out.

"Does mom know?" she said after a few moments. "Did you tell her you saw us?"

"I might be a little odd to some people, but I am not suicidal. I wouldn't put it past your mother to kill the messenger."

Erin internally sighed in relief. "She's really going to go through the roof about Jackson after this."

"You can't tell your mother about this, Erin. As much as I like, Jack, and you know I do, this would throw her over the edge and I'm not sure even I could handle her."

Erin's tears were flowing hard. "But, daddy, I love her." He wrapped his arms around his daughter in deep sympathy. "I know, honey, I know. I'm just afraid for you, peanut, I really am. Your mother isn't balanced and I just don't know what she'd do if she found out about this." Erin squeezed tighter.

"What do I do, dad?" Erin was almost hysterical. "I can't imagine my life without her. God, she means everything to me."

Joe pulled back and cupped his daughter's face. "Sweetheart, I can't make this decision for you. I know this is huge, but so is the situation." He kissed the top of her head; the action so reminiscent of Jackson, just made her cry even harder. "Just think about it with all of your heart and you'll make the right decision for you and everyone around you."

"I never meant for you to see me like that. I'm so sorry, dad." New tears ran down her face, which were wiped away by warm callused thumbs.

"Peanut, a father never wants to see their daughter in any intimate situation, and really don't expect to see them with another woman, but I know you're sorry. I know this embarrassment will be tricky for both of us to get past. We will get past it, though, I promise you," he reassured. "I've thought for awhile that there might be something between you, and after today in the boat, I was pretty sure I was right. That's not to say I'm used to the idea, happy with what has transpired, but it's just not surprising to me. Again, we'll get through it." He looked in her eyes. "No matter what you decide, ok?"

"I'm sorry I disappointed you. Your opinion means so much to me. I'm sorry I didn't talk to you and mom about my tattoo. It just came to me last night when I was looking out over the water, then I just did it."

"I know you are. Sometimes impulsive decisions to do things can be very disruptive though. Just make sure you think things through before you act on them, ok?" He kissed the side of her face.

"Thank you, daddy. I love you so much." She hugged him again.

"I love you, too, peanut."

"Let's go in before your mother calls the forest ranger or nine one one."

Erin held her father's hand, grateful for his calm demeanor. He'd never been one to yell, but always thought communication was the key to any situation. She knew he was angry, but he always had a way of expressing it in a way that made her think about things. It was a wonderful trait that missed her mother completely when she was in line to be born.

They walked into the cottage together, her mother was, of course, on the couch waiting for them. "You're lucky I didn't call the authorities to come look for you, young lady. Where were you?"

Oh, wait." She stopped Erin before she could answer. "Don't tell me. You were with Jackson," she said in a very snide voice.

"Katie, don't start. I found Erin and Jack on the pier saying goodbye to the lake," he lied. "She was almost on her way in." Katie looked between Joe and her daughter. "I don't know which one of you is worse!"

"Mother, we're leaving tomorrow. Is it really such a big deal?"

"Yes! You said you'd be here and you weren't. That sounds like deceit to me. You've gotten really good at that. I'm sure just another lovely attribute you picked up from dear old Jack."

"Katie, we're done with this. I want a peaceful night sleep before I have to drive six hours in the car," he explained sternly. "I don't want to hear about this crap in the car, either. We are leaving tomorrow. Let it go."

Katie shook her head and once again, stormed off to bed without a goodnight to either of them.

"Thank you, dad," Erin whispered and Joe turned to her.

"In all my years of marriage, I have never lied to my wife before tonight." That statement hit Erin in the gut heavily. "I don't really want to do it again."

"Dad..."

"I don't want to talk about this night again, Erin. Ever."

"Ok, dad, I promise." He leaned over and kissed her cheek and went to bed, leaving her alone with too many thoughts to process at once.

She walked slowly to her room and closed the door. Flopping down on her mattress, she put her hands behind her head and stared at the ceiling. Images of Jackson floated through her mind like a warm exotic hallucination. Their assignation almost felt like a dream and not a reality. Images of how her mother would react to their pairing came into view next, causing her stomach to churn. All the small details of her mother's verbal abuse were crashing down upon her. The nasty comments, the brutal deconstruction of Jackson and her aunt and the irrational behavior in the shower today. These vivid thoughts and actions distressed her immensely. Would she ever accept their relationship? Would she ever accept Jackson as part of their family? Would she be able to say her name without the venom that dripped with each syllable?

Erin rolled on her side not knowing what to do. She'd finally followed her heart, only to have her mother put up a blockade the size of the Great Wall. Could she blast through to the other side, or would she remain in place fearing her mother's wrath? Erin's tears welled in her eyes and soon rolled down her face. The decision she would make would be one to stay with her forever.

~*~*~*~*

The morning sunshine was very cruel to Erin's unrested eyes. She'd packed her bags and loaded them in the car before her parents had woken. Checkout time was nine o'clock and it was coming far too fast for her. Her parents woke to find her sitting at the table, staring out the window in deep thought.

"Good morning, peanut." Her father smiled at her. Seeing her eyes, he knew she'd had a very sleepless night.

"I'm gonna go find Jack and say goodbye, ok?" she said, knowing he wouldn't understand the impact of those words.

"Ok, your stuff all ready to go?"

"It's in the car already. So I'll be ready when you are."

He leaned to kiss her cheek as she stood. "Tell Jack goodbye for me."

"I will." She didn't even acknowledge her mother's presence.

With a heavy heart, Erin left the cottage in search of the one person in her life that made sense to her in everyway. She found her giving a small child an inner tube from the boathouse. When Jackson's eyes met hers, she instantly knew something was wrong.

"Hawk, what is it?" she asked as Erin approached.

Erin shook her head. "Not here. Can we go up?" She motioned to the loft. With a nod of her head, Jackson led the way.

The two women went up the loft and Jackson's stance was very tense as she was anxious to hear Erin's news. Erin's back was to her and she could tell she was crying.

"Hawk, honey..." She started to touch her, but Erin recoiled at the contact. Jackson immediately pulled back and unconsciously looked at her hand.

Erin turned around, tears freely falling down her face. "I can't..." She took a deep breath and started again. "I can't see you anymore, Jack." Jackson's eyes went wide with confusion and hurt. "What? What are you talking about? Did I do something?"

"My mother knows about us. She came up here last night while we were making love," she lied.

Jackson's mouth shaped into an O. She realized there was no way she would've heard anyone with everything that was going on.

"I'm not strong enough to handle her, Jack. I'm just not." She cried in earnest. "Not even my father can control her anymore. I can't do that to him." Jackson's face fell. As soon as she knew Erin was trying to make peace for her father, her hope was gone. There was no way she could

change Erin's mind.

"She'd never accept us as a couple. Hell, she doesn't even want me to be friends with you, anymore." Erin's voice was nasal and shrouded in emotion and tears.

"Hawk, you're almost twenty years old. Can't you just move out or... I don't know get away from her somehow?" Jackson was becoming more angry with each second that passed.

"Jack, you know I can't. She'd make my dad stop paying for school, she'd damage our relationship and I can't do that to him. I just can't." She was completely sobbing, breaking Jackson's heart into a million pieces with each tear she cried.

She walked to Erin and opened her arms in which Erin fell instantly. She wept harder than she thought possible, choking her breathing. Erin knew she needed to get away from Jackson, but it was killing her to even think about moving. With strength she didn't know she had, she kissed Jackson with everything she could possibly give to her to show her the love in her heart. Jackson kissed her back, filled with such pain and anger, but couldn't bear the thought of denying her.

They pulled apart and Jackson asked, her voice clouded in pain, "Can I call you at least?"

Erin shook her head almost violently. "No. You can't. Please don't call or write to me anymore, Jack. It'll be too hard."

With those final words, Erin fled down the ladder, out of the boathouse and out of Jackson's life. Heart completely shattered, Jackson walked down the rungs of the ladder and into the boathouse. Her eyes had yet to shed a single tear. She watched as Erin got into the backseat of her father's car. She could see her crying, but had no way to stop the tears. Katie came out just as Erin flew past her, tears streaming down her face. A brief look of confusion entered her mind, but then she saw Jackson looking at the car, pain clearly evident on her face.

With a sneer of victory she walked up to Jackson with aplomb. When Jackson saw her, she only just resisted the urge to slap her.

"Well, I guess you finally got what you wanted," Jackson commented, voice dripping with anger.

"Yes, I did."

"But have you asked yourself if Erin has?"

"She doesn't know what she wants," her mother maliciously spat.

"She is almost twenty years old, isn't it for her to decide what that is?"

"She's too young to make decisions like that." "I'd have to disagree with you, there," Jackson protested.

"Well, I guess it's good that your vote doesn't count then."

"To Erin it does," Jackson defended.

"Like I said, you don't count anymore. Do us all a favor, Jackson and stay away from my family," she threatened.

"You know this isn't over. One day Erin is gonna get tired of your bullshit and then where will that leave you?" she dared.

"We'll just have to see. Right now, I have my daughter attending a prestigious art school and soon she'll be finding a wonderful man to share her life with. I'd say that leaves me pretty happy."

"I'd say delusional, but you say tomato..."

"Good-bye, Jackson." Erin's mother turned to walk towards the car.

"See you later, Katie."

Jackson's arms were folded against her chest, pulling against the rage and hurt she was feeling. As the car pulled out of the lot, a part of her had died and she wasn't quite sure if she could ever feel alive again.

Chapter Thirteen

Present Day - The Northwoods Island City

Erin finished telling Jackson the full version of what happened that night and the following morning. Her head was spinning from everything she was told. They sat on the roof overlooking the water with their legs dangling off the side.

"So it was your father who saw us and not your mom?" Jackson clarified.

"Yeah," Erin answered.

"Why did you tell me that it was your mother then? I don't get it."

"Because if I had told you it was my decision to leave you, it would've hurt you so much more, Jack." she sadly explained. "My mother was the one to blame for it, so I just said it was her instead. I didn't want you to think badly of my father, either. I know how much you liked him. As you can imagine, it was quite a shock for him to see us that way."

"I had no idea your father would be against us being together." Jackson's voice carried the hurt she felt.

"He wasn't." Jackson looked over at Erin with confusion in her eyes. "Then why didn't you stay with me?" Jackson couldn't keep the pain inside any longer. The tears began to roll down her cheeks. She wiped them away angrily.

"At first when I told you I wasn't strong enough to deal with my mother, that was true. She was really crazy at that point and neither of us could handle her."

"I just can't believe he stayed with her as long as he did. He was too good of a man." Erin's head dropped. "Yeah, he was. This wasn't his fault, Jack, I promise you. Please don't feel badly about him." "Erin you're telling me that it was him who made you decide against us, so he wouldn't have to deal with Katie."

"That's partially true. I guess a part of me was crying out inside because I wanted my mother to love me, unconditionally," she started to explain. "She was a nightmare even after we left, so that idea was squashed quickly."

"What is the whole truth then?" Jackson was getting tired of these games.

Erin's eyes were full of tears. "The fact of the matter was my dad knew he was sick that night. He didn't tell us until we got home. His doctor called after we got back from dinner. He didn't even tell my mom, Jack. Even though he knew he was dying, and he could've left her to live out his days with me at his side, he loved her and wanted to live out his time with her!" her voice raised, filled with emotion. "Once he told me that, I knew I had made the right decision. It never could've happened had I continued to see you. It was already ugly, it would've gotten worse."

Jackson absorbed this information but was still unsure of how to feel. She knew it wasn't an easy decision for Erin to make. It was far too large of a decision for a nineteen-year old girl to take on by herself. Erin was impulsive, that she knew. Her trip back home when she'd found out about Jackson's sexuality and then the return trip to the Northwoods, Jackson was reminded of that quirk. She tended to run on emotion and didn't always think everything through, even though her heart was in the right place.

"You know, even on his deathbed, his thoughts returned to you," Erin spoke quietly.

"What do you mean?"

~*~*~*~*

January 1997

Joe laid on his bed, waiting for Death to take him. His body had become incredibly weak and he had accepted a long time ago that this cancer would get the better of him. During the past seventeen months, a horrible guilt had haunted him regarding his daughter. Erin had chosen to make his life better instead of going after her heart. It was a decision he hated for her. He knew today he needed to talk to her about that fateful day in the Northwoods.

Erin had come into his room after hearing he wanted to talk to her. When she walked in, he asked her to close the door. After she complied with his wishes, she sat down in the chair that was next to his bed. She immediately took his frail hand in hers.

"What is it, dad? Do you want me to read to you again?" she asked.

"No, peanut. I need to talk to you about what happened with Jackson." Erin's face fell and her heart began to race. "What about Jack, dad?"

"I never should've put you in that position." "Dad, it was my..." "No, it wasn't and you know it." He stared into her eyes. "Whether or not you realized it, I made that decision for you. I could've told you that I would've supported you had you chosen to stay with Jack. I could've told you that if it got bad, that I would take you away from your mother. God, I could've said so much to help you..." Tears formed in his eyes. Erin's eyes filled with tears. "Dad, what are you saying?"

"I'm saying that when I found out I was going to die, all I wanted was for my family to be with me for as long as I had left. God knows your mother and I have had a few rows over the years, but I do love her. That wouldn't have happened if you chose Jack. I knew, as soon as I saw you two that day that it would break up our family. I had a selfish desire in wanting us together, even though I knew you were hurting and for that I will never forgive myself. I didn't want my last days on this earth to be filled with fights with Katie or between Katie and you." Tears streamed down his cheeks and Erin couldn't help but cry with him. "God help me, but I didn't want my last days to be miserable." He cried, grasping Erin's hand. "I knew you felt like the one who wasn't strong, but it was me... I am so sorry, peanut for being such a weak man."

Erin grabbed his hand and laid her head on his chest. "Oh, dad, please don't do this to yourself, please. I don't think you were weak at all. You always stuck up for me." She cried on his chest. "I don't blame you for wanting your family around you when you were sick. Who wouldn't want that?"

He lifted her head as best as he could to look in her eyes. "Can you forgive me, peanut?"

Their watery eyes stared at one another. "There is nothing to forgive, dad. I would've done the same thing to keep my family together." *I did do that.* She hugged him as tightly as she dared. "But if you need me to say it, I swear, I forgive you."

"Thank you, peanut. I love you so much." They held tightly to one another.

"I love you too, daddy."

~*~*~*~*~*

"He died that night," Erin said, voice filled with so much emotion. She looked up at Jackson who had tears streaming down her face. "He just wanted us around him before he died." She looked out over the water. "If... If I had to make that same decision today, I still would do it the same

way." Jackson nodded her head, knowing that it must have been an awful time for them. She knew how much his family meant to Joe, she could see that with his amazing ability to still love Katie after everything that had transpired.

"I know I hurt you, Jack. God knows I have lived with that knowledge every damn day and everyday I was so sorry for breaking your heart." She breathed heavily. "But I also know that my heart died the day I left you. Hell, my own husband picked up on that and had to go off to find love in another woman's bed. Now he's gonna be a daddy." She laughed mirthlessly.

Ouch. "But, your mother said you were happy with him." Jackson was confused.

"I'm sure she also told you I was having a grandchild for her, too," Erin guessed.

Jackson nodded. "I guess I should've learned my lesson with Katie long ago and figured anything she would've said about you would be a lie."

"You must have contacted her right before she called me, because she was drilling into me how awful I was for going against the church and why wouldn't I fight for my marriage." She tucked an errant strand of hair behind one of Jackson's ears. "Seven years later she is still threatened by you in my life."

Something stuck out in her mind. "Going against the church? So you're divorcing him?" Jackson said almost as a statement and not a question.

Erin nodded. "Yeah, it's almost finalized. Jeremy wouldn't give me my house and that's all I wanted out of this divorce. When I told him that he'd have more than the house to give me if he fought, he soon changed his tune."

"I'm sure. I'm sorry it didn't work out for you, Hawk. Seriously, I am."

She squeezed Jackson's knee. "Thanks. There was nothing wrong with him, he was a lovely man until this; kind and giving. It was just me not being able to love him like I should have. No one should have to live in a loveless marriage. I can't say that I blame him for stepping out, I just wish he would've told me he was unhappy first." She shrugged, wiping the tears from her face.

"Where did you meet him?" Jackson asked.

"He came to one of my art shows. His name is Jeremy, if you wanted to know," Erin added unnecessarily as Jackson knew his name all too well. Jackson nodded for her to continue.

"Anyway, he was really gregarious and sweet and I liked him instantly. Like being the keyword there, unfortunately. I think when we were married I did love him, but it was that kind of love you have for puppies or something like that. You know, loving their personalities and wanting to care for them." She laughed at herself. "I wasn't *in* love with him, though, but I guess I wanted to marry him before my dad died, and I'm sure you can guess that my mother was over the moon."

"I'm sure," Jackson said with a roll of her eyes.

"But five years is a long time to be with someone who didn't return your affections. We should've split before his infidelity, that's for certain. It would've made this better for us both. Well, me for sure," she added with a wink.

Jackson put her arm around Erin. "Thank you for telling me what happened."

Erin leaned on Jackson so naturally. "I'm so sorry for breaking your heart, Jack." Jackson held her tighter.

"I know, Hawk, I forgive you," she whispered and turned her head to kiss the top of Erin's.

They stayed that way for a few moments, then Erin softly said, "Jack, after you and I made love that night, I... I felt alive for the first time, I mean, *really* alive."

"So did I." Jackson's voice was rough from crying.

"I've never felt that way since," she admitted softly.

"Me either."

"Jack..."

Before Erin could continue, a voice was heard from the distance. "Jackson!"

Both women stood quickly and flew down the ladders to the ground. Cindy's voice was shouting from her house. Jackson began to run, knowing the desperation in Cindy's voice could only mean one thing. *Jackie*.

Jackson raced towards the house and met up with Cindy.

"What is it? How's Jackie?" she asked quickly.

"She's not good, Jack. She wants to see you and Erin. Her doctor is on her way."

Jackson shared a worried look with Erin and they both went inside quickly. As they entered the room they saw the small figure on the bed. She looked more frail to Jackson than from even just a couple hours before. Her eyes were closed and Jackson's heart lurched.

"Jackie?" Jackson rasped, grasping her aunt's chilled hand.

Jackie's eyes opened slowly and she gave Jackson's hand the smallest of squeezes. She noticed Erin in the room, walking towards the other side of Jackson. She patted Jackie's leg softly.

"Hey, you."

Jackie's voice was very soft and roughened, her breathing was very labored. "I love you both."

She wheezed. "Thank you for giving me... the best life possible... I was very blessed."

Jackson and Erin both had tears in their eyes. They knew what Jackie was doing.

Jackson spoke, "You are the best mother I could've hoped for, Jackie. Thank you for giving *me* the best life possible. I will always love you."

Jackie looked at Erin. "Take care of my little girl for me, will you? She likes to get into trouble... you gotta watch her close."

Erin's tears rolled down her face. "I will, Jackie, I promise. I'll take good care of her." She patted Jackie's leg in reassurance.

"Thank you." She gave one final squeeze to Jackson's hand before she took her last breath. The alarm on her heart monitor went off and Cindy came in the room. After confirming that Jackie had passed, she turned it off.

Jackson and Erin wept, leaning on each other heavily. After several minutes had gone by, Jackson bent down to place a final kiss onto Jackie's forehead. Erin rubbed her back and mirrored Jackson's actions once she pulled away. With a final whispered, *I love you*, Jackson left her room. Erin took one last look at Jackie's lifeless form and blew her another kiss from the doorway. *Godspeed, Jackie.*

When Jackson entered the front room, she noticed the doctor walking up the path. When she opened the door to greet her, the doctor took one look and knew her patient had expired.

Dr. Glenda Jones looked at Jackson and gave her a large hug that was returned whole-heartedly. "I'm so sorry, Jack. She was such a wonderful woman," she whispered.

"Thank you, Glenda. I know you did all you could for her and for that I will be forever grateful. Cindy is in with her now."

Glenda turned and noticed Erin, she extended her hand. "I'm Dr. Glenda, or the good witch from the Northwoods as Jackie called me." Erin gave a watery smile to this charming doctor. "I'm Erin, an old friend of the family. Thank you for giving Jackie such great care."

"You're Erin?" she asked, looking at Jackson then back to Erin. "Well, I've heard your name come up several times. It's nice to meet you. You are a very well liked woman in this house."

Erin grabbed Jackson's hand and continued to smile at the doctor. "Thank you for saying so."

Jackson put her arm around her and pulled her to her chest. Glenda took that as her cue to check with Cindy about the specifics of her patient's leave from this world.

Jackson buried her head into Erin's hair and wept. Erin held her close and whispered words of comfort to her. Jackson pulled away and caressed Erin's face. "Thank you for being here. It

meant so much to her... and to me."

"Thank you for calling me." They shared one final hug before Jackson pulled away knowing there were a lot of phone calls to make and arrangements to be made.

~*~*~*~*

Three days later found them standing at Lakeside Cemetery next to Jackie's gravestone. Jackie's plot was next to her parents and shared by her twin sister, Emma, Jackson's birth mother. Her sister was cremated soon after Jackson was born and after sharing their mother's womb, it was only fitting for their parents to have them share this as well. A blank stone was placed into the ground next to Emma's and Jackie's name would soon be carved into the marble.

The service was very moving. The children from Jackson's advanced music class came out to play *Amazing Grace*, touching Jackson to the core. Erin wasn't surprised to see how much Jackson's students cared for her. She knew the compassionate and loving woman made an impression on everyone she met in some way. Anyone who was familiar with the family or resort came out to say their goodbyes to a very well loved woman in the community. The Thomas's had been a part of the area for many years and most of the locals knew them well.

It was a beautiful spring day; blue sky and around seventy degrees. Everyone had a nice story to tell Jackson as they hugged her or shook her hand in condolences. Jackson had made arrangements at her home for close friends to come after the funeral. A catering company took care of all the food and drink. Erin made sure to take care of everything so Jackson wouldn't have to worry about a thing, except mourning the loss of the woman who raised her. With a final rose on Jackie's stone, Erin and Jackson went home.

When they got back to the house, it was bustling with so many faces she'd seen most of her life. Erin had no luck trying to find Sandra to tell her about Jackie. Jackson looked relieved that she wasn't able to locate her. It just may have been too much for her to handle. She was given Jackie's ashes, as per her request to be cremated. Jackson knew that her aunt belonged in Lake Tomahawk as it was such a part of her. It only seemed fitting as her final resting place. Jackson wanted to have the same when her time came to leave this Earth.

Cindy, Janet and Dr. Jones were all in attendance and were the first to greet Jackson.

"Jack, that was a beautiful ceremony. She would've been very pleased," Glenda said warmly.

"Thank you, Glenda. I'm just glad it was you who took care of her. You guys have known each other since high school and I know how comfortable she was with you. Again, thank you." Jackson couldn't help the tears that seemed never ending on this day.

Glenda leaned over to hug Jackson tightly. "It's hard to lose patients, but harder when they are friends, too." She pulled away and gave a warm look to Jackson. "If you need anything, you give me a call, ok?" Glenda kissed her cheek.

"I will."

Similar voices of thanks and respect were shared among the other women. Erin was very touched with how close Jackie's team had gotten with Jackson. She felt silly in thinking that anything was going on between Jackson and Cindy. The thought now was so foreign to her. It was that warmth and compassion that made Cindy a great nurse. There was no question that Jackie got the best possible care.

When the last of the guests left the house, Jackson went outside to get some fresh air. When she looked up, she noticed the flag had been lowered to half-mast. Erin walked up next to her and saw what had caught her attention.

"They say it's a sign of respect to a wonderful person when the flag is lowered. Well, Jackie was the best, so I thought it was necessary," Erin explained.

Jackson looked at her with wonder in her eyes. "You really did take care of everything for me. I can't thank you enough for helping me through this, Hawk. I'll never forget it."

Erin entwined their fingers. "I did a lot to help my mom when my dad died, so I figured I'd go with what I knew. I'm glad you're pleased with the way things went."

Jackson nodded. "I am. Jackie would've loved it."

Erin tugged on her hand. "You wanna take a walk? Get some fresh air in our lungs?" "That would be great."

The two walked silently around the property, hands clasped between them. Jackson was turning a thought around in her head and figured this would be as good of a time as any. "Hawk?"

"Yeah?" She looked up at her taller companion.

"Will you come with me when I sprinkle her ashes? It would mean so much to me if you would."

"Oh, Jack, of course I will. You didn't even need to ask." She squeezed her hand. "Just tell me when, and I'll be happy to go."

"When." she said softly to Erin's amusement.

"Ok, honey, let's go." Erin slipped off her shoes and dangled them from her fingers as they walked towards the boat. Jackson looked at her and smiled as she too, took off her heels before boarding.

"Oh, that feels good." Jackson wiggled her toes.

Erin boarded the boat and noticed the ashes had already been placed inside. She smiled internally knowing Jackson was never one to put things off when they were painful. Jackson untied the cleats and pushed the boat off from the dock. They drifted out slowly to get deeper before starting the engines. Once started, Jackson drove the boat to a small cove that she used to fish in

as a child with Jackie and her grandfather. When they approached the lily pads, Jackson killed the engine and dropped the anchor.

The cove was so quiet and serene, Erin was in awe of its beauty every time they'd come here. It was, she thought, the perfect place to sprinkle Jackie's ashes.

Jackson lifted the brass urn, and opened the lid. She motioned for Erin to come next to her. "This is where my mother's ashes are as well. I thought it only right to sprinkle Jackie's with hers."

"It's a beautiful gesture, Jack."

With extreme reverence, they each took a handful of Jackie's remains and held them over the side of the boat.

"This place has always been a part of you, Jackie. I hope you spend a wonderful eternity here, where you belong. I love you," Jackson said through her tears as she sprinkled the ash into the water.

"Jackie, thank you for allowing me to come back into your lives when it truly mattered the most. I promise you, again, that I will take care of Jack for as long as she'll let me." She sprinkled her ashes and added, "And even when she won't. I love you. Rest in peace."

Jackson tipped the urn and gently poured the remaining ashes into Lake Tomahawk. They held the side of boat as they stared into the water until the last of the powder was absorbed. Erin rubbed Jackson's back as she let more tears fall into the water. After a few more moments, Jackson lifted the anchor and turned the boat towards home.

The ride was peaceful as the wind blew through their hair, each lost in her own thoughts. The day had been very emotional and taxing on Jackson and she knew she wouldn't have made it if it weren't for the women sitting in the boat with her right now. She watched Erin as she closed her eyes, allowing the breeze to give her solace. Erin knew nothing healed her soul like the Northwoods and would be sad when the time came for her to return to Chicago.

Jackson docked the craft in the boathouse and hung up the keys once they exited. Erin took her hand as they walked barefoot to the pier. The sun had begun to set, creating an amazing palette of colors. The women stayed silent, just watching until the sun hid behind the horizon once more.

"Do you want to come in for a drink or something?" Jackson offered. "I'd really just like to decompress for awhile. This day was...whew," she breathed. "It's taken so much out of me."

Erin squeezed her hand. "I know, honey. Yes, I would absolutely love to come in for a drink and decompress with you." She smiled. "Come on. I think I hear the Drachenstein calling my name."

"That is a really good Riesling. It's not too dry and not too sweet. It's like... the perfect wine. Where did you get it?" "A small wine shop in Chicago. I buy it by the case since Howard, the

owner, orders it special for me." "By the case? Have you turned into an alcoholic since we last saw each other?" Jackson asked, semi-jokingly.

"Well, with my mother, you'd think that would be the obvious answer, but no, I just like to have some on hand for dinner parties or events and such. This is actually the most I've had to drink in months."

"Well good. I'd hate to have to carry you home." Jackson laughed for the first time of the day as they started to make their way back to the main house. *God, it's good to have her here again.*

Chapter Fourteen

The two women sat on the couch, feet tucked under their pantsuits and glasses of wine in hand. Jackson's head was leaning against the back of the couch with Erin trying to decipher what was being talked about on Larry King. Initially they weren't even paying attention, but one of his guests was an art critic and was going off on a new artist's work.

"Can you believe this jackass?" Erin asked, outraged by this man's lack of actual art knowledge. "He wouldn't know the difference between finger paints and Paul Gauguin."

Jackson laughed at Erin's ire at this so-called art critic. "So if he turned around and said he liked one of *your* paintings, would that still make him a jackass?" she asked playfully.

"Well, yes, he'd just be a jackass with taste and simply chose the wrong topic to discuss on Larry's show." She winked at Jackson and took a sip out of her glass.

When a commercial came on the television, Jackson let out a huge yawn. The day had taken an extreme toll on her. Erin noticed right away and looked at her.

"Are you ready to go to sleep? You've got to be exhausted."

Nodding, Jackson said, "My body is tired, my heart aches, but my mind just won't shut off." She put her wine glass down, laid on her side and put her head in Erin's lap.

Erin began to stroke the long dark hair and Jackson instinctively grasped Erin's knee then lightly stroked it with her thumb. The connection between them had completely returned and neither woman had discussed how long Erin would stay. Erin figured she'd stay until Jackson didn't need her, but leaving her wouldn't be that easy at all. Her mother no longer got to tell her what to do, so what was actually preventing her from just staying as long as she wanted? To Erin it was simple, Jackson hadn't asked.

After forty-five minutes passed, Erin noticed that Jackson was sound asleep in her lap. She was reluctant to move as she didn't want her to wake, but her bladder was calling out to release the wine she had ingested. She was able to slip out from under Jackson's head, but had to fight her searching hand. Even in deep sleep, Jackson needed to keep her hold on her.

Erin leaned down and whispered soothingly, "I'll be right back, don't worry." She kissed the side of her head and went to relieve herself.

When she returned, Jackson was sitting up on the couch and had turned off the television. Looking at the clock, Erin noticed it was well past midnight. She knew Jackson would be going to bed.

She bit her lip in thought then asked, "Do you need me to stay with you tonight?"

Jackson looked up at her, *Yes!* her body screamed, but she answered, "No, I should be ok. I think I'm just gonna take some time to reflect a little then go to bed."

"Are you sure?"

Jackson nodded. "Yeah, I'm sure. Thanks for offering though." She got up to walk Erin to the front door and pulled her into a warm embrace. "Thank you for everything, Hawk. You made these last few days seem almost bearable." "You are most welcome, Jack. You know I would do anything for you and Jackie. I'm glad she's out of pain now and resting with her parents and your mom," Erin said, hugging back warmly.

They pulled apart then Jackson leaned down and kissed her cheek. Erin's eyes closed at the familiar contact. When she pulled away, Erin told her, "If you need me, I'll be with you in no time flat, ok?"

"Thank you, Hawk. It really meant the world to us that you came." They shared a smile. "Good night." "Night, Jack."

Erin walked back to her cabin and noticed her cell phone light blinking, indicating she had messages. She began to strip her clothes off from the day, used the bathroom to brush her hair and teeth, then grabbed her phone and slipped into bed, sighing at the feel of the clean linen against her skin.

Pushing her voicemail button, she listened to the first of four messages.

First message, "Erin, it's your mother, why haven't you called me back? Are you home yet? Call me when you get this."

Erin rolled her eyes and deleted the message. She listened to the next only to hear almost the exact same message from her mother, which she also deleted.

Third message, "Hey, girl, it's Kim. Just wanted to let you know we're all set for tomorrow night, so don't worry about a thing. We already have a few regulars calling to see if they can get a sneak peek at your stuff. Don't worry, I won't let anyone see them until it's time. They are beautiful and will do very well, as usual. I hope things are going as expected up there. I'm thinking about you. Talk to you soon, bye!"

"Ah, Kim, you're such a good egg."

Fourth message, "Hi, Erin, this is Paul. Just wanted you to know that Jeremy signed the papers finally, so we should be done with this in no time. Just hang in there, kiddo, we're in the home stretch. Give me a call when you get back into town."

"Thank you, Jeremy," Erin breathed out. *I cannot wait for this to be over and done with. We just have to work out the house documents and I am free and clear. Thank God.* Her head fell back hard against her pillow and she closed her eyes. *Man, what a day.*

~*`~*`~*`~*`

Jackson laid in bed with her eyes wide open, tears streaming down her face. Losing Jackie was one of the worst experiences of her life. Erin's words continued to resonate in her head, *I'm glad she's out of pain now and resting with her parents and your mom.* That thought brought a modicum of solace to her when she thought about it. Jackie was definitely in pain towards the end of her time, but Glenda had made sure it was as minimal as possible.

Not being able to sleep, Jackson got out of bed and went into the kitchen to eat some leftovers from the service. She looked at the clock and noticed it was almost two in the morning. She closed the refrigerator and got a glass of water instead. "It's too damn late to eat. God, I just want to sleep."

Jackson walked back into her room and got into her bed. Laying down on her back, Jackson continued to stare at the ceiling.

If you need me, I'll be with you in no time flat.

Jackson contemplated calling Erin just to hear her voice. Erin being with her for almost a week had brought such a comfort to Jackson. It was a comfort her body and soul had been missing for far too long. Rolling onto her side, Jackson closed her eyes and sighed.

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Erin heard a noise, jostling her from an unsound sleep. A small clicking sound sped up her heartbeat. She had her phone near her if necessary. Not hearing the sound again, she held tight to her bedcovers and tried to relax enough to fall back asleep. When she opened her eyes again, she nearly screamed at the sight of Jackson's silhouette standing in her bedroom doorway. Seeing the look on Jack's face, she knew not to be afraid any longer.

"Jack? Are you ok?" she asked quietly, her calm voice belying her frantic pulse.

Jackson took a couple steps towards Erin's bed, removing her clothing as she did. "I need you," she whispered hoarsely.

Without thought or hesitation, Erin pulled open her covers and invited Jackson into her bed. Jackson immediately climbed into bed and moved on top of Erin. "I need you," she whispered again, trying not to close her eyes from the sensation of Erin's naked form beneath hers. Erin reached up and looked into Jackson's eyes. She tucked Jackson's hair behind her ears with gentle fingers. Her fingers slowly traveled to Jackson's lips and she tenderly traced them. Jackson's eyes closed at the light touch and soon found her lips captured by Erin's. The weak whimper that left Jackson's mouth fired up her already crazy desire for Erin. She kissed Erin with a passion she'd never felt before. The raw desire to consume this woman was overwhelming.

Erin responded equally to the hungry kisses and returned her own repressed yearning for Jackson. She held handfuls of Jackson's hair as they melded themselves to each other once more. Tongues battled for control followed by sighs and moans of pleasure. Jackson's head moved down to Erin's throat and across her collarbones and shoulders. Finding Erin's small Tomahawk on her chest, Jackson reverently kissed the image, letting a few tears fall on it as well.

She moved lower and kissed and licked Erin's breast before pulling aroused hardened flesh into her mouth. Erin moaned audibly, creating a hot surge of heat through Jackson's body. Her hand began to play with Erin's other nipple as Erin massaged Jackson's head with her hands. Kissing between her breasts, Jackson moved lower to kiss her stomach and hipbones. She idly played inside Erin's belly button with her tongue and could hardly contain herself as Erin's arousal reached her nose. Feeling only a need to fill Erin with all of the love she had for her, she slowly moved lower and kissed the dark wiry hair at the apex of Erin's thighs. Erin's body moved gently as her sighs became louder. Her hands were still wrapped in Jackson's hair, urging to her to do as she pleased.

Jackson's warm hands gently parted Erin's lips as her mouth moved closer to take the first taste of her. After the initial wet contact, both women moaned and Erin's body moved more freely. Jackson relished in the taste and texture that was Erin. She explored every area she could reach, much to Erin's delight. She teased and tasted every orifice and ounce of skin in her path. Jackson's tongue moved into Erin causing the redhead to lift her head to meet Jackson's eyes. They shared a molten stare as Jackson continued to drink from her.

Jackson rearranged her body and soon her fingers replaced her tongue inside of Erin, filling her completely.

"Oh, God, Jack..." Erin gasped her first words since Jackson's arrival.

Jackson watched as Erin writhed on the bed as she slowly moved her fingers within her. Jackson had truly never seen a more gorgeous sight. Erin's hips were frantically trying to keep with the feverish pace Jackson had established. When she felt Erin's insides begin to quiver, she moved her head back down and brought her tongue to Erin's clitoris. With the lightest of touches, Jackson flicked her tongue quickly and soon Erin was begging her for release. With the combination of external and internal stimulation, Erin was soon brought to a precipice of the purest form of ecstasy.

Jackson rode out the waves with her, holding on tightly as Erin's body convulsed, exploding with

pleasure. With relentless touches and wet kisses, Jackson quickly brought Erin to a second orgasm, finally stopping her ministrations and moving up her body. Jackson kissed and tasted every inch of Erin until she reached her panting mouth. Soon they were lost in their kisses and the taste of Erin between them.

Erin wanted so badly to return the love and pleasure to Jackson that she flipped them over, surprising them both with her strength. She looked down into glassy eyes and gently brushed the hair from her eyes. She moved her own hair to one side and lowered herself to kiss Jackson again. She kissed down her cheek and tugged lightly on her earlobe with her teeth.

"I cannot wait to taste you," Erin whispered, filled with incredible desire for Jackson.

The inflamed woman beneath her whimpered while Erin moved down her body to take one of Jackson's nipples into her mouth. The feel of her nipple between her teeth and lips was extraordinary. She had teased Jeremy in this fashion before but it was never him she was thinking of. To have the real Jackson in front of her was dizzying and electric. She sucked on her nipple as her hand began to wander down her torso. She felt the tremors coming from Jackson as she passed over her stomach. Soon she was lost in the copious wetness between her legs. Jackson couldn't help the moan that was brought from her throat.

She brought her hand down to Erin's and together, they went inside of her, filling and satisfying. Jackson had never shared herself like this with anyone, but she knew Erin wasn't ever *just* anyone. Jackson felt so incredibly full and just observed Erin as she sat back to watch their hands move together.

"So beautiful," Erin whispered, meeting Jackson's eyes once more.

Erin moved lower and took Jackson's hand from within her and placed her fingers in her mouth. Her eyes closed at the amazing taste of Jackson. The dark haired woman closed her eyes as Erin drew each digit into her mouth and cleaned it with her tongue. Once her fingers were removed of their ambrosia, Erin dipped her head and drank from the source.

When Erin's tongue reached the tip of her clitoris, Jackson arched her back and hissed loudly. With her fingers moving slowly into Jackson, the artist painted very quickly with her tongue, bringing Jackson to a feverish state of arousal. With only a few more strokes of her tongue, Jackson opened her mouth, gripped the sheets and let her release wash through her. When it was over, she remained still, breathing rapidly.

"Sweet Jesus," she rasped, closing her eyes, completely satisfied.

Erin moved up her body, slowly kissing her way up. When she reached the mismatched eyes, Erin's eyes were filled with tears, completely overwhelmed with emotion from their experience. Jackson immediately reached up and gently wiped the tears from Erin's face.

"What's wrong, Hawk?" she asked softly.

"I'm so sorry I wasn't strong enough before," Erin forced through her tears.

"Oh, sweetheart, don't worry." She brought Erin down to kiss her with all the love she could muster. "I'll be strong enough for both of us, I promise. I won't lose you again."

"I love you, Jack."

"I never stopped loving you."

Erin rested her head on Jackson's chest and felt the larger body wrap around her. In a cocoon filled with love, the two women let the comfort and warmth lull them into a peaceful sleep.

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With the morning sun coming in through the window, Erin's eyes slowly awakened. First thing that she noticed was she was alone. She took a deep breath and smiled, stretching languidly. The smell of breakfast cooking in her kitchen relaxed her first instinct to jump out of bed to find Jackson. She pushed back the covers and walked her nude body towards the delicious smells. Jackson had put on her shirt from the night before but nothing else. Erin just stood back and marveled at the beauty in front of her.

Sensing she was no longer alone, Jackson turned to find Erin's naked form watching her. The smile that was produced on her lips was instant.

"God, I could get used to that every morning." She wiggled her eyebrows, making Erin chuckle.

She walked up to Jackson and put her arms around her. Jackson rested her chin on top of her head as they held each other in front of the stove. Pulling back, Erin gave her a very tender good morning kiss, which was quickly returned.

"How did you sleep?" Erin asked, hungrily eying the bacon frying in the pan.

"I slept like a baby; you?"

"The same. You really put out the heat when you sleep. I was warm and snuggled all night long."

Jackson's smile grew as she listened to the young artist. "I'm so glad."

"Last night was so beautiful, Jack. I am just... wow."

Jackson, remembering Erin's lack of vocabulary the last time they were intimate, laughed at her current description of their coupling. "Your vocabulary still gets stunted when you're moved, doesn't it?"

"Don't tease me. It's usually from something *you do* so take it as a good indicator that you're doing it really well."

Jackson scratched her fingernails lightly over Erin's buttocks and up her back, causing a wave of goose bumps to form on Erin's skin. "Don't tease, huh? I think you like to be teased."

Erin sighed as a rush of arousal flew through her. "What's for breakfast again?" Her eyes were unfocused as she looked into Jackson's eyes.

Jackson could feel the hunger radiating from Erin's body that had nothing to do with food. "How do you like your eggs?" she whispered into Erin's ear, while wreaking havoc on her insides by touching and teasing her body.

"I don't like eggs," she panted then pulled Jackson's head down for a passion filled kiss.

Jackson moaned into her mouth, turned off the stove and picked Erin up so she straddled her body. She walked down the hall holding Erin as they reached Erin's bed, then fell heavily down upon her, legs still wrapped around Jackson. When Erin felt her body filled with her lover's fingers, she knew breakfast would be postponed until at least dinner.

~*~*~*~*

After several hours of making love with an occasional run to the bathroom, Jackson and Erin got out of bed. They ordered pizza, drank a ton of water, threw out the old bacon from the stove and curled up on the couch watching television.

Jackson realizing she still had a resort to run said, "I gotta run to the house and check messages. If someone needs something, I'll have to take care of it. A friend of ours, Daniel, is helping us, well, me, run the place while I deal with losing Jackie." "It sounds like Daniel is a good guy."

"He is," Jackson agreed. "He's worked here a few summers when we needed help or wanted to take our own vacation and whatnot. I can leave it to him for a few days while I sort out everything." She sighed. "It's going to be weird living there without her."

Erin curled up tighter around her. "I know, honey, it's going to take some time."

"I kinda want to change the place anyway, maybe now is the time to do it."

"What do you want done?" Erin asked.

"It just needs upgrading. We've upgraded most of the cabins, have new condos and built the new duplex, I think the old house needs a makeover," she explained.

"Could you live in one of the newer places while you redo your house?"

"Oh, absolutely. Hopefully I can find a contractor that will get the work done before winter. I know a few people that could help me out, though. I just have to make the call."

The vibration of Erin's cell phone on the coffee table interrupted their conversation.

"Hang on a sec. I'm sure it's my mother ready to call out the cavalry since I haven't called her." She picked up the phone and grimaced when she saw the number of her childhood home. "Yep, I gotta take this, sorry." "That's ok; you talk to dear old Katie. I have to run to the house to change and stuff. Walking home in my jammies is going to be scandalous! I haven't done the walk of shame in ages!" They both laughed, kissed each other and with a wave, Jackson went on her way.

Erin answered her phone. "Hello, mother." She sighed and got comfortable on the couch.

"Erin! Dear Lord where have you been? I've been trying to reach you for days!" her mother shouted.

"Yes, I know. Mother you know where I am and why I'm here. What is so important that it couldn't wait? Jackie died a few days ago."

"Oh, I'm sorry. I'll make sure to say an extra prayer for her in church this week."

You do that; say one for your own soul while you're at it. "I'm sure it'll be a comfort to Jack that you're praying for her."

"I can't believe you aren't coming home tonight to attend your own art show. Isn't that a little irresponsible?" her mother's voice was like nails to a chalkboard for Erin.

"Mother! Did you not hear what I just said? I told you that Jackie died," she repeated. "Jack is a mess. I'm not going anywhere until I know she'll be okay."

"You have a life here too, Erin. Don't forget that."

How could I with you around? Erin's mother had been ranting for several minutes about nonsense and she tuned her out. She saw Jackson returning, fully dressed in jeans and a sweatshirt with her hair pulled into a tail. A smile instantly lit up Erin's face. She gave a quick knock on the door and came in. When she saw that Erin was still on the phone she made funny faces at her to try to lighten the mood in the room. Erin put her finger to her lips.

Erin heard the tail end of her mother's speech and she bristled. "All I wanted to do was make sure you were alright. There's no reason you should be so snippy with me," Katie lied.

"Bull." Erin called her to the carpet. "Why have you really been calling me? To find out if Jackson has worked her wiles on me?"

"Wha... what?" her mother stuttered, not used to being called on her intentions.

"You heard me. There is no other reason you would leave these alarming messages that I call you at once if it wasn't for something like that." "Erin, don't take that tone with me," she defended.

"Mother, if you have nothing more to say to me then I'm going to go take care of Jack." Jackson sat next to her and started to kiss her neck. "She needs me," she almost whispered.

"I do need you," Jackson whispered in her other ear. Erin slapped her away, trying hard not to giggle.

"Fine, you go take care of *her*."

"Mother, I just hope that one day you realize how mean you've become because at the rate you're going, when you're older and need someone to take care of you, there won't be a single person in line for the job. Good bye." Erin closed her phone, disconnecting the call.

"God she infuriates me!" Erin leapt off the couch. Jackson was ashamed to admit it but she was getting a little turned on with Erin's anger at her mother.

When Erin turned to look at Jackson, the unmistakable look of desire was all over her. "You cannot be serious?" she asked, jarring Jackson from her haze.

"What?" she answered dumbly.

"You were looking at me like you do in the bedroom. You were getting hot, weren't you?" she asked playfully.

Jackson's face flamed. "N...no, I um..." Jackson looked up and saw Erin's raised eyebrow and smiled. "Um...so?"

"You are adorable, Jackson Thomas. Absolutely adorable." Erin kissed her gently and giggled at her embarrassed friend. "I'll keep your secret, I promise," she whispered conspiratorially in Jackson's ear, causing Jackson to pull her into her lap.

"Ack!" she screamed then mumbled around Jackson's probing tongue. After a quick make out session, Jackson pulled back.

"I just love that I can kiss you whenever I want." She smiled. "I know I should be grieving, but I'm so happy you're here, Hawk."

"I am too, honey."

"I like when you call me that," Jackson shyly admitted.

"What? Honey?" she questioned.

"Yeah. It's really sweet. I like it."

"Well honey is sweet and you're just about the sweetest person I know, so it fits." Erin gave her a

quick kiss and got up to get their plates ready for the pizza.

The doorbell rang as soon as Erin stood up and she looked at Jackson. "Is that timing or what?"

"You go get the plates, I got this one." Jackson pulled out her wallet and greeted the young man at the door. After they exchanged money for pizza, she closed the door and brought the piping hot pie to the table. "I hope this is halfway decent. I know how particular you Chicagoans are about your pizza," she teased.

"Well, we'll just have to see. If it sucks, I'm outta here." She winked at Jackson.

They shared a quiet meal and evening together reveling in their closeness. When the time came for Jackson to return home, she knew she didn't want to sleep alone in her house, so she invited Erin to stay the night.

"I'd rather you be with me on my first night there without Jackie, if that's ok."

"It's absolutely, ok. I don't think I could sleep without you now," she admitted.

"Good, me either, let's go."

Chapter Fifteen

The day came for Erin to drive back to Chicago. She had spent fourteen wonderful days with Jackson up in the Northwoods. As the two explored their renewed love, the knowledge that they were living a state apart troubled Jackson greatly. This was her home and she couldn't imagine living anywhere but in the Island City, but Erin had always lived in the Chicago area. As much as she wanted Erin to be with her, could she drum up the courage to ask her to move her whole life just to be with her? Her friends, her work, her home, all of those things were in Chicago. Would she be willing to part with them to be with her?

Jackson was gnawing on all of this inside her head as she walked Erin to her car. The trip was a very quiet one. Erin could sense the uneasiness in her companion, but knew it was probably everything she was worrying about as well. What was in the plans for their future? Erin had been direct with Jackson for most of her life, when she wasn't running away, but she was far from running away now. There were too many questions on the table that hadn't been approached. She was going to get to the bottom of them before she drove four hundred miles away.

Turning to her taller companion, Erin asked, "I can see the engines spinning in that head of yours. Tell me what's going on up there and please don't leave anything out. Regardless of how you think I'll react."

Jackson smiled at her straightforwardness. She was still feeling completely raw and vulnerable and didn't want to sound needy. "I... um... really don't want you to leave. I just got you back, Hawk, I don't want to lose you again." Jackson looked like she might cry and Erin didn't want

that.

"Oh, honey, you will never lose me again. I promise you. You're it for me, Jack. I was going to wait for you to do this, but I think I'm just gonna have to insist that you ask me to move here."

Jackson's eyes lit up like a small child's who was given an ice cream cone. "You mean it? You'd move up here with me?"

Erin was saddened by Jackson's lack of belief in the strength of their connection. But considering their history, she could hardly blame her. "Yes! There is no place in the world that I'd rather be. Jack, you are my heart, my soul and my reason to wake up every morning. If you want me here as much as I want to be here, I will start making arrangements immediately."

Jackson picked Erin up and spun her around, happier than she'd ever been. "You have made me the happiest woman on the planet, Hawk. I love you so much I can't even breathe," she said through her misty eyes.

Erin eyed her playfully yet seriously. "Jack, you still haven't asked."

Jackson blushed and took both hands of Erin's and kissed them gently. *I better make this good.* "Erin, Hawk, the light of my life, the fire in my loins, will you come to the Northwoods and live with me happily ever after until we breathe our last breaths together? Pretty please?"

Erin smiled and shook her head at Jackson's description. "I'm all that, huh?"

"All that and a glass of bubbly."

"How can I turn down such a scrumptious offer like that?" Erin asked playfully.

Jackson smirked. "I don't think you could." "No, I don't think I could either." Erin wrapped her arms around Jackson and squeezed.

"I guess it's settled then," she breathed in Erin's hair.

"Yes, it is." They chuckled and Erin gave her a light kiss as they pulled apart. "I'll need a little time to get my affairs in order. I need to put my house on the market. After I'm officially divorced, mind you, I still don't want Jeremy to have it."

Jackson looked at her seriously. "What about your work, Hawk? Your work is there." "Jack, look around us." Jackson moved her eyes around subtly. "Where do you think I got my inspiration to paint what I do? This is my work's source. It'll probably get even better with my muse back in my life."

"Your muse?" Jackson questioned.

"Yes, silly. You. You've always been my biggest fan, since I was nine years old. Having you

around me is going to be magical again," she explained with a warm smile. "I can't wait," she whispered, adding a wink at Jackson.

Jackson was so pleased. "Do you need any help?" A startling thought came to her mind. "What about your mother? She is going to blow a gasket."

Erin laughed. "Let her blow then. I will not let her take away the biggest joy in my life again. She did it once and I thought it would kill me. Never again, Jack. I will be back, I promise."

Jackson looked a little nervous, the twenty-one year old girl's pain returning. Erin took Jackson's face in her hands. "I promise you."

Seeing the consternation leave Jackson's face, Erin kissed her again. "You could come with me, you know. You said Daniel would help you for a couple more weeks. That would give us time to get some stuff together. Actually, I can wait to sell my house until *your* house is ready. That way I wouldn't have to put so much stuff in storage." Erin saw the excitement in Jackson's eyes and knew she'd made the right decision to ask her. "Whaddya say? Come back with *me* this time."

"I'll have a bag ready in ten minutes!" Jackson flew towards her house leaving a laughing Erin still by her car.

~*~*~*~*~*

Jackson and Erin made their way into Chicago without any setbacks. Jackson had thrown her bag in the open trunk and quickly sat in the front seat, to Erin's amusement. She was ready to go in a heartbeat as soon as Erin had put it out there. Roughly six hours later, after a few stops to grab drinks and to find a rest area, the girls were walking up the path to Erin's home.

"Hawk, this is just beautiful," she commented on the stone archway they walked under to get to her front door.

"Thanks. It is a pretty great place. It should show pretty well." She jiggled her key and with a twist of her wrist, the door opened, welcoming both women inside. Once inside, Erin closed the doors and rubbed her chilled arms. "It's a little cold in here. Let me check the thermostat real quick."

Erin walked them into her living room to check the furnace temperature. She reset the device to bring the house back up to seventy degrees. "That's better. I'll be glad when summer arrives for good. These warm then cold days really suck." Jackson laughed. "Yes, they do. That's the beauty of the Midwest, though. You can see all four seasons in a day if you watch carefully." Erin agreed wholeheartedly.

"Want me to show you around?" Erin gestured around her.

"Sure, lead on!"

Erin gave her the five-cent tour, which was very impressive for Jackson. Erin had obviously done very well for herself with her artwork. When they crossed the threshold into Erin's studio, Jackson's sharp intake of air made Erin smile. On every wall was a representation of the Northwoods. A few easels stood holding canvases and a large drawing table was positioned under the one large window facing her backyard.

"Oh, Hawk, this place is amazing." She walked up to a certain picture and pointed to it with a huge smile. "I remember when you drew this one! God, I think it was right after you told your mom that Jackie was not a viper trying to charm you or something."

Erin laughed at the memory. "You're right. I went right up to the roof and drew all afternoon. You were so concerned because I was so angry with her. God, that woman has a mouth on her." "Don't look at me to dispute that."

Shaking her head, Erin said, "Don't worry, you're the *last* person I'd seek out if I needed someone to defend my mother. Well, last before me. I'd never defend her. As far as I'm concerned, she gets what she gets."

"Right on."

Erin's cell phone vibrated in her pocket and she pulled it out to see her mother's phone number. "God that woman has a sixth sense or something."

"Uh oh, I smell trouble," Jackson joked, Erin raised her finger at her.

"I'm gonna take this really fast to get rid of her. Two seconds." She hit the Talk button and answered, "Hello, mother."

"Erin dear, it's good to see your car in your driveway. May I come in?" her voice made Erin's face go a little pale. Jackson raised her brow in question.

"You're out front?" Both women's eyes were round. Then Jackson smirked and nodded her head to encourage a visit from Katie. "Sure mother, I'll be right down." Katie hung up the phone after a quick, *thank you*.

Erin turned to Jackson. "Are you feeling like causing trouble or something? Why would you want her to come in?" "Aw come on, I haven't seen Katie in a long time. I'm sure she'd like to give me a huge hug."

"Oh, I'm sure she'd like to give you something alright, but a hug wasn't what came to mind."

The doorbell chimed, halting their conversation. They walked down the stairs to greet Katie.

Erin grabbed the knob and looked to Jackson. "Here goes..."

"Mother. How nice of you to stop by." Her mother walked in as soon as Erin opened the door.

She pulled her purse strap over her shoulder.

"I'm glad you're home," she started, not seeing Jackson behind her. "I think two weeks was plenty of time for you to give to that girl. Frankly, I think you spent way too much time up there." Katie kept talking and Erin just let her continue to hang herself in front of Jackson, who's arms were now crossed over her chest. "I'm sure she has a... I don't even know what to call one of those people, to take care of her needs."

"A girlfriend? A lover? A lezzzbian?" Jackson's low voice made Katie turn around, her face was blazing red.

"J...Jackson!" her voice hid no surprise. "Hello, Katie. So nice to hear you again." Katie turned to her daughter with daggers in her eyes. "Why didn't you tell me she was coming back with you?"

Erin put her hands on her hips. "Frankly, because it's none of your business."

"Erin! Do not speak to me like that," her mother said angrily.

"I'm sorry, mother, you're right, I should show you the same amount of respect you've always shown me." She walked into the living room with her mother in tow. As Katie passed Jackson, the taller woman couldn't help but wiggle her eyebrows at her, causing the flustered woman to pick up her pace.

Erin pulled out her phonebook from an end table, sat on the couch and grabbed a sheet of paper. *Might as well get this out of the way now.* "Mother, what's the name of that moving company you used to ship your furniture to St. Gregory's bazaar?"

"It was Wilken's, but why do you need a moving company?" she asked, a sinking feeling washing over her.

"Because I'm going to need to move some things into storage while our house is being renovated," she explained cryptically, enjoying the play of features on her mother's face.

Our house. "Who's the other half of the our?"

"Jack and I, mother. I'm moving up to the Northwoods." Erin continued to look in her book nonchalantly even though her heart was pounding in her chest.

"You're what!" Katie cried out. "Why on Earth would you do something so ridiculous?"

Erin turned to face her. "It's quite simple, mother; because I love her."

Her mother could hardly form her next words she was so flabbergasted. "Wh...what do you mean by that?"

"I. Love. Her. Does this honestly surprise you? Did you think I could actually forget about her all this time?" When Katie just sat and stared at her, she continued. "I know you did your damndest to keep us apart, mother, but I'm not a child anymore and I'm finally gonna live my life the way I choose. And I choose to be with Jack."

Katie's eyes went wide. "You can't possibly be telling me you're going to live your life as a... a lesbian?"

"No, you're right, mother, I'm not a lesbian." She looked to Jackson. "I'm a Jacksian." Jackson couldn't contain the laughter that shot from her mouth. She quickly covered her mouth when Katie shot her a dirty look, her body still shaking with laughter.

"Mother, I may not be a lesbian, but I am in love with Jack. I've always been in love with her. So all of your tirades worked, I did fall into her trap, just like you said. If I wasn't so angry with you for making my adolescence a living hell, I'd probably thank you for making me so aware of my feelings for her."

"Don't you dare blame me for this! All I did was try to protect you." Erin got angry. "From what, mother? From love? Love is not wrong! It's a gift you should be thankful for when receiving it. You tried to make me someone I wasn't and in the process made me resent you for many years, but you know what, mother? I'm done feeling badly about you. You've chosen to live your life this way and that life is all yours. I want no part of it if you can't accept me for the person I am and always have been."

Jackson wanted to hug and kiss her at this very moment, but stayed put. "Jack and Dad were the loves in my life and my biggest supporters. I lost Dad to cancer, and I almost lost Jack because of you. I'd die first before going through that again."

"You ungrateful girl!" her mother snarled. "I gave you everything a little girl could want and this is the appreciation I get?"

"You're right, mother. Some little girl *may* have wanted all of that, but I didn't and you *knew* I didn't. But yet you kept at it as if you could make me give in or change my mind. I might not have been strong enough before, mother, but I'm not giving in this time. Jack is my heart and soul and I'm going to live out the rest of my days with her." Erin looked directly into Jackson's eyes while she said this, and then turned back to her mother. "With or without you in my life."

Katie pulled her car keys out of her purse. "I fear for your soul, Erin. You'll be lucky if you see your father in the afterlife." She started to stomp towards the front door, turned in front of Jackson then looked at Erin. "You make it so hard for me to love you."

Erin just smiled at her mother. "You know, Katie, I was thinking the exact same thing."

Her mother gave her a final glare then left her house, slamming the door in her wake.

Jackson looked at Erin with enormous love pouring from her eyes. "I cannot believe you just did

that!" "Yeah, well, she had it coming. I figured now was just about a good a time as any to give her my new address." Erin walked up to Jackson and put her arms around her. "Thank you for being here. Just your presence gave me that little extra that I needed."

"I'll always be here for you. Always."

~*~*~*~*~*

Several months later...

Erin walked around with the last of her boxes, placing them in the new studio that had been built into their newly renovated home. She sighed as the last of them was placed on the floor. Grace was creeping around, investigating every part of her new home. The orange tabby had been happy to see her owner again after two weeks with Kim. Jackson and Grace were still battling to see who wrapped around mommy's body when it came time for bed. Unfortunately for Grace, Jackson was winning that battle and wasn't giving up her title anytime soon. The house was beginning to feel like home for the two women and this would be their first official night spent inside.

Erin had spent the last few months in the Northwoods marveling at the change from spring to summer. Autumn would soon prove to be more than even her imagination could conjure. With more seasons to add to her colorful Island City repertoire, she could barely wait to get the new pieces to Kim. Her studio would provide the perfect workspace for her creations.

Jackson walked in and smiled at the look on Erin's face, she could tell she was enormously pleased. "They did well, no?"

"Jack, this is absolutely perfect! My view is unbelievable. God, I never thought I'd see the beauty of this place whenever I wanted. I'm so grateful that you're sharing that part of yourself with me."

"I'm not sharing, this place has always been a part of you too. I knew that from the very first day we met. I could tell it meant more to you than a vacation spot and you've proven that with every picture you've painted or drawn."

Erin pulled out one of her cherished drawings out of a box on the floor. "Yes, it was much more to me than a vacation spot. I found my heart here." She turned to hand Jackson a picture from her "Serenity" Collection. Jackson's eyes went wide.

"Oh, Hawk. This is... wow..." She was always amazed at how Erin had seen her. "No one else seems to think I'm this flawless goddess you keep making me out to be."

Erin smiled warmly. "They just don't know you the way I do." She leaned up and shared a kiss with Jackson, who still held the picture. "You've always been my inspiration. I've kept these in boxes for so long and now that you're back in my life, I can't wait to put them up."

Jackson saw the large boxes and her eyes widened in surprise. "These all contain pictures of... me?"

Erin nodded, blushing slightly. "Yeah. I'm going to put up the ones from my youth and ones that mean the most to me, but I think I'm ready to sell the others. Don't worry I won't sell any that identify you, there are some with just a profile and unless they know you, they won't put it together. If... if that's ok with you."

Nodding rapidly, Jackson replied, "Absolutely, they are yours to sell, Hawk. I'm very honored to have been a subject you drew so often."

"I was gonna hang all of them then have you look at the walls, but I figured that might be a little too much. I think this is a little less intimidating."

"I think if I had walked in and seen my face everywhere, it would've been a little weird." She smiled sheepishly.

"But it's such a pretty face," she complemented, taking Jackson's hands.

Blushing a little, Jackson squeezed Erin's hands, and said almost inaudibly, "Thanks." She looked around. "Want me to help hang?"

Erin's face lit up. "That would be great, let me get them all arranged and we can do it together."

After a couple hours, the "Serenity" Collection had been sorted through and some were placed on the walls with others placed in a shipping crate for the gallery. They both walked around the room, looking at the paintings and drawings of Jackson surrounded by the Northwoods.

"This is why I called it the 'Serenity' Collection. Just look at your face, in every picture." Jackson did as she was asked and was amazed at what she saw.

"Yeah, I guess this place does have that affect on me." She turned to face Erin. "But I think it was mostly you who made me feel that way."

"Smooth talker," Erin said with a sparkle in her eye.

Jackson pulled her close and looked into her eyes for a long while. "It *was* you." She bent her head and gave Erin one of the most tender kisses she'd ever been given. She sighed when she pulled back and rested her head against Jackson's strong shoulder.

As the sun was beginning to set on the first night in their new home, Jackson and Erin walked hand in hand towards the pier reflecting on the perfection surrounding them. The reds and oranges in the sky were breathtaking; Erin had already begun the painting in her mind.

Sitting down on the chairs facing Lake Tomahawk, they realized in many ways it was more than simply a body of water. It held more memories than any photo or scrapbook; it was a birth place

for their friendship and talents to grow; it was a resting place for Jackson's mothers; but most of all, it was a symbol etched into their hearts to remind them to fight for love and the life they deserved to live.

The End

Please feel free to drop me a note or post some feedback if you enjoyed this story. Thank you for reading!

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