

Jackson and Chase: It's a Job

By Kate Simon

Chase Munroe stared at her computer screen, praying for the words to come. She'd hit the jackpot with her first *John Doe* script. Her hero was a covert operative delivering justice with or without government sanction. It took her a year to write the hero she'd envisioned. Michael Grant looked out for the little guy. As a former army ranger, he had a network of present and former soldiers he could call on as needed but he preferred to work alone. He'd tried working on the right side for awhile. He spent three years as an FBI agent but he found the system too compromised. He'd seen too many bad guys get away with murder. He quit the bureau and went off grid. Now, as John Doe, he delivered the bad guys the justice they deserved.

It was a great story with a great hero. It should have been a slam dunk sale. She got the same complaint from every producer she pitched. The hero was too introspective, too soft because he cared about victims. One producer said "This isn't a chick flick. Nobody wants this guy to talk about his feelings. They want to see him kick some ass."

Chase agonized over those meetings. She'd spent a year of her life, in between writing for a kids show, bringing John Doe to life. Now they wanted her to change him. No way. Then she looked at the increase in the taxes on her small bungalow and started the rewrite. If she could get this movie sold, she could eventually write the movies she wanted to see. She pulled apart her script and sandwiched in plenty of fights and car chases. She convinced producers to give the script a second look. It sold. Damn it.

They cast Jackson Calder as John. He was perfect for the role. Frankly, she was surprised they got him. He was very popular, especially with the ladies. It had something to do with his ripped abs and to die for blue eyes. Chase was stunned when Jackson wanted to talk to her about John. They discussed how she envisioned him over a very nice dinner at his home in the hills. She thought he was just being nice to the writer or, less likely, wanted to get into her pants. It turned out to be neither. Jackson was very serious about his job. He gave everything he could, or what the director would allow.

The movie was a huge hit. As soon as the box office hit one hundred million, she was signed to a lucrative deal to write the second script. A year later *John Doe 2* was an even bigger hit and she bought a bigger house. Now she was reworking some pages as they shot the third installment. It was getting harder and harder to crank out the pages.

She was afraid she was losing John's voice. They wanted more action and less dialogue.
She hated it, but she was committed.

Jackson sat down at a picnic table with his lunch. Tents were set up in the parking lot of the building where they were shooting. The morning shoot on the roof had been exhausting. It was a physically demanding fight scene, but it was also hot as hell. He needed a cold drink in the shade.

Larry Weston was a great director but he was too absorbed in the spectacle and less concerned with the story. He was afraid he would lose the essence of John. He didn't want to be just another action star. He was afraid he'd never get cast in anything without a car chase. He could only do them for so long. Thirty-eight wasn't that old, but if he wanted to still be acting years from now, he had to make some changes. He'd already decided this would be his last *John Doe* movie.

He saw Nancy, the PA, looking for a seat. The crew tables were full and it was a general rule that cast and crew sat separate. "Nancy, over here," he called.

"Oh, Mr. Calder, I really shouldn't."

"Don't be ridiculous. Now sit," he said. "And it's Jackson."

Nancy smiled through her blush and took a seat opposite him. "Thanks." She glanced over at the crew table and caught some side eye, especially from the women. "I'm going to hear about this."

"Relax and enjoy your meal." He took a sip of his ice tea. "What do you think of the movie so far?" You would have thought he'd asked for her cure for cancer.

"Uh, well."

"Tell me honestly."

She sighed and put down her fork. "It's not as good as the first one."

He surprised her with a smile. "You're right. It's not."

Larry interrupted their conversation by sitting down next to him. He put his hand on Jackson's shoulder. He completely ignored Nancy's presence. "Jack, buddy. I want to talk to you about the next scene. I've had a brilliant idea."

Jackson looked at Nancy and rolled his eyes. This couldn't be good. "What's your idea?"

"We have the helicopter lifting John up as he's chasing Vulcan."

"Yeah...and."

"I want you to do the stunt."

"Excuse me? My stuntman is ready to do it."

"The audience needs to see John up close. The helicopter door will be closed so we'll use the drone operator to get your close up. Don't worry. We will go up just high enough to get the shot. It'll be great."

"This seems pretty risky."

"Tom Cruise jumps across buildings. This is just a little ride in the helicopter."

"On the helicopter," Jackson sighed. He knew he wasn't going to win. He wasn't about to tell Larry his star was afraid of heights. "Fine."

Chase had finally finished the rewrite on the last pages. She pushed out of her chair and walked over to her small fridge. The upside to being the writer of a hit series of movies was having her own office, small as it was. She grabbed a water and took a deep swig. She was about to go to the set when she heard a pounding on her door. She was surprised to see a hyperventilating Nancy. Chase met her at the beginning of the shoot. Nancy wanted to be a writer and had asked her for advice.

“Come in.”

“Chase, you’re not going to believe it.”

“Sit and take a breath.” She waited until Nancy’s breathing slowed. “Now tell me.”

“The helicopter stunt, Mr. Weston wants Jackson to do it.”

“What?”

“He’s agreed but I don’t think he wants to do it.”

“That’s crazy! That bit wasn’t even in the original script. Larry had me add it.” She grabbed her new pages and opened the door. “Come on. You’re driving.”

Fortunately, the set was only fifteen minutes from the studio. Chase prayed she could get there before Jackson did something stupid. Larry had already been stupid, but that didn’t surprise her. They pulled into the lot after flashing their id badges to the guard. Chase looked up when she heard the helicopter landing on the roof. They ran into the building and looked for the elevator. Chase frantically pressed the up button.

“You know that doesn’t make a difference,” said Nancy.

Chase shot her a glare. “It makes me feel better.” As they got in the elevator, an occupant of one of the offices tried to join them. “Sorry, we’re full.” The doors closed on the shocked woman.

“Why did you do that?” asked Nancy.

“I’m not stopping on another floor.” The elevator stopped on the top floor and they found the stairway to the roof. The door opened to a swarm of people. Larry spotted her and was not pleased. Directors normally don’t want writers on set.

“Chase, have you brought the new pages?”

“Yes,” she said, holding up the folder. “Then give them to the script supervisor and I’ll look at them when we’re done here.”

“Jackson, where the hell are you?” He peered out from behind a group of crew people. They appeared to be hooking him up for the stunt. He smiled and walked toward her. They’d developed a cordial relationship since the first movie, but she wouldn’t call them friends.

“Hey Chase. Come to see me fly?”

“Are you out of your fucking mind?” she yelled. “You’re going to kill yourself.”

“It will be fine.”

“You aren’t trained for this. What did the stunt coordinator say?”

“Well, he’s not for it but he says it should be okay.”

“Oh well then, let’s do it.” She shook her head. “You do know this is crazy.”

Larry joined them. “Why are you yelling at my star? You’re just a writer.”

“I’m just the writer who wrote you a three hundred-million-dollar franchise.” She smacked Jackson’s chest. “And I care what happens to him.”

“Ow,” Jackson said, rubbing his chest.

“He will be perfectly safe.”

Chase realized Larry was a losing battle. “Jackson, please. Let the stuntman do it. I don’t want to see you hurt, or worse.”

Jackson smiled. “Tom Cruise does his own stunts.”

“Tom Cruise is an idiot! He’s hurt himself lots of times and sooner or later it will get him killed. You’re not him. You’re not an idiot.” She stood closer to him and softened her voice. “Please, Jackson. I don’t want to see you hurt. You’re so much more than this.”

He put his hands on her shoulders. “I’ll be careful. I promise.”

Jackson walked over to the stunt coordinator for a final check of his harness. Were those tears in Chase's eyes? She really didn't want him to do this. Neither did he, but he wouldn't say anything. He wanted to get it over with. He liked the original scene where he fought the guy and knocked him off the roof. Now he had to climb up the helicopter's skid and pretend to open the door. The villain will actually open the door and Jackson will pull on the guy's shirt. They'll be back on the ground when they shoot the villain falling to his death. He looked over at the chopper. This was as crazy as it sounded. Maybe Chase was right.

The stunt coordinator hooked his harness on the helicopter. He pointed out the small handle they'd welded on so he could reach the door. He glanced over at Larry who was giving instructions to the drone operator. The guy looked like he belonged behind the counter of a pot dispensary. He sighed and resolved to never do something like this again. He nodded he was ready to go. The chopper fired up its engine and it began to lift off. He barely heard the drone over the engine but he knew it was just above him. He did his best to look like he was determined to get inside.

Jackson didn't realize the drone was pulling back to match his progress up the chopper. He heard a noise he knew was wrong and was pelted with bits of plastic and metal. The chopper began to sway back and forth. He saw the roof coming at him faster than he liked. Pain rocketed through his body as he hit the roof feet first. His last thought before he blacked out was, he should have listened to Chase.

Chase saw the drone get sucked into the chopper's blades and rain down on Jackson. He lost his grip and was dangling from the harness. There were screams from the crowd, including her own. The stunt crew ran to Jackson and pulled him free of the chopper just before it hit the ground. She ran toward him as soon as the chopper powered down. Blood was coming from the gash in his forehead. A bone pierced the cloth of his slacks. A crew medic tried to stanch the blood that was soaking his clothes and the roof beneath him. She felt faint at the sight but she willed herself to keep standing. She wouldn't add to the turmoil. She stood near his head. "Jackson, Jackson, can you hear me. Say something,"

“It’s better if he’s unconscious,” said the medic as he worked. “If he was conscious, he’d be in agony.”

She stood back as an EMT crew and their gurney made their way to him. A furious Larry was taking his rage out on the drone operator. She pushed on his shoulder and forced him to look at her. “You couldn’t go with the script I gave you,” she yelled. “You had to go for the bigger stunt!” She pointed at Jackson being lifted on the gurney. She turned back toward Larry. “Look what your arrogance has done.”

Larry looked at Jackson as he was wheeled toward the stairs. “I don’t know how long it will be before we can film the final scenes.”

Chase grabbed him by the shirt. “Filming! That’s what you’re worried about? You better pray he survives.” The crew medic was tending to the pilot, who appeared to have a head wound. The stunt man, who’d been inside the chopper, seemed uninjured. A second EMT crew ran past her to attend to the pilot. “Where are you taking them?”

“Mercy General,” said the EMT.

She saw Nancy standing off to the side, looking pale. “Come on. You’re driving.”

“Where?”

“Mercy General.”

Jackson opened his eyes and immediately regretted it. He didn't know a human body could endure such pain. "I'm going to throw up," he said, hoping any of the people working on him heard him. A nurse put a plastic pan in front of him and boosted him up. Another wave of pain washed over him as his lunch made a return appearance. The nurse took the pan and wiped his mouth. "Thank you," he whispered.

"You're welcome, Mr. Calder."

A man with sandy hair replaced the nurse at the head of his bed. "Mr. Calder, I'm Dr. Brown. You have a compound fracture of your left leg and luckily, only a simple fracture of your right."

"I don't feel very lucky."

"How did this happen?"

"I fell off a helicopter."

"Excuse me?"

"It was a stunt gone wrong. I was climbing up the side and I was suppose to open the chopper door. The drone that was filming it must have hit the rotors. Next thing I knew, I was being pummeled with plastic and metal bits. The chopper was swinging back and forth as it went down. That's the last thing I remember."

"I'll rephrase. You're damn lucky. I'm going to repair your legs but you need surgery now. I've ordered something for the pain."

"Thank God."

"I'm going to get ready for your surgery. Do you want to see your girlfriend before you go under?"

"Excuse me?"

"Your girlfriend is in the waiting room and I understand she's creating a fuss."

Jackson smiled. It had to be Chase. "Yes, please. Send her in."

Chase paced back and forth in the ER waiting room. She only stopped when she saw the news of Jackson's accident show up on the TV screen. The news didn't have any more information about him than she did. She wasn't family. They wouldn't tell her anything. Her studio ID was the only thing that convinced the receptionist she wasn't just some groupie. She'd sent Nancy back to the set to see what she could find out about production. A nurse came out of the ER and approached her.

"You can see Mr. Calder now," she said quietly.

She followed her to an exam room with a glass door covered by a curtain. The nurse opened the door and she followed her in. She couldn't help but gasp. Jackson's head was bandaged. His legs were wrapped in multiple layers of bandages. He turned to her and smiled.

"Hi, sweetheart. Give us a kiss."

Damn. He'd heard she said she was his girlfriend.

"Well, come on. I don't look that bad."

"Yeah, you do," she said as she walked toward him. She gave him a soft kiss and whispered, "I told you so."

"They'll be coming for him soon," said the nurse as she closed the curtain behind her.

"Coming for you?"

"Surgery to put my legs back together."

"Oh. I'm not going to ask you how you feel. I hate predictable lines."

"Actually, it's not as bad as it was. They gave me something that took the edge off."

"Good, good," she said as she looked him up and down.

"What is it?"

She wiped a tear from her cheek. "I'm so sorry."

“You have nothing to be sorry about. You tried to warn me. I didn’t listen.”

“Yeah, that’s right, you putz!” Chase started a full-on cry. She grabbed the edge of his blanket and wiped her cheeks. “Look what you’ve got me doing.”

A tall, grey-haired man entered the exam room. “Mr. Calder, I’m Henry Wilson, the hospital director. I’m sorry you’ve been injured. I’m here to assure you that your health and your security are our priorities. When your surgery is over, you’ll be moved to a secure room. We are experienced in caring for celebrities and dignitaries.”

“Thank you,” said Jackson. “This is my girlfriend, Chase Munroe. Will you please make sure she has access to my room.”

“Of course. He’ll be in room 710. I’ll call the floor to let them know to expect you, Ms. Munroe,” he said. “I’ll be going. They’ll be taking you to surgery soon.”

Chase waited until they were alone. “Why did you tell him I was your girlfriend?”

Jackson smiled. “You started it.”

“They were trying to get rid of me. I showed them my studio ID and said that so I could find out how you were.” She started to cry again. “I saw you fall.”

He reached for her hand. “I’m so sorry I put you through that.” He took a pained breath. He hoped they’d come for him soon. “Look, Chase, the truth is I don’t have any family here in California. All I’ve got are people I pay to be in my life. I know you well enough to know you’re not here about the movie. I’d like it if you’d stay.” He gave her the best movie star grin he could manage. “You’re a girl. You’re a friend. So, that makes you my girlfriend.”

She squeezed his hand tight. “Don’t you dare try and charm me, Jackson Calder. You’re still on my shit list for not listening to me.”

“Noted.” As they came to take him to surgery, he pulled her close. “Wish me luck.”

She gave him a quick kiss. “Good luck.” She leaned close and whispered, “You’re going to need it. Once you’re better, I’ll make you pay for not listening to me.”

Jackson opened his eyes and saw he was in a large hospital room. There were a couple of paintings on the wall and the furniture was definitely not hospital standard issue. He tried moving but his legs seemed to be secured in place. He was surprised he didn't hurt nearly as much as he had in the ER. In a large recliner was a sleeping Chase. She'd stayed. Of course, she had.

"Hey, sleeping beauty," he called.

She stirred in her chair. She saw he was awake and smiled. "There you are." She got up and stood by the bed.

He glanced down at his legs. "I think I won't be going anywhere soon."

Her smile faded, as she remembered she was still mad at him. "That's right, you won't. Maybe you'll listen to me next time."

"There won't be a next time. He reached his hand out to her and hoped she wouldn't want to break what bones were left. "I'm not going to do any more *John Does*."

"What? Of course, you will. You'll recover and you'll be chasing bad guys sooner than you should."

"I decided before this happened. I don't want to be stuck in action movies for the rest of my career. I want to do more." He was stunned when she smiled.

"Thank God. You're so much more than *John Doe*."

"But it means no more *John Doe* scripts for you."

"I'm more than *Joe Doe* too."

A nurse wheeled her computer cart into the room. "Welcome back, Mr. Calder. I'm Vicki. I'll be your nurse this shift. How are you feeling?"

"Not bad, considering."

"On a scale of one to ten?"

"About a five."

Vicki shook her head as she took his vitals. "That's the nerve block. It will wear off soon enough."

"Great," he mumbled.

"I've got a painkiller for you. It's better to get ahead of it before the blocks wear off." She put a needle in his IV. It was only a few moments before he felt a warmth shoot through his body.

"Whoa. That's some strong stuff."

"I'll let your doctor know you're awake," she said as she turned her cart around. "Just press the button if you need anything."

"I will, thanks, Vicki."

"You're welcome," she stopped and smiled. "By the way, my husband and I are big fans of *John Doe*. We always go opening night."

"I'm glad you enjoy them." He looked up at Chase. "This is the writer of the *John Doe* movies, Chase Munroe."

"Wow," she smiled as she shook Chase's hand. "I thought you were his girlfriend."

"She is," he smiled

Chase waited for the nurse to leave and closed the door. "Why do you keep telling people that? They're going to start to believe it."

"Would it be so bad if they did?" he chuckled as he rubbed his nose. The drug was hitting him hard. "I'm going to..." He closed his eyes and didn't finish his sentence.

It felt like five minutes but the clock told him he'd been asleep for an hour. Chase was back in the recliner, looking at her phone. "Anything interesting?" he asked.

"You're blowing up."

"I already did that."

“Ha, Ha. You’re all over the net. Everything from it was no big deal to you’re dead.”

“Not yet,” he smiled.

“Don’t say that!”

“Sorry. If I don’t laugh, I’ll cry.”

“Is it the pain? Should I get someone?”

“No. I’m just thinking about how the hell I’m going finish shooting. It’s going to be a while before this face is camera ready.”

“Don’t even think about that now. Your only job is to get better.”

“There are dozens of people working on this film. If they shut down production, everyone is out of work.”

“They are not your responsibility.”

A knock on the door interrupted them. Dr. Brown came in with another doctor. She had short dark hair and a bright smile. “Hello Mr. Calder. This is Dr. Stacey Hawkins. She’s the best trauma surgeon in the country.”

“Ahh, he’s so sweet,” she said as she tugged on his arm.

“Excuse me?” asked Chase.

“She’s also my wife. I asked her to take a look at your case.”

Dr. Hawkins walked to Jackson’s bed. She took a pen light out of her pocket and looked in his eyes. “They have you lit up!” she chuckled.

“Hey, six pins and twenty staples in his left leg. Right leg in a cast. He needs it,” said Brown.

Hawkins looked back at her husband. “I’m sure he does, dear.” She turned off the light and asked him to follow the pen with his eyes. “For someone who fell off a helicopter, you’re damn lucky.”

“Your husband said that.”

“Actually, you’re lucky for two reasons. First, you have the best orthopedic surgeon in the country to put your legs back together. I’m not saying that because I married him. He really is that good. Second, you don’t have severe head trauma. I had a look at your x-rays. I repeat, damn lucky.”

“Now it’s just a matter of recovery and a lot of physical therapy,” said Brown. “You’ll be here for a few days. I assume your girlfriend will be able to help you out at home.”

“Sure,” said Jackson.

“Well, I…” Chase stuttered.

“Otherwise, I recommend hiring some help. You’re not going to be able to manage on your own for some time.”

“Some time?” asked Jackson.

“At least six weeks. I’ll take the cast off the right leg first, in about six weeks. You’ll be able to get around better then. Your left leg could be problematic. Follow my orders and you’ll recover your mobility.”

“If he doesn’t?” asked Chase.

“You could wind up with a nasty limp. So, follow the orders, do the work and you’ll be fine.”

“Thank you, doctor. Both of you,” said Jackson.

Chase closed the door behind the doctors and turned to Jackson. “What the hell was that? Did you just make me your nurse?”

Chase was dumbfounded. She'd gone from Jackson's work friend to designated caregiver in one day. "What the hell are you thinking?"

"Well..."

"Well, nothing. I'm not a nurse. I can't take care of you. I can barely take care of myself!"

"I'll hire someone for the medical part. I'll need some help getting around my house. You could order the food delivery for me. I don't expect you to do it for free."

"You could do that yourself online. What is going on? You look guilty about something. I already told you that you didn't have to be sorry about the accident."

"I'm not going to do anymore *John Doe*'s. That means no paychecks for you."

Chase sat down on the chair. "For God's sake. I don't need your money. I certainly wouldn't expect you to pay me for ordering Chinese."

"You've been writing *John Doe* for six years. It could be a while before you sell another script."

"Thank you for the confidence in my ability."

"No, I don't mean that. You're a brilliant writer."

Chase smiled. "Thank you. I know what you're saying. This industry is fickle. That's why I saved my money." She got a good paycheck for the first movie, but the second and third movies got her a much bigger paycheck. She also got a small percentage of the film. That was almost unheard of in the industry. She wasn't in the J.K. Rowling stratosphere, but she could afford to focus on her writing without worrying about the bills.

Jackson smiled. "Clever girl."

"Yes, I am."

The security guard knocked and stuck his head in the room. "Excuse me. There is a man out here insisting on seeing you. He says his name is Weston."

Chase rolled her eyes. "Do you want me to get rid of him?"

“No. I’ll have to see him sooner or later. Let him in.”

Larry came barreling in the room but stopped dead when he saw Jackson. He tried to regain his composure. Chase thought he didn’t even notice her. “Jack, buddy. You look great.”

“I look like shit.”

“You’ll be up in no time.”

“I’m going to be laid up for a minimum of six weeks.”

“That’s crazy. We have a movie to finish.”

“Do you not see how bad he’s hurt? He has two broken legs because you,” said Chase.

Larry suddenly realized she was in the room. “What are you doing here?”

“I want her here,” said Jackson.

“This is all your fault,” she said. “You had to risk lives to get the shot.”

“Oh God, I never asked,” said Jackson. “How are the pilot and Greg. Did they get hurt?” They both looked at Larry who had no answer.

Chase sighed. “Greg is bruised but okay. The pilot has a gash in his head and a concussion. Not to mention a helicopter stuck on a roof until it can be repaired.” Jackson looked at her. “I sent Nancy back to the set to see what was going on. Production got shutdown by the crashing drone until further notice. You have more to worry about than a movie. I suggest you call your lawyer and make some proactive settlements,” she said.

Larry looked totally confused. “Who the hell do you think are you?”

“We’ve already covered that today. I’m the one who created *John Doe*. You’re the one who nearly killed him. Try to remember that.”

“Watch your tone, Munroe. You wouldn’t be here if it wasn’t for Jack!”

“Larry, no,” said Jackson.

“What is he talking about?”

“Anyone can write this crap. Jack wouldn’t sign for the sequels unless you were the writer and you got a percentage of the box office. Ridiculous!” Larry looked her up and down. “If he was going to put a girlfriend on the payroll, he could have done a hell of a lot better than you.”

“Larry! Shut up and get out before I call that security guard back in here.”

“Jack, you have responsibilities to the movie and to your fans.”

“Get. Out. Now,” Jackson said with all the vehemence he could manage through his growing pain. Larry slammed the door and left them alone. Chase had gone pale.

“Explain,” she said. Jackson smiled to himself. Chase was known for brevity.

“Larry wasn’t going to sign you for the second movie. He wanted to sign Bernie Schwartz.”

Chase went from pale to flushed with anger. “That hack?”

“Exactly. The reason I took the first movie was you gave John a unique voice. He wasn’t like any of the action heroes I’d played. I knew only you could write him.”

“The percentage?”

“I thought it was only fair.”

“Would you have ever told me?”

“No. I didn’t want you to think it was charity. I was simply protecting the work.”

Chase paced the floor, trying to absorb what she was told. It suddenly dawned on her what had happened. She looked at Jackson. “You gave up some of your percentage for me.”

“You’re worth it.”

Jackson woke up when the food server set a platter on his rolling table. “Thank you.” He opened the cover and saw a small steak and a baked potato. “Oh, that looks good.”

“Do you need any help?”

He smiled to see Chase was still here. “Could you help me sit up?” He moaned as Chase moved the bed up.

“Do you need a shot? I’ll get the nurse.”

“No, I’m okay for now. My back is pretty sore.”

“You fell onto a roof. Be grateful it’s not broken.”

“You’re not going to let me forget that are you?”

“Not likely.” She managed a smile. “At least not for now.”

Jackson took a bite of the steak. “Ah, that’s good.”

“I’m willing to bet that’s not normal hospital food.”

“Probably not.”

“You’re all over the news and the net.”

“You mentioned that.”

“No, I mean it’s everywhere. I think you might want to release a statement before everyone writes you off as a lost cause.”

“You haven’t. You’re still here.”

“Of course. You’re the one who made me your... designated driver. It would look strange to people if I left. Now, about a statement.”

“I suppose that’s okay, but no pictures.”

“Luckily, no one on site had any pictures. I think everything happened too fast. There is a reporter, Jim Collins. He has a good reputation. We could give him a statement and be sure it he gets it right.”

“Sounds like a plan. You call him while I finish this. I’m starving.” He took another bite of his steak and looked at Chase. “Wait, have you eaten?”

“I’m fine.”

“That’s a no.” He pushed a button and the nurse responded in record time, in person.

“Yes, Mr. Calder. How can I help you?” she said. This wasn’t Vicki. He must have slept through her shift.

“Chase hasn’t eaten all day and here I am, eating this delicious meal. Do you think you could order another meal for us?”

“Of course. If you need anything else, let me know. I’m Angela. I’ll be your nurse on this shift.”

“Thank you, Angela,” he smiled. He heard a giggle as she closed the door behind her.

“For God’s sake,” said Chase. “Even with you beat to hell, the women are falling all over you.”

“You don’t,” he said.

She looked at him as if he’d grown a second head. “Don’t be ridiculous. I’m a writer. You’re a movie star. We’re work acquaintances. The only reason I’m here is because you need someone to run interference with people like Larry. Now if you’ll excuse me, I’ll try and reach Jim Collins.”

He watched as she made the call. Why was it ridiculous?

Chase hadn’t realized how hungry she was until they set the steak in front of her. She demolished it in record time. Jackson was asleep. She tried not to make much noise. Sleep was what he needed. What she needed was to figure out what to do next. After six years of working together, she knew Jackson as well as you could a colleague. He didn’t make the party circuit. He was all about the work. She knew he dated. The last one was

Kasey Jordan, an actress who was in the *John Doe 2*. Chase knew they'd never last. They didn't.

Now he was counting on her to help him. It wasn't like she had other obligations. The last six years her life revolved around writing *John Doe* scripts. Any free time she had was spent working on her passion projects. She had several scripts in various stages of completion. She hadn't pitched any because she'd been obligated to the franchise. She also hadn't wanted to give the producers a reason to get rid of her. That was before she knew Jackson was the reason she was still on the films. He was the reason she had a nice house and a healthy bank account. She owed him.

A quiet knock on the door was followed by a red-haired man opening the door. "Ms. Munroe?"

"Yes."

"I'm Jim Collins."

"Please come in."

He noticed Jackson's eyes were closed. "I could come back later."

"No, it's fine," said Jackson. "The meds keep me sleepy but I think I can stay awake long enough to talk."

Chase indicated the chair for Jim while she stood back.

"You didn't bring a camera, did you?" said Jackson.

"No sir. Ms. Munroe said not to."

"Well, you can see why," as he pointed to his swollen face.

"All things considered; you don't look so bad. You still look like you."

"Good to know."

"Can you tell me how it happened?"

“I was supposed to climb up the side of the helicopter and open the door. The drone camera got sucked into the rotors and rained down on me. The helicopter wobbled back and forth before it landed on the roof. The crew freed me from the harness and pulled me out of the way before it landed on me. I owe them my life.”

Jim looked up from his pad. “Wow. It sounds like a very dangerous stunt. Why were you doing it?”

Jackson looked past Jim and smiled at Chase.

“What am I missing?” asked Jim.

“I was warned by Chase not to do it. I should have learned by now to listen to my smart friend.”

“Yes, you should,” said Chase.

“You are the writer of the *John Doe* movies.”

“Yes, I am. Most people don’t pay attention to the credits.”

Jim smiled. “It’s my job to pay attention. Why did you warn Mr. Calder? Was the scene not safe?”

“No. Our stunt team is the best. They’ve been with us through all three movies. I didn’t want Jackson to do the stunt because it was so complicated. I thought the team should handle it.”

He turned to Jackson. “So why did you do it?”

“I thought Chase was being overly cautious.”

Chase crossed her arms and glared at him.

Jackson nodded. “The truth is the director wanted the shot and I’m just arrogant and stupid enough to think I could do it. Playing a character like *John Doe* for as long as I have can make you believe you have abilities you really don’t. It was foolish of me and Chase will make sure I never forget it.”

“Damn straight,” she said

“Are you two together?”

Jackson looked at her and smiled. “Chase is a dear friend who cares about me, not the movie star.”

“That’s not the story,” said Chase. “We needed someone who could be trusted to tell the truth without embellishment. You have a good reputation in the industry.”

He looked down at his pad. “The official word from the production office is the movie is shut down until you’re recovered. They said they expect to be back up in a few weeks.”

Jackson smiled. “Well, I have two broken legs and a face fit for a monster movie. It may be a bit longer than that.”

“A bit longer?” said Chase. “You have a compound fracture on your left leg. You have pins and staples holding you together. You’re going to have a hell of a time recovering.” She looked at Jackson’s smile and over to Jim’s curious face. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said that. Today has been very upsetting. I’m sure Jackson will ace his physical therapy.”

Jackson finished his breakfast and prayed it was time for his medication. Chase came into the room, looking worse for wear. "Did you get any sleep?"

"Some." She sat down and pulled a copy of the LA Times out of her bag. "You're above the fold."

"Excuse me?"

She held up the paper and it featured a publicity shot of him. "It means you're front-page news. Above the fold is the first thing people see. I read his article. It's very good. It doesn't sugar coat what happened but it doesn't over sell it either. Basically, you're a talented actor who went too far out of his lane."

"So, I'm an idiot."

"We've already established that," she smiled. "Have you talked to your agent?"

"Yeah. He called late last night. He's on vacation in Fiji. He woke me up at two a.m. screaming at me for ruining his vacation."

"He can afford a tropical vacation because you are his client."

"Yeah, well, he missed that point. He thought he had to come home to handle the fallout. I told him we had it handled."

"Do you have anyone to call?"

"Nope. I talked to my parents this morning." Chase stared at him. "What's the look?" he asked.

"Not even Kasey?"

"We were over months ago. Are you actually feeling sorry for me?" he chuckled.

"You're alone?"

"You can be alone and still be happy."

"Well, aren't you evolved?" she smiled as she went back to the paper.

Chase waited for Jackson to come back to his room. He'd been going to physical therapy for five days. He'd made enough progress in his recovery that he was bitching about getting released. She still wasn't sure what she was going to do when he went home. He'd hired a nurse and a physical therapist but they would only see him during the day. He would need help at night. She didn't know if she was up to it.

The door opened and the transport person, Mark, pushed Jackson in the room. His metal crutches were next to him in the chair. "How did you do?"

"Moved my legs, invented new curse words, same old same old." Mark helped him up into the bed. Chase tried not to admire Jackson's biceps as he pulled himself up.

"You're getting better with the crutches," said Mark.

"All those pre-shoot workouts seemed to have paid off."

She waited until Mark left and then stood beside Jackson's bed. "How are you really doing?"

"Honestly, I can tell I'm getting better but the work is a bitch."

"You've never shied away from hard work."

"Thank you." Jackson gave her a smile. Not a Hollywood movie star smile. It was a genuinely pleased smile. She might have read something into it, if she didn't know better.

Dr. Brown entered the room with a smile. "Well, Mr. Calder, the reports from PT are you a determined if...colorful patient."

"Yeah, I apologized to the staff for my language."

"You've done very well. I think I can release you tomorrow."

"Tomorrow?" both Jackson and Chase asked. Jackson with joy, Chase with terror.

"Yes. You said you got medical help while you need it and with your girlfriend there, you should be fine."

Jackson held out his hand. "Thank you, doctor."

"You're very welcome. I'll see you in the morning."

Chase watched the doctor leave. "With your girlfriend there," he'd said. She looked at Jackson who was smiling like he'd won an Oscar. Now it was time to put up or shut up. She took a breath and tried to smile. "Well, that's good news. I'll drive you home. Do you still live in the same place?"

"No, I moved."

"I will need your address. Your 'girlfriend' doesn't know where you live."

"Funny, that," he laughed.

"Hysterical. Now, the elephant in the room. You can't be alone, not yet. I see how exhausted you are when you come back from therapy."

"I'll be able to manage. I know I've put you in a difficult situation. You don't have to stay with me."

"I assume you didn't move to a one-bedroom apartment."

"No. I live in the hills. Four bedrooms."

"One level or two?"

"One."

"That's good. I don't want to drag your ass up and down stairs."

"But I'm noted for my ass. They said so in *People*."

She crumbled up a napkin and tossed it at him. "Shut up, idiot."

Jackson was so glad to be going home. Even though he was given the best of everything in the hospital, it was still a hospital. It was noisy and people were always poking him or taking readings. More than three hours of sleep in a row was rare. He would be so happy to see his own bed. It cost more than his first car, but it was worth every penny. "The house should be in order. Margie was in yesterday for cleaning and she stocked the kitchen for me."

"Margie?"

"My cleaner. She comes once a week."

Chase pulled up the long driveway to his home. "Holy shit," she whispered.

He smiled at her expression. His house was a sprawling white stucco with a Spanish tile roof. "Yeah, it's pretty cool."

"Pretty cool? My two bedroom in Pasadena is pretty cool. This is unbelievable."

"I'm glad you approve. Let's get inside." Chase got his crutches out of the back seat and helped him out of the car. He handed her his keys and maneuvered himself toward his front door. Chase held the door for him as he came in and turned off the alarm. "The code is 4754."

"Trust me with your valuables, do you?" she smiled.

He stopped and looked at her smile. "Yes. I do." He followed her into the living room and nearly ran into her. She'd stopped in her tracks and was staring at the view with her mouth wide open. The entire length of the back of his house was all glass. It provided an uninterrupted view of his pool and the city beyond.

"Wow," she whispered.

"I'm glad you like it."

"Aren't you afraid paparazzi will get shots through all this glass?"

"No. They'd have to be pretty determined to climb that hill. Even if they did, I'm pretty boring. They wouldn't get more than me watching TV."

Chase shook her head and turned toward him. “Unbelievable.”

“Did you bring your swimsuit? I told you about the pool. I won’t be able to use it for awhile. There’s no reason you shouldn’t.”

“Yeah, I did. Let’s get you into bed.”

He couldn’t resist a broad smile. “Well now…”

“Shut up,” she huffed. “You need to take your med, lay down and sleep.”

“I’m fine.”

“You look like crap.”

“You’ll turn my head, ma’am,” he said with a southern accent.

She stood behind him. “Lead the way and I’ll get your stuff out of the car.”

He led her down a hallway to his room. He had to admit, Chase was right. He really was tired. He glanced out at the view he’d missed. He sat down on the bed and set his crutches next to him on the floor.

“Can you sleep in those?” she asked.

He was wearing hospital scrubs. The clothes he was brought in with were a bloody, shredded mess. Chase had disposed of them so no one could get morbid souvenirs. “Yes, these will be fine. He pulled off his hospital socks and got under the covers. Every muscle in his body sighed with relief.

“I’ll be right back.”

Jackson closed his eyes and wondered if he’d be awake when she got back.

He wasn’t.

Chase sat on the sofa and stared out the city. Jackson had been asleep for hours. She set her things in a beautiful guest room down the hall from his room. She even had her own bath. That reduced the chance of running into him wearing a towel. Damn it.

She wasn't blind. Even beat up and exhausted, he was a handsome man. He had thick, wavy hair and a goatee she thought was sexy. But nothing compared to his bright blue eyes. They could reduce a woman of any age to a giggling school girl. She had to remind herself she was his colleague and his friend. She was not girl friend material.

"Hey."

She turned to see a sleepy-eyed Jackson, standing with his crutches. He'd managed to change from the scrubs to a t shirt and shorts. "How are you doing?"

"Okay. I guess I was more tired than I thought."

"Are you hungry?"

"I could eat. How do you feel about Chinese?"

"Love it."

"I'll put an order in." He sat down next to her on the couch. He pulled up a menu on his phone and handed it to her. "Order what you want." She picked out her favorites and handed it back to him. He picked out his meal and put in the order. "All my info is already in the app. I order from them all the time."

"You look like you're in pain."

"So much for small talk," he smiled. "I am, a little."

"You feel asleep before I could give you your med. I didn't want to wake you."

"I needed the sleep. I'll take the med after I eat. Did you settle into your room?"

"Yes, it's very nice. I picked the one with it's own ensuite. Very fancy," she smiled.

"I'm glad you like it." They stared at each other for an awkward moment. "Are you okay? I know I've steamrolled you into this."

“I wouldn’t be here if I didn’t want to be. You’re a friend and you need help.”

“We’re friends?” he smiled.

“Yes, you idiot. I thought we were just colleagues but I was wrong. Only a friend would stand up to Larry and the producers to keep me on the project.”

“I’m glad we’re friends. You’re a brilliant writer. I knew if *John Doe* was not going to become a caricature, I needed you.”

“Thank you.”

“Fill me in on you. Did you always write stories?”

“Even before I could write. My mother said I would tell her long stories about my stuffed animals. Editor of the school newspaper. English lit major in college. Typical stuff.”

“I doubt little Chase was ever typical.”

“I think that was a compliment,” she smiled. “I wasn’t little Chase. Chase is my mother’s maiden name. I changed it because I was tired of editors and producers not taking me seriously. When they see the name Chase, they assume I’m a man.”

“They wouldn’t make that mistake when they saw you.”

“Another compliment. You’ll turn my head, sir,” she said in a southern accent.

“Tell me.”

“Tell you what?”

“Your name before you changed it.”

She rolled her eyes. “I always hated it. I really must like you to tell you. Tell anyone else and you will suffer my considerable wrath.” She took a breath. “It’s Jill.”

“That’s a perfectly nice name,” he said.

She tilted her head. “Think about it.”

“What? Jill Munroe is a perfectly nice name.” He stopped and looked at her. “Why does that sound familiar.” She clasped her hands to resemble a pistol. He couldn’t help laughing out loud. “Oh my God! Charlie’s Angels.”

“My dad was a big Farah Fawcett fan. I can’t believe my mother let him get away with naming me that. You can stop laughing now.”

“No, I can’t,” he said wiping his eyes. “It’s not nearly as bad as my name.”

“Your name?”

“It’s John Smith.”

“You’re kidding.”

“Nope. John Smith. Not even a middle name. My parents, I love them dearly, but they had a distinct lack of imagination when it came to naming me. John Smith Jr. didn’t make it any better. I hated sounding so ordinary so I went by Jack. That’s why I don’t mind when Larry calls me Jack. It’s actually my name.”

“Okay, you win,” she smiled.

He gasped and then started laughing again.

“Now what?”

“Don’t you see it? We’re Jack and Jill!” He bent over laughing.

“Oh my God.”

The doorbell interrupted his laughing. “Saved by the bell,” he said.

“That’s another show,” she said as she walked to the door, followed by more laughter.

Jackson watched Chase doing laps from his seat on the couch. She was making good use of his pool. She'd been swimming every morning. Maybe it was time he joined her, even if it was just on the deck. He balanced on his crutches as he pushed open the slider. He walked out on the deck just as Chase got out of the pool. She wore a plain one-piece suit, but it looked sexier on her than a tiny bikini. He smiled at her long, slim frame. Her short, dark hair was slicked back from the water. Damn, she had legs for days.

"What the hell are you doing?" she yelled as she ran to his side.

So much for that train of thought. "I thought I'd join you. I haven't seen the sun in two weeks."

"The deck is wet. You don't want to slip and lose all the progress you've made." She walked with him over to a deck chair. "Now sit."

"Yes, Mom." He got his legs on the chaise. The sun felt great on his skin.

"I'm sorry if I was a little abrupt," she said as she was drying off with beach towel. His train of thought was back on track.

"No, you were right. I do need to be careful."

"Isn't your therapist due soon?"

"Today is a day off. He doesn't want me to overwork it. I've already done my home exercises." He reached for her hand. "Thank you for looking after me."

"I haven't done that much. I've placed take out orders and yelled at you to take your meds."

"You've helped me move around and kept me safe. I appreciate that."

She nodded toward the pool. "It's not like staying here has been a hardship."

"Can you just let me say thank you?"

She smiled and nodded. "You're welcome."

He swore she blushed. "You've been here nearly a week. Am I keeping you from anything or anyone?"

“Are you fishing for information on my love life?”

“You haven’t mentioned anyone.”

“That’s because there isn’t anyone. I don’t do relationships. What I do is write. I have my laptop. I’ve been working when you’re asleep. I’ve actually gotten quite a lot done.”

“You’re not still working on the movie, are you?”

“No. These are other scripts I haven’t pitched.”

“So, pitch.”

“What?”

“Let me hear what you’ve got. I’ve already said no more *John Doe*. Do you have anything in your bag of tricks that doesn’t involve car chases?”

“Or helicopters?” she smiled.

“I’m permanently done with helicopters. Tell me what you’re working on now.”

“It’s nothing you’d be interested in. It’s about a high school principal in a tough area.”

“What makes you think I wouldn’t be interested?”

“You’ve never done anything like it.”

“That’s exactly why I’d be interested. Let me read it.”

“I don’t know.”

“Please.”

She sighed and wrapped the towel around her waist. “Fine. After dinner. I’m going to take a shower. Dinner will be ready in an hour.”

“What did you order?”

“I made a roast.”

“Really?” he smiled.

“Yes, really. I can only eat so much take out. Stay put until I get back. I don’t want you slipping.”

Jackson looked up at the sun and smiled. “No problem.” He sneaked a peak at her as she walked into the house. He’d been thinking a lot about Chase. She was a good friend. Unlike most of the people in his life, she didn’t want anything from him. She was smart, funny and didn’t take his shit.

Chase had made no indication she’d be open to taking their relationship in another direction. She was a beautiful woman and the longer she was here, the harder that was for him to ignore. He reminded himself she was here as a friend and he was damn lucky.

Jackson sat down on the couch with Chase's tablet. It took some more convincing, but she'd finally given it up. He got his legs comfortable on the chaise portion of the couch and looked at the file, *"The Hard Road Home."* He took a sip of his coffee and set it down on the table. He began to read about Jeremy Thorne, an idealistic school principal. He was determined to help his students fulfill their potential despite their circumstances. He also had a turbulent relationship with his parents. They felt he was wasting his Ivy League education on a hopeless cause. Jackson gasped when he read that the student Jeremy had worked with all through the movie, was killed in a drive by shooting. Jeremy was one of the few people at the funeral. The image of the boy's mother, mute in her pain, was so vivid to Jackson, he felt like he was standing in the rain next to her.

Jackson took another sip of his coffee and found it lukewarm. He'd been reading for nearly an hour. He wouldn't bother to heat it. He needed to see where Jeremy went.

He hadn't been here in nearly a year. Tired of the constant arguments, he'd avoided his parents. He didn't really know why he was here now, standing in the rain. He knocked on the door and listened for footsteps.

"Jeremy! Why did you knock? Come in, you're soaking wet," said his mother.

"I didn't want to startle you."

"It's your home. Max, Jeremy's here."

His father came up from his basement man cave. "You look like a drowned cat."

"Hi, Dad."

"Why are you here? Isn't it a work day?" he asked.

"I was at a funeral."

His mother took his wet coat and handed it to his father. "I'll make you some tea."

"Thanks, Mom." He sat down in the living room. This was the place he'd watched Saturday morning cartoons. He'd watched from the stairs as his parents drank whiskey sours as they entertained their friends. It had all seemed so normal. He thought everyone lived like that. Little did he know.

His father sat down in his recliner as his mother sat down with the tea. He took a sip and smiled. "Just two sugars, you remembered."

"Of course, I remembered. You're my son."

"Was it a colleague?" asked his father.

"Max!"

"What, Florence? It wasn't family. As far as I know all the relatives are still on the right side of the dirt. Although your sister, Susan, is questionable."

"Max, really!" His mother took his hand. "Was it a friend, dear?"

"No," he whispered. "It was a student. His name was Darryl. I'd been working with him to get a place in a writing workshop this summer at Temple. He wanted to be a journalist. He would have been a great one. He was shot in a drive by. Police said it was a case of mistaken identity." He looked at his mother and tears finally fell. "He was only 15." His mother held him close and let him cry himself out. She handed him a napkin to wipe his eyes. "I'm sorry."

"It's fine dear. You'll stay for dinner. I'm making a pot roast. That's your favorite."

He managed a smile. "Yeah, Mom. It is." She stood and went into the kitchen. His father was still in his chair, watching him. He stood and Jeremy thought he was going to retreat back to his man cave. Instead, he sat down next to him.

"I never cared enough to cry over my job. It was just a job." He put his hand on Jeremy's shoulder. "You're making a difference to these kids."

"I thought I was but I don't know how I'm supposed to go on like nothing's happened."

"You're not. You mourn this boy so carry him with you. If you care this much, you can't give up."

He managed a small smile. "You're right, of course."

“I’m not always. I wasn’t right about you wasting your education. The world doesn’t need another stock broker, like me. It needs people who care enough to cry. I’m proud of you, son.”

The final scene of the movie was Jeremy taking a deep breath before walking into his school.

Jackson wiped tears off his cheeks as he set down the tablet. “Chase! Get your ass in here!

She dashed into the living room. “What? Did you fall?”

“Get over here.” He patted the couch and she sat next to him. He handed her the tablet and kissed her cheek. “You are a freaking genius, woman. You have to let me play Jeremy.”

“I think you’d be brilliant but that would be up to the producers, of which we have none.”

“We can work on that, but nobody gets this role but me.”

Jackson looked at Chase preparing their lunch. Eight weeks had flown by. Having her here was becoming second nature. He was going to have to get used to being alone again. His right cast was off and the left one was now a walking boot. If he was honest, he could take care of himself now. He took a deep breath and walked into the kitchen. It was time.

“What’s for lunch?”

“Fish tacos.”

“Sounds great.” He poured them both an ice tea and sat down at the kitchen island as Chase sat the meal in front of him. “Thanks.” She sat down next to him. “I got a call from Larry.”

“Oh yeah? What did he want? Does he have a helicopter on stand by?”

“No. He wants me to come to the studio tomorrow for some ADR.”

“Okay, I’ll drive. We should make sure he’s not going to film it.”

“It’s just additional dialogue recording.”

“Yeah, but you know Larry. He might want to film it for the publicity. You look better than you did but you’re still recovering.”

“Thank you, I think?” he smiled. “There is something I wanted to talk to you about. I’m getting around pretty well by myself now.”

Chase looked straight ahead as she sipped her tea. “You’re finally sick of me being under foot.”

“No.”

“I’m surprised it didn’t happen sooner. I’ll drive you to the studio tomorrow, then I’ll pack it in.”

He reached for her hand. “That’s not what I’m saying. I’m trying to be honest. I am better.”

“No, I get it. I don’t take it personally. I was just here to help.”

Her flushed cheeks told him she was taking it personally. “Chase, what I’m saying is I may not need you here, but I want you here.”

“What? I’m confused.”

“I don’t need as much help getting around but I like you being here. We still have the movie to work on.”

“I’ve written my last pages for *John Doe*.”

“I mean *The Hard Road Home*. I want us to work on getting it to the screen.”

“You’re serious.”

“Absolutely. I’ll do whatever it takes to get this made.”

“Wow. You are serious.”

“I am.”

“I don’t need to live here for that.”

“No, you don’t.” He stood and walked back and forth. He had to say this right. “I guess what I’m saying is, I would like it if you stayed.”

“But why?”

Jackson couldn’t believe this. She was genuinely confused. Maybe everything he’d been feeling was one sided. He sat back down. “Spending time with you has been the best part of all this.”

“Well, thanks. I’m more fun than two broken legs.”

“No, damn it, I’m getting this all wrong. What I’m trying to say, badly, is that I think we’ve become very good friends. You’re one of the smartest people I’ve ever known. I like being with you. You make me laugh; you don’t put up with my shit.” He touched her cheek. “I lose myself in your eyes. You’re so beautiful. I’d really like to see if this could go somewhere.”

“Don’t be ridiculous.”

Now he was going from embarrassed to frustrated and maybe a little angry. “Why am I ridiculous?” he asked through gritted teeth.

“We covered this in the beginning. I’m not girlfriend material.”

“Bull! If you don’t find me as attractive as I find you, then just tell me.”

She pushed away from the table and started pacing back and forth. “I can’t! You’re right about us becoming great friends. You’re probably the best friend I’ve ever had. I don’t want to ruin it.”

He took her hand, forcing her to stand still. “What makes you think we’d ruin it?”

“Because every man I’ve ever loved has always turned out to be a massive disappointment. Father, brothers, lovers, they’ve all broken my heart. There’s only so many times I can put the pieces back together. I can’t take that chance. Not again. Not with you.”

He stood and brushed a tear from her cheek. “Okay. I understand. But I need you to understand that I really care about you. I’ll respect your wishes but it won’t stop me from hoping you’ll decide we’re worth a chance.”

“What if I don’t change my mind?”

“Then we’ll still be the best of friends.” He was glad when she finally smiled. “What do you think about staying? I won’t pressure you for anything, I promise. You have to admit, it will be easier to work on the movie and you do love telling me what to do.”

“True. I have to admit, the view is pretty good,” she smiled.

“Oh, really?” he grinned.

She indicated over his shoulder at the mountains. He laughed out loud. “One thing’s for sure. I’ll never get a big head around you.” They sat back down to finish their lunch. Life with Chase would never be dull.

Chase drove Jackson to the studio. She made sure he was wearing shades and a ball cap. She flashed her ID and the guard waved them through. They pulled into the lot and she walked next to him, making sure he was steady on unfamiliar ground. They walked into the studio and found Larry and the engineer waiting for them. Also waiting was an unwelcome surprise.

“Jackson, sweetheart, it’s so good to see you.” Kasey Jordan walked toward him and gave him a hug. Chase noticed it wasn’t returned.

“Kasey, what are you doing here?” asked Jackson.

“Larry told me you were coming in today and I wanted to see you for myself.” She pushed out a pouty lip. “It was very rude of you not to return my calls or my texts. I was so worried about you.”

Chase tried to hide a smile. She had no idea Kasey had been trying to reach him.

“I thought we could get a few pics of the two of you. We need to keep the interest up in the movie,” said Larry.

Jackson shot him daggers. “Not gonna happen.”

“Jack, buddy, somebody’s going to get the first shot of you. Let’s control the narrative.”

He pushed Kasey back a step. “We’ve been over for months. Aren’t you dating Martin Stone?”

She gave a dismissive wave. “That was nothing.” She touched his face where the fall left a small scar. “Poor baby. I know a brilliant plastic surgeon who could get rid of that for you.”

“Kasey, that’s enough.” He looked over at Larry who was pretending to be busy with the engineer. He knew he was in trouble. “Larry, I’m here to work.”

“Yes, yes, of course. Kasey, honey, you can sit in the booth if you like.”

Jackson looked at Chase. “Do you mind sitting in the booth?” He nodded back toward Kasey.

“No, I don’t mind,” she smiled.

Chase sat for an hour on the least comfortable chair in the booth. She didn’t mind because she’d never seen this part of the process. Sometimes background noise or technical glitches interfered with the dialog. Jackson was covering a monologue to the victim he was trying to help. He concluded and looked into the booth.

“That’s great,” said Larry. “Let’s move on.”

Chase shook her head slightly. Jackson nodded and hit his mic. “Let’s try that one again.”

“It’s fine,” said Larry.

“Let’s make it better than fine.” Jackson redid the scene. He lowered his voice while still matching the screen. The effect was to make his character more sincere and believable. He looked into the booth. Chase nodded and smiled. He returned her smile with a patented, lopsided one of his own. She tried to not let her heart race, but he was gorgeous and she was human. He stood and walked into the booth.

“I need a break.” He looked at Chase. “How about some lunch?”

“Oh, yes,” sighed Kasey as she looked at Chase. “I’ll have a endive salad, balsamic on the side, and a sparkling water.”

Jackson stood stock still. Chase didn’t think she’d ever seen him this angry. “Who the hell do you think you are?” he demanded.

“What? She’s your assistant. She’s getting your lunch. She can get mine too. If I go, people will make a fuss,” she smiled.

“This is Chase Munroe,” he said slowly, as if that would impart some knowledge. It did not. “She’s not my assistant. She wrote all the *John Doe* movies. I wasn’t asking her to get me lunch. I was asking her to lunch.”

“What? Her?” she pointed her perfectly manicure finger. “You couldn’t possibly. Look at her. She looks like you found her at a Walmart.”

Chase raised her chin, trying not to acknowledge the direct hit to her ego.

“If you don’t have the intelligence to know the brilliant woman who wrote the words that made you famous, you could at least treat her with basic human decency. But that’s beyond you.” Jackson pointed at Larry. “Chase and I are going to lunch. We’ll be taking our time.” He pointed at Kasey. “If she’s not gone when we get back, you’ll have to pay to reschedule the rest of the ADR.” He took Chase by the hand and walked out of the studio to the car. He got in and slammed the door. “I’m sorry about her.”

Chase leaned over and kissed his cheek. “Thank you,” she whispered.

They got a table at the deli and looked at the menus. Chase hoped it would cover her blush. Jackson had defended her to Kasey and now they were out in public, like they were a real couple. He took off his cap and sunglasses.

“Is that a good idea?” she asked. “Someone’s going to take a picture and sell it.”

“I’m done hiding.”

The waitress came over with her order pad and a smile. “Mr. Calder, it’s so good to see you. How are you feeling?”

“I’m doing much better Amy, thanks. How have you been?”

“Good. The baby is finally sleeping through the night.”

“I’m sure you and your husband are glad about that.”

“You have no idea,” she smiled.

“This is Ms. Munroe.”

“Oh, you wrote the *John Doe* movies.”

“I did,” she smiled. “Most people don’t read the credits.”

“My husband and I had a bet after we saw the first one. He thought an action film like that had to have been written by a man. I showed him Chase Munroe was a woman and he had to take me to dinner. Thanks for that,” she smiled.

“I’m glad I was able to help.”

“What can I get you?”

“A Rueben and an ice tea.”

“That sounds good. I’ll have the same,” said Jackson.

Amy brought their drinks and Chase took a sip. “Do you know everyone here?”

“Amy’s a good kid. She was working right up until she delivered.” He took a sip of his drink. “I have an idea.” Amy brought their sandwiches.

“Here you go.”

“Thanks. Amy, do you have your phone?”

“Yeah. The boss lets me keep it on in case my mother needs to reach me about Charlie.”

“Why don’t you take it out and make a video of us. You can call it Jackson Calder’s still alive.”

“Oh, my boss won’t like it.”

“I’ll tell him I said it was okay. You can sell it. Call it my contribution to Charlie’s college fund.”

“You’re kidding.”

“Nope. Grab your phone.”

She pulled it out of her pocket and aimed it at them. The manager came towards them but Jackson smiled and waved him off. Amy started filming. “Hi, Mr. Calder. It’s good to see you.”

“Hi Amy. It’s good to be seen,” Jackson smiled his lopsided smile. Amy giggled. Chase rolled her eyes.

“How are you doing?”

“I’m doing really well thanks to the great first responders and doctors and medical personnel at Mercy General.” He leaned over to Chase, insuring she was in the shot. “I also have to thank my friend, Chase Munroe. She looked after me and kicked my ass when I needed it.” He looked at her and smiled. “I don’t know how I would have made it this far without her.”

“Did you meet filming *John Doe*?”

“Yes, we did. Chase wrote all three films.” He smiled and put his arm around her shoulders.

“Will you be working on the next *John Doe*?”

Chase looked at Jackson in a panic.

“We are currently working on a script,” said Jackson. He nodded at Amy and she understood he was done. She shut off her phone and slipped in back in her pocket. “Give me your phone number and I’ll have my lawyer call you. She’ll help you sell it.”

“Thank you, Mr. Calder,” she grinned.

“You’re very welcome. Thanks for making sure Chase was included.”

Amy grinned at Chase. “I read the credits.” She wrote her number on the back of an order slip and went back behind her counter. She engaged in an animated conversation with her manager, explaining the video was Jackson’s idea.

“What was that?” Chase asked.

Jackson chuckled. “I’m controlling the narrative.”

Jackson was tired after finishing the rest of the ADR. He was surprised at how much the day took out of him. He changed into shorts and a t shirt and walked toward the kitchen.

“What would you like for dinner?” she asked.

He sat down at the island. “Whatever you want will be fine. I need to make a call.” He pulled out his phone and pushed a contact. “Hi. It’s Jackson Calder.”

“Mr. Calder! How are you?”

“I’m doing well, thank you, Carrie. Is Katherine available?”

“For you?” she laughed. “One minute.” He didn’t have long before another familiar voice got on the line.

“Jackson? How are you doing?”

“I’m good. Thank you for the fruit basket.”

“You’re welcome. What can I do for you?”

“I want you to call a woman I know. Amy is a waitress at the studio deli. I had her do a video of me and I want you to help her sell it to an outlet. Someone was going to get the first pictures of me. I’d rather it be someone I like.” He pulled the number out of his pocket and read it to her.

“Got it. I’ll call right away.”

“Thanks, Katherine.”

“I’ll let you know how we make out.”

Jackson disconnected the call sat back in his chair. “I’m beat. You wouldn’t think looking at a screen and talking would be so exhausting.”

“You haven’t done that much for nearly three months. Of course, you’re tired.” Chase handed him an ice tea. “You still have to eat. How about Italian?”

“Sounds good.”

He'd had just finished his spaghetti when his phone beeped. He pulled it out and looked at a text. "Yes!"

"What is it?"

"A text from Katherine. She got Amy ten thousand for the video."

"Wow!"

"It's going to be on tonight's broadcast of *Entertainment This Week*."

"That's in an hour. Get comfortable on the couch while I clean up."

Jackson stood up and smiled. "Normally I'd offer to help, but I'm going to sit my ass down." He got comfortable on the couch and turned the TV to the right channel. He thought he'd close his eyes for a moment. He felt a hand on his thigh.

"Hey, sleeping beauty."

He opened his eyes and smiled at Chase. "Just resting."

"You've been snoring for the last half hour. I wouldn't have woken you up but the show is on next."

"In an Entertainment This Week exclusive, Jackson Calder out and about less than three months after his near fatal, on-set accident."

"It wasn't near-fatal," he said.

"Hush."

Jackson stared at the screen. He couldn't believe that was him. He was pale save for the dark circles under his eyes. He knew his jeans felt loose but he hadn't realized the weight loss was evident in his face. The video ended and they returned to the hosts.

"It's a relief to see Jackson doing so well after such a horrible accident." The presenter smiled.

"Oh, God," they both said. Jackson put the TV on mute.

“Everyone is going to think I’m your girlfriend.” Jackson was still staring at the screen. She hit his shoulder. “Are you listening to me?”

“I look like crap.”

“So that would be a no,” she huffed.

“What?”

“The video makes it seem like I’m your girlfriend.”

He turned off the TV and looked at her. “People are going to think what they want. I made it clear that you are my friend who has helped me recover. We’ve already established that I would like it if you were my girlfriend. I’m sorry if you find the idea of being the girlfriend of Frankenstein is so repulsive.”

“What? You’re being ridiculous.”

“Am I?” He pointed at the screen. “I looked half dead. Dark circles under my eyes, pale as a ghost,” he pointed to his face and legs. “I’m all scarred up. What the hell was I thinking?”

Chase smacked his shoulder. “You’ve been inside for months so you lost your tan. You’ve lost some weight but that’s fixed quick enough with meals like we just had.” She sighed and took his hand. “You look great, idiot. Any woman who looks at that video is only going to see your blue eyes and your smile. Any man will be envious. Jack, listen to me. The scars will fade, although they’ll make you look even more butch.”

He smiled. She really was the best friend he’d ever had. She kicked his ass when he needed it. And she used his real name to do it. He leaned in and kissed her cheek. “Thanks, Jill,” he smiled. “I’m not being vain, I swear.” He pointed to his face. “This is how I make my living. If I ruin it, I ruin my career.”

“Trust me. You’re still freaking gorgeous. The camera still loves you, even the camera on a smart phone.”

“Thank you.” He stood and stretched. His legs were aching and he was still exhausted. “I should get to bed.”

“So should I. It’s been a long day.” They walked down hall and stood at their bedroom doors. “Sweet dreams, Jill.” He didn’t understand why she rolled her eyes. “What’s the look?”

“What look? There was no look.”

“There was definitely a look.”

She sighed and leaned up against her door. “I hate that expression. Everyone says it.”

“What’s wrong with wishing you sweet dreams?”

“I don’t think they exist. I’ve never had them.”

“Never?”

“No. Nightmares, frustration dreams, yes. No dreams of swimming in chocolate.”

“Not even any...you know.”

“Sex dreams?” she smiled. “Those fall under the heading of frustration, sometimes nightmares.”

He couldn’t believe what he was hearing. He reached out for her.

“What are you doing?”

“I’m going to hug you and you’re going to let me.” He wrapped his arms around her. He pulled her tight and whispered in her ear. “Tonight, you’re going to dream about a tropical beach with white sands. The ocean is a turquoise blue and warm. You’re floating along and you can see the colorful fish swim by because the water is so clear. You will be at peace.” He pulled back and kissed her forehead. “Sweet dreams.”

A school of yellow striped fish swam by. A couple of them tasted her toes. “Hey there. I’m not food.” She floated on her back, looking up at a bright blue sky. She heard a voice and turned toward the beach. Under a beach umbrella was a man waving at her. She started swimming toward the voice but stopped. If she got to the beach, she’d have to leave the water. She wanted to stay. She looked up at the beautiful sky. It was too perfect. It had to be a dream. She closed her eyes and enjoyed moving up and down with the small waves. She kept her eyes closed as long as she could.

Sun warmed her face. Chase opened her eyes and saw the mountains through the large windows. She smiled at the view. She got up and brushed her teeth. She debated a soak in the Jacuzzi, but it wouldn’t be the same. She walked out to the living room and stopped. Jackson was moving around the kitchen, pouring coffee into large mugs. She smiled as he cursed at some spilled milk. She loved him. She knew it as sure as she knew he loved her.

“Oh, you’re up,” he said. “I was going to bring this to you in bed.”

She walked toward him and smiled. She slid her arms around his neck and kissed him. “Thank you,” she whispered.

“Uh, I think that’s my line,” he smiled as he slipped his arms around her waist.

“The water was wonderful.”

“It worked?” he smiled.

“It worked.”

“You’re still holding on to me.”

“How about that?” she smiled. She gave him another kiss and whispered, “I love you.”

“I love you too,” he grinned.

“I know.”

He kissed her again. This time, with a passion that sent an electric shock straight to her toes.

“Jack, I want to take this slow. Are you okay with that?”

He smiled and caressed her cheek. “My sweet Jill, I’ll great with it.”

Jackson walked carefully into his pool. He didn't need his boot anymore, but he didn't want to take a chance of falling. He eased in up to his shoulders and smiled. The water felt great.

"Well, hey there."

He looked up and Chase was standing on the deck. "Damn, girl," he smiled. He knew he was leering, but he couldn't help it.

"What?"

"I think you should know, I'm a leg man."

"Oh yeah?" she chuckled.

"You have legs for days." He watched as she walked to the deep end and dove in. She swam under the water until she reached him. She popped up from the water and wrapped her arms around his waist. He gave her a quick kiss. "My own mermaid."

"How's the leg?"

"Good. The doctor cleared me to start swimming again."

"Catch me if you can," she grinned and dove back under the water. He had to swim as fast as he could to catch up to her.

"Take it easy on me," he laughed.

"What fun would that be?"

"The doctor also cleared me to go back to work."

"No helicopters."

"I promise. I've already talked to Larry about it."

"Are you sure? You know how he is. I don't want you taking any unnecessary chances."

"Do you want to come with me?"

"No. I've already given him the last pages."

He saw the look on her face and knew it was more than that. "Talk to me."

"I don't want to see you on that roof again." Her eyes teared.

"Sweetheart, I promise you I'm done with stunts. I don't want to go through rehab again, but most of all," He touched her cheek. "I never want to frighten you like that again."

She gave him a soft kiss. "Thank you."

"I've studied your rewritten script. It's great but..."

"But what?"

"You realize that change you made is an awful lot like another, very famous movie."

"Call it an homage," she smiled.

Two weeks later they were making an appearance at the wrap party. The producers, Robert Cooper and Austin James, had gone all out. Verdun was one of the nicest restaurants in LA. They were probably just glad that they hadn't wasted millions on an unfinished film. Jackson held tight to Chase's hand, not wanting to get separated from her in the crowd. His heart sunk when he saw a familiar bleached blonde coming toward him.

"Jackson, sweetheart. You look terrific," said Kasey.

"Thank you." He pulled Chase closer. "If you'll excuse us, we need to mingle."

Kasey wrapped her hands around his opposite arm. "Oh, come on, Jackson. You can do so much better." She grinned a snake smile at Chase. "In fact, you have."

Chase grabbed her hand and yanked it off his arm. "Jackson is too kind of a person to make a scene." She stepped closer. "I'm not. Back off, bitch!" Kasey gasped and disappeared back into the crowd.

Jackson leaned toward her and whispered, "I love you."

They were making the rounds when Robert and Austin approached them.

“Jackson, you look great.”

“Thanks, Robert.”

“Why don’t you make a little speech to the troops,” said Austin.

He had been holding Chase’s hand. Now he pulled it to his chest. His heart was racing. “Yeah, sure.” They started to move toward the head table but Chase held him back.

“What’s going on. Why are you so upset?”

“I’m fine.”

“No, you’re not. What’s up?”

“They completely ignored you. You’re the one who created *John Doe*. They should be kissing your ass, not mine.”

“Ewww, no thank you,” she smiled. “I appreciate your support but I don’t need them to acknowledge me. They signed my check. That’s all I needed from them.”

Jackson smiled and kissed the back of her hand. “Come on. I have a speech to make.”

They walked into the house and Chase turned off the alarm. He set down his keys and chuckled. "Back off, bitch?"

Chase smiled through her blush. She slipped her arms around his waist. "I realized in that moment; she was messing with my man. She pissed me off. If she hadn't backed off, I would have made her regret it. Are you mad?"

He gave her a deep kiss. "Does that answer your question?"

She kissed him again. "We've been doing this for weeks. Thank you for respecting my wishes. I know this has been hard on you."

He rolled his eyes and chuckled. "You have know idea."

"Let's call this the longest foreplay in history." She took him by the hand and led him toward his bedroom. He stopped before he opened the door.

"Are you sure?"

She gave him a kiss that rocked him to his toes.

He grinned from ear to ear. "Well, all right." He opened the door and led her inside. He pulled her into a deep kiss. He wanted to be slow and gentle. After months of keeping his lust in check, it was very difficult. She turned around and he unzipped her dress. She shrugged it off her shoulders and he gasped. He divested her of her lingerie "Good Lord, woman. Now that I've seen you like this, I'm never going to be able to resist you." She pulled back the covers and scooted under the sheets.

"You say that like it's a bad thing," she grinned.

He couldn't get naked fast enough.

Jackson smiled as he poured their coffee. Chase wasn't up yet but he was too restless to sleep longer. Last night was better than he'd imagined, and he'd imagined it a lot. Everything seemed right about Chase in his life. It wasn't easy. They argued, debated and tried to figure how to live together. But he couldn't imagine doing this with anyone else. Ever.

He was setting out bowls of fresh fruit when Chase joined him. She looked adorable in her *John Doe* T shirt and shorts. He wrapped his arms around her and gave her a kiss. "Good morning."

"You mean good morning, again." She grinned and gave him another kiss.

He tugged on her T shirt. "Making a statement?"

"I thought it was appropriate."

"You've never worn it before. I didn't know you had one."

"I have three. Fred in promotions always makes sure I get a swag bag before the release."

They sat down and he sipped his coffee. He briefly thought about asking how friendly she was with Fred. He realized that would be an instant fight. Chase wasn't a flirt and she wasn't seeing anyone when they got together. Even if she had been, it was none of his damn business. He took a spoon of his melon and smiled. Crisis averted. "I wanted to talk about something."

"So, talk," she said as she took a spoonful of blueberries.

"I'd like it if you'd move your things into my room." He reached for her hand. "I loved waking up with you this morning. I'd like to do that every morning."

Chase gave him a sly grin. "I think that could be arranged. I liked going to bed in the arms of the sexiest man alive, according to *People*."

He rolled up his napkin and tossed it at her. "Very funny." She laughed when it landed in her fruit bowl. "You could turn the other bedroom into an office."

Chase nodded. "That could work."

"Would moving the rest of your things in work?" he asked.

"What?"

"We been together just about all the time for the last three months. Why don't we make it official?"

"I am here most of the time and it would make the waking up with that sexiest guy a lot easier," she smiled. "There's not that much in my house I'd want to move. I could probably make some money renting it out."

"Why not sell it? Who needs the hassle of being a landlord?"

"Because I don't want to sell my house," she said through gritted teeth.

"Chase, are you still not sure about us? Are you making sure you have an out?"

"Maybe I want to keep what's mine!" She pushed herself away from the table and walked down the hall. He heard the bedroom door slam. Her bedroom.

"Shit!" He got up and walked down the hall and opened the door. She was sitting on the edge of the bed with her head in her hands. She looked over at him and saw the tears. He grabbed some tissues off the dresser and handed them to her.

"Leave me alone!"

"No," he said quietly.

"What do you mean, no?"

"I was clear. No. I will not leave you alone." He sat down next to her. "I love you and I want you to talk to me. I can't know why I've upset you if you don't talk to me."

"You want me to give up what's mine and become part of what's yours. I can't do that."

Jackson took a breath. He needed to be very careful. He didn't want to lose his temper or his girlfriend. "Have I made you feel like I thought of you as...less than your own person?"

"No," she whispered.

"You know that I respect you. You're brilliant. I think you're the best friend I've ever had. The smoking hot thing goes without saying."

She gave him a surprised look. "No, it doesn't."

He smiled and took her hands in his. "There hasn't been a moment since I met you that I didn't want you. Your beautiful green eyes mesmerize me. I've demonstrated how much I love your legs. You have a killer body. All without a stitch of makeup. You are a very beautiful woman."

"Oh, please. You date women like Kasey. The perfectly formed, made for the camera woman."

"Do you know when I realized I would never have a real relationship with her?" He smiled. "We been dating for a few weeks when we made our first red carpet appearance. She was holding on to my hand like a vise. She'd kiss my cheek while looking at the camera. She never looked at me. I was a photo op to her."

"Pfft," she waved her hand. "I could have told you that. It would have saved you what I bet were very expensive dinners."

"Thank God, I've finally learned to listen to you."

"Yeah, well," she said as she turned away.

"I'm listening now."

"You really want to hear my sob story? How my father left us when I was a kid. How my brothers left as soon as they could, leaving me holding the bag with Mom. All the boyfriends she brought home, hoping they would be the one to help. Only they took more. In the end there was just me to take care of her until she died from alcohol and a broken heart. Then of course there was the boyfriend in college who thought he should be able

to sleep with my roommate while he slept with me. Or the guy I let move in with me who quit his job because I was making enough for both of us. I can't give away any more of what's mine. Not anymore."

Jackson stared at her for a moment. She'd seen so much pain. He shouldn't add to it. He held tight to her hands. "I can't pretend to understand what you went through. I've had a blessed life. I have wonderful parents, who, by the way, want to meet you. I've had my struggles to be an actor. When I lost faith in myself, my parents didn't. I didn't have to face any of the ordeals you faced. But now that you've told me, I understand. Don't sell your house. Keep what's yours. I don't want you to ever believe I think you're an extension of me. I want you as my partner in work and in life. Partner and best friend. "I love you."

"You mean that, don't you?"

"With all my heart."

"You've never lied to me before, so I guess I should believe you now."

"That would be helpful," he chuckled. "I was serious about my parents. I told them I'd fly them out from Philly for the premiere."

"Oh God," she muttered.

"I only told them I broke my leg. They don't know I broke them both or that I did it falling off a helicopter, so no spilling the beans."

Her mood immediately switched to outrage. "You did what? You have parents that love you and you didn't tell them the truth. What if they see it on TV?"

"They don't watch a lot of TV."

"I bet their friends do. You call your parents now."

"I will. Are we good?"

"We're fine." She pushed him off the bed. "I mean call them now."

“Fine. I will.” He grabbed her hand. “You’re coming with me. I’m likely to get chewed out.”

“You’re a grown man. Are you afraid of your parents?”

“Of course! Now, come on.”

Jackson put on T shirt and a pair of shorts. He didn’t want to talk to his parents in his boxers. They probably assumed he was sleeping with Chase, but there was no need to make a point of it. Chase had run a brush through her short hair. She tugged at her shirt.

“Is this alright?”

“You look great.” He indicated she should sit next to him on the couch. He pushed a few buttons on the remote and his TV opened FaceTime. It rang until a woman appeared on the screen. Mary Smith had a lovely round face and curly brown hair.

“Jack, sweetheart! It’s so good to see you, finally!” She turned away from the screen. “John, it’s Jack.” An older version of Jackson walked into view. He had the same crystal blue eyes as his son. His wavy hair had gone silver.

“Hello, son. How are you doing?”

“I’m good, Dad. I wanted to introduce you to Chase.”

“Hello,” she said quietly.

“It’s about time,” said Mary. “He’s talked so much about you.”

“You have?” she asked.

“Not that much.”

“Oh please. It’s been Chase did this, Chase did that. I knew it was a matter of time before you introduced us. I understand you wrote the *John Doe* movies.”

“Yes, ma’am. I did.”

“Looks like you found yourself a clever girl,” said John with a smile just like his son’s.

He put his arm around her shoulders. “I sure did, Dad. She’s brilliant.”

“You look too thin. Are you sure you’re better?” ask Mary.

“I’m all healed.”

Chase slapped him on the shoulder. “Tell them.”

“Tell us what? What’s going on?” asked John.

“Chase was very angry with me that I didn’t tell you the whole story about my accident.”

“John Smith, have you lied to your mother?” said an angry Mary.

“No, Mom. I just didn’t tell you everything.”

“Start at the beginning,” said Chase.

“I was very foolish and tried a stunt I had no business doing.” He looked at Chase and smiled. “Even though Chase tried to talk me out of it.” He took a breath and looked at his parents. They were going to be so mad. He hated this. “I was holding on to a helicopter when it took off.” He saw his mother go pale “The drone camera got sucked into the blades and damaged the helicopter. I hit the roof first and the stunt crew got me out of the way before the helicopter landed on me.”

“Oh my God,” whispered Mary.

“Go on,” said Chase.

“There’s more?” asked John.

“I did break my right leg but I also broke my left leg too. It was a compound fracture and I needed surgery to put it back together.”

“Why didn’t you tell us?” asked Mary.

“I didn’t want you to worry. I had great doctors and Chase took great care of me.”

“I didn’t realize he hadn’t told you. I said he had to tell you right away.”

“You told us not to believe the news. You were fine,” said Mary.

“I am fine.”

“Sin of omission,” said Chase. “Stand up and show them.”

“No,” he said through clenched teeth.

“Better they should see all of it than let them wonder.”

“Fine.” He stood up and showed his parents his scars. Chase stood and pointed to the scar on his forehead.

“This has healed well and they will all fade,” she said.

“Oh, Jack,” Mary wiped tears from her cheeks.

“I promise, I’m okay, Mom,” he said as he sat back down.

“Don’t ever keep anything from us again,” said Mary.

“Yes, ma’am.” He looked at Chase and grinned. “In the spirit of full disclosure, I want to tell you Chase and I have decided to live together.” He felt her nails dig into his thigh.

“That’s great, son,” said John.

“She seems wonderful,” said Mary.

“You’re not upset? You’re Catholics. I thought I’d be in for a lecture about living in sin.”

“Jack, when have we ever been that dogmatic?” said John.

“We’re happy you’ve found such a wonderful woman. She’s obviously someone who can keep you on the straight and narrow,” said Mary. “Of course, we’d love to attend your wedding and have grandchildren, but that’s us. We’re glad you have someone who makes you happy.”

Jackson smiled and took Chase’s hand. “She does. She really does.”

“Is he good to you, dear?” asked John.

“He is. He’s a fine man, kind and good hearted.” She smiled at the screen. “You did a good job raising this one.”

“Thank you, dear. We look forward to meeting you in person, Chase,” said Mary.

“So do I, Mary.” She looked at Jackson and smiled. “Chase is my pen name. My real name is Jill.”

“That’s lovely. It suits you, Jill,” said Mary.

“Thank you.”

“Wait, you mean like,” John paused and made a Charlie’s Angels pose.

“Yes, John. My father was a big Farah Fawcett fan.” She looked at Jackson. “See what I mean.”

“It’s the reason she changed her name.”

“I think I can make an exception for family.”

Two months later they were getting ready for the world premiere of John Doe 3. They'd gotten it through post production faster than most films. There was still a lot of interest in Jackson's accident and recovery and producers wanted to take advantage of the publicity.

Chase slipped on the long black gown. She thought she'd paid a ridiculous amount of money for a dress she might never wear again. The long-sleeved dress hugged her frame and had scoop neck that wasn't too low. She put on more makeup than she'd worn since college. It still wasn't a lot. She wasn't a girly girl and didn't like making a fuss.

"Wow."

She turned toward the door and saw Jackson. He took her breath away. His agent had convinced him to let a designer fit him with a new tuxedo. She walked toward him and put her hands up his chest. He'd worked hard since the accident to regain his shape. His trim waist was accented by his broad shoulders. "You look amazing," she whispered.

He brushed his hand up her arm. "You look so beautiful." He gave her a light kiss. "I brought you something."

Chase hadn't noticed the box in his hand. He opened it up and revealed a magnificent diamond necklace. It was two strands of diamonds that joined in a loop. A thick rope string of diamonds. "Wow. It's beautiful." He took it out of the case and put it around her neck. She looked in the mirror and ran her fingers over the stones. "Who lent you this?"

"It's not a loaner."

She turned toward him. "What? You bought this? It had to be ridiculously expensive."

"My darling Jill. I'm a ridiculously rich movie star and I bought something shiny for my girl friend. It's what we do," he grinned.

"This something shiny could buy a house in my hometown."

Jackson shrugged. "Probably."

“You’re crazy.”

“Possibly.”

Chase smiled and gave him another kiss. “You’re a silly man.”

“Definitely.”

“I love you anyway,” she chuckled.

“I love you too.” He took her hand in his. “Come on. My parents are waiting. We don’t want to be late.”

They walked into the living room where his parents were waiting. Mary looked beautiful in the tea length blue gown she’d helped her pick out. John looked like an older version of Jackson in a beautifully tailored tux. If he looked like his father in forty years, she’d be a happy girl. She gave her head a little shake and stopped herself from going there. They’d just moved in together. They hadn’t talked about anything beyond it.

“You both look wonderful,” she said.

Jackson kissed his mother’s cheek. “You look beautiful, Mom.”

“Thank you, dear. Jill, helped me pick it out.”

“What am I, chopped liver?” as John.

“You look very dapper, John,” said Chase.

“Jill, that necklace is stunning,” said Mary.

“Your crazy son bought it for me.”

“Don’t you like it?” she asked.

She turned to Jackson and smiled. “I love it.”

They’d run the gauntlet on the red carpet. She stood aside so the photographers could get a picture of Jackson. They were all asking him to jump as if that would somehow prove he was healed. Chase glared at the look he was giving her. If he jumped in the air,

she would kill him, right here, right now, in front of witnesses. Instead, he walked over to her and took her hand. He pulled her close and started dancing with her. She couldn't help but rest her head on his shoulder. He was a wonderful dancer. He stopped dancing and gave her a quick kiss. The crowd applauded.

Now they sat in the dark theater watching the movie. It was going very well, with lots of gasps and a smattering of applause at different scenes. The scene she was dreading came up. Chase gripped his hand tight.

"It's okay, sweetheart. I'm here. I'm fine," he whispered.

She saw him coming up in the elevator and the determined look on his face as he approached the bad guy. This was filmed the day of the accident. Then her rewrites started.

The villain smiled. *"What are you going to do? You can't kill me. I have too many friends. I know too much."*

The camera shot a close up of Jackson's face. His scar had been skillfully covered. He gave a smirk and shrugged his shoulders. Then he pulled a gun from behind his back and shot the man. He walked up to him and pulled the object of their chase, a flash drive, from his jacket pocket. He looked at the dying villain.

"I'll take my chances."

He looked at the pilot who was making a move toward him. He extended one finger and waved it back and forth. Then he turned and walked away. The scene got the largest reaction of the entire movie. The audience laughed and applauded.

Jackson leaned over and whispered, "You're a freaking genius."

Jackson sat down on the bed and sighed. It had been a long day. Chase smiled at him.

“You want to help me get undressed?”

“Always,” he chuckled.

Chase set the necklace back in its case, then shimmied out of her dress. She hung it up and put on a pair of short silk pajamas. He reached for her hand and pulled her down to sit next to him on the bed.

“Did I tell you how beautiful you looked tonight?”

“Yes, you did.”

“Good. I was so overwhelmed by you; I couldn’t be sure.”

Chase pulled at his bow tie and loosened his collar. “So, what’s bothering you?”

“It was the best movie of the three. Your rewrites got rid of Larry’s horrible edits. It’s going to be a huge hit.”

“It will make a ton of money. You might even be able to pay off my necklace,” she smiled. “And that’s a problem, why?”

“There’s going to be a lot of pressure to make another one. Once the opening figures come in, we’re going to get a phone call.”

“Probably. Did you sign to do a sequel?”

“No. I only sign for one movie at a time. We’re in for a very uncomfortable meeting.”

She pushed him back on the bed. Let’s worry about that when it happens. In the meantime,” she smiled “how about I get you out of this gorgeous tux.”

Jackson wrapped his arms around her and gave her a deep kiss. “I don’t know how I got so lucky to have you in my life. I think you should know; I’m going to do everything I can to keep you in my life.”

Chase smiled. “I’ve always admired your work ethic.”

He laughed as she undid the buttons on his shirt.

Jackson held the door to Katherine's office for Chase. His mother had raised him to be a gentleman. It was so ingrained, he did it without thinking. The entrance was tastefully decorated in rich woods and comfortable fabrics.

"Hello, Carrie," he said.

She stood and extended her hand. "Mr. Calder, it's so good to see you. My husband and I saw your movie this weekend. It was terrific. Thanks for the tickets."

"I'm glad you enjoyed it. This is Chase Munroe."

"The writer!" She shook Chase's hand. "I have to ask. That scene on the roof, Indiana Jones meets T2?"

Chase laughed. "We're calling it an homage. I wasn't letting him get back on that helicopter."

"Good for you! I'll let Ms. Davenport know you're here." A moment later they were shown into Katherine's office. She came out from behind her desk to give him a hug.

"Jackson, it is so good to see you. You look well healed."

"I am. This is Chase."

She extended her hand. "Katherine Davenport."

"Chase Munroe."

"Will your lawyer be joining us?"

"I don't have one. Jackson has a very high opinion of you. Would you consider representing me?"

"Of course." Katherine moved back behind her desk and Jackson and Chase took the seats opposite. "I understand from Jackson he doesn't want to do any more *John Doe* films. Do you feel the same?"

"I do. I have a number of scripts I've worked on in-between *John Doe* scripts."

"She has one called *The Hard Road Home* and I love it. I want to do it."

“It’s a matter of finding a producer who wants to back us,” said Chase.

“My sister-in-law, Marina, has just formed her own production company. Send me a copy and I’ll get it to her.”

“Marina?” asked Jackson.

Katherine grinned. “You’ve met my husband, right?”

“Of course, Val. Great guy.”

“I think so.”

“Do you remember his last name?”

“It’s Sokooooo...holy crap.”

“Would someone like to fill me in?” asked Chase.

“My husband is Vasily Sokolov. My sister-in-law is Marina Sokolov, although she prefers using her married name, Nash.

“Holy crap,” said Chase.

Jackson’s heart was racing. “Chase, do you have your tablet?”

“Yeah.”

“Send Katherine the file.”

“Are you sure we...”

“Hell yeah. Send her the file.”

Katherine handed her a business card with her email. Chase booted up her tablet and pulled up the right file. She typed in the address and sent it. “Okay. It should be in your inbox.”

Katherine looked at her computer screen and nodded. “There it is. I’ll call Marina after our meeting.”

“I really appreciate this, Katherine,”

“Don’t thank me yet. She’s a smart businesswoman. She’ll analyze the hell out of it before she makes a decision.” She sighed and opened a file on her desk. “This is going to be a tough meeting. No one else in that room is going to want to jump off this money train. Have you seen the numbers from the opening week?”

“I’ve heard it did really well but we were spending time with my parents. We only dropped them at the airport this morning.”

“You could call one hundred and thirty-five million domestic box office doing well. The three hundred million in international box office is off the charts. Look for a heavy push to get you to sign.”

“Oh boy,” said Jackson.

“Why don’t you wait in the conference room. I’ll get some papers for Chase to sign. That way I’ll be her legal representative in the meeting. The producers and your agent will be here in twenty minutes.” Katherine opened the door to the adjoining conference room. Chase and Jackson took seats in the middle of the long table.

“Wow,” he said.

“Wow, indeed. You were pretty pushy in there. I would have wanted to read through it before we gave it to a potential backer.”

He covered her hand with his. “Sweetheart, we’ve done nothing for the last six months but review and edit. It’s perfect. We both know it. I was blown away when Katherine could give it to Marina Sokolov. She has a great reputation in the business. I’m sorry I pushed. I don’t think we’ll regret it.”

“We better not.”

“I’ll buy you something shiny,” he said with his best movie star grin.

She smiled and pulled back her hand. “Shut up.”

Katherine returned with paperwork for Chase. “There. We’re official,” she said. Carrie opened the main door and a smiling Robert Cooper and Austin James. They were

followed by his agent, Tom Plant. All the men were smiling and patting each other on the back. That wasn't going to last long.

Tom walked over to Jackson and shook his hand. "Jackson, buddy. Congratulations. You're a huge hit, again. You're going to get some great offers." He'd said the last statement for the benefit of the producers. He was angling for a bigger payday for the next film. Tom took the seat next to Jackson.

Robert and Austin sat down on the opposite side and smiled. "The box office is fantastic. We're on track to break the top ten of all time. Time to work on the next one. Strike while the iron is hot," said Robert.

"Absolutely," said Austin.

Jackson looked at Chase and then Katherine. She nodded, knowing what he was about to do. "None of you acknowledged Chase is in the room."

"It's not usual to bring your girlfriend to a meeting like this but I didn't want to be rude," said Tom.

"Rude!" Jackson yelled. Chase covered his hand. He tried to calm himself for her sake. "Chase Munroe created *John Doe*. None of us would be sitting here without her."

"Of course, of course," said Robert. He glared at Tom. "What Tom meant was it's unusual to bring a writer to these meetings. We might want to talk to her about the next script."

"Possibly," said Tom. He glared at Chase. He didn't like Chase's rewrites being pushed through by Jackson. He preferred his clients stick to what they knew. He didn't like running interference with producers and directors.

"Might? Possibly?" asked Jackson. "Chase Munroe is the reason we had such a great script, as soon as other people stopped messing with the concept. Chase is the smartest person in this room. No offense, Katherine."

"None taken," she smiled.

“Well, that brings me to the point of the meeting,” said Jackson. “We’re done with *John Doe*.”

The room erupted in shouts. “You can’t do this!” said Austin.

“Actually, I can. I never signed for a sequel. You are free to continue the franchise, but Chase and I are out.”

“This is her,” said Tom. “You can’t let a woman ruin your career. We’re going to be hip deep in offers. Are you really going to let her cost you millions?”

Jackson could feel his face heat as his temper rose. He looked at the agent who’d been with him for the past ten years. He thought for a moment he owed him some loyalty but then again, to Tom, he was a commodity. He turned toward Katherine and smiled. “When does my contract with Tom expire?”

“In a few weeks.”

“What? Jackson you can’t!”

“Again, yes I can.”

Tom jumped to his feet. “I made you; I’ll destroy you!”

Katherine cleared her throat. “You might want to think about threatening the client of someone who put *The Inquisitor* out of business.”

“What the hell was the point of this meeting if you were going to stick it the people who made you millions?” demanded Robert.

“Because I thought I owed a face-to-face meeting with the people I’ve worked with for the last seven years. I have no illusions about this business. It’s just a job, like any other. This one made us all a lot of money. But it doesn’t always have to be that way. Sometimes we can make something small and wonderful. We hit the lottery with *John Doe* because the customers bought the tickets. Katherine, I think we’re done here.” Jackson reached for Chase’s hand and they walked back into Katherine’s office.

He closed the door and sat on a small couch. Chase sat down next to him.

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I am. I didn’t expect any better out of them but I didn’t expect to feel like this.” They heard shouting coming out of the conference room.

“Should we go back in there?” she asked.

“No. Katherine’s got it under control.”

“What was that about The Inquisitor?”

“They hired a paparazzi to get a photo of Marina and her daughter after the girl had been kidnapped.”

“I remember that. It was national news.”

“The guy snuck into their hospital room. Katherine sued them into the ground.”

“She’s a force to be reckoned with.”

“Then I’m glad she’s on our side.”

Chase sat down on the couch. Jackson brought them each an iced tea. "I'm at a loss for words and that's never happened," she said.

"I know. I'm not sure how to feel. We just found out we were going to make millions from the movie."

"We?" she asked.

"We. Your percentage should be worth quite a few million."

"Whoa," she said then looked at him. "Yours will be worth..."

"A ridiculous amount of money." He took a sip of tea. "I've also cut loose the people I've been working with for the last seven years. My agent was ten years. I think I'm feeling a bit guilty."

Chase took his hand. "You look at me, Jack. In all the years I've known you, you've never done anything you didn't want to do. You told me months ago; you were done with action movies. You want to do good work. The kind of work you got in the business to do. You know they were going to ring as much money out of *John Doe* as they could. I wouldn't be surprised if the producers recast. As far as Tom is concerned, all he did was complain you couldn't work when you were injured. He didn't send you so much as a fruit basket, let alone visit you. You made them all a fortune. You don't owe them anything."

He put his arm around her shoulders. "My sweet Jill. You know me better than I know myself. I don't know how I managed without you."

"Neither do I," she smiled.

Jackson's phone rang and he pulled it out of his pocket. "It's Katherine. Hello, Katherine."

"Put me on speaker."

"Hello, Katherine," said Chase.

"I've heard back from Marina."

“So soon?” asked Jackson.

“Her exact words were ‘Don’t let anyone else see this. I want to talk to them right away.’”

“Really?” asked Chase.

“Really and she means right away. Are you up for a FaceTime?”

“Sure,” said Jackson.

“Fine, I’ll be back on in a few minutes.”

Chase jumped up. “Will you stop answering for me?” She started toward the hall.

“Where are you going?”

“This is Marina Sokolov, the most beautiful woman in the world. Everyone says so. I am decidedly not. I need to change and run a brush through my hair. There’s not enough time for makeup, oh God,” she said as she pulled against his hand.

“Will you please settle down. You are Chase Munroe, brilliant writer. You are Jill Munroe, beautiful woman. T Shirts, jeans and legs for days. You are you without makeup or any kind of artifice. You are the best version of you, just as you are.”

Chase sighed and sat back down. “It’s a good thing you’re so damn cute.” She leaned in and kissed him. “I love you, Jack.”

“I love you, Jill.”

His phone beeped and he put the FaceTime call up on the TV screen. Katherine looked back from the screen. Next to her in a split screen was the most beautiful woman in the world, with her hair in a messy ponytail, no makeup and looking like she hadn’t slept. “Jackson, Chase, this is Marina.”

“Hello, it’s very nice to meet you,” said Chase.

“Hello, Mrs. Nash,” said Jackson.

“Hah. Katherine told you. Today I’m definitely Mrs. Nash. Our youngest has a stomach bug and she’s had us up all night.”

“I’m so sorry,” said Jackson.

“Not to worry. It’s a kid thing. She’ll be fine. Please, call me Marina. Okay, first, Chase, you’re brilliant. This is the best script I’ve read in years.”

Jackson leaned in and whispered, “I told you so.”

“Shush,” she said and gave him a bit of a push. “Thank you, Marina.”

“Jackson, I think you’re a tremendously talented actor. You bring so much depth to your roles. I was very impressed. I think you’ll be terrific in this movie.”

Jackson managed to struggle out a “Thank you.”

“I want to produce it. I also have my eye on the English teacher part.”

“That’s great,” said Jackson. “I’ve always wanted to work with you. There is one hitch. I’ve fired my agent but it’s not effective for a few weeks. I can’t sign anything until then.”

“Understood. I can make that work. If you’re looking for a new agent, I know mine, Stan Price, would be thrilled to take you on. Once the legalities are settled, we can meet and get this project off the ground. I’m really looking forward to working with you both.”

They heard a plaintive “Mama” in the distance.

“That’s my cue. I have to go. We’ll keep in touch. Goodbye.” The screen became just Katherine.

“Wow,” said Jackson

“I don’t know what to say,” said Chase.

“You have a few weeks to catch your breath. I’ll let you know of any developments.”

“Thank you, Katherine,” said Jackson.

“You’re welcome.”

The screen went dark and Jackson and Chase looked at each other. "This is happening," he said.

"Marina Sokolov called me brilliant," she whispered.

They spent the next few days relaxing at home. Jackson had gotten her to promise not to work. He'd convinced her they both needed to escape work. There was no reason to leave the house. They had a beautiful home, pool and hot tub. She grinned at the use they'd made of that hot tub. At night they cuddled on the couch and caught up on shows they hadn't had time to watch before.

They were watching the latest must-see TV when her phone rang. She didn't recognize the caller ID. Jackson put the TV on pause. "Hello?"

"Hey, Jill. How's it going?"

"Sam?" Her voice shook.

"It's me. I know it's been a while."

"A while? Try fifteen years."

Jackson put his arm around her.

"I've been out of the country. I'm glad you haven't changed your number. I tried Mom's number but it said it was out of service. Can you give her me her new number?"

"It's plot 147 at Cheltenham cemetery. She died two years ago."

"What? Why didn't you call me?"

"Because I didn't have your number. I didn't have George's number either. I even hired someone to find you both but they had no luck."

"Geez, I'm sorry. Ah, did she leave us a...message?"

"Other than my sons broke my heart? You really mean did she leave you any money. She didn't leave a dime. I took care of her myself. Your sorry is fifteen years too late."

“Jill, don’t be angry. I just wanted to say hello. I saw you on TV with Jackson Calder. You’re doing pretty well for yourself. I saw those *John Doe* movies. I didn’t realize my kid sister wrote them.”

“You and George left me alone to take care of Mom when I was eighteen. I had to work two jobs just to keep a roof over our heads. You abandoned me to take care of her.”

“Jill, come on. She was so tough on us. She was damn hard to be around when she was drunk. She was a lousy mother.”

“Don’t you dare! Don’t you fucking dare! She did the best she could after Dad left us. You aren’t getting a dime from me, ever! And that goes for George and Dad if either of them is still alive. Don’t ever call me again!” She disconnected the call and threw down the phone like it was hot.

Jackson didn’t say anything. He pulled her into a tight hug and let her cry herself out. He kissed her forehead as she looked up at him.

“Sorry,” she whispered.

“Nothing to be sorry for.” He gave her a gentle kiss. “What would you like to do?”

She managed a small smile. “You’ll think it’s weird.”

“I won’t” He held up three fingers. “Scouts honor.”

“I want to get in the hot tub.”

“Do you want to change into suits?”

She gave him a genuine smile. “Why bother.”

They walked out to the deck and got out of their clothes. Jackson turned on the jets and they slipped into the water. Chase sighed and slid her shoulders down under the water. Jackson reached for her hand under the water. She leaned her head back and closed her eyes. The water always quieted her mind. Jackson knew how to comfort her soul. He knew instinctively this was not a sexual experience. He was giving her the peace and calm she needed. He was there for her however she needed him.

“I have an idea,” she said.

“Oh yeah?”

“We still have a couple of weeks before we get to work.”

“Yes.”

“I think we should take a trip.”

“Sure. Hawaii, Maldives, Paris?”

“Philly”

“Excuse me?”

“Do you think your parents would mind if we dropped in on them?”

“They’d be delighted. We could go anywhere in the world. Why my family’s house?”

“I think I need to be reminded that not every family was like mine. Your parents are so nice. I had a great time shopping with Mary. I think she likes me well enough.”

“Well, enough? She’s crazy about you. So is my dad.”

“You really think so?”

He smiled and reached for his jeans. He pulled his phone out of his and hit a contact. “Hi, Mom.”

“Hi sweetheart. How’s Jill?”

“She’s great. She’s right here.” He turned the phone towards her.

“Hi Mary.”

“Mom, I know we’ve just seen each other but Jill has expressed a desire to see where little Jack grew up. Would you mind if we came for a visit?”

“We’d love it. When are you coming?”

He looked at Chase and smiled. “Tomorrow and could you possibly make your pot roast?”

“Of course, sweetheart.”

“I’ll call you when you can expect us.”

“Your father will pick you up.”

“Don’t bother. Driving to the airport is such a pain. I’ll arrange for a car. We’ll see you tomorrow.”

He disconnected the phone and smiled. “Wait until you taste her pot roast”

Chase sat at home, working on a script for a TV cop show. She'd signed with Stan Price when Jackson did. He'd gotten several offers for her, but this one piqued her interest. The heroine wasn't your average cop. She was a mother and a detective. She wasn't perfect and struggled with work and life balance.

Jackson was filming the last of *The Hard Road Home*. They'd set up production with Sokolov Productions. Marina ran the production with military precision. She said it was a knack she'd picked up from her husband. The key was to hire good people and then let them do what they do best. Chase and Jackson were both producers on the film. They'd contributed financially to the project. They had enough faith in the project to risk their own money. She'd done what she needed to do for the project. Now it was up to Jackson to bring it to life. She finished the last pages of her script and hit send. Now it was time to hit the pool.

"I thought I'd find you here."

She looked up and saw Jackson standing in the doorway. "How did it go?"

"Great. We finished filming. Nothing left but the ADR and any pick up shots."

"Don't forget about all the press."

"Ugh, don't remind me."

"You know you have to do it. It's a little film. We need the press."

"You have to do it too," he smiled.

"What?"

"You're the most successful writer in recent Hollywood history. They'll want to talk to you too."

"More likely they want to talk to me because I sleep with you."

"Do you think, for just once, you could try to have the confidence in you that I do?"

Chase smiled and got out of the pool. She walked over to him and put her arms around him.

“You’ve gotten me all wet,” he smiled.

“You need a shower.”

“Care to join me?” he grinned.

“I’d be delighted.”

Chase put on her new evening gown. She tried to tell herself it was okay to spend a crazy amount of money on the gown because this was the Oscars. They'd spent nearly two years producing, film and promoting their film. Once it won several festivals, including Sundance, they'd had no problem finding a distributor. It did well in the theaters. Word of mouth had given them a satisfactory return on their money. It wasn't *John Doe* money, but nothing was.

The real shocker came at the nominations. She wasn't surprised that Jackson was nominated for best actor or Marina for best supporting actress. Chase was stunned when she was nominated for best original screenplay. The best surprise when the film was nominated for best picture. She felt like her work had been validated by the industry. Never again would she have to explain Chase Munroe was a woman.

"Hey there, gorgeous."

She saw Jackson standing in the doorway in his tux.

"Good. You can help me put on my necklace." She opened the box of the diamond necklace he'd given her for the *John Doe* premiere. He placed it around her neck and kissed her shoulder.

"You look perfect." He took her hand and sat her down. "I bought you something shiny I thought you'd like to wear."

"Seriously? You spent five figures on this necklace."

Jackson smiled, "Well..."

"More?! You're truly are crazy."

"Could we please get to the other shiny thing I have for you?"

"Why not? We've already established you're crazy."

He pulled a small box out of his jacket. He opened it to reveal a large diamond ring on a diamond band. "We've been together nearly three years. They have been the happiest of my life. Where ever you are, I'm home. I've spent my whole life looking for the kind of relationship my parents have. I've found that with you."

Chase gave him a half smile. "Are you saying I remind you of your mother?"

"No, of course not. What I'm saying is I love you madly. I've loved you since the moment you yelled in my face to not make the helicopter stunt. I've loved you when you yelled at me to take my meds and not take chances. I've been in love with you for years. My darling Jill, will you please marry me."

"Well, you do buy me the shiniest things."

"Jill, you're killing me."

"Well, I can't have that. I don't want to be a widow before I'm a wife." She caressed his cheek. "I never thought I'd say this to anyone ever. Jack Smith, I love you with all my heart. I love how you believe in me. I love how you make me feel safe. I even love how you care enough to argue with me. I love how you give me your whole heart. Yes, Jack. I'll marry you."

He slipped the ring on her finger and gave her gentle kiss. "I love you so much," he said as he wiped his eyes.

"Jack, did you think I'd say no?"

"I thought it was a possibility. Considering everything you've been through; you might not want to change what we have."

She took his hand in hers. "If you'd asked me two years ago or even last year, I might have said no. But I've learned we're a team, you and I. Partners. I never feel less than you. I'd like to feel that way with you for the rest of my life."

Jack took her face in his hands. "You're going to need to redo your lipstick."

A few minutes later they walked out to the living room where his parents were waiting. "We should get going, Jack. The traffic will be crazy," said John.

"In a minute," he said. "We have something to tell you." He held out Chase's hand to show off her new engagement ring. His mother screamed and his father laughed and applauded. The hugs and tears were interrupted by the limo driver ringing the doorbell.

Jackson pressed the intercom. "I'm sorry. We'll be right out."

"I'm sorry, sir but it's getting late."

Jackson helped Chase in the car so her gown wouldn't get too mussed. John helped Mary with her gown.

"Off we go," said John.

They hit traffic pretty quickly. Chase reached for Jackson's hand. "Don't worry sweetheart. We'll get there in time."

"I've been doing this trip for years," said the driver. "I will get you there in time to get your trophies. I know when I'm driving winners."

Jackson chuckled. "I thank you for your confidence."

Six hours later they climbed back into the limo. "Thank you...I'm sorry, I did get your name."

"It's Dave."

"Thank you, Dave. We're all a bit tired."

Dave pointed to their trophies. Each one of them was carrying an Oscar. "I told you so."

"Yes, you did," he smiled.

They took their seats and relaxed. Chase and Mary kicked off their shoes. John and Jack loosened their ties. The Oscars were four hours and another hour for press and pictures. They went to the Governor's Ball, only because his mother wanted to go. Even she'd had enough after an hour.

"I can't believe that happened," said Chase. "Best original screenplay. I assumed Mark Fellows would win."

“You deserved to win,” said Jackson. “Without you, we wouldn’t be here. I thought Parker Ford would win best actor. I can’t believe I won.”

“I can,” said Mary. “You were wonderful.”

“Thanks, Mom. At least after tonight we won’t have to do anymore talk shows.”

“You mounted a great campaign,” said Mary.

“How do you know about Oscar campaigns?”

“Jack, you’ve been in show business for twenty years. Do you think I wouldn’t have subscriptions to the Hollywood Reporter and Variety?”

“You are amazing, Mom.”

“Of course, I am, dear.”

“I just wish this was about the movie and not about how many talk shows we’ve done.”

“Oscars have always been a campaign,” said Chase. “We were trying to get the word out about the movie. We didn’t have a big marketing budget. These will get more people in the seats.”

“But did we win because of our movie, or because of *John Doe*?”

“Son, like your mother said, you deserved to win. You are a wonderful actor. I cried at the movie.”

“You cried, Dad?”

“Everyone cried. And if you remember everyone applauded at the end. That’s why your mother and I are carrying your Best Picture Oscars.”

“We got those as producers. Marina was the driving force.”

“I was so please when she won Best Supporting Actress.”

“So were we. She deserved it,” said Jackson.

Chase pulled on his hand. “Hey, where is all this coming from? I’m the one who’s the insecure mess, not you. Jackson Calder, you are a brilliant actor. Does some of your Oscar represent *John Doe*. Yes. You’ve worked hard for twenty years. You’ve done brilliant work even when the scripts weren’t the best. You’ve earned the respect of your peers.”

“You’re not talking about your scripts, are you?” he smiled.

“Don’t be ridiculous.” She gave him a little kiss. “Jack Smith, you are a good man and you deserve good things. Like your new fiancé.”

“Yeah, I do.” He looked at his parents. “Look away, folks,” he grinned as he pulled her close for a kiss.

A school of yellow striped fish swam by. A couple of them tasted her toes. "Hey there. I'm not food." She floated on her back, looking up at a bright blue sky. She heard a voice and turned toward the beach. Under a beach umbrella was the man waving at her. She started swimming toward the voice but stopped. If she got to the beach, she'd have to leave the water. She wanted to stay. She looked up at the beautiful sky. It was too perfect. It had to be a dream. She closed her eyes and enjoyed moving up and down with the small waves. She heard the voice again.

"Jill, you've been out there forever. You're going to fry."

"Okay, okay," she said as she swam to shore. She had a good reason to get out of the water.