



The Light Year (Stardust Beach #6)

Author: *Stephanie Taylor*

Category: Romance

Description: Everyone thinks Barbie Roman has it all.

But this time, being perfect might cost her everything.

With her picture-perfect looks, polished manners, and political pedigree, Barbie Roman was raised to play the role of the ideal daughter, wife, and mother.

From an exclusive enclave in Connecticut to the sun-soaked shores of Stardust Beach, she's spent her life smiling, supporting, and staying silent.

But now, the stakes are too high—and Barbie's time as the quiet good girl is running out.

Her husband Todd is one of NASA's rising stars, and with three young sons at home, Barbie should be focused on family and friendship.

Instead, she finds herself caught between two worlds: the ambitious men in her family who want to use the space program for their own political gain, and the tight-knit circle of astronaut wives who have come to feel like sisters.

Barbie knows her father and brother could destroy everything if they push too hard—and this time, she refuses to be the pawn in someone else's game.

But standing up to the people who raised her means risking the golden life she's always known.

And speaking out could cost her more than just comfort—it could cost her everything she's built.

A story of legacy, loyalty, and the strength it takes to break free, *Stardust Beach: Book Six* is a heartfelt, empowering journey of one woman discovering her voice in a world that never asked for her opinion.

Total Pages (Source): 36

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 10:59 am

...

Westport, Connecticut

The room was dim. Not dark, just dim. Barbara always preferred to have a light burning in the bathroom attached to her bedroom.

Even though she was nearly eight years old, she still didn't like to sleep in the dark, and each night, her mother tucked her into bed with no fewer than three dolls and teddy bears.

Slipping from her soft, warm sheets, and putting her bare feet on the carpet, Barbara looked around: her three-story dollhouse was silhouetted near the brocaded wallpaper, its interior facing out so that she could see the many bedrooms with their tiny beds; the mantle with its faux fire burning; the tiny doll mother standing in the kitchen holding a miniature replica of a cake.

Barbara herself had never seen her mother standing in a kitchen and cooking anything, but she knew that, in many homes, the mommies did the cooking and the daddies left the house for work, coming home just in time to sit down at the table for dinner.

Barbara paused in the doorway of her room, bare toes curled into the carpet, as she listened for any sound of her parents. But the house was cold and quiet.

The hallway was long, and the walls were covered in framed paintings and photographs.

It seemed to go on forever. At regular intervals, a wall sconce burned warmly, keeping the hallway from sinking into complete darkness.

Right outside her bedroom door, Barbara stood, peering at the closed doors that lined both sides of the hall.

Still no sound. She tiptoed on, wincing at every creak of the floors.

This wing of the house--the West Wing, as her mother always called it--ended in a wide staircase that turned a corner halfway down, its banister made of smooth and oiled wood.

She ran her hand along the rail as she walked down the vacuumed stairs, her eyes catching on the large portraits of her serious-looking grandparents as they watched over the West Wing.

At the bottom, Barbara looked around again.

Her stomach growled; her mother had been right: refusing to eat her dinner because she didn't like salmon or asparagus was a choice that she regretted.

And now, in the cloak of darkness that had fallen over the house just after midnight, Barbara made her way to the kitchen not to see if there was any salmon left, but to try to get her hands on some of the cookies that Winnie, their main cook, kept in a jar on a shelf.

As she walked on bare feet past her father's office, Barbara could hear his voice.

"No," George Mackey said gruffly, "that's not what I asked for.

No." He was clearly on the phone, but just to be safe, Barbara ducked into the

darkened room across from his office and hid behind the door.

"Tomorrow is my wife's birthday," Mr. Mackey said, "and I asked you to handle everything so that I can be here, where I'm needed. "

Barbara stood behind the open door, listening, but not realizing the satin bow that held her hair back had slipped from her blonde curls and landed just outside the door.

As she watched through the crack between door and frame, Neville, the tall, narrow man who had worked for her family since before her birth, strode down the hall, pausing only when he saw the blue satin bow.

He stooped and picked it up, frowning at the pale blue bow in his dark-skinned hand as he stood just inches from Barbara. She held her breath.

Neville inspected the bow, his lips twitching in a smile. He took a step into the darkened room, standing just inches from Barbara. She was sure he could hear her eyelids blinking.

"Hello, little miss," Neville whispered. Even in the dark, Barbara knew he was grinning. "It's okay. It's me, Neville."

And Barbara knew that it was okay; Neville, who had three daughters of his own (and even some grandchildren, if she was to believe what she heard, though his skin was smooth and young, and his hair still dark) was the one member of the staff who always made Barbara laugh.

She stepped out from behind the door, eyes wide, and said nothing as she looked up at him.

"Miss!" Neville whispered, putting a finger to his lips. "Did you wake up and wander

down here? Are you lost?" he teased.

Barbara's face split into a wide smile; of course Neville knew she wasn't lost. This was her house, and she knew every nook and cranny of it by heart.

Barbara loved being chased through the various wings by her older brother, Theodore, and on holidays, she liked to play hide-and-seek with her cousins.

She shook her head, mischief dancing in her eyes.

"Hmmm," Neville said, pretending to consider their predicament. "Winnie tell me you did not eat your dinner, young miss." He shook his head disapprovingly, making a small clucking noise with his tongue. "Winnie tell me that young miss left allll the fish on her plate."

Barbara stared down at her bare toes, feeling ashamed. Winnie, who was Neville's wife, was an excellent cook, and Barbara loved her almost as much as she loved Neville. "I wasn't hungry at dinner," she whispered.

"But you are now, yes?"

Barbara nodded, looking at the satin ribbon that Neville still held in his hands. When he caught her looking, he handed it over. "Okay," he said simply. "Okay."

Without prompting, Barbara offered him her hand, and he took it in his large one, peering out the door like he was searching for the enemy.

Neville looked back at her seriously, putting his finger to his lips once more.

"Kitchen," he said simply, taking a few steps into the hallway in a dramatic version of her own tiptoeing walk.

Barbara put a hand over her mouth and stifled a giggle as she followed along.

George Mackey's imposing voice disappeared behind them as they made a mad dash down the carpeted hallway, Barbara's short legs racing to keep up with Neville's longer ones.

Barbara glanced back just before they turned a corner into the kitchen.

Her father's shadow cut into the puddle of light that fell on the hallway carpet, and she knew that if he stepped out of his office, he would see her, and then there would be trouble.

She sucked in a sharp breath and her heart nearly leapt out of her chest.

The kitchen was dark. Instead of reaching for a light switch, Neville turned on an oil lamp on the counter and a warm glow filled the room. The counters were bare, and the sink was empty. Every surface had been wiped clean after dinner.

"Okay, miss," Neville whispered, still keeping his voice low. "We will find you a snack."

The cupboards were organized the way Winnie liked them, with cans facing out, jars in order of what was contained within, and boxes lined up tallest to shortest.

"Oatmeal?" Neville whispered. Barbara shook her white-blonde head and bit her lip. It wasn't oatmeal she wanted. "Crackers with butter?" he offered, reaching for a box on a shelf. Barbara shook her head again.

Neville was about to take a jar of canned pears out for her inspection when the lights flicked on, blazing bright. They both blinked guiltily.

"Now, just what am I seeing here, huh?" Winnie asked, her round, incredulous eyes ping-ponging back and forth between her husband and the youngest child of her wealthy employers.

"I know you not in here getting food for Miss Barbara, you old fool," she said to Neville, making a tsking sound at him.

Winnie tightened the robe around her soft body and patted the scarf that covered her hair.

Barbara had never seen her in pajamas--it had never even occurred to her that Winnie wore anything but her kitchen uniform.

"She said no to dinner and her mother say no more food till morning. "

Neville made a disbelieving sound. "Baby girl is hungry," he said in protest, waving a hand at his wife. "Let her eat."

Winnie looked back and forth between them again, seeming to weigh the potential consequences. She blew out a loud, exaggerated breath. "Okay," she finally said, giving the belt of her robe another tug for good measure. "What you want, child?"

Barbara watched Neville and Winnie together as they looked in the cupboard, and she tried to imagine them as newlyweds in another country, where she knew from overhearing Winnie tell one of the younger maids that she and Neville had gotten married on a beach with flowers in her hair.

She tried to imagine them raising their own daughters and she wondered if these girls found Neville as funny as she did.

If he played games with them and made jokes the way he did with her.

"Bread with butter," Winnie finally decided, one fist on her meaty hip. "One piece."

Barbara's heart sank. "Cookies?" she whispered, still keeping up the pretense that her father might not find her up and roaming around the kitchen in the middle of the night. "Please?"

"Oh, lawdy," Winnie said, laughing so that her ample bosom heaved with the exertion. She shook her head and looked down at Barbara. "You a con artist, little miss. You trying to get us in trouble!"

"I'm not," Barbara said earnestly. "I'm just hungry."

"Then bread it is," Winnie decreed, setting about the task of slicing a piece and then slathering it in salted butter. "If you hungry, you will eat the bread."

Barbara tried to swallow her disappointment, and as she took her first bite of bread, Winnie walked to the icebox and pulled out a bottle of milk, pouring a tall glass and setting it on the table.

"Thank you," Barbara whispered again, sliding the glass closer.

She ate her bread under the watchful eye of Winnie in her headscarf.

Every time Winnie turned her back to wipe the counter unnecessarily (having been trained in the fine art of staying busy while on the clock, even if it meant making up work to do that didn't truly need to be done), Neville would wink at Barbara, holding a finger to his lips conspiratorially.

In return, Barbara held a small finger to her own lips and watched him with dancing eyes.

Leaving behind an empty milk glass and nothing but a few bread crumbs for Winnie to sweep away, Barbara slid off the chair and looked up at Neville, who offered his hand again.

“I will return the little miss to her room,” he said to his wife with a serious face. From the look she shot him, she must have known that he was up to mischief of some sort, but she nodded crisply, dismissing them both without another word.

Neville led Barbara through the darkened halls, past her father’s office, which was now dark and quiet, and back up the stairs of the West Wing.

At the door to her room, he bowed slightly at the waist, slipping a hand into the pocket of the loose pants he wore now that he was no longer on duty for the day.

From the pocket, he pulled two cookies, which he presented to Barbara as if he were Prince Charming handing her the glass slipper.

Barbara beamed at him, looking at his face to make sure he wasn’t kidding, and then back at the cookies. She hesitated only briefly before taking the cookies with a gap-toothed smile, revealing the two bottom teeth that she was currently missing.

“Thanks, Neville,” she whispered.

“Yeah, it’s okay, miss,” he said to her, ruffling her loose hair. “You go to sleep now. And don’t get any crumbs in the bed, or my wife will have my head. You hear?”

Barbara nodded eagerly, tiptoeing back into her bedroom and closing the door behind her.

It was the last time she ever saw Neville.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 10:59 am

...

Barbie

Jo Booker is holding Barbie's hands so tightly in her own that they have become one knotted mass of fingers and white knuckles.

The women sit, side by side, eyes trained on the radio before them as if they can somehow will their husbands' images into view, rather than just the dead air that the audio provides.

Dave Huggins, NASA's official photographer, is crouched in one corner, face hidden by his camera. He is quietly snapping shots of the scene. Both women have long since ceased to hear the click of his shutter.

"Mission control to Gemini," Arvin North's scratchy voice says. Barbie's hands tighten involuntarily on Jo's as they wait to hear a response. None comes.

"They are currently at one full revolution per second," comes another voice from mission control. Barbie glances at Jo and sees a tear sliding down her perfectly placid face. All the blood has drained away in the mere minutes it's taken for their husbands to go into a catastrophic roll in space.

The elation they'd both felt as the men successfully docked Gemini with the other space shuttle was quickly replaced by fear as Bill's voice had come through the radio, letting mission control know that they were in a roll.

The women's joyous hand-holding had morphed into them hanging onto one another for dear life.

“Jo,” Barbie rasps, tugging at her friend’s hands now, trying to pull her back from wherever she’s gone mentally. “They’re going to be okay, aren't they?”

Jo turns to her with haunted eyes. Her pupils are fully dilated, and she looks as though they’ve already gotten the final, terrible news that their husbands won’t be coming home.

“Jo?” Barbie tries again, freeing one of her hands and pressing it to Jo’s pale cheek. “They’re going to come out of this. They have to.”

In her own words and tone, Barbie hears desperation.

There is no alternative outcome for her: Todd will return to Earth safely.

He has to. They have three little boys and a whole life ahead of them to live—together.

She will not leave Cape Kennedy today without word that her husband is alert and making a safe return.

From the first time they met, Todd had been her safe place, her love, her protector. Life without him is not an option.

Barbie loses herself in Jo’s blank stare for a long moment, flashing back on a life that’s already been so rich and full. She sees Todd walking down the hall of her high school, books under his arm, looking apprehensive as he assessed the other students who lined the shiny hallway.

“Who’s that?” Barbie’s best friend, Catherine, had whispered, nudging Barbie with a sharp elbow.

“I heard he’s our new scholarship kid,” Octavia said.

Octavia, the first among them to get a car of her own and to lose her virginity in the back of it (to Bryant Parker, no less, who they all knew was Octavia’s third cousin, even if she hotly denied it), curled her lip in outward distaste, though her eyes sparked with curiosity and desire as she took in the handsome blonde boy.

“Probably poor as dirt, but he looks like a great kisser.”

Barbie watched him with interest. He held his head high, a tentative smile on his lips as he searched the numbers over the doors, looking for his next class.

Without thinking it through, Barbie peeled away from Catherine and Octavia, walking over to the boy and offering him her own tentative smile.

This was a forward move, to be sure, but it was also 1954, and the times were changing.

After all, this wasn’t the twenties or thirties, when Barbie’s mother would have been chastised endlessly and called “loose” or “fast” for approaching a strange boy; this was a new era.

Eisenhower was in office; schools were being desegregated; Bill Haley and the Comets were on the radio; the US was developing the first atomic submarine.

But for all of that, there was still one line that was difficult to cross: that of class.

And, without question, Todd Roman wasn’t one of them.

His school uniform looked like those of the other boys, but something about the way he wore his hair, or the unstudied way he tied his necktie, gave away his lack of a pedigree.

But Barbie didn't care. The moment she was standing in front of him, her books clutched to her heaving bosom as her heart raced, she saw his straight, white smile, and knew he was the one.

"Hi," Barbie said breathlessly. "You look lost."

"I was, but I think I just got found." Todd's smile grew even wider, and from any other guy, this would have seemed like a put on. But when Todd said it, it sounded genuine. And funny. Barbie laughed out loud at his unexpected good humor.

"Where are you headed?" she asked, bending forward to try to read the class schedule he held in his hand. It was upside down, and she reached for it, glancing at the neat cursive of the school secretary. "Ah. Mr. Woods. He teaches American Lit. I'm on my way there myself."

"Can I tag along?" Todd asked.

Barbie nodded eagerly. "You can," she said. "I'm Barbara Mackey."

"Barbara Mackey—my guardian angel." Todd eyed the rest of the kids as they watched Todd and Barbie with suspicion.

She'd broken free of the pack and done the unthinkable: attached herself to a total stranger, an outsider, a newcomer. And she loved the way it made her feel.

"You can call me Barbie," she said, her heart going soft as she looked into his trusting eyes.

“And you can call me your biggest fan.” Todd gave her a look that said he knew what he was up against in this new environment. “But everyone else calls me Todd Roman.”

“Todd,” Barbie said, falling into step beside him as they made their way to Mr. Woods’s room. “Todd Roman. I like the sound of that...”

“Roman?” Arvin North’s voice crackles on the speaker again, and Barbie is yanked out of her reverie. She drags her eyes away from Jo’s as the door of the room opens. A man stands there, his name tag swinging on a lanyard around his neck.

“Mrs. Booker. Mrs. Roman,” he says, looking at them with gravity.

“Mr. North has asked that I remove the radio from the room for the time being. We’ll update you as soon as we know more.

” He makes a move to take the radio, but Jo snaps out of her trance as he does, and she looks up at him with sparks in her eyes.

“No, you will leave it,” Jo says, holding up a hand. The man, clearly not used to taking orders from a woman, stops. He looks at them uncertainly, and then back at the door as if reinforcements might appear there. “We have a right to know what happens to our husbands as it happens.”

The man appears to be on the cusp of making a decision, though it’s unclear which way it will go. He takes another step towards the radio.

Jo stands. “I said leave it,” she insists. “I’ll deal with Arvin North later.”

The man looks at her with disbelief. “Ma’am,” he says half-heartedly.

Jo walks to the door and holds the knob. “We’re fine in here, thank you,” she says. The tear that had snaked down her face was now dried, leaving a light trail of mascara in its wake.

With the man gone, Jo sits again and takes Barbie’s hands, this time more gently. She’s back, and she takes a deep breath, shaking her head and sitting up straighter.

“Barbie,” Jo says, rubbing her lips together before she speaks. “Our men are going to fix this. I know it in my heart.”

Barbie watches her friend’s face, and something about Jo’s certainty brings her a sense of peace. She exhales and lets her shoulders drop slightly as she sits back against the stiff cushions of the couch. “Okay,” Barbie says, nodding. “Okay.”

Dave Huggins repositions himself in the room, reminding them he’s still there. He’s a master at blending into the scenery, and as they’ve sat there together, he’s continued to snap photos, but as unobtrusively as possible.

“Gemini to mission control,” comes Bill’s voice. He sounds a million miles away. “Booker here.”

A cheer goes up from mission control. It’s been nearly a minute of absolute radio silence from space, and everyone on the ground has feared the worst.

“Booker,” Arvin North says with force. “I need you to put all your attention towards roll thruster number eight. Can you do that?”

Bill mutters something unintelligible.

“Commander Booker,” Arvin North says loudly. “Stay awake. Stay focused. Roll thruster eight has been firing continuously, and we think it’s causing the roll. I need

you to shut it off.”

There are sounds from space that the women can’t quite identify, but they’re both on the edge of their seats as they wait for Bill to manage this feat—whatever it may entail.

“I,” Bill says. “I can’t.”

“You can. You must.”

Bill is breathing heavily. “Number eight,” he rasps. “Okay.”

The conditions in space are unimaginable for Barbie, and she is absolutely desperate to hear her husband’s voice.

Todd has said nothing for quite some time, and this makes her incredibly uneasy.

But for the moment, it’s easy to focus all her attention on what Bill is doing and to hope it works so that he can stop the roll.

“Have you located the thruster?” North asks, guiding Bill as if he’s leading a blind person through a task. “It’s going to be to the left on your panel. A string of square buttons that runs vertically. Number eight will be at the bottom.”

“I see it,” Bill says. He sounds strained and distant. “I got it.”

For a long, tense moment, everything hangs in the balance.

There is silence in the room, as Barbie, Jo, and Dave Huggins all wait.

Mission control is quiet. The only noise is a wailing from down the hall, where

Barbie's youngest son, three-year-old Huck, has been left in the care of a young secretary charged with watching him.

"Mommmyyyy," Huck cries. He sounds more tired than aggrieved, and Barbie pushes his cries from her mind as she waits. Even the pleas of her youngest child aren't going to pull her from this seat until she knows what's going to happen to Todd and Bill.

"Prepare to disengage... roll thruster eight," Bill says with obvious difficulty. It touches Barbie's heart to hear him using the formal protocol when all anyone wants is for him to push the damn button.

Barbie and Jo hold their breath.

"Roll thruster eight is disengaged," comes Arvin North's voice.

Instead of cheering, there is a pause from mission control as they wait to see whether this will do the trick.

Time ticks by slowly, and Vance Majors says a few words to Todd and Bill that are clearly meant to keep the dialogue going and to not leave the men alone as they wait to see what happens.

"Roll speed is slowing," North says. "We are now rolling at about half the speed we were before turning off the thruster."

This should be a cause for celebration, but everyone remains subdued.

"Roll has reduced to one revolution every five-point-two seconds," North says. And then after a long pause: "Roll reduced to one revolution every ten seconds." They wait for what feels like an eternity. "Roll has ceased."

Now, finally, mission control breaks into wild applause and cheering, and Barbie turns to Jo.

They have the same look in their eyes, and without speaking, Barbie knows Jo is just as happy as she is about the maneuver, but also just as fearful that one or both of their husbands has suffered terribly and may not make it home.

Jo opens her arms and Barbie falls into them. Dave Huggins snaps a few shots of them embracing, though from a slight distance, so as not to interrupt their moment.

“They did it,” Jo says, reaching up to swipe at the tears Barbie hasn’t even realized are streaming from her own eyes. She laughs as Jo’s thumbs brush against her cheeks.

“Bill did it,” Barbie says. In this moment, Bill is an absolute hero to her. Whatever he did up there is going to bring their men home, and they’ll deal with everything else once Gemini lands safely. “I just want to hear his voice,” she whispers, so only Jo can hear. “I want to hear him awake.”

“You will,” Jo promises, just as Huck begins to wail from down the hall again. “Go get your little guy, and we’ll entertain him in here while we listen.”

Gratefully, Barbie rushes out the door. All she wants is to feel Huck’s warm, squirming body in her arms, to feel his tear-stained face against her cheek. All she wants is to hear Todd speak, for him to be alert, for him to be home.

All she wants is for her world to be whole again.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 10:59 am

jo

. . .

"Sorry to call so early," Barbie says the moment Jo lifts up her ringing phone. "I figured you were awake."

"I am," Jo says in a hushed voice. She'd chosen not to tell the kids about the drama in space, in hopes that they might make it through the school day and get home without hearing anything.

In her mind, there was no reason to strike fear into their young hearts every time their father went to work, and while she knows they will hear about how close Bill had come to disaster, she just hopes that by the time they do, she's figured out how to mitigate the scariest details and make it sound more like a minor snafu.

"Todd is fine," Barbie says. Her voice breaks on the last syllable and she starts to sob. "He's okay, Jo."

"I know," Jo says, pulling the long phone cord so that it stretches across the kitchen and she can sit at the table. Steam curls up from the coffee she's just poured. "He'll be here in a couple of days."

The process following splashdown has been detailed for them repeatedly, but you never know until it's your husband who has gone into space and returned, just how long forty-eight hours can feel.

Still, Jo is well aware that they will have to be evaluated post-splashdown, will get on a plane in Okinawa, and then will be taken directly to Houston for a full check-up.

After that, they'll fly home and be reunited with their families as quickly as possible.

Of course, there's still the very real possibility that something happened to one of them in space that will need further medical intervention, but Jo's gut feeling is that both Bill and Todd will come through with flying colors, and will be back on the Cape as quickly as possible.

"Jo," Barbie says softly, in the kind of quiet, still voice that only comes out in the middle of the night or in the most dire of circumstances. "If anything had happened..."

"But it didn't," Jo says firmly. "You can't do that, Barb."

"I can't not do that."

The women are silent for a beat. "If you do that every time he leaves, you'll rip yourself to shreds, and you'll make it impossible for him to go."

"I know. And this is his dream."

Jo lifts her coffee cup and sips. "Has it always been?"

"His dream?" Barbie sighs, contemplating.

"I think so. Or something like it. Todd came to my private high school during our senior year, and he was so smart, Jo.

I could tell the first time we did our homework together that he was smarter than any

other boy I'd ever known.

And he loved science. He couldn't get enough of Astronomy class or talking about the universe.

So I think so, in a way. Todd has been talking about going to space for several years now. "

Jo nods and holds the phone receiver between her ear and her shoulder as she wraps both hands around her warm mug of coffee.

"Bill, too. He's been a pilot for about twenty years now, and as soon as NASA said they were looking for astronauts, he got tunnel vision on this idea that it would be him.

His entire goal was to get to space." She smiles now, remembering the day he'd come home talking about space travel for the first time.

"It was like a kid with a new toy, and he seemed so enthusiastic about it that I couldn't help but be supportive.

It wasn't until he was actually halfway into the selection process that I really and truly realized how his dream would mean uprooting our lives and starting over. "

"Do you regret it?"

"Moving here?" Jo squints out at the moon, which is still visible even as the sky starts to show the faintest tinges of a summer morning dawning over Florida.

"I regretted it at first. It was so hard.

But the kids were young enough that they just settled in and made new friends, and I forced myself to get out there and find a way to make this home. "

"The hospital," Barbie says knowingly. "I so admire your work there."

"Not just that--but thank you. I think meeting you ladies and really forming a bond and a friendship went a long way towards me feeling like I was home again."

"It's the same for me," Barbie admits. "I got here from Connecticut, and suddenly it was just me at home, pregnant and with two little ones underfoot, and I wasn't sure how to do it all."

Jo remembers feeling the same way; her mother and her sisters had been her constant companions and her network back in Minnesota, with childcare duties shifting between all of them as they supported one another through the ups and downs of daily life.

"Did your family help you out a lot back home?" Jo asks, reaching for the coffee pot to top off her mug. She knows Barbie lost her mother before the kids had come along, but she isn't sure whether there were aunts or cousins who maybe pitched in. "Because my family was a lifesaver."

"No," Barbie says. "Not exactly." She's quiet on the other end of the line for a long moment. "I had help... nannies. And a maid."

Jo blinks a few times and resists the urge to laugh out loud. For a second, she thinks Barbie might be kidding, but it becomes apparent that she's not.

"Oh," Jo says. "Wow. Okay. I've never actually met anyone with a nanny or a maid."

But hey," she adds quickly, "your dad is a senator, so that makes sense."

" But does it? Jo isn't sure. She'd assumed that maybe Barbie's family had some kind of money to go along with the status, but the idea of having a staff person in her house to do the cooking, cleaning, and childcare is almost too mind-boggling to contemplate.

"I'm not even sure anymore that it does make sense," Barbie says, laughing at herself. "I grew up that way and most of the people I know had a household staff, but then I met Todd and my whole perspective shifted."

This intrigues Jo: Barbie has mentioned now that Todd went to private school on a scholarship, and also that being with him changed her outlook on things. Despite the exhaustion from waiting up all night to hear that Gemini 8 had landed safely, she wants to know more.

"Tell me more about Todd," Jo says, sipping her coffee.

"Oh, Todd is the sweetest human alive," Barbie says. "Truly. His parents are hardworking. His dad is a mechanic with his own shop, and his mom stayed at home with the kids. I love the Romans, but my parents weren't terribly impressed by them."

Jo makes an encouraging noise and then pulls the receiver away from her ear to listen to the noise in the hall. It's early for the kids to be up, but she waits, and then hears nothing more. She puts the phone back to her ear.

"They sound like wonderful people," Jo says. "And Todd is very impressive. They have to love him, right?"

"Well, the first time I brought him home to meet my family, my dad shook his hand and then looked at his nails to see if he had grease under them."

"Ouch." Jo winces.

“He laughed it off like it was a joke and launched right into a discussion about what Todd was planning on doing with his life, but I was mortified. I’d told them how Todd was at my school on a scholarship, and how smart he was, but it was like all they could see was that he didn’t come from money.

That his parents had no status for them to impress their friends with.

They couldn’t say, ‘Oh, Barbara is dating so-and-so’s son—don’t you know them?

” she says in a mocking tone. “It drove a wedge between us, because once I fell for Todd, I wasn’t giving him up. ”

“How’d the wedding go?”

Barbie chuckles softly. “About how you’d imagine.

My parents paid for an enormous to-do, and I worked overtime to make sure his family and friends felt welcomed.

But it was gorgeous, Jo. I felt like a Kennedy.

I spent the day saying my new name to myself: Barbara Jean Roman .

I couldn’t get over the fact that Todd and I had actually made it.

So I raced around that reception, trying to make everyone happy, and then Todd and I climbed into the back of the car together to be whisked away for our wedding night, and I never looked back. ”

“Wow,” Jo says, impressed. “This is all so much more dramatic than my marrying Bill. Of course, my parents had questions about me marrying a divorced man, and

they weren't sure it was a great idea, what with his first wife being in a facility and all, but they got to know him, they asked a lot of questions, and then all those fears went away.

I think they were more excited about us moving down here than I was. ”

“I wish it had been that easy,” Barbie says wistfully.

“But, family is family, right? You don't get to pick them.

” She goes quiet for a moment. “So being down here gives me a chance to step away from it all, but like I said, it was hard to get used to not having any help. And don't get me wrong: my father will pay for me to hire people down here, but I thought this was a good time to make a clean break.

To start my life the way I wanted to live it. ”

“That's brave.”

“Not really,” Barbie says wryly. “It's just me trying to finally grow up. At thirty,” she adds with a laugh. “I think it's time. And, you know, when my brother came down here for the holidays with his family, and he and Bill got into that whole?—“

“Oh, god,” Jo interrupts, shaking her head and closing her eyes. “Don't even mention that. I'm so embarrassed.”

“What? That's not your fault, Jo. I hope you know I saw that whole thing as having nothing to do with you and me or with our friendship.”

“I was hoping you didn't hold it against me.”

“Are you kidding?” Barbie scoffs. “Jo, I know my brother. Ted has been Ted for my entire life. He’s entitled, and, frankly, kind of a prick.”

Jo barks a laugh of surprise. “Sorry,” she says. “I wasn’t expecting that.”

“Listen, I didn’t even bother to ask him what happened. I’m pretty sure he said something or did something to offend Bill, and I wouldn’t want to get in the middle of that. It has nothing to do with you and me.”

Jo smiles over her cup of coffee. “I appreciate that. And I agree.” Of course she isn’t completely sure what it was about Ted Mackey that had set Bill off on New Year’s Eve—most of that information had been reserved for Dr. Eve Sheinbaum and their therapy sessions—but she knows enough about Bill to put the puzzle pieces together.

“So, are we just staying awake until they get home?” Jo asks. The coffee’s effects are already waning, and she can feel a deep exhaustion setting in behind her eyes, manifesting as a throbbing headache.

“Oh, Jo, I can’t,” Barbie protests. “I’m so tired.”

“Then I say we both turn in here for a couple of hours, try to sleep before our kids wake up for the day, and do our best to make it till bedtime. What do you say?”

“I say, ‘goodnight,’” Barbie says.

“Goodnight, Barbara Jean Roman,” Jo says as she stands to hang up the phone on the wall. “Sweet dreams.”

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 10:59 am

barbie

. . .

"Daddy is coming home," Barbie says, bouncing Huck on one hip. She's anxious about seeing Todd and hearing his retelling of the experience firsthand, and even though the wheels of his plane haven't yet touched the ground, she's already nervous about how she'll feel the next time he leaves.

"Hey, Mom?" Henry looks up at her just as the noise of the incoming plane vibrates through the air and drowns out his words.

Barbie reaches out a hand and puts it on the warm head of her son, looking into the blue eyes that so closely resemble her husband's.

Henry's lips are moving, but she can no longer hear his words as the plane descends rapidly, its wheels touching the end of the airstrip.

The pilot applies the brakes and a loud, whooshing sound makes the little boys cover their ears.

Not far away, Jo and her three kids stand, though hers are all older now--even little Kate is growing like a weed, standing tall and serious at ten years old next to her sister, who is thirteen, and her brother, who Barbie can hardly believe is old enough that she's seen Bill teaching him how to back the car out of the driveway and steer it carefully through the neighborhood.

The plane comes to a halt and within minutes, the door opens, and a staircase is in place so the men can step onto the ground and greet their families.

"Daddy!" Henry and Heath go running towards Todd the moment his feet hit the tarmac. Huck squirms in Barbie's arms until she lets him go, watching as his short legs carry him at top speed towards his father.

Todd scoops Huck off the ground and looks down at his other boys as they throw themselves at him, smiling up at their hero. Barbie's eyes fill with tears and she swipes at them, glancing in Jo's direction to see that her friend is doing the same thing.

Bill and Todd stand there, surrounded by their kids, as Barbie and Jo wait for their turns. The women both stand proud and strong, holding back their own emotions as they watch their husbands reunite with the children.

Jo wanders over to Barbie and puts an arm around her shoulders.

Her other hand is tucked into the pocket of her full skirt.

The women are in silhouette against the pink and tangerine sunset, and Barbie glances out at the line of palm trees that stand around the main building at Cape Kennedy.

The sound of the plane's engines cooling down ticks and hums all around them.

"They're home," Jo says softly. A warm breeze picks up, blowing their skirts slightly. It's September third, and the feeling of what passes for autumn in Florida is in the air. "Now our lives can get back to normal."

Barbie nods as she snuffles. "I know. But it was scary, Jo. I need to get my bearings

again so Todd doesn't see how much it rattled me."

The children step back from their fathers then, and Jo and Barbie walk over to the steps of the airplane, where bags are being unloaded and set on the tarmac nearby.

"Hi," Todd says, opening his arms for his wife. Barbie nearly falls into them as Jo stands on tiptoe to wrap her arms around Bill's neck.

"Hey," Barbie sobs, burying her face in Todd's chest. She puts her hands to his shirt, grabbing onto his lapels as she tries to hide her tears.

"Oh, come on now," Todd says in a husky voice. He's never liked to see her cry, and the heightened emotion of this journey has them both in tears. "We're good-- everything is fine."

Barbie shakes her head, her face still pressed against Todd's powerful chest. "But you weren't saying anything," she murmurs, her sobs coming out as brief hiccups now. "You were up there, and I could hear Bill, but I didn't hear you, and..."

"And you thought the worst." Todd puts his hands on her arms and gently pulls her back so he can look at her tear-stained face.

The kids are now whooping and running around under the airplane, dodging the pilots as they stand around talking in the waning light.

"It's understandable that you were worried, Barb, but this is my job.

Every time I go up there, you have to know there's the chance something could go wrong. "

These words are not what Barbie needs or wants to hear, and she heaves with another

oncoming sob.

"Oh, girl, come here." Todd pulls her close again, tucking her blonde head under his chin and wrapping his arms around her.

He holds his wife tightly as their three boys shout with joy, chasing one another around on the tarmac.

A few feet away, Bill and Jo are talking seriously, and their three kids are inspecting the airplane, climbing up the steps that the flight attendant has invited them to take so they can go inside and see the cockpit.

Barbie forces herself to inhale deeply and then release. She does this three times and calms her entire body. Her head clears, and her shoulders relax.

"Dad!" Heath says, running up to them and skidding to a stop next to Todd. "Can we have cheeseburgers for dinner? Can we go to the drive-in?"

Todd is rubbing Barbie's back in slow, lazy circles, and she steps back from him now, wiping her cheeks with the backs of her hands as she laughs at their son's excitement. "You boys want the drive-in?" she asks Heath. He nods eagerly. "Okay, get your brothers and we'll go."

When Barbie looks back at Todd, he's observing her. "You okay?"

Barbie is not okay, but she knows that, for his sake, she has to be. She gives a firm nod. "Never better."

There will be time later—when the kids are asleep and Barbie has gotten used to Todd being with her again in the flesh—for her to ask questions and to understand what happened up there in space. But for now, she has all her boys with her, and she's

prepared to enjoy it.

Todd smiles at her. He's clearly pleased that she's ready to get this show on the road. "It's burger time, boys!" he shouts at his sons, who take off running toward the car, little Huck lagging behind as he tries to keep up with his brothers.

Todd loops an arm around Barbie's waist and they follow their boys into the sunset.

It had been terrifying. And almost impossible for Barbie to imagine. Over the early days of Todd's return, he'd been giving her bits and pieces of what happened on Gemini, and Barbie could only listen to so much before covering her eyes and her ears and shaking her head as she fought off tears.

She loves Todd so much, and she can't stand thinking of him unconscious or in pain.

"Barb," he says one morning, standing next to her at the kitchen sink as she slowly rinses dishes in her robe. "I'm still having some troubles with feeling dizzy."

Barbie shuts off the water, sets the dish on the rack, and turns to look at Todd as she dries her hands on a dishtowel. "Dizzy?"

Todd puts his hands to his head. "I wake up at night and my head is spinning. I get up and every morning I feel like I'm going to black out."

"Have you told anyone?"

"No way. I don't want to be pulled from the program."

The boys are in the front room, playing relatively quietly as Barbie cleans up after breakfast. She puts a fist on one hip as she frowns up at her husband's face. "You know you can't just not say anything. You need to address this."

Todd's head hangs and his shoulders roll forward as he leans against the counter. "I know. I just hate going to the doctor."

Barbie knows this. She has known Todd for so long that she can predict his every response, and the minute he said he felt dizzy, she knew it would be like trying to coax one of the boys into going to the doctor.

"I'm setting it up," Barbie says, turning her face up to his to kiss him. "Go get ready for work. I'll try to schedule it for as soon as possible."

Once Todd is out the door with his coffee in a thermos and his lunch in a metal pail, Barbie gets Heath and Henry out the door--to second grade and kindergarten, respectively--and settles Huck down with a box full of blocks and trucks.

She pulls out a Stardust Beach phone book and selects a doctor, then calls and makes the appointment for Todd.

Her greatest fear was that he wouldn't come home, which had been downgraded to the idea that he might come home hurt, and now she's just worried about the long-term effects of his trip to space.

A knock on the door pulls her away from the kitchen, and Barbie opens it to find Carrie Reed on her doorstep.

"Hiya," Carrie says, grinning at her. "Have you had long enough to re-feather your love nest now that your man is back?" she teases, waiting to be invited in.

Barbie and Carrie have a long-standing Wednesday morning coffee date at the Romans' house, and they always pour a cup and sit at the kitchen table or on the patio to gab while Huck plays amiably with whatever of his brothers' toys Barbie has dragged out to occupy him.

"Of course," Barbie says with a laugh. She holds the door open wider and Carrie follows her in, tossing her long, straight brown hair over one shoulder as she spots Huck playing in a patch of sunlight on the living room rug.

"Hi, little guy," Carrie says, ruffling Huck's soft baby hair as she passes by. "I bet you're glad to have Daddy home again, huh?"

Huck breaks from his game and looks up at her at the mention of his father, then goes back to stacking colored blocks and talking to himself about big trucks and brown horses.

"Patio?" Barbie asks, leading the way into her kitchen, with its red-painted cabinets and white counter tops.

Her wedding china is emblazoned with a pattern of strawberries and daisies, and she loves how fresh and unstuffy it feels after a childhood of Wedgwood china and understated elegance.

Barbie pours two mugs of coffee and follows Carrie outside, where they can see straight through the patio door and into the living room and keep an eye on Huck while they talk.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 10:59 am

"Okay, you know I'm not one for idle gossip," Carrie says, leaning back in her chair and crossing her feet at the ankles as she holds her coffee mug in both hands. "But what is this business going around about Bill Booker kissing some woman at the Cape?"

Barbie's jaw drops. "What? I haven't heard a word. Oh, I don't know, Carrie," she says, shaking her head. "I'm not sure I even want to hear it if it doesn't come from Jo directly."

"Well," Carrie says with a shrug, putting her mug to her lips. "It's out there, and the rumor is circulating."

"Did you hear that from Jay?"

"No, he's just a regular guy," Carrie says, flapping a hand at Barbie. "He comes home and wants to talk about work stuff, not the actual interesting things going on there."

Barbie isn't sure what to say, but she's uncomfortable at hearing the news, and she doesn't really know what to say to it.

It reminds her of a time, many years ago, that rumors were circulating around Westport about her own father, and she has never forgotten how her mother felt, having to go to dinner parties and fundraisers with a smile on her face, rubbing elbows with the same women who spread the gossip from ear to ear like some sort of communicable disease.

In fact, there had been a time, when Barbie was twelve, that she was worried her

father might move out and leave the family.

Her mother spent every evening locked in a guest bedroom in a different wing of the house from the master bedroom and from George Mackey's office, and any time Barbie walked by the closed door, she could hear her mother crying quietly to herself.

There was shouting in the house, and Barbie overheard various accusations from her mother about her father spending time with other women.

It had been scary and confusing for her.

Ultimately, her mother had ended up with a new amethyst ring the size of a quarter and she'd eventually come out of the guest room and rejoined them at the dinner table, but things had never been quite the same between her parents again.

Barbie wants no part of contributing to that same scenario for poor Jo, who does not deserve to have women—especially her friends—passing around tidbits like this nonsense about Bill kissing someone at work.

"Listen," Barbie says, deftly changing the subject. "I wanted to hear more about that protest you were talking about last week. Who was it for?"

"Clarence Triggs." Carrie sets her coffee mug on the table and levels her gaze at Barbie.

All frivolous chatter about Bill and Jo falls away instantly.

"He was found shot in the head. It was the Klan," she adds in a whisper, looking around as if someone might be listening to their discussion.

"It had to be. And the fear is that nothing will happen--that no one will be held

accountable. "

Barbie's eyes narrow as she listens. "So what did you do to protest?"

"We went to Tallahassee and marched on the capitol.

We were on the news and everything." A grin spreads across Carrie's face.

"I helped organize the whole thing, and I know we're not changing what already happened, but we need to let our government know that we will not stand for the outright murder of our citizens. "

Barbie shifts her gaze to the still water of the swimming pool, then turns her head to get a glimpse of Huck in the living room; he's still thoroughly engaged in building block towers.

"You're right," Barbie agrees. "That is definitely not okay."

Carrie is watching her from across the patio table.

"I'd love to have you join me at a protest or a march, Barbie.

If you're interested, that is." She holds up a hand. "No pressure whatsoever. I know not everyone feels personally connected to the cause or to civil rights in general. I'm also working with a church not far from here that could really use our help, so if you want to pitch in on something like that, I'd be thrilled to have you with me there, too."

Barbie knows that Carrie's words are meant to let her off the hook, not to make her feel as if she doesn't care about other people, and she nods.

"I think I'd like that," Barbie says. "I would."

In her mind's eye, when she thinks of civil rights, she pictures Neville and Winnie. She is personally connected to the cause. She does care about how people--all people--are treated in America.

At the thought of Neville and Winnie, the night before her mother's birthday in 1944 comes back to her.

She'd crept back into bed with the cookies that Neville had stolen for eight-year-old Barbie, eating them carefully and brushing all the crumbs onto the floor, just like he'd asked.

The last thing Barbie remembers is falling asleep happily, her eyes glazing over as they scanned the dollhouse across the room.

Her final thought before sleep washed over her was of the miniature mother in the dollhouse--the one in the apron.

Had she been baking cookies for her children?

And if so, would she always make sure they had some after school or before bed?

But the next day... that's the day that is still memorable for Barbie, over twenty years later.

She'd kept herself busy all day as the servants and hired staff had cleaned and decorated the house, and every wonderful smell imaginable had emanated from the kitchen.

But Barbie knew instinctively to stay away, lest she draw Winnie's ire for being

underfoot.

By dusk, the partygoers were arriving in full evening attire, and her mother had swept down the staircase in the most beautiful rose-colored chiffon dress that Barbie had ever seen.

The house glowed with lit candelabras, and the staff wore starched uniforms with aprons for the women, and gloves for the men.

A string quartet played at one end of the giant sitting room at the front of the house, and everywhere Barbie looked, glamorous adults held champagne flutes as they talked in muted voices and laughed at jokes she knew she wouldn't understand.

Barbie hid behind couches and peered into doorways as she made her way through the house, remembering how Neville had helped her hide from her father the night before.

It had been a fun game then, but now it appeared Barbie was the only one playing, and that even if she weren't hiding, no one would have paid her any mind.

"She married him for money, you know," one woman was saying to another as Barbie sidled up to them, hands laced behind her back.

Barbie's blonde hair was pulled back in a black velvet ribbon, and her white taffeta dress had a matching belt made of black velvet.

She knew she looked pretty and like a well-behaved little girl, so she smiled at the adults who noticed her, most giving her a distracted half-smile before turning to pluck a fresh drink from a silver tray.

"Of course she did," the other woman whispered. "And that's why she's staying, too."

Can you imagine putting up with the nonsense that comes with being married to George Mackey?”

This got Barbie’s attention: the women were discussing her father. She stopped and pretended to admire a potted plant along a windowsill, keeping herself within listening distance.

“I would never,” the first woman said. “Not even for all this.”

They both looked around, taking in the fine furniture, the heavy brocade curtains that Marion Mackey insisted the staff take down once a month to clean, and the shining piano in one corner of the room.

“She came from nothing, you know.”

The second woman pursed her lips and gave the smallest shake of her head. “I heard she was a college dropout?—“

“College?” The first woman sounded horrified. “Why would a woman that beautiful be going to college?”

“To be a nurse ,” the other woman said, putting emphasis on the word nurse as if it were just a hair more respectable than being a lady of the night.

“Oh my.” The first woman, older by a decade, put a hand to her chest and looked scandalized. “And did he pay for her to finish college?”

The other woman laughed, but it sounded mean. “Well, he got her in a family way as soon as possible, so I don’t think she had much choice about going back to college, but also why should she? She has all this.” She swept a hand around, indicating house, servants, children.

“Hmph,” the other woman said, finally catching sight of Barbie and lifting an eyebrow. The women moved away as a unit just as the string quartet launched into Schubert’s “Death and the Maiden.”

Barbie wandered on, stopping to eat a tiny pastry that she discovered too late was filled with meat instead of sweet jelly or custard. Barbie made a face, but chewed and swallowed the hors d’oeuvre like she’d been taught to do.

The kitchen doors swung open as she drew near, and Barbie heard the clatter of pans and the rapid-fire discussion between cooks and servers as they prepared and plated the food.

She stood just outside as the warmth of the ovens and the stove filtered out into the hallway.

Schubert was muted, but she could still hear it in the distance.

“Missus done fired him?” came a woman’s voice that Barbie couldn’t quite place.

“Mmm, no. Not missus—the senator did.”

Barbie knew that voice—it was Winnie’s. She bit the inside of her cheek, waiting.

“Why he do that?” the first woman asked. “Neville always do what he’s asked.”

“Yes, he does,” Winnie said. “He always did.” There was disappointment in Winnie’s voice, though Barbie could not see her face. She’d known Winnie and Neville her entire life, and even without seeing Winnie’s face, she could imagine how she looked.

“So why the senator man go and fire him?”

Winnie clucked her tongue in a way that was more than familiar to Barbie. “He stole cookies for little miss last night and let her eat in the kitchen here at midnight. Missus said no to that. Said little miss was to go to bed hungry. Senator didn’t like him disobeying.”

There was a sharp intake of breath, and for the briefest pause, the clattering and movement stopped short.

Even Barbie, who wasn’t supposed to be lingering outside the kitchen and spying, had a moment of clarity: Neville was because of her.

A man who had worked for her father for over a decade was sent away over something that minor.

To Barbie, it was a feeling that life and everything about it were impermanent.

For the people in the kitchen (Barbie realized much later in life, as she looked back on this moment), it was the realization that job security and loyalty did not exist when you worked for a white man.

“Anyway,” Winnie said with a clap of her hands. “We got work here. Get this food on the plates, or we’ll all be fired.”

There was laughter in the kitchen, but it was utterly joyless.

Barbie didn’t want to hear anymore. In fact, she’d heard quite enough for the entire evening, and rather than rejoin the birthday party in the main rooms, she crept up the stairs of the West Wing and into her own bedroom, closing the door softly.

Instead of being there while her mother blew out thirty-two candles on her birthday cake, Barbie sat on the floor in front of her dollhouse, playing quietly.

In the scenario she created there, everyone was happy. No one had money, and no one went without. No one got fired for being nice to children, and everyone got birthday cake and cookies. Lots and lots of birthday cake and cookies.

The patter of tiny hands against the glass of the patio doors brings Barbie back to the present. Little Huck is there inside their house on Stardust Beach, smacking the window with both pudgy hands. Carrie jumps up from her chair across the table from Barbie and opens the door for him.

“Hey, buddy,” Carrie says, reaching out both hands for him and picking him up easily. She rests Huck on one hip and slides the door closed again to keep the cool air inside. “Want to come out here with us?”

Barbie smiles at her friend gratefully, and she watches how easily Carrie leads Huck over to a spot in the shade under a palm tree, setting him down with the truck he has in his hands.

“I do want to help out anywhere I can,” Barbie says to Carrie definitively. “I want to join you at a march or help at the church—anything, really. It matters to me.”

Carrie stands upright after getting Huck settled, smoothing the front of her homemade peasant dress with both hands.

She looks at Barbie like she’s seeing her with fresh eyes.

“Yeah?” she says with a smile. “Okay, then. Let’s get you out there, girl.

I’ve got a few things cooking, and I know I’ve got something you can be a part of. ”

This sits right with Barbie; she knows she has something to offer the cause—whatever that cause may be.

With a satisfied grin, she leans back in her chair and picks up her now-cold coffee, smiling at her little boy as he drives his truck up the trunk of the palm tree.

If nothing else, Barbie will do as her mother did for her: she'll set an example for her children.

She'll show them what it means to give and to do and to be more than the world thinks you are.

And she'll start right now.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 10:59 am

bill

. . .

The flashbulbs pop as Bill and Todd sit behind a small, two-man table under the hot lights.

They are flanked from behind by the rest of the crew, and Arvin North stands at a podium to the right of the table.

The room is filled to the gills with members of the press, and this time, the wives have been asked to stay away.

There simply isn't room for extra bodies in the space, and the thought that the wives might add another layer of drama to what is already a dramatic situation had forced Arvin North to declare that this press conference was for astronauts only.

"Question one," North says now, pointing at a reporter from the Miami Herald . The man stands, pen and notepad in hand. "Commander Booker, my question is for you."

Bill gives him a serious look and a single nod as he waits.

"When you realized that Gemini was in a spin, what was your first thought?"

Bill clenches and unclenches his jaw; he wants to keep his words measured and not give away too much of himself here.

"I thought about my family, of course," he says, keeping his eyes on the reporter. "I knew my wife was here at Cape Kennedy, listening to the transmission between Gemini and mission control, and I thought of her."

There is a loud rush of voices as the room breaks into shouts and reporters angle to ask the next question. North points at a severe-looking woman with a tight bun.

"Elizabeth Prue, New York Times ," she says.

"This is for both astronauts." She consults the notepad in her hand.

"Were you specifically trained in protocol for an uncontrolled roll, and, if so, did that training result in the reversal of your situation?

Essentially, did NASA provide training that saved this mission and both your lives, or do you feel this was the work of divine providence? "

Bill frowns; he isn't accustomed to reporters bringing God into the equation, though he is used to both pilots and astronauts calling on a higher power to ask for or show gratitude for a safe landing.

Perhaps Ms. Prue is looking for a religious quote and is fishing, but he's still skeptical of the question, and he turns to look at Todd.

"We were trained for almost any eventuality you can think of," Todd says, speaking firmly and clearly as he leans into the microphone on the table in front of him.

He looks at Elizabeth Prue through his eyelashes as he lowers his chin.

"I think we can all thank the higher power to whom we answer," Todd says, "but we can also absolutely thank NASA for giving us thorough and clear training on how to

handle various situations. "

"Thank you." Elizabeth Prue sits as everyone else stands and shouts again.

"One more question," Arvin North says, pointing at a man to the right of the room.

"Jack Levy, Orlando Sentinel ," he announces. "At any point, did either or both of you lose consciousness?"

Flashbulbs pop again. Bill knows that he himself did not entirely lose consciousness, though he recalls some out-of-body type of thoughts and sensations.

He does, however, feel strongly that Todd lost consciousness, though this hasn't been widely reported.

He leans into his microphone and takes this question.

"Mr. Levy," Bill says firmly. "Neither of us lost consciousness during the mission.

We were able to remain clearheaded and focused on stopping the spacecraft from its continued roll.

There are studies underway to determine the lasting effects of space travel on the body, but at this time, we're both right as rain, and we thank you for the great question. "

North sees an opportunity here to wrap things up and he knocks on his small podium the way a judge might bang a gavel.

Bill and Todd stand, and as they do, the cameras explode in a dazzling show of flashbulbs and twinkling lights.

Later, Todd will blame the flashing for his slight stumble, but in the moment, as he lurches toward Bill, grabbing onto his arm for support, he laughs it off and leans into the microphone on the table.

"Right as rain, folks," Todd says, holding up a hand to the crowd to let them know he's fine.

But as they walk down the center aisle together, with Bill leading the way, Bill notices that Todd keeps his left hand planted on his right shoulder the entire way.

There is a note on Bill's desk when he gets back after the press conference. It's folded in half and tucked beneath his phone.

I need to talk to you. Meet me along the fence line that overlooks the launch pad at 11.

-J.

This is from Jeanie Florence--Bill has no doubt.

He reads it again, glances around the office, and then folds the paper into fourths and tucks it into his pants pocket.

It's nearly 11:00 now, so he picks up a pencil and scratches something on a notepad self-consciously, then stands and walks to the exit.

Outside, the September sun is hot and nearly at its apex.

Bill squints at the parking lot, the buildings in the distance, the launch pad, and the tree line.

Far down the fence, to the right, he sees a lone figure of a woman in an orange dress with a big yellow daisy print, long, auburn hair falling down her back. It's Jeanie.

Bill approaches, hands in the pockets of his pants. He has had little time to process the idea that she needs to talk to him, so he has no idea what this could be about, but he's curious as hell, and wants to hold his tongue and let her talk.

"Hi," Bill says, approaching with his head bent slightly, as if she's a horse he might spook.

But Jeanie is forthright and ready to talk. She turns and walks directly to him.

"You almost died," she says in a tone that borders on accusing, one hand holding onto the chain-link fence as she stands in front of him.

Her fingers are laced through the steel mesh and she's looking up at him, her face a jumble of emotions.

"You went out there, and you nearly died, Bill," Jeanie says, her words merging into a hysterical sob.

"I was just sitting here in mission control, and I didn't know what to do.

.." Her head falls forward, silky, straight hair hiding her face.

"I didn't know how I could go on if something happened to you. "

Bill is watching her, but he feels almost as though he's watching from a distance.

Jeanie has made it so clear--more than clear--that she's unwilling to be a part of some torrid love affair with a married man, and he's accepted that. It had never been his

attention to be attracted to another woman besides Jo anyway, and he has no desire to embark on some vow-breaking entanglement—at least not any more than he already has. So he's accepted her words, and now here he is, watching her cry over his potential demise.

He isn't sure what to feel. It's confusing.

Exciting, heart-wrenching, and confusing.

"Jeanie," Bill says softly, reaching out with one hand and tucking her hair behind her ear. "I'm right here. I'm fine."

She tosses her head back suddenly, eyes aflame. "But you almost weren't . And if you'd died, Bill, I would have had to quit NASA. To give up my dream."

Bill can't help himself—he has to ask: "But why?"

Why should your dream hinge on my safety or survival?

We're nothing, Jeanie. You've said so yourself.

" It hurts to say the words, because being this close to her reminds Bill all over again that--in a different place and time, or under different circumstances--they could be something. They really could.

Jeanie looks around wildly, her tears drying on her skin in the heat. "You're right: we're nothing. But you're something to me--as a person, Bill. As someone I... someone I care about."

"I care about you, too," he says carefully, not wanting to say a single word that will make her believe he's trying to move on her or make some sort of romantic overture.

All he wants is for her to know that he values her--as a person.

As a coworker. As a friend. As a woman. Oh god, he can't deny that's what he values most: her womanhood.

The way she looks, sounds, and smells. Bill can almost feel her warm skin under his fingertips—if only he could reach out and touch her arm. Just to comfort her! Nothing more.

But before he can debate the wisdom of that, she launches herself at his torso, wrapping her arms around him and putting her cheek to his chest. Bill is stunned; he's momentarily frozen as he feels her press her compact body to his, but then he gets his wits about him and wraps her in his arms. It might not be the smartest or the best thing to do, but in Bill Booker's experience, when a gorgeous woman hugs you, you hug her back. It's just plain chivalry.

The hug, which is arousing feelings in Bill that he'd rather not contemplate, goes on for much longer than a beat, and when Jeanie finally lifts her head and looks up into Bill's eyes, it's just as a plane passes overhead, the rumble and roar of its engines drowning out any possibility of speaking.

Instead, they lock eyes and look deeply into one another, and Bill's heart thumps wildly as he sees the things in Jeanie's hazel eyes that he's secretly and desperately wanted to see all along.

"Bill," she says, though the word is lost in the airplane's noise. But his name is unmistakable on her lips. "Bill," she says again, tilting her chin up to him.

And, oh lord, the wisdom of kissing Jeanie in broad daylight isn't even a question for Bill, though it absolutely should be.

He loses himself in her eyes, in the way the sound of the airplane seems to drown out the world, and in the way his heart feels when a beautiful woman looks at him with such blatant emotion.

With no thought whatsoever, Bill presses her body against the chain-link fence with his own, causing her to gasp into his mouth as he covers her lips with his.

The kiss is deep and probing. There is no questioning in it, as there was that night in the stairwell. This time, there are no pulses of hesitation, no jolts of guilt flooding his veins. Now, there is only desire, and Bill barely holds it in check as he pushes Jeanie into the fence.

Jeanie would stop if she didn't want this , Bill thinks to himself as her hands rest on his waist. Her mouth is open, her eyes are closed, and her hot tongue is in his mouth as the plane flies away, leaving in its wake nothing but the sound of their intermingled heavy breathing. Jeanie would stop this?—

And then she does. She nearly pushes him away, looking like someone has just woken her from a dream. "Bill," she says raggedly. "Oh, Bill." Her eyes go wide before she turns to walk away.

Bill is left there under the midday sun, sweat running down both the front and the back of his overheated body as he comes out of the mental fog that has allowed him to kiss Jeanie again.

He watches her walk away, arms wrapped around her midsection as she makes a beeline for the building, leaving him alone there at the fence.

Damn it, he thinks . I've really done it now .

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 10:59 am

barbie

. . .

"Vestibular dysfunction." The doctor is looking at Todd with a serious face.

Barbie, who is sitting on the side of the room, legs crossed, purse in her lap, feels her stomach fall.

She has no idea what vestibular dysfunction is, but it sounds serious.

Her eyes jump over to Todd to see how he's taking the news.

"Essentially, you have damaged your inner ear, and that disrupts the flow of information from the inner ear to the brain.

" The doctor, a man in his late fifties with salt-and-pepper hair and a white lab coat that's buttoned over a shirt and tie, stands and walks over to a life-size drawing of the human body and all its parts.

He points at the brain. "If the messages aren't being received properly, you can experience bouts of dizziness and disorientation, and it can be, frankly, quite debilitating. Particularly for an astronaut."

Todd grimaces and rubs one temple. "Will it just go away on its own?"

"Well." The doctor puts one of his hands into the big, square pocket of his lab coat

and pulls out a pen and a note pad.

He holds them as he ponders Todd's question.

"It's possible. However, it's also possible that you'll experience nystagmus, which are rapid, involuntary eye movements.

It can also lead to headaches, tinnitus, and double vision. "

Todd groans audibly. "I can't afford to have any of that happen. I need to be fixed, doc. Like, now. What can I do to speed this along?"

The doctor's serious face melts into an amused smile, and for a moment, he gazes at Todd the way a father might look at an impatient son.

"We can get you started with rehabilitation and some medication to control the vertigo, and we'll check back in a couple of weeks to see if things are improving.

In the meantime, I can write you a doctor's note to get some time off work and focus on recovery. How does that sound?"

Barbie bites her bottom lip as she waits for Todd's reply; she knows exactly how this will sound to him, and she also knows that he hasn't yet let Arvin North know how he's feeling.

Barbie doesn't entirely agree with the way he's handling things here, and certainly being up front with the doctors at NASA would be his best bet, but it's not really up to her to dictate her husband's methods when it comes to work, so she stays quiet and watches the emotions that pass over his face.

"I don't know about getting time off," Todd says, patting his knee with one hand

nervously. "Yeah, I think that will make me look like I can't handle things, and I know I can. We were in a full-blown, one rotation per second roll, and I think my body just needs a bit of time to right itself."

"Mr. Roman," the doctor says, looking serious again.

"While I don't dispute that you know yourself better than anyone, I will tell you that my bigger fear is that your body won't heal itself naturally and quickly, and that instead of a little physical therapy, we might instead be looking at surgery. "

Todd's face blanches. "Surgery? No. No, I'm not interested in that."

The doctor uncaps the pen in his hand and scrawls something on his notepad, the top page of which he tears off and hands to Todd.

"Then I suggest you fill this prescription, make an appointment for physical therapy tomorrow morning, take the absence note I'll leave for you at the front counter, and commit to recuperating. Am I making myself clear?"

Todd, clearly chagrined, looks down at the linoleum floor beneath his feet. "Yes, sir," he says, sounding like a school boy. "I hear you."

The drive home is quiet, and Barbie tries to focus on ways she can keep the boys busy and occupied during the time Todd is off work.

If she's being perfectly honest with herself, she's kind of excited at the prospect of having her husband home for a bit.

It will give her the opportunity to soak in his presence, and for them to do things together as a family.

By the time they pull into the driveway, Barbie is already imagining Todd resting on the couch as the boys play nearby, or the five of them in the pool, where Todd can easily lie back and float if he gets dizzy. It could actually be kind of nice for him , Barbie thinks.

Todd shuts off the car and pulls the keys from the ignition. He leans his head back and closes his eyes, looking utterly defeated.

“Todd?” Barbie sets a hand on his knee tentatively. “Are you okay?”

Without opening his eyes, Todd blows out a loud breath.

“I can’t do this, Barb. I can’t have surgery.

I can’t be on sick leave. I was lucky to even get on that mission in the first place.

” He opens his eyes and turns to look at his wife.

“We all knew that Booker was a lock, but the other spots are always up for grabs.”

Barbie frowns. “What makes Bill a sure thing?”

“His seniority,” Todd says, ticking things off on his fingers. “His military experience. His relationship with Arvin North?—“

“What, do you mean that he kisses up to North?” Barbie wants to understand, and if there’s an unfair advantage for someone else in Todd’s work life—even if it’s the husband of someone she likes and respects very much—then Barbie wants to know about it.

“No, not like that,” Todd says, shaking his head. “But North favors him. It’s not

widely broadcast or anything, but he has a special affinity for Bill. I mean, why else would he go to the trouble of rehabilitating Bill and having him lead a mission after he punched your brother, for God's sake?"

Barbie turns her head to look out the window.

She'd committed to not involving herself in the dramas of the men (even if one of the men in question is her only brother), and she isn't really interested in parsing why Bill had felt compelled to hit Ted.

Frankly, if she's being honest with herself, there have been plenty of times in her own life when she would have liked to hit Ted.

"I guess he sees something in Bill," Barbie says, knitting her hands together in her lap.

The windows of the car are down, but it's still hot in the September afternoon.

The boys are being watched across the street from their house by Carrie, who agreed to take Heath and Henry in after the school bus dropped them off, and Carrie has had Huck with her all morning, so Barbie is starting to feel the itch to run over and get the kids.

"Which is fine," Todd says, putting both hands on the steering wheel and squeezing it until his knuckles go white. "But there's a lot of behavior being rewarded that, in my humble opinion, shouldn't be."

Barbie nods. "The fight," she says knowingly.

"Right. The fight, the way Bill spends far too much time mooning over Jeanie Florence, the?—"

Barbie's head snaps to attention and she turns to look at her husband. "Is that true? The whole thing about Bill and Jeanie kissing?"

It's Todd's turn to look at her quickly, and when their eyes meet, she knows that Todd knows more than he's let on.

"Todd Roman!" Barbie shouts, thwacking his upper arm with the back of her hand. "It's true! You knew about it!"

"How did you know about it?"

"Carrie mentioned it over coffee," Barbie says with a shrug. "But I thought maybe it was just gossip, and I didn't want to hear it or spread it around."

"Well," Todd says, looking resigned to the facts at hand.

"I don't think it's just gossip. Bill is always watching her, and she's always watching him, and the rumor is—between you and me, because please, I don't want to get caught telling tales—that there's actual video footage of them kissing in the stairwell on the night of the explosion at the Cape."

"Wow," Barbie says, blinking a few times.

"Just wow, wow, wow." Her mind immediately goes to Jo, as it had when Carrie first brought up the topic.

How is this fair to Jo, who works her tail off for everyone else, and how is Bill going to carry on like this and humiliate a woman as solid and good as Josephine Booker? Barbie can hardly imagine it.

"I know." Todd gives a single shake of his head. "And he's not even canoodling with

a Cape Cookie like Mack Poulson. He's gotta muddy the waters at work, which is just bad form."

"Wait!" Barbie whacks his arm again. "Mack Poulson is messing with a Cape Cookie? Doesn't he have that nice wife and the five kids?" She is stunned and scandalized at the thought of a nice, clean-cut guy like Mack Poulson carrying on with a loose woman.

"Yeah, that's Mack." Todd looks so nonchalant about it that Barbie is even more scandalized. "Is this something that happens a lot? Do the guys at NASA pick up girls at The Black Hole and step out on their wives?"

Todd makes a face and then revises it so that he looks slightly remorseful at having to deliver the news to his wife.

"I guess some do," he says, shooting her an apologetic look.

"Guys being guys and all. But most of the core ones in my group are straight shooters, Barb. Believe that. Jay Reed, Vance Majors, Ed Maxwell—no way. They might appreciate a beauty as she sweeps by on her way to the jukebox, but I've never seen one of them so much as dance with another woman.

Now, Bill... before this Jeanie business, I would have put him in that category too, if I'm being honest. In fact, I thought of him as our unofficial leader.

A real no nonsense kind of guy. But knowing he might have kissed one of our engineers calls that into question... "

"Okay." Barbie nods, trying to accept this news about a man she knows relatively well. "Ugh. Do you think Jo knows?" This pains her to consider.

“Oh, jeez.” Todd puts up both hands in surrender. “That would be more your area than mine, hon. Women’s talk is not something I engage in a whole lot. Do you think she knows?”

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 10:59 am

Barbie chews on the inside of her cheek as she looks at their closed garage door through the front windshield. “No,” she finally says, shaking her head and folding her arms across her chest. “I don’t.”

They sit there in silence for a beat, and then it’s Todd’s turn to pat her leg.

“Well, babe, then I think we should keep it that way. It’s not our business, and you know Jo better than I do, but I think she’s the kind of lady that wouldn’t take too kindly to hearing something like that from anyone but Bill. ”

“You’re right about that,” Barbie agrees.

“Listen, how about if I get the mail while you grab the boys?” Todd offers. “I’d walk over and get them, but I don’t want Huck to demand that I carry him when I’m feeling unsteady on my feet.”

“No, of course,” Barbie agrees. “I should thank Carrie for watching them anyway.”

And she does just that, greeting her sons and lifting Huck up onto her hip as she thanks her friend for taking care of her brood. She’s distracted, and Carrie is busy with her own two children, who are running around and excitedly discussing a school play as the phone rings in the kitchen.

“Sorry. There’s a big protest at the end of the month, and I’m the point of contact,” Carrie says apologetically as she tips her head in the direction of the ringing phone.

She reaches out to ruffle Huck’s hair. “These guys can come over anytime—they

were as easy as pie,” she says, blowing Barbie a kiss as she dashes off to answer the ringing phone, nearly colliding with her daughter, Christina, as she does.

Barbie lets herself out, still holding Huck, as Henry and Heath look both ways and then race across the street towards their house.

She could use a nap, but it’s only three-thirty, and Barbie still has hours of mothering, cooking, laundry, and now caring for Todd and making sure he doesn’t do anything that the doctor wouldn’t want him to be doing.

The excitement she’d been feeling about having all of her boys home—even Todd—has dissipated slightly.

Barbie sets Huck down inside the front door and then drops her purse on the table in the entryway.

There is a mirror over the table, and she pauses and looks at her tired, heat-wilted reflection, leaning in close as she swipes a hand beneath each eye to try to wipe away what are actually dark circles.

“God, Barb, you could use a break yourself,” she mutters, fluffing her hair and making a face.

When she glances down, she sees the pile of mail that Todd has brought in and dropped in the wide, flat dish where they leave their keys.

Barbie picks up the envelopes and shuffles through them: bills; a notice about a neighborhood barbecue; a heavy, expensive envelope with a wax seal on the back flap and a return address in Westport, Connecticut.

She flips it over again and frowns at it.

It's addressed to Todd, but it's from George Mackey.

Barbie kicks off her shoes and wanders into the main room, where the boys are already wrestling on the carpet in the middle of the giant open area. "Todd?" she calls out, still holding that one envelope. "You got something from my father."

Todd is reclined in the chair that faces the giant picture window. He's facing the street with his eyes closed as the boys roll around in a tangle of limbs nearby.

"Hmm?" Todd says, opening one eye. "What did I get?"

Barbie sits on the arm of the recliner, perching her rear end next to her husband and handing him the envelope so that she can watch as he opens it.

Todd sighs and slips a finger beneath the flap, popping open the wax seal. The heavy card stock inside the envelope slides out, and Barbie can see a short message that's typed out and signed in blue ink—the scrawl at the bottom of the note is unmistakably her father's.

"Dear Todd," he says aloud, clearing his throat before he goes on.

"Thank you for your service to this country, and for your bravery in undertaking the exciting frontier of space exploration. I am thrilled to hear of your safe return, and wish you all the best during your tenure at NASA." He pauses and turns to look up at Barbie with a slight smirk before glancing back at the note.

"It's signed 'Senator George Mackey.' I feel so special," he says, his voice dripping with sarcasm.

Todd hands the note and the envelope to Barbie.

“Better put that in the scrapbook you keep of all my newspaper clippings.”

Barbie takes the note and re-reads it, hoping that Todd has left out a few words or lines that make the note more personal, but his reading of it had been faithful: her father has sent him what amounts to a form letter. Without a doubt, Bill Booker got precisely the same message.

Barbie is about to defend her father when the phone rings and she slides off the arm of the chair, taking the note with her as she steps over the kids on her way to the kitchen.

“Roman residence,” Barbie says into the receiver.

“Barbara?” It’s her mother-in-law, calling from Connecticut, but the way Theresa Roman shouts down the line, you’d think that she was calling from a distant planet. “Can you hear me?”

“Yes, Theresa,” she says patiently, leaning her head out into the living room so that Todd will hear that she’s got his mother on the phone.

He turns his head slightly and looks in her direction, then makes a show of closing his eyes and pretending to snore.

Barbie waves a hand at him. “I can hear you.”

“Honey, how is Todd? Is he okay?”

“Yes, he’s fine,” Barbie says, wedging the phone to her shoulder so that she can open the refrigerator and poke around to see what there is to cook for dinner.

Her exhaustion has ratcheted up several notches at the sound of her mother-in-law’s

voice.

It's not that she doesn't like Theresa—and she's always adored Todd's dad, Benny—but her hands are truly full here.

And Theresa Roman is famous for being overly dramatic about every single thing.

“But he was in that terrible situation in space, Barbara,” Theresa says, as if Barbie might not have heard. Barbie can picture her twisting her rosary between her fingers as she talks. “And he's already been through so much.”

It takes all of Barbie's strength not to sigh audibly as she looks down at the stupid note her father had sent, and as she listens to Theresa work herself into a lather on the other end of the line.

Without asking or waiting for further clarification, Barbie guesses Theresa thinks Todd has “been through so much” due to marrying Barbie, and while she and Theresa are on good terms as women, Barbie knows well that she will never be good enough for Todd—at least in Theresa's eyes.

The combination of her father's public persona, his well-known dalliances with other women, and her mother's untimely death, had left a stain on Barbie's family that Theresa has never quite gotten over.

As Theresa yammers on, Barbie's mind wanders.

She remembers her own mother right before her wedding, attending dress fittings with Barbie, and helping her to select flowers for each table, to taste different wines, and to choose the band for the reception.

It had all been so much fun, and Barbie had felt as though she and her mother were

on the same page—that they were doing something that Marion Mackey understood and knew how to do: put on a party.

The day of her last dress fitting, the two women had stood in the back of Love it wasn't often that her mother dropped her guard and spoke freely, but they were alone in the back of Love & Lace, and perhaps she felt as though she had something that needed to be said.

“I do love Todd,” Barbie said carefully. “And I’m over the moon to be his wife.”

Finally, Marion returned to her daughter’s side, handkerchief in hand, as she met her eyes in the mirror once again.

“I know you are, honey. And I know your father has made things difficult. He wanted you to marry someone who was more... politically active. Whose family contributed more, perhaps, to our community on a financial level. He had hopes that you’d match with someone who had a pedigree that would benefit both you and your future children. ”

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 10:59 am

“And him,” Barbie said, feeling anger wash over her as she gathered her skirt in both hands and stepped off the pedestal.

Now she was eye to eye with her mother. “You’re sugar-coating it, Mama.

He wanted me to marry someone whose family was rich, with business and political ties that would benefit him.

He wanted to be able to tell people the name of the family that his daughter married into and feel proud, not like he had to explain who that family was and why his daughter had chosen to marry a total nobody. ”

“Oh, Barbara,” Marion said. She touched her handkerchief to her face. “I want to tell you that’s not true, but I can’t lie to you.”

“There’s no need to. I’m aware that you’re both disappointed in me for not marrying Jameson Young, or Raymond Canter.

You made sure Ted brought all of his prep school friends around when I was in high school, and none of them took.

I didn’t want to be with Quinn Myers III, or Patton White.

I wanted Todd, and I wanted him from the moment we met,” Barbie said with urgency, reaching out and taking her mother’s hand.

“I saw him, and I just knew that he would be good, and kind, and fun, and he is,

Mama. He's all those things. ”

Marion pressed her lips together and squeezed her daughter's hand. “I know, Barbara. I can see all those things in Todd. He's a lovely boy, and he adores you. I won't deny any of that.”

“Then why don't you stand up to Dad when he says things about me marrying Todd? Why do you let him berate me every time he has to write a check for the catering, or the reception hall?”

Marion swallows hard and waits a moment before answering. “Because I understand how things work, Barbara. I'm a woman who wanted to finish college, and I found a man who could pay for that to happen.”

“But you didn't go back,” Barbie said, knowing that her words might hurt her mother. “You let him decide your future for you.”

Marion shrugged one shoulder. “I guess I didn't need to go back once I married your father. And I had Ted so soon after, and then you came along... life got busy.”

“So you're saying you truly only married Daddy for the money.”

Marion doesn't hotly deny this; instead, she blinks slowly, looking at Barbie with a steady gaze.

“I married him strategically. I knew that if I were to become Mrs. George Mackey, no child of mine would ever have to figure out where the money was coming from for an education. I knew I'd never struggle.

But in my heart... sure, I would have loved to have the kind of thing you and Todd so clearly have. Any woman would want that.”

Barbie bit back tears. Hearing that her mother had wanted something different for herself, and that she understood why Barbie loved Todd, was enlightening. She dropped her mother's hand then and pulled her close, hugging her tightly.

"I want that for you, Barbara," Marion whispered in her ear as they hugged right there in the sunny back room of Love where there is no crisp bite to the air.

Instead, the palm trees wave lightly in the breeze, and the hoods of the cars in the driveways look hot in the sun.

Barbie kisses Todd one more time before she slides off the arm of the chair and puts out both hands to help him up.

"Okay, let's get you in there to save your mother from endless playground stories. It's time for me to start dinner here soon anyway."

Barbie lets Todd rest an arm around her shoulders like he's really in need of her support, and together, they walk through their home with their arms around each other, much the way they once walked through the halls of their high school.

barbie

...

Todd ended up staying home for a week before declaring himself well enough to get through a workday, and while Barbie isn't entirely certain that he's being honest (she's seen him reach out for things to steady himself on numerous occasions when he thinks no one is watching), she's willing to let him get back to it simply because having him at home has added an extra layer of work to her days that is, quite frankly, exhausting.

"Welcome back," Jo says, patting Barbie on the knee as they sit next to each other on a beach blanket, facing the ocean.

It's Thursday midday, and they've been at the beach since ten o'clock with Huck and Carrie and Jude.

Frankie would have joined them, but she teaches a Thursday morning ballet class, and she had a doctor's appointment scheduled right after to make sure that everything is progressing on target with her pregnancy.

"Oh, I'm so glad to be back," Barbie says.

It's only been a week since she's hung out with the girls, but that was enough of being everyone's housemaid.

"Todd is feeling better, and now I have my mornings and afternoons free until the

boys step off the school bus.” Just then, Huck walks over with a bucket full of sand and pours it over his mother’s bare feet.

“Okay, I’m free except for Huck, but he’s an easy guy, aren’t you, buddy?”

In response, Huck pats the sand like he’s trying to turn his mom into a human sandcastle, then runs off to refill his bucket.

“Just think—soon Frankie will have a little one to tote around with us,” Jo says, looking out at the water. “That will be so much fun, won’t it?”

Carrie nods and looks wistful. “I always thought I’d have four kids,” she admits. “Maybe five. But then I had two, and I realized I was happy there. I think you know when your family is complete, even if it ends up looking different than you always thought it would.”

“I think so, too,” Jude agrees. “I had the twins and immediately knew that was enough for me.” She waves a hand around in a cutting motion. “No more!”

“How about you, Jo?” Barbie turns to her friend to see that she’s still looking out at the water.

“I’m happy with my three,” she says, though there’s a hint of longing in her voice.

“I think I always would have been happy if another had come along, but that window sort of closes, doesn’t it?”

” She turns to the other women with a tight smile.

“And so you realize how blessed you are, and you get on with it.”

Barbie had never imagined that Jo might have wanted anything other than what she has. To her, Josephine Booker is the kind of woman who gets exactly what she needs, and if she doesn't get it, she goes out and hunts it down. To Barbie, Jo is a woman who can make things happen.

"How's your book coming?" Jude asks Jo. She readjusts the wide-brimmed hat that shields her face from the sun and stretches out on the blanket so that her long legs are basking in the warmth of the September sun.

"Oh, the book is good." Jo slides on a pair of sunglasses and smooths the blanket around her.

"I've really gotten into my groove with it, and I'm beyond excited to think about it showing up in bookstores.

Can you even imagine walking through a shop and seeing it there for sale?

"She shakes her head. "It's so bizarre to contemplate. "

"Not to us," Barbie says. "We all think you can do anything, Jo."

It looks like Jo is about to laugh at this, but she glances at the earnest faces of her friends and the laugh fades away. "Well, thank you, ladies. I appreciate the vote of confidence. I'm not sure I always think I can do anything, but it's nice to have other people think so."

"Can we get a sneak preview of the book?" Jude asks, rolling onto her side and propping her head up on one fist. "Can you tell us the plot? We're sworn to secrecy—I promise."

Jo giggles. "You want to hear about it?" The other women nod eagerly.

“Okay, well, it’s about a woman who wakes up in a pile of hay in a barn, and she has no idea where she is.

A handsome man comes into view, and they’re both confused: he has no idea who she is, she can’t see anything and she doesn’t understand how she fell asleep in her bed and woke up in a barn. ”

“Oooh,” Carrie says. “Intriguing.”

“Anyhow, he hands her a pair of glasses, which she normally doesn’t wear, and they realize that they don’t know each other at all, but the man, Henry, lives in 1894, and the woman, Adeline, is from 1965.”

Jude sits up like a shot. “Time travel? Is it time travel? I love that!”

Jo nods, warming up to their excitement.

“Yes, it is. And Henry is a farmer with no wife and children, while Adeline is an independent married woman from the 60s who isn’t sure how she ended up in the past. Of course there’s an attraction, but there’s also confusion, and there are misunderstandings.

It’s been a huge adventure to write it, and I feel really good about this book. Really strong.”

“Has Bill read this one?” Barbie asks, leaning back so that Huck can dump his new bucket of sand on her shins and knees.

He’s the only little one still not in school, and the rest of the women appear to be enjoying their childfree moments in a way that makes Barbie yearn for the moment, two years in the future, when Huck will be in school and she, too, will have her hands

free all day.

But she doesn't want to wish it away, as Huck is definitely her final baby, and she knows how quickly it all goes anyway.

"No," Jo is shaking her head and making a strange face. "He hasn't. He's been so busy this year with Gemini and just work in general, that I haven't bothered him with it."

Barbie glances at Carrie, who glances at Jude, and then all the women look away at the same moment, no one meeting Jo's eye.

Barbie looks back at Jo and sees that she's completely oblivious to the little flicker of recognition that's passed between the other women.

She hates that they all know something about Jo's life that she doesn't know, but there is absolutely no way that she's putting herself into the center of that mess by saying anything.

She does, however, wonder if Frankie knows, and—as Jo's best friend—whether that makes Frankie in some way obligated to clue Jo in to the gossip that's going around about Bill and Jeanie Florence.

"But," Jo is saying as she sighs, "the book is still a long way from done, and if I were being smart, I'd skip the beach altogether until I get the first draft done.

I just love hanging out with all of you so much!

" She reaches over to touch Barbie and Jude on their respective arms, and then finally Carrie, who she pats on the knee.

“Being with you ladies has really been the best part of Stardust Beach to me, and I get a lot of inspiration from all of you.”

“And Frankie,” Jude adds. “Can’t forget her.”

“Oh, god, no—I would never forget her. Your friendship—all of you—has been my lifeline here.”

Jude rolls on to her back and tilts her chin to the sky, eyes closed, hat pushed back so that the sun is grazing her fine features. “So, do we all get a cameo in your stories?”

Barbie slaps Jude on the thigh. “Jude! That’s not how it works. Authors don’t just insert people from their regular lives like that.” She pauses and turns to Jo. “Wait, do they?”

This makes Jo laugh out loud. “Sure. They can. But you have to be careful not to make it obvious if you’re putting a real person into your story. At least until you get their permission. But if it’s something unflattering, then you should probably disguise them as much as possible.”

“Have you ever put someone you hate into your stories?” Jude asks. Barbie tries to shoot her a look, but Jude still has her eyes closed and her face turned to the bright sun. “Like a woman you don’t like or someone who wronged you?”

Barbie glances at Carrie and Carrie pulls a face. They have clearly both read Jo’s stories and extrapolated the fact that the woman in the parking lot with Winston, the male lead, was based on someone real... someone they all know... someone like Jeanie Florence.

But during that time, Jude had been going through her own struggles, battling an alcohol addiction and tracking down an old friend and, inadvertently, her own

mother. So it makes sense that she's a little tuned out on the lore behind Jo's stories.

Barbie claps her hands together loudly. "Oh!" she says, accidentally startling Huck as he dumps a bucket of warm sand on her thighs. He jolts and then laughs when he realizes that his mother isn't upset. He runs off for more sand. "Jude," Barbie says. "Tell us where things stand with your mom."

Jude sits back up and pulls her hat low again. "Well, as you know, she was here in May and we got completely reacquainted, and she and the girls fell in love with each other. It was truly what my heart needed."

"Amazing," Carrie says, looking relieved at the change of topic. "Have you spoken to her lately?"

"We talk on the phone once a week, but she writes me a letter every single day."

"What?" Jo looks surprised. "Every day?"

Jude nods. "Yep. She chooses a different topic every day and she writes about it. I usually get one letter a day in the mail, and sometimes they're about flowers, or why she loves Hawaii, but other times she'll write about me as a little girl, or about my brother, who she wants me to meet. It's been special."

Jo shakes her head, awed. "I think this is such a beautiful story. Better than anything I could dream up or write."

Jude looks impressed by her own scenario. "It is pretty incredible. I hadn't seen her for almost twenty-five years—can you imagine?"

Barbie shakes her head; she can't imagine, although it's already been nearly eight years since she's seen her own mother.

Page 11

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 10:59 am

A wave rolls up and crashes loudly, licking the sand before it retreats.

As her friends talk, Barbie is transported back to summer at the Jersey shore.

The house her family had rented was large and directly on the water, and though she and Todd were newlyweds, they'd joined everyone there for a week, prepared to mingle with Ted and his wife, Elizabeth, as well as Barbie's parents and any guests who happened to be staying in one of the well-appointed rooms that overlooked the ocean.

The commotion downstairs the morning after their arrival had woken Barbie from a deep sleep, pulling her to consciousness as she rolled over to touch the empty spot where Todd had been the night before.

"Hello?" she called out, sitting up in the piles of white bedding and looking around in the morning light. "Todd?"

They had a bathroom attached to their room—a suite—but the door was open and the bathroom silent, so Barbie knew the noise that had woken her wasn't from Todd showering or shaving.

She slid out of bed and found a robe and slippers, pushing her hair from her eyes as she heard a wail from below that alarmed her. She tightened the belt of the robe and rushed out of the bedroom and down the stairs.

What greeted her there was a sight she would never forget: her father, on his knees, keening and howling as a police officer stood to the side, looking helpless and

guarded. Ted was huddled on a couch with Elizabeth next to him, eyes wide in shock.

Todd stood on the front porch, visible through the open door, as he spoke to another uniformed officer.

“What?” Barbie asked, panic rising in her chest. She’d forgotten instantly that she was clad only in a thin robe and that her father and brother were in the room. “What’s going on? Where’s Mom?”

Barbie’s brother looked up from where he’d buried his face in his hands, looking traumatized and wrecked. “Mom,” he said. “Mom drowned.”

Barbie felt the floor meet her hands and knees as she fell, and only when Todd rushed in from the porch to help her back to her feet did she realize that she’d landed on all fours.

“What?” Barbie asked, looking at Todd searchingly as he led her to a chair. “What happened? Where’s my mother?”

“Hey,” Todd said gently, setting her down and helping her to close her robe over her thighs as she stared up at his face, looking lost. “I’m trying to get information from the police officer now.”

George Mackey’s wailing hadn’t stopped, but instead morphed into deep, body-racking sobs that pulled Barbie’s attention to him.

“Dad?” she rasped. “Dad?”

She tried to stand up from the chair to go to him, but Todd didn’t let her. He kept her in the chair, ostensibly to prevent her from taking another fall.

“I’ll get more information,” Todd said, pointing at her to stay in the chair as he walked back outside to speak with the police officer, leaving the room a confused, shocked, heartbroken mass of Mackey family members with Barbie at its center.

As it turned out, and as the family deduced over the coming days, Marion Mackey had mixed sleeping pills with her wine, and then proceeded to get into an argument with her husband on the balcony of their suite.

Ted, who had heard the yelling, had gone to check on them, and assured by his father that everything was fine, he’d left his parents to it.

After all, both Ted and Barbie had heard their parents yell and argue over the course of their lifetime, and a wine-fueled argument was nothing new.

But when George Mackey woke in the morning to find his wife gone, he’d searched for her first in the house, then walked outside and into the unfortunate scene that unfolded in one horrifying moment: Marion, sprawled face-first in a small tide pool, her satin nightgown soaked and drifting around her body, her brown hair loose and floating in the water like seaweed.

In the ensuing years, Barbie had wondered a thousand times whether her father had known how drunk and distraught her mother was, and if there was anything he might have done to stop her from going outside.

In her darkest moments, she’d even wondered whether George Mackey had somehow encouraged—even a little—his wife’s demise, perhaps by locking her out of the house, or leading her out into the darkness and then pushing her into the water.

But those thoughts were fleeting, and the trusting, innocent part of Barbie didn’t even want to contemplate such things.

Still, George Mackey had remarried exceptionally quickly, and within months of the funeral, he refused to even speak to his children about their mother.

At first that had seemed cold-hearted to Barbie, and she hadn't understood—as a woman in the first blush of the honeymoon phase—how love could end so abruptly and with no looking back, but as the years have gone on, she's come to understand what it means to love someone and to lose them.

She's grown into a woman who understands the complexities of love and loss, and now she thinks that maybe, just maybe, her father had found it easier to bury that part of his heart along with her mother.

“I'm so happy for you,” Jo says to Jude there on the beach.

Barbie blinks away the memory of that trip to the Jersey shore and nods along with the other women.

“Me, too,” she says, smiling through her own sadness.

To have the chance to talk to her mother now would be a gift; to share with her all that's happened in the past eight years—including the births of all three of her sons—would be a blessing.

But instead of feeling sad for herself, she brings forth a real smile for Jude, because she is happy for her friend. She truly is.

Huck carries over another bucket of sand and dumps it right in Barbie's lap. At this, the women all laugh knowingly, and Barbie looks down at the way the sand is sifting into the cracks and crevices of her thighs and shorts.

She'll be rinsing sand out of her nether regions for days to come at this rate, but as

Huck hurries off again, all she can do is smile. Motherhood is a gift, and it's one she refuses to take for granted.

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 10:59 am

jeanie

. . .

The kiss by the fence had lit her on fire. Heat raged from Jeanie's solar plexus and radiated out as Bill's lips pressed against hers, his tongue searching her mouth right there at the Cape, where anyone could have seen, had they been looking.

Two women in flowered swim caps and padded swimsuits drift by, waving liver-spotted hands at her when she turns her head in their direction.

Jeanie smiles and waves back, but then turns her face to the sun again, the sound of everyone's voices blissfully drowned out by the silence she hears underwater.

Bill kissed me. He didn't even care who was watching. What does this mean? How do I feel about it ?

The questions in her mind are unrelenting, but the answers don't come easily. The day of the kiss, she'd come home to Vicki, intent on not telling her about it, but all it took was one look for her roommate to drop the magazine in her hands and pick up a cigarette.

"Spill it, princess," Vicki had said around the cigarette as she touched it with the tip of a flame to light it. "You've got 'just been kissed' energy all around you." Vicki blew the smoke out and put her bare feet on the coffee table, crossing them at the ankles.

Jeanie had laughed, still thinking she might be able to keep the kiss to herself. It took only moments for her to fold, sitting down across from Vicki with an air of defeat.

“I asked to talk to Bill outside today,” Jeanie admitted. “He met me at the fence and we just... we kissed. A lot.”

“Ooooh,” Vicki said, narrowing her eyes. “More, please.”

“He pushed me up against the fence and I completely forgot that we were in direct sight of the building. I have no idea if anyone saw us.”

“Are you doing it on purpose?” Vicki asked without hesitation. “Do you want to get caught?”

“No? I don’t think so?” Jeanie sounded as conflicted as she felt, and she knew it.

“I think common sense would say that I want us to get caught so that it’s out there, but common sense would also say that I don’t want us to get caught because that will create so much trouble for Bill at home, and definitely for both of us at work. ”

Vicki exhaled smoke as she nodded slowly. “Right. It would. But as we discussed, you two were caught on camera kissing—at least as far as we know. So it’s not like no one knows about you and Bill.”

Jeanie slumped forward, putting her forehead to her knees as she remembered the way people were already gossiping.

“I know, I know,” she said, her words muffled as she talked into her legs.

Vicki reached over and scratched her back lightly through her cotton dress, her long fingernails sending chills up and down Jeanie’s spine.

Jeanie sat up and looked at Vicki with flushed cheeks. “Do you think I’m self-sabotaging?”

“That would be insane. You’ve worked way too hard for that.”

“I know. I have. But maybe I’m sabotaging Bill? Maybe I feel so angry at him for getting us into this situation—wait,” Jeanie stopped herself, waving both hands back and forth. “I can’t put this on him. I did this, too.”

“You did,” Vicki agreed with a single nod, tapping her cigarette into an ashtray. “You most definitely did. And you’re a grown woman, so let’s not take anything away from you by putting it all on him.”

Jeanie nodded. Her sigh was so heavy that it felt like it carried actual weight as it left her body. “I think I need to leave, Vic.”

Vicki’s eyebrows shot up. “Leave NASA?”

“Leave Florida,” Jeanie said sadly. “This is my dream job, but I’m turning it into a nightmare, and I can’t stop myself.”

Vicki ground the cigarette out in her ashtray. “Let’s just tap the brakes there, princess. I know you to be a tough, smart lady, and there’s no reason for you to run away with your tail between your legs. Maybe you just need to redirect your affections. Go out with other men.”

“I tried!” Jeanie protested, holding out a hand and ticking the men off on her fingers. “I went out with Peter Abernathy,” she said, referencing a fellow engineer whom she’d dated a year or two prior.

“Snooze,” Vicki said, rolling her eyes. “Never liked him.”

“And I went out with that guy you set me up with.”

“I apologized for that,” Vicki said, wagging a finger at her. “He looked different when I met him in a bar after two cocktails.”

“I’ve gone out with two or three other guys that I’ve been set up with since I moved here, and none of them took. There was no... spark.”

Vicki nodded wistfully. “There does have to be a spark.”

The women sat there in silence for a moment, letting the late afternoon light drift through the front window of their shared condominium.

Jeanie’s shoulders slumped again. “I’ve only ever had a spark with Bill,” she said, sounding forlorn.

“But Bill’s already got a spark—with his wife,” Vicki said firmly.

Jeanie thinks about that conversation now as she floats in the swimming pool.

Her eyes are shaded behind sunglasses as she lets her arms and legs float limply in the water like seaweed.

The two liver-spotted women in bathing caps walk by again in the shallow end of the pool as they swing their arms in an exaggerated movement, sort of like they’re on a stroll together, only with the resistance of the water to slow things down.

They’re talking animatedly, but Jeanie’s ears are still in the pool.

She knows Vicki is right: there’s no reason for her to pack her bags and her cat and leave Florida.

There's no call for her to abandon her own dreams just because she and Lieutenant Colonel Hot-to-trot can't keep their hands off one another.

The very thought of having to call and tell her mother that she's screwed up her life over a married man is enough to sober Jeanie completely, and she puts her feet on the bottom of the pool, standing up abruptly and letting the water stream over her tanned body.

Her hair drips down her back and she walks over to the steps of the pool, climbing out and walking over to the chair where her towel is slung over the back.

She takes off her sunglasses and squeezes the water from her long hair, then wipes her face off and dries the droplets from her arms and shoulders.

The eyes of everyone in and around the pool take in her youthfulness with wistful longing, and then the retirees all go back to their books and conversations before Jeanie even notices their admiration.

There's no way she's going to give up everything she's worked for just because her hormones are playing tricks on her. Jeanie is infused with determination in this moment, and she knows she can stay away from Bill. She knows she can, because she has to.

To do anything else would be career suicide, and would also mean she'd given up on herself entirely. And if anyone is going to believe in her and make her dreams come true, it's going to be Jeanie.

She wraps the towel around her waist, knotting it tightly, and slides her sunglasses back on her face.

The women in the pool give her one more smile, and every man in the gated pool area

watches her walk away.

barbie

. . .

As she pushes Huck on the swings at the park in early October, Barbie recalls a time when her mother had taken her out for an evening.

She'd been fourteen, and shy, in the midst of an awkward teenage girl phase that left her feeling like she didn't belong in her own body, and her body didn't belong or fit into any clothing or space she might inhabit.

"Put this on," Marion Mackey had said, handing Barbie a dress on a hanger. The dress was a dark, midnight blue shantung silk, with a cinched waist and a netted petticoat under. To Barbie's surprise and delight, it had fit—and looked quite lovely.

When she descended the stairs, Marion had been waiting with her gloves in hand, lips pursed as she assessed her daughter.

"Beautiful," she said, handing Barbie a shrug to put over her shoulders. "Off we go."

They were in the back of the car together, being driven by Etan, the man who had driven her family for as long as Barbie could remember, when her mother reached over and encircled Barbie's wrist with her long, narrow fingers.

The sky was the same color as Barbie's dress, and they cut through the night in their black Pontiac Streamliner.

“Darling,” Marion said in her deep, movie star voice. “We’re not actually going to a fancy dress occasion.”

The balloon of excitement in Barbie’s chest popped.

In 1942, her father had ordered an electric car called L’oeuf Electrique, which created a tidal wave of excitement for Barbie and Ted.

They waited on pins and needles for this futuristic car that was supposed to look like an egg.

But when it arrived, it was a tiny bubble of a car with a strange metal steering wheel, and though her father got behind the wheel joyfully, ready to show it off to his children, the excitement over an egg-shaped car had vanished.

This was nothing more than a strange toy for her father, Barbie had realized.

This moment felt much like that one, and she looked at her mother with dismay.

“Where are we going?” she asked, trying to keep the disappointment out of her voice.

As she waited for a response, a feeling came to her: there was a hint of subterfuge to this outing, and that brought its own sense of excitement.

Immediately, Barbie sensed she was expected to keep this from her father.

She caught Etan's eye in the rearview mirror, and for the briefest sliver of a second, she thought she caught him winking at her.

"My love," Marion said, still holding her daughter's wrist. "You and your brother are extremely blessed. You live lives of ease, and you've never wanted for a single damn

thing. Not every child is so lucky."

Barbie swallowed, feeling guilty as she turned her head to look out the window. What was she supposed to say to that?

"Hey," her mother said, squeezing her wrist. "That's not a judgment on you children—that's just how it is."

And I want you to get a full view of the world before you grow up and fully inhabit it.

You need to understand how people live—and not just people with money.

" Her mother tapped her knee and leaned forward, speaking to Etan.

"Can you please pull in behind the church? "

Etan nodded wordlessly and swung the Streamliner in behind the Catholic church on the corner. He cut the lights and turned off the car.

"Now," Marion said, turning back to her daughter. "We're going to change our clothes and spend the evening helping people who aren't as fortunate as we are. All I need you to do is smile and be willing to do what we're asked, okay?"

Barbie, who trusted her mother implicitly (despite the very real teenage urge to roll her eyes at ninety percent of what Marion said and did), nodded seriously. "Okay, Mama," she whispered.

Under the dark of night, and with the car parked beneath a thick tree, Marion and Barbie stood behind the Pontiac with the trunk opened wide, unzipping each other's dresses and slipping them off amidst clandestine giggles.

"Here, wear these," Marion said, thrusting a pair of cotton trousers at Barbie.

She put one leg into them and then the other, pulling them up to her waist and holding them there, as they were several sizes too big for her.

Marion leaned over the trunk and pulled out a long piece of grosgrain ribbon, which she threaded through the belt loops and then tied in a jaunty bow at the waist. Barbie took the men's shirt that her mother offered, buttoning it up and rolling the cuffs so they didn't hang down over her fingertips.

For their feet, they each put on canvas shoes with rubber soles and then looked at one another.

Barbie felt like they were in costume, and about to embark upon a fun, madcap caper of some sort.

But Marion's face turned deadly serious as she took both of her daughter's hands in her own and pulled her closer.

In a low voice, she whispered: "Sweetheart.

There are many things I haven't told you yet, and now is not the time for all of them.

" The car idled in the darkness as Marion pulled Barbie away from the exhaust, setting her on the curb and then sinking down next to her so that their knees were touching.

"But in life, sometimes a woman doesn't want to be pregnant, and furthermore, she can't afford to be—for a variety of reasons. "

Barbie's eyes were wide as saucers; it had never occurred to her that pregnancy was

anything other than a blessing between a married couple, and, as she thought about it then, she realized she wasn't even entirely clear about how it all happened.

"I need you to listen to me," Marion said gently, putting her hands on either side of Barbie's knees and looking right into her eyes.

"It's a messy business for a lot of women, trying to remedy this particular situation, and there are doctors who can help, but it's very dangerous. Do you understand me?"

Barbie nodded, but inside her head, her mind was shouting: "No! No, I do not understand!"

"Okay, then I need you to just follow my lead.

We're volunteers. We help women when they arrive.

We comfort them, we listen, we don't ask questions, and we do not judge.

We offer water or juice, we hold their hands before and after they see the doctor, and if someone isn't feeling well, we find her a place to lie down, and we put a washcloth to her forehead and tell her she's going to be alright. That's all we do, okay?"

Barbie felt that these tasks didn't seem to warrant the level of seriousness in her mother's eyes and tone, but she nodded again anyway. "Okay, Mama."

"We do not have to agree with the decisions that any other woman makes in her life, Barbara, but we do need to support them. Women are the backbones of one another's lives, and we only survive by leaning on each other and keeping each other's secrets. Do you understand?"

Barbie nodded again, and her mother patted her legs and then stood up, holding out

her hands to pull Barbie up off the curb.

Marion walked around to the driver's window and rapped on it with her knuckles. Barbie watched her, loving this vision of her mother in oversized slacks and an oxford shirt, looking to the world like an impish, adventurous woman rather than a wealthy, worldly wife and mother.

"Etan," Marion said as he rolled down the window.

"Ma'am?"

"We'll be back here in three hours. You'll be here?"

"Yes, ma'am," he said, putting one jacket-clad elbow on the doorframe and putting his dark fingers to his forehead in a small salute. "I'll be here."

Marion tipped her head toward the street and beckoned for Barbie to follow, which she did.

That evening, Barbie learned more about being a woman than she had in the first fourteen years of her life.

She saw women of every color, every social strata, and of every age and size come through the doors of the makeshift clinic where she and her mother volunteered.

The first girl her own age who walked in, looking shy and scared and ashamed, had nearly thrown Barbie off course.

She'd stared openly, wanting to know how and why a girl, who was clearly too young to be married, had come to see a doctor about pregnancy.

Seeing Barbie's face, her mother had walked over and physically turned her away, pushing her towards a different room with a whispered admonishment: "We don't judge."

Now, go help to restock the clean towels. "

By the end of the night, Barbie had seen several women faint, three vomit, and had heard one wailing so loudly from behind a closed door that she'd turned to her mother in fear, only to receive a single shake of the head.

They left the clinic--which was really a makeshift space built behind a real doctor's office--looking and feeling exhausted.

Barbie's hair was damp and stuck to her forehead, and her shirt had come untucked at some point, and now hung down nearly to her knees.

In the parking lot of the church, Etan saw them coming and turned over the engine, idling with his headlights off as Barbie and Marion silently re-zipped one another into their dresses, then balled up the sweaty, blood-and-vomit stained clothing they'd worn all evening so they could shove it into the trunk.

Barbie's mother slammed the trunk and smoothed down the front of her dress. "We'll get home at the time I projected, and no one will be any the wiser about where we've been," she said, lowering her chin and looking at Barbie to make sure she understood.

Barbie nodded and followed her mom into the backseat of the car.

Barbie slept all the way home, dreaming fitfully of crying women, of silent babies, of dead flowers, and of the girl her age who had disappeared behind the closed door of the doctor's room and come out looking ashen.

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 10:59 am

“Mommy?” Huck asks Barbie in the middle of her reverie. His little legs are sticking out straight as he sits in the swing. Barbie is pushing him from behind. She walks around to the front of the swing so that he can see her face.

“Yes, sweetheart?”

“Mommy, I love you.” Huck smiles at her, and her heart melts.

He’s the sweetest and cuddliest of her three boys, and she thanks her lucky stars nearly every day that she’s got him as her last baby.

As Huck grows, she’ll miss the hallmarks of toddlerhood, of raising little ones, of kissing scraped knees and cutting crusts off sandwiches, but at least she’ll have the memories of falling asleep next to Huck on his tiny bed during afternoon naps.

She’ll remember quiet days at the park, just the two of them, and, hopefully, he’ll remember those days, too, and grow up to defy the old adage about sons only being sons until they take a wife.

“I love you too, Hucky,” she says, reaching out and grabbing his tiny feet to stop his swinging. He gasps with delight at the quick halting of the movement. “I love you so, so, so much.”

It had come to her on different occasions over the years—that night she spent at the clinic with her mother—particularly as she learned what they’d truly had to do to the women she saw coming in and out of that nighttime clinic, and she’d wondered even more about their lives as she’d grown into her own.

She'd wondered how they'd each come to be in a position where they felt the clinic was their best and only option, and each time she thought of them, she felt gratitude to have never been in that situation herself.

"Can we go home, Mommy?" Huck asks, looking tired as he rubs his eyes.

Barbie reaches down to pick up her three-year-old from the swing, and rather than set him on the ground, she holds him on her hip, savoring for just a moment that feeling of having a little one cuddle up to her neck and bury his face in the scent of his mother for comfort.

Barbie crosses the park with her purse over one shoulder and Huck's head on the other, remembering how fortunate her life has been, despite the tragic way she'd lost her mother.

Marion Mackey had been so many things in her own life: college student, young wife, mother, scorned woman, passionate lover, community activist, feminist, alcoholic, and then, finally—nothing at all.

Just a memory to those who'd loved her. But not to Barbie.

To her own daughter, Marion had been a champion; someone who always did what she felt was right, and who did her best to pitch in where she was needed, even if no one ever knew about it.

The afternoon sunlight warms Barbie and Huck as they make their way across the grass to their parked car, and she smiles at the way her child feels in her arms. If she can impart to her own sons even half of what her mother had given to her, she will count herself a lucky woman.

If she can let them know how important it is to be bold, to be brave, and to help

others in the ways that their grandmother had, then that will be enough.

In that way , Barbie thinks, setting Huck on the backseat of the car and watching him lay on his side and pull his knees to his chest as he closes his eyes, in that way, my mother will live forever .

“Father Watkins,” Carrie says, bowing her head slightly as she and Barbie walk down the aisle of the church. “It’s so good to see you.”

The First Baptist Church of the Gospel is on a rundown street on the outskirts of Cocoa Beach, with more boarded-up storefronts than open ones.

As they'd driven up, Barbie had noticed the knots of Black children and teens riding around on rusted bikes, or sitting on sidewalks just talking and laughing.

Some had eyed the unfamiliar cars pulling into the church's parking lot with open suspicion.

“Caroline!” Father Watkins calls out, lifting a hand and giving her a wide, familiar grin. “You came back.”

“I did,” Carrie says. “And I brought a friend to help.” She turns to Barbie, beaming. “Father Watkins, this is Barbara Roman.”

Barbie can’t help but feel nervous as she blushes under the intense gaze of the tall, Black man in clerical robes. “Thank you for having me,” she says.

Father Watkins spreads his hands wide. “Barbara, the Lord brings all kinds of people to our church, and we’re grateful for every single one.

” He reaches out to offer a hand for Barbie to shake, which she does.

Father Watkins places his other hand on top of hers and holds the pose for a moment, looking at her with a long, serious gaze.

Finally, he releases her hand. “I’m so glad you’ve come to be a part of our ministrations, and I trust Caroline will show you around. ”

Carrie leads the way to a hot kitchen in the back of the church, where several Black women wear aprons and headscarves. They pass big bowls and containers down the assembly line they’ve formed at the cracked counter.

“Ladies,” Carrie says, pulling an apron off a hook behind the swinging door. “I brought more hands to help. This is my friend Barbie.”

Seven sets of dark eyes turn to look at Barbie, and she flushes again. She’s never been much of a blusher, so this response surprises her—she’s going red yet again here in this perfectly lovely church.

“Hi,” Barbie says hopefully, smiling at the women. They stop what they’re doing and just stare at her, as if they’re waiting for her to break into song. Or to turn around and leave.

Barbie does neither.

The oldest and largest of the women looks her up and down with a dubious expression, her eyes making the full journey from Barbie’s tanned face and blonde hair, all the way down her powder blue dress to her flat shoes, and back to her face again.

But just when Barbie is about to panic, the woman breaks into a huge smile and a hearty laugh.

“Oh, baby, you’ll do just fine. Wash your hands and grab you an apron.” She turns back around to the other women, signaling for them to carry on, which they do.

Within minutes, Barbie is sandwiched between two women from the church congregation who are already nudging her and laughing as they talk, making her feel like one of them.

She takes her spot on the assembly line seriously, slicing bread and passing it on for sandwiches, and then switching with someone else to bag up the finished meals, which she lines up in a neat row on the counter.

The afternoon passes with the gospel music from a radio on the windowsill filling in the gaps between laughter and stories, and Barbie relaxes into the flow of their meal production.

As she listens to the women talk—their speech cadences and delivery so different from her own—she’s reminded of the comfort she found amongst the kitchen staff in her own home growing up.

As a little girl, listening to Winnie speak to the other maids and cooks had soothed Barbie.

Their laughter was as warm as anything coming out of the oven, and it had felt like home.

After an hour or two of being in the back of this church in Cocoa Beach, Barbie feels much the same.

"You were good at that," Carrie tells her when they leave through the back door and walk out into the bright October sun together. "I have to admit, I wasn't sure you'd blend in that easily. I'm impressed."

Barbie squints in the sunlight as she pauses next to the door of her car. "I meant it when I said I wanted to get involved, Carrie. I admire all that you do, and I want to be a part of it."

Carrie leans against the warm metal of Barbie's car with her arms folded across her chest. She looks Barbie in the eye.

"There are a lot of things to be a part of, Barb.

" Carrie purses her lips. "It's like—all this ttime, I've just been going about my life and not realizing how many people are basically cast out by society.

How many children are going to bed at night feeling hungry.

How many of our young men are dying to fight other countries' wars.

We just need to pick something and then dive in.

Try to help. Even if we can't fix the world, we can do our part, you know? "

Barbie does know: she'd seen her mother quietly go about doing her part for most of her life.

"I hear you," she says. "And I thought I'd need to try a bunch of things to know where I belonged, but I think this is it—this church.

The food, the fellowship, the community.

I really liked the feeling I got from Father Watkins. "

A huge grin crawls across Carrie's face. "Yeah? Me too!" She reaches out to grab

Barbie's upper arm gleefully. "The first time I met him, I just felt... safe. And seen. He's such a good man. And this church does a lot of positive things for the community."

"I can tell." Barbie looks around at the parking lot; hers and Carrie's are the nicest and newest cars there, and she feels a certain way about that.

"I never want to look down on anyone's life or standard of living, but I know how fortunate we are," she says quietly.

"And, specifically, I know how fortunate I am.

My family has never gone without, and many people struggle daily. I get that."

"The fact that you see it and get it is half the battle, Barbie. You would be amazed at how many people want to close their eyes to injustice." Carrie is still holding Barbie's arm, and she shakes her a little for emphasis. " We need to keep our eyes open."

It's Carrie's utter sincerity that really seals the deal for Barbie—well, that and the fact that an idea has suddenly crystallized in her mind, and she knows she won't be able to rest until she sees it through.

"I want my eyes opened even further," Barbie assures her. "I want to see what's happening beyond the borders of my own neighborhood."

There is a fiery spark of recognition in Carrie's eyes as she looks at Barbie from a new vantage point. "Okay, Barbara Roman," she says, folding her arms across her chest once more and nodding at Barbie. "Then buckle up. Because I have things to show you."

barbie

. . .

"The doctor wants me to have some sort of x-ray," Todd says, tossing his briefcase onto the couch dejectedly. He flops down next to it, letting his head fall back as he stretches out his legs with a deep sigh. "I feel fine, Barbie. I don't know what he wants from me."

Barbie, who has been kneading bread in the kitchen, wipes her hands on her apron as she stands over Todd with a worried frown. She puts a hand to her husband's forehead as if he might have a fever or something.

"Well, honey," Barbie says, sitting down next to him and pushing his briefcase to the side. "I think we have to trust him if he sees a reason for an x-ray. Have you been feeling anything strange?"

Todd closes his eyes for a long beat and then opens them again, focusing on Barbie. "During the day, I feel fine, but when I get up from the bed in the morning, everything is still spinning," he says, looking pained to have to admit this.

Barbie sucks in a breath. "Why haven't you told me?"

Todd shrugs, looking so much like his teenage self that Barbie wants to lean in and kiss him.

"I didn't want you to worry," he says. "You're busy with the kids and the house, and

when I was off work, I realized that you already had your hands completely full. You don't need me underfoot, and to be perfectly honest, I get bored being at home all day."

He at least has the good sense to look apologetic when he says this, but Barbie still rears back, all thoughts of kissing him gone.

"Oh?" she says. "My life is boring to you?"

"No," Todd says, realizing that he's said the wrong thing. "No, no, no. It's fine for you, Barbie, but I need to be out of the house doing something. I need to be contributing to the world."

Barbie sits there for about twenty seconds, stunned, looking into her gorgeous, amazing husband's earnest blue eyes, and then she stands up again, looking down at him with both hands on her hips.

"Are you actually telling me that being a good mother isn't somehow contributing to the world?"

"You think I do nothing around here?" Her voice is high-pitched and screechy, and angry tears prick at the back of her eyeballs.

"You've got some nerve, Todd. Calling women's work unimportant," she says in a huff, turning and walking away.

Before she reaches the kitchen, she turns back to him, untying the belt of her apron as she stares him down.

"You think what I do around here is so mind-numbing and dull that you're above it?"

Well, guess what, Mr. Roman? Sometimes it's the same thing for me.

Who made these rules anyway? Who decided that women have to do all the grunt work, while the men get to go out into the world and 'contribute'? "

Todd's face has fallen, and he's watching his wife in disbelief, looking as though he expects her to admit at any moment that the joke's on him— ha ha, your wife is just playing at being mad, Todd Roman !

Only she's not. Barbie yanks the apron off over her head and balls it up in both hands before tossing it at Todd. The light yellow fabric falls open on his lap, draping over his knee as he stares at it open-mouthed.

"If you think my job is stupid, then you do it for a while!"

Todd sits upright, lifting the apron off his lap and looking at it like it's a foreign object. "Barb..." he says. "That's not what I meant."

"Well, that's sure what you said." Barbie is now standing in the archway between the living room and the foyer, and her chest is heaving with the exertion of her emotions. "And you know what? I get bored sometimes too."

Todd still looks like he's waiting for the punchline of a joke. "So... what—are you going to volunteer at the hospital with Jo Booker?"

Barbie can hear the disbelief in his voice, and she doesn't like it. She and Todd rarely fight or even disagree, but this feels fundamental. This feels as though, if she doesn't stand her ground now, she'll eventually have no ground left to stand on at all.

"I might, Todd," Barbie says. "But first I'm going to volunteer at the First Baptist Church of the Gospel."

Todd laughs like she's making a joke. "The what?"

"You heard me."

"But... Barbie. Is that a—is it a?—"

"A Black church?" Barbie lifts an eyebrow.

She knows that Todd, at his core, is a loving man who believes in the equality of all humans, but she's also aware that he, much like everyone else she knows, is a product of his time.

The thought of his wife giving her time at a church in a part of town where they might not otherwise drive is undoubtedly a hard pill to swallow.

"Yes, Todd. It is a Black church. And I went there with Carrie and we packed meals in the kitchen with the women parishioners."

The smile falls away from Todd's face. "You're serious? You did this?"

Barbie gives a curt nod. "I did. I went there, and it was wonderful. The people. The mission. The camaraderie... I loved all of it." She pauses, expecting Todd to object and tell her she is, under no circumstances, to go there again.

But instead, he just watches her face, looking at his wife like he's meeting her for the first time.

"Okay, Barb," he says, turning his palms to the ceiling. "Do what you need to do. I trust you."

This stops Barbie in her tracks; she'd been prepared to fight tooth and nail to make

Todd see how important it is for her to give something of herself in this world.

But now he's just looking at her with eyes of acceptance.

And maybe a little pride. He trusts her to decide, and Barbie feels validated.

She is also not quite as surprised as she might have been, because she's known all along that the man she married is good and loving.

"Right," Barbie says, her indignant attitude somewhat deflated. "Okay then."

"Will Huck go with you?" Todd frowns slightly.

"This time I asked Maryanne Justice to watch him for a few hours," Barbie admits, tipping her head in the direction of the neighbors who live diagonally across the street from the Romans.

Maryanne has two small children of her own, and she'd been fine with watching Huck as well, but that's not a permanent solution.

"The church has a daycare room and several of the other women brought their little ones along. I thought it might be good for Huck to meet some kids who... well, who don't look like him and his brothers," she says, holding her head high.

"It was a big, formative part of my life to get to know the people my parents employed, and to understand that they didn't live or look like us. "

At this, Todd narrows his eyes slightly, and it's clear that he's thinking about his words before he says them.

"I can appreciate that, Barbie, but don't forget that you're not there to save anyone.

No one needs a savior to swoop in. And I think it's also important to point out that, while your parents certainly paid a rainbow of people to work at your house, those were not your friends.

They were paid employees, and you saw only what they let you see when it came to their lives. ”

This is a sobering thing to hear, and Barbie can feel her cheeks turning pink. “Of course,” she says defensively. “I know that.”

Todd leans back on the couch again, closing his eyes, and Barbie knows that this discussion is done.

It had gone better than she'd imagined, and yet she still has a strange feeling in her chest as she remembers Winnie and Neville and Etan and every other non-white person who had worked in her household as she'd grown up.

In her mind, this had always been a way for Barbie to see her parents as welcoming all kinds of people into their home, and she's suddenly realizing how naive that was of her to feel that way.

After all, Winnie and Neville weren't there as guests, and she knew the staff used a different door than anyone else who came to visit.

And, of course, Barbie couldn't forget how Neville was summarily dismissed just for helping a little girl to a couple of cookies at bedtime.

As she goes about her own kitchen duties that evening, keeping one eye on Todd to see if he exhibits any signs of being dizzy or faint, and keeping the rest of her attention on the boys as they play in the backyard, Barbie wonders if perhaps her own altruism is really nothing more than a way to pay penance for the deeply buried

feeling she's always held in her heart, the one that nags at her and reminds her it was all her fault.

That she'd done something bad to get a man fired, and that, no matter what she did now, nothing could truly right the wrongs that had gone on under the roof of her own childhood home.

The back doors of the church kitchen are propped open by bricks, and the women are stacking, boxing, and carrying individual care packages of canned food out to the bed of a waiting pickup truck.

Barbie and Carrie are there again, with their heads covered by scarves that are folded into triangles and tied at the napes of their necks, and their feet in flat canvas shoes for comfort.

Barbie is pleased to see that her hands are covered in dirt and grime as she sorts the dusty cans and jars people have pulled from their shelves and cabinets and donated to the cause.

"Make sure you wipe those down good, baby," Eartha says, walking behind Barbie and pausing to examine a banged-up looking batch of canned goods.

"Someone did us a kindness of donating things from their own kitchen, but Lord knows we don't need to be delivering a bunch of dirty stuff to old Mrs. Ingram and making her feel like a charity case. "

Never mind that what they're doing is charity; Barbie has quickly come to see their work less as an act of pity, and more of an act of love.

Each week, the church provides goods—meals, canned foods, hygiene products like toothpaste and toilet paper, and used books and magazines for entertainment—to a

list of people who, for various reasons, cannot leave their own homes.

Page 16

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 10:59 am

The first week Barbie had volunteered for this process, Father Watkins' son, Sam, had been behind the wheel of the truck, and Barbie had sat in the passenger seat with Huck between them as they'd driven around the neighborhood, stopping at various houses so that Sam could run up to the door with a box for Mrs. Ingram, whose only son had died in Korea and who couldn't get to the grocery store because of her diabetes; so that they could deliver a box to Mr. and Mrs. Younger, who both had trouble remembering where their house was any time they left it, and so the church had decided it was far safer to bring the items to them; and to make sure that old Mr. Wilson, who couldn't hear a word they said, had food to eat because he hadn't left the house since 1959, when his wife died and left him a childless widower.

The whole process is one that Barbie loves, and some weeks she delivers with Sam, while other weeks she boxes items and loads them into the truck.

And occasionally, like now, she simply cleans the donations off and sorts them out, which gives her a chance to really think about what they have to offer all these people, and how important it is to be a part of something bigger than herself.

And even though Huck spends most of the time she's there playing with blocks and trucks with a little group of other children who, as Barbie expected, look nothing like him, she hopes that someday he'll remember the time they spent at the church, and that he'll understand how important it is to give things to the world instead of just taking from it.

"Well, this is looking like an excellent selection," Sam says, his deep voice pulling Barbie out of her thoughts.

She's on her knees in front of a pyramid of dented cans, wiping each one down with a damp rag.

When she looks up at Sam's tall figure, her eyes land on his sparkling eyes, and she smiles.

"We got a whole load of homemade jams and canned fruits," Barbie says, smiling even wider as he puts his hands on his narrow hips and assesses the donations. "I think that will be a nice change, being able to throw something sweet into some of the boxes."

"Oh, you know it will," Sam says, shaking his head at the generosity of their parishioners, which is something she's seen him do repeatedly. "Doesn't matter how old or young people are, we all love a bit of jam on some bread, or that sweet taste of pears in syrup after we finish our dinner. Right?"

Barbie pushes herself up to a standing position and brushes her hands together. "Absolutely," she agrees. "I've never met a person who didn't like dessert."

A look passes over Sam's face that she can't quite name, but just as quickly as it arrives, Sam claps his hands, rearranges his expression, and looks over to where Eartha is giving Sam's sister, Betty, a dressing-down over putting too many cans of creamed corn in Mr. Wilson's box.

Sam chuckles. "Miss Eartha does not suffer fools," he says, shaking his head with amusement just as he'd shaken it before in awe over the generosity of the donations.

Barbie reaches for the rag she's been using to wipe the cans and twists it in her hands. "Hey, Sam," she says hesitantly. "Can I ask you something?"

The women in the kitchen continue their hustle and bustle, shooting Barbie looks

when they see her standing around chatting with Sam, but no one says anything.

“Sure you can, Mrs. Roman,” he says, putting his hands on his hips again. He looks at her curiously.

“I was just wondering?—“

“Barbara?” Pauletta, an extremely round, grandmotherly type of woman who oversees the children playing while everyone else does the sorting and boxing, is standing in the doorway to the kitchen with a tear-stained Huck on her hip.

Barbie’s little boy has his thumb in his mouth and he’s hiccuping as he looks at his mother with his temple resting against Pauletta’s collarbone.

“Little man here got into a scuffle over some wooden blocks,” she says apologetically.

“He and the other boy are just fine now, but I wanted him to come and see Mama and let him dry his tears.”

Barbie tosses the rag aside again and goes to Huck, who climbs into her arms and wraps his legs around her waist while she hugs him.

“You’re okay, buddy,” she says to Huck, and she knows he is. She’s got three boys, after all, and a tussle over blocks is nothing worth writing home about. “You’re fine. You ready to go back and play so Mommy can finish working here?”

Huck nods against her chest, thumb still in his mouth.

“Thanks, Pauletta,” she says to the woman as she hands Huck back. “I’ll wrap up here soon and come get him so I can take him home for a nap.”

Pauletta smiles at her and carries Huck back to the playroom, and Barbie turns to Sam, ready to carry on their conversation. But he's not there.

On the other side of the kitchen, Eartha is still ranting at Betty, but Sam is nowhere to be seen. Barbie looks around, and everyone is busy doing whatever they've been tasked with, so she carries on with wiping down cans and putting them in boxes.

There's work to do and not much time for chatting anyway, and soon Barbie is lost again in the flow of being a part of a bigger project, happily doing her part to get the older folks of the community fed and cared for.

jo

. . .

“Frankie!” Jo says, walking to the end of the driveway to greet her best friend for an evening walk in mid-November. “I say this with all the love in my heart, but honey, you’re as big as a house!”

Frankie laughs as she puts both hands on the sides of her enormous belly. The smile on her face and in her eyes makes it clear that there’s nothing she’d rather be at this moment than the size of a house.

“I’m ready to burst, Jojo,” she says with a laugh.

Even her cheeks have gotten fuller, and while Frankie has retained the lithe, muscular figure of the Rockette she once was, she is now undeniably softer, rounder, maternal.

She glows from within like a warm candle is burning inside of her, and Jo stops and stares, fondly remembering the feeling of harboring new life for just a moment.

“Well, you look gorgeous,” Jo says, blinking tears from her eyes as she reaches out to take Frankie’s hand. The sun is hovering on the horizon, and the air feels cooler now that Thanksgiving is approaching.

The women walk together, slower than usual, and after a block or so, Frankie loops her arm through Jo’s, forcing her to walk even slower as Frankie’s breathing becomes a bit more labored.

“I swear, this kid is taking over my entire body.” Frankie laughs. “It’s got to be a boy—he’s so demanding.”

Jo shakes her head, remembering all three of her own as babies.

“Girls can be just as demanding,” she assures her friend.

“I felt like Nancy never slept when she was in my stomach, and therefore, I didn’t either.

And when she was born, she was alert for about twenty hours a day—no joke.

Now, the best part was that she was an observer, always, and would be happy wherever I put her, just watching everything go on around her, but a baby who is awake needs attention, and I felt like I was constantly chasing Jimmy around and also keeping an eye on Nancy.

” She stops talking now, recalling this period of her life and just reliving the exhaustion that felt as though it lurked near the surface of her every conscious hour.

“You’re not making a second baby sound terribly appealing,” Frankie says, squeezing Jo’s arm with her own as they walk on, linked together.

“Oh, don’t even think about that until you’re healed from this one,” Jo says, nodding down at the enormity of Frankie’s midsection.

“When people tell you the pain of childbirth is forgotten the instant they hand over your newborn, they aren’t entirely joking, but there will be moments during recovery where you are reminded—acutely—of how painful the whole thing is. ”

Frankie blanches. “I feel like there are things I don’t know. Do they just keep us in

the dark so that we don't revolt and refuse to have babies?"

"There must be some secret plan along those lines." Jo smiles at her best friend wryly, matching her steps to Frankie's as they round the corner and walk in the direction of the neighborhood park.

"But the conspiracy must extend to other women as well, because I feel like my mom or one of my sisters could have done me the favor of letting me know some of the more shocking bits."

Frankie slows to a stop and lets go of Jo's arm. "I need to know," she says, eyes wide. "What horrible things has no one told me yet?"

"Oh, Frankie..." Jo trails off, feeling as though she's already said too much.

Of course it's not true that women would actually revolt and stop having babies if they were all shown informational videos before ever getting pregnant, but Jo is pretty sure that letting them in on some of the more "delightful" aspects of the process would undoubtedly create some reticence on the part of young ladies to give their bodies over to the cause and to act so excited about it.

"Tell me, Joey-girl," Frankie begs, folding her arms so that they rest on top of her shelf of a belly.

"I'm not walking until you do. In fact, I will sit down on this lawn here," she says, turning and pointing at the house they've stopped in front of, "and I will stay here until I give birth if you don't tell me what no one else will. "

Jo bites on her lower lip, weighing her options. "Okay," she says, relenting. "First of all, there's a lot of pushing."

Frankie rolls her eyes. “I got that much already.”

“Well, it’s just...” Jo looks away, scratching at the side of her neck nervously. “Sometimes when you’re pushing a lot, it can force other things to come out.” She lowers her chin and looks at Frankie, hoping she’ll get the message.

“Like, what? I’m going to push my small intestine out?”

Jo keeps staring at her. “Nope. Not that.”

Frankie lifts an eyebrow, looking a bit worried. “My gallbladder?”

Jo shakes her head and glances down.

“Wait, do you mean—“ Frankie’s face goes red. “Like when you push in the bathroom?” Jo nods slowly as the horror descends on Frankie. “No way. No. I’ve never heard of that. Not one person has told me that I could accidentally...”

Frankie looks around as if there might be some escape hatch from the situation she’s in, and for a moment, Jo thinks she might actually fall right down on their neighbor’s lawn, as she’s threatened to do. Jo reaches out and takes her friend’s hand.

“Hey, the doctors and nurses see everything,” she says soothingly.

“Nothing that happens will surprise them, and most likely, you won’t even know if that happens.

They just swoop in and take care of it, and when they go out to the waiting room and let Ed know the baby has arrived, they definitely don’t mention that. No one ever knows.”

“Why did no one tell me this?” Frankie wails, looking panicked. “What else, Jo? I know there’s more.”

Jo tugs on Frankie’s hand and they walk again, making their way to a bench on the edge of the park, where they sit as the sky turns purple and teeters on complete darkness.

“Frankie, baby,” Jo says, lacing her fingers through her best friend’s and holding on tightly. “Sometimes the baby is big. Huge.”

“Of course it is. But the body is designed to do this—giving birth is completely natural.”

“Uh huh.” Jo nods encouragingly. “It is. But occasionally a big baby can rip the mother if the doctor isn’t careful.”

Frankie frowns. “My stomach already feels like it’s going to rip! But it won’t, right?”

“Yeah, not your stomach.” Jo rubs Frankie’s hand and then pats it soothingly. “Down there. You can tear, so the doctor watches carefully, and rather than letting you rip, they...” Jo swallows hard and winces. “Cut you.”

“Oh, god!” Frankie wails, putting a hand to her chest. “No!”

Jo nods again. “And then they stitch you back up. Sometimes tighter than they need to.” She frowns at the memory of her own painful recoveries. “I complained to my mom about it one time—I told her it felt uncomfortably tight—and she said it was called ‘the husband stitch.’”

Frankie looks mad; she actually looks angry as she shifts her body around and tries to stand, putting one hand on her lower back. Jo tugs at the hem of her shirt and forces

her to stay seated.

“Jo,” Frankie whispers, looking around the empty park. “Are you telling me they cut you on your—you know?” She waves her hand in a circular motion.

“Yes, in order to keep it from ripping, which is arguably worse,” Jo says, trying to make it all sound reasonable.

“And that when they sew you back up, they sometimes make it tighter for your husband ? As if he’s done anything at all except get you into that situation?” Her face is flaming with the indignity of knowing that there is no way out at this point but to go through it. All of it.

“Yes,” Jo says, feeling as remorseful as if she herself had invented such a barbaric notion. “See, I told you there were things that no one really passes on beforehand, and it seems wrong to me that we all just sit on the information and don’t share it with one another.”

“I have to say, Josephine,” Frankie says, wild-eyed.

“You could have told me all of this a little sooner.” She points both index fingers at the unmistakable swell of the nearly full-term baby under her shirt.

“Now I have to dread going into labor because of the pain, which is something we all know about, but also all of this ?”

Jo lifts a shoulder sympathetically. “You did say you wanted to know,” she reminds Frankie. “And honestly, I think women have a right to. We’re not children. I knew none of that when I went into labor with Jimmy. And I kind of wish I had.”

“What would you have done differently?”

Jo lifts her eyebrows, feeling tired. “I mean, I couldn’t stop whatever happened with the pushing, but I would have been adamant about not getting stitched up like a teddy bear in danger of losing its stuffing. There’s no call for that.”

Frankie’s cheeks are getting less red as she listens and begins to calm down. “Okay, so you think I should say something to my doctor?”

“That’s up to you,” Jo says earnestly. “Your experience is yours, and it’s personal.

But I do believe we should all be telling one another every bit of information that we can.

It’s insane to me that this cloak of silence is in place, and that women are treated like infants or like barnyard animals just there for the breeding.

I do not like that, and I’ve learned a lot just from the things I’ve seen and heard at the hospital. ”

Now it’s Frankie’s turn to lift her eyebrows. “But we go into it willingly, Jojo—we aren’t horses or cows.”

“We do,” Jo agrees, “but without all the information. Generally speaking, we’re raised up with very little information about life or our bodies.

If we’re lucky, our mothers whisper something to us about our monthlies, or hand us some supplies, but other than that, what girl did you ever know who fully understood where babies came from when her body started to develop?

I didn’t even completely understand what would happen on my wedding night until it did. ”

They'd covered this terrain before, and Jo knew that, by the time she married Ed, Frankie had been more experienced than Jo had, but she was still willing to bet that no one had sat Frankie down and given her the nuts and bolts and the finer points of sex.

"You're right," Frankie says, tugging on a strand of hair thoughtfully. "They keep a lot from us."

"And once we get married, most of us have babies quite young, and instead of telling us about the process, they distract us with things like baby showers, with decorating nurseries, and picking out names for the babies. Which, for the most part, kind of works."

Frankie looks mad all over again. "Are you doing things differently with your own daughters?"

A flicker of discomfort passes over Jo's face, but then she takes a deep breath.

"I am. Absolutely. I've already explained to them both about their monthlies, why they have them, and how to manage their own bodies.

It was hard, because my mother wouldn't even look me in the eye when I got my first period, but I want there to be no shame in their lives when it comes to these things. "

"Good for you," Frankie says, still looking miffed by this entire discussion. "If I have a daughter, I'm doing the same thing. I'll tell her everything."

"There's a lot more work to do," Jo says.

"Once they start dating, I need them to understand the things that boys will want to do with them, and the ways they need to protect themselves, or to make their own

decisions. I expect that to be a much tougher conversation, although when I explained her menstrual cycle, Kate was already pretty traumatized.” She laughs lightly at the memory.

“So while I will tell them what I know before they settle down and get married and have kids, I’ll do it slowly.

It’s too much information for a young girl to handle all at once. ”

“It’s like looking right at the sun,” Frankie says, taking Jo’s hand in hers again.

“God, what an awful way to run this show,” she says, looking down at her belly sadly.

“And the crazy thing is that I would still have gladly gone through it all for the joy of having a baby, I just think someone should have handed us pamphlets about all of this when we were teenagers. Given us a heads-up, right?”

“I couldn’t agree more, Francesca,” Jo says, standing up and holding out both hands so that she can pull Frankie to a standing position. “It’s wrong to keep us in the dark about our bodies.”

They start to walk together again, through the November night. The houses they pass are filled with light and warmth, and the sliver of a moon hangs in the middle of a blanket of glittering stars over all of Stardust Beach.

“Life is so complicated, Jojo,” Frankie sighs as they walk down her street and pause at the end of her driveway so that Jo can drop her off at home first. She rests her head against Jo’s shoulder as they stand there, side-by-side, looking up at the sky over the rooftops.

“It is,” Jo agrees mildly, putting her cheek against the top of Frankie’s head. “And this, my friend, this is just the tip of the iceberg.”

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 10:59 am

barbie

. . .

The Senatorial campaign kicks into high gear in early November, with Election Day coming up on Tuesday the eighth.

Barbie is sitting at the kitchen table, flipping through the pages of the newspaper as her cold coffee sits next to her.

Tight Race Between Candidates says one headline.

Upcoming Vote Expected to Change Course of House says another.

Barbie's eyes skim the pages and pause on a black-and-white photo at the bottom of page ten.

Two men are shaking hands on the front steps of a stately building.

The younger one is beaming directly at the camera.

"Theodore Mackey, son of Senator George Mackey, prepares to take the helm as he goes into the family business," reads the caption. Barbie looks back and forth between the image of her father and brother and the words beneath the photo. Take the helm, she thinks. Family business.

The short column that goes with the photo is a quick read, and details her father's

years of service in the Senate, his stance on the Vietnam war (in favor), his passion for the Space Race, and the fact that he'd been married to Marion Mackey and produced two children—an unnamed daughter, and the son he's pinned all his hopes on, young Theodore.

Barbie closes the paper and slaps the front cover of it violently, causing her coffee to slosh around in its cup. Huck's worried face appears in the doorway to the kitchen, a firetruck clutched in his hand as he looks at his mother.

"Oh, honey," Barbie says, noticing him. "Mommy is fine. Go play."

With one more glance at his mother, Huck vanishes back to the tangle of trucks and cars he's been sorting through in the front room.

Barbie stands and walks over to the phone on the wall, unclipping her earring as she picks up the receiver. Carrie answers on the third ring.

"Hi," Barbie says without preamble. "I was wondering what you thought about me establishing a foundation."

"A foundation for what?" There is laughter in Carrie's voice. "You building a house, Barb?"

Barbie doesn't even crack a smile; she's all business. "No. I want to establish a foundation that meets needs."

Carrie's frown is almost audible over the phone line. "Okay," she says, clearly trying to puzzle out what her friend is saying. "I'm listening."

"I'm turning thirty in two weeks," Barbie says seriously. "And I've always known that, when I turn thirty, I have access to a trust fund that my mother left for me."

Carrie's laugh is one of disbelief. "You have a trust fund?"

Barbie has forgotten for a moment that she's not in Connecticut anymore; her friends here don't come from families with trust funds and houses at the shore and family trees that they can trace directly back to the Mayflower.

To Carrie, a trust fund undoubtedly sounds ridiculous. Spoiled. Out of touch.

Barbie forges ahead. "I do. My mother had set one up for me and another for my brother, and when she died, she'd already set the terms. Ted is three years older than me, so he's already gotten his, but now it's my turn.

I have no idea how much is in the fund, but I want to use it for something good. "

Carrie hums softly as they sit on the line. "Okay," she says. "A foundation."

"Yep."

"Well, I think it's worth talking to Todd about, if you haven't already.

Because, not to be nosy, but most of us could use an inheritance to pay for our houses or to put away for our kids' futures, you know?

He might not want you to sink all of it into a foundation or to give it away, even for a great cause. "

Barbie stands next to the phone, slipping her foot in and out of her shoe as she thinks about this. The sound of Huck making vroom-vroom noises on the living room rug is in the background.

"It's my money," Barbie decides. In her heart, she knows Todd will agree with her

about this. They've been together for nearly half their lives, and if she knows anyone, she knows him. "Todd will support my decision."

Carrie gives a low whistle. "Well, then I think you know what you're going to do, and hey—it's pretty exciting. Not everyone would take a chunk of money and spend it on starting a foundation, Barbie. That's very generous."

Barbie shrugs this away, though Carrie can't see her. "I never really thought of it as mine anyway," she admits. "And even though my mom would have adored my boys and would have wanted to spoil them like crazy, she would also have loved seeing me do something for others. I know that."

"Your mom sounds like she was a really wonderful lady, Barb."

The surprise wash of tears that sneak up on her when she thinks and talks about her mother is there again, and Barbie smiles against the urge to cry as she turns to face the sliding door to her backyard. "She was," Barbie says simply. "She absolutely was."

Her next phone call hadn't gone quite as smoothly, but Barbie never really expected it to.

"You want to do what?" Senator George Mackey's voice had boomed over the phone line.

So excited was Barbie that she hadn't even bothered to worry about the long-distance telephone charges, nor had she considered whether her father would be free to talk.

In the run-up to the election, he'd been fairly busy steering Ted towards the Senate seat, but Barbie knew if she called his office, his secretary would put her through.

“I want to use my inheritance to start a foundation to serve my new community.”

“That’s insane,” Senator Mackey said. “I will not allow it.”

“It’s my money to spend,” Barbie had said defiantly. “Mom left it to me, and I want to help where I can. Do you know how many people go hungry in this country, Daddy? Do you?”

Senator Mackey grumbled something she couldn’t understand. “Those are the people who need to learn to pull themselves up by their bootstraps, Barbara.”

“Those are the people I want to help,” she said haughtily, feeling more defiant and also more firm in her beliefs than she had since her father insisted she rethink marrying a nobody like Todd Roman.

“I want to set up a foundation in Mom’s name,” she’d said, inspiration striking in the moment. “The Marion Foundation.”

George Mackey was fuming on the other end of the line. Barbie knew her father well enough to know that he was probably standing at his desk, one fist on his hip, staring out the window at the autumn trees and fallen leaves, his face as stormy as the gray November sky.

“Any foundation formed with the money your mother and I set aside for you should be called The Mackey Foundation.” He paused, leaving a wall of silence between them. “If you’re going to give our money away, then at least help your brother’s political career by shining some light in his direction.”

Barbie had rewarded that comment with silence; she and Ted were not particularly close, nor had they been since childhood.

And anything she aimed to do altruistically really had no weight on his political aspirations.

But she knew that saying those things over the phone to her father was just a faster way to get him to intervene and disrupt her plans, so she'd simply moved on.

"I'd like to look into the formation of a foundation, Daddy," Barbie said instead. "Can you give me the name of a lawyer to speak to?"

The rest of the conversation had been brief, but Barbie knew from experience that her father would not roll over so easily.

They'd ended the call with him promising to set her up with legal counsel, and Barbie had hung up, feeling tentatively proud of herself for coming up with the idea at all, much less posing it to her rather imposing father.

Now, as the day has worn on, and Barbie has lost herself in the daily details of her life, she's played the conversation over and over in her mind, worrying each word from her father like a pebble worn smooth.

Any foundation formed with the money... at least help your brother's political career... that's insane... those are the people who need to learn to pull themselves up by their bootstraps, Barbara...

Her father's words and opinions bounce around in her head as she opens the front door and greets Henry and Heath at the end of the school day.

The same words echo in her ears as she cuts up celery and spreads peanut butter in the little troughs of the vegetables.

She puts the plate on the table with three glasses of milk and calls the boys to come

eat so they can all walk to the park together and meet up with Carrie and her kids, but all the while as her children snack, Barbie is standing at the kitchen counter in her knee-length skirt and Keds, doodling thoughts onto a notepad and only half-hearing what the kids are saying.

This is important to her, and she's going to make this work—there is no other option.

The Marion Foundation--even the very notion of it--is scratching at an itch that has, thus far, felt totally elusive for Barbie.

But finding her way out into the world, the actual, real world, has opened her eyes.

Life is not just cocktail parties for politicians, and it's not skiing in Vermont at Christmas.

Of course, marrying Todd all those years ago had given her entree into a lifestyle far more common than her own, and she'd loved walking into the Roman household and seeing the family she'd always wanted for herself: happy, warm, contented, and not the least bit ostentatious.

But Barbie had also loved her own upbringing; there's no way to pretend that the comfort that money provides doesn't have some upsides--it just does.

And, as a young girl, the life she'd known had been, well, the only life she'd known.

Living entirely without creature comforts isn't something that Barbie is keen to do herself, and a big part of her goal with the foundation is to provide every human she can with some of those comforts.

Or, at the very least, with the basic necessities for life.

What that will all look like is as yet undecided and unknown, but her mind is whirling with the possibilities. She puts a package of chicken breasts into a glass casserole dish and bathes them in broth and spices, then puts the dish in the fridge until she gets back from the park with the boys.

There's plenty of work to be done and there are still a million details to hammer out, but Barbie wants to sit down with Carrie on the park bench as the children play together so that she can tell her all about this big idea.

If there's one person in her life who she knows will be excited to see things move forward, it's Carrie, and so Barbie grabs the list she's been making on the kitchen counter and shoves it into her pocket, ushering her now-fed boys out the door and into the afternoon sun.

bill

...

He and Jeanie have spoken--of course they have.

Bill has apologized for the public nature of his display of affection, but not for its occurrence, which feels honest to Bill.

He'd been so moved by seeing her out there at the fence that day that doing anything other than holding her, kissing her, and making his feelings known would have been entirely disingenuous.

And, to her credit, Jeanie has owned up to her own decision to lean into the kiss, though Bill would have been fine taking the full blame for such an action.

In the ensuing weeks and months, they've had heated discussions outside the building during smoke breaks (Bill puffing away at a cigarette from the pack he keeps stashed in his drawer at work), and in stairwells, though they now know well enough that to touch one another in the stairwell would be akin to announcing to the world that something is going on between them.

And that, Bill thinks, is the ultimate question: is anything going on between them?

Surely what has happened so far would be enough to cause irreparable harm to Bill's marriage, and without a doubt, their ongoing fascination with one another (though, would Bill call it a fascination?

Maybe an attraction? Interest? Emotional pull?) will have to come to a finale of sorts.

They simply cannot go on as they have been, and so, just days before Thanksgiving, Bill has asked her to meet him at The Black Hole for a drink after work, which should give them the cover of seeing one another publicly and with coworkers, and will ideally loosen them both up enough for a quick walk by the pier so that Bill can explain himself further to her.

What the drink amongst coworkers really does is allow Bill to observe Jeanie as she laughs and talks with the other astronauts and engineers, and in doing so, he sees the way she's lit from within.

Her witticisms and funny comebacks as the engineers crack jokes make Bill smile as he watches her, and when she turns to look at him mid-sentence, Bill gets caught staring.

The smile on Jeanie's face grows serious. "I think so, don't you, Bill?" she asks, including him in whatever discussion she's been having with a guy named Jack.

"You'll have to excuse me," Bill says, feeling embarrassed, "I got lost in thought. Say again?"

Jack leans on his elbow and raises his voice, preparing to be heard over the din of the other happy drinkers.

"We were just saying that we're rounding the bend into '67, and that means we have three more years to get to the moon.

Jeanie thought we should start a pool to see who thinks we'll make it before 1970, and she said the two of you both believed we'd have boots on the moon during this decade. "

Bill looks down into his glass as he smiles; this is a frequent topic of conversation over drinks, and Jeanie knows that he not only thinks it's possible, but inevitable.

"I do think we'll make it," Bill says definitively. "Absolutely. Put me in the pool for ten bucks."

"Bets start at twenty," Jack says with a smirk. "Count you in?"

"I'm in." Bill lifts his glass and knocks back the last swig of whiskey. "But for tonight," he says, patting the table as he stands. "I'm out."

The Beatles are on the jukebox, and there is a holiday warmth to the bar, with people who are already free for the holiday relaxing into second and third drinks, and layers of tinsel criss-crossing the bar and hanging from the ceiling like streamers at a birthday party.

"You know," Jeanie says, consulting her watch. "I should probably head out myself." She stands and gathers her purse. "See you all tomorrow--at least those of us who are pushing through to Thanksgiving Day." She waves at the table and follows Bill out into the twilight.

"Ohhh," Bill says, putting both hands into his pockets as they walk beneath the swaying palm trees that line the path to The Black Hole's front steps. "I should probably walk it off for a few minutes before I drive." He glances at Jeanie nervously. "Would you want to walk a little with me?"

Jeanie shrugs, trying to look cool, but Bill can sense her nerves. "Sure," she says. "The only thing waiting at home for me is a cat and a plate of whatever Vicki has saved me for dinner. But are you sure that you don't need to rush home to... anything?" Jeanie waves a hand vaguely.

"Nope. Not just yet."

They walk quietly down to the wooden planks of the pier and stroll side by side as the rising moon reflects against the water.

After a few moments of silence, Jeanie speaks: "Do you really believe we'll get there?"

Bill's heart stops; is she asking what he thinks she's asking? Because it's a question he's not prepared to answer. His blood pumps wildly, sending adrenaline coursing through his veins. "I hope so," Bill says throatily. "I want to, but I'm not sure how."

Jeanie looks at him, her long, brown hair hanging over one shoulder. Her eyes are soft. "If we want something bad enough, then I think it feels like it's within reach, don't you?"

"Sure," Bill says, hands still in pockets. "It feels that way. But there are obstacles, Jeanie. There are other considerations." He isn't sure how to phrase this, and he isn't even sure that he's openly admitting that he wants something he can't—or shouldn't—have.

"Oh, I know," Jeanie says, sounding almost breezy. "But in a situation like this, people rise to the occasion."

As the water laps against the wooden posts in the water, Bill stops walking.

He frowns at the boards beneath his feet, trying to imagine what that would even look like.

If he wanted to be with Jeanie, would Jo really rise to the occasion?

Would he even dream of shaking up his life and his family that way?

In his quiet moments, the fantasy has played itself out, without question, but even under the cloak of night and sleep and dreams, Bill knows that fantasy and reality are two wildly different things.

"It's still a lot to consider," Bill says carefully, daring to look at Jeanie. Her eyes are wide and curious, her face unbothered. "But I need you to know that I think about it."

A cloud passes over Jeanie's face. "Of course. I do, too. I would imagine that we all do." Jeanie looks out at the water as it ripples. "Getting to the moon has been the ultimate goal all along, hasn't it?"

It takes Bill a heartbeat or two to realize that this is what she's been referring to: getting to the moon. Not them making a go of it, not him leaving Jo and the kids, but them getting to the moon as an organization and as a country.

"Right," Bill says slowly. "It's been the ultimate goal--for all of us."

"He quickly recalibrates, feeling both relieved and a little disappointed that Jeanie has been talking about the moon and not about them.

Would he have even wanted a discussion along those lines?

Could that have ever gone smoothly, been productive, and ended well?

"Anyway," Jeanie sighs and keeps walking, leaving Bill no choice but to start walking alongside her. "We still have three years, and I think we have to keep our eyes on the prize." She glances over at Bill meaningfully. "That prize--the moon."

It's the first time during the entire evening that she's let on that there's an

uncomfortable boulder between them, and Bill isn't sure whether he should seize this opportunity or ignore it.

He stops walking again. "Jeanie," Bill says tenderly. "Can we talk? It's not about the moon."

Jeanie walks a few more feet and then stops, keeping her back to Bill. He can see from the set of her shoulders that she's prepared for whatever it is he's about to say.

Suddenly, she turns to face him, cutting off his words with a single, steely glance. "I'm seeing someone, Bill. It's new, but it feels serious."

This is not what he'd been expecting—not at all.

In his mind (and certainly in his private fantasies), Bill has imagined Jeanie going home each night and pining away for him.

Or, at the very least, not entertaining thoughts of other men.

It's beyond ridiculous to think about such things, not only because Jeanie is a person and not an android, but because he goes home each night to Jo and the children.

He certainly isn't alone, pining away for her and keeping his heart only for Jeanie Florence.

He can't afford to. It isn't reasonable, and at this moment, Bill realizes it isn't reasonable for Jeanie, either.

"Wow," he says, taking an involuntary step back. "That's... I had no idea. Congratulations. Is he at NASA?"

Jeanie shakes her head and her eyes skate sideways, landing on the reflection of moonlight on water. "No," she says, looking sheepish. "He's a pilot for TWA."

This almost makes Bill laugh out loud, but it comes out as a soft, measured chuckle. "A man who reaches for the heavens--that seems right for you."

"Maybe," Jeanie admits. "Or possibly he's just right for now. I'm not sure yet."

Bill makes a noise that sounds like "Mmhmm," and pairs it with a nod. "I hear you. I guess you have to kiss a few frogs and all that." He tries for a lopsided, careless grin but misses, based on the pitying look in her eyes.

"You're not a frog, Bill," Jeanie whispers, closing the distance between them with three steps.

She stops right in front of him, looking up into his eyes.

There is a boat tied up about ten feet away from where they stand, and it bobs gently in the water in a motion that mimics the pitch and sway of Bill's stomach.

"You're just a guy—a great one--but not the right one for me.

" Her eyes mist over just slightly as she looks up at him, and Bill nods, knowing she's right.

They stand there like that, listening to the creak of the boat tied to the pier, and after some time, Bill looks away from her.

He'd kiss her one more time, just for good measure and for his own internal box of memories, but he knows this is wrong.

He's a frog, and she's a princess, and he needs to focus on the moon and his family while she does the things that she needs to do.

With more restraint than he'd ever imagined he could have in Jeanie's presence, Bill holds out the crook of an elbow and offers it to her. "Walk you to your car, Miss Florence?"

Jeanie looks at his arm and then up at his face before looping her arm through his. "I'd like that," she says with a single nod. "I really would like that."

barbie

. . .

"Happy birthday!"

Thanksgiving is over, the leftovers stored, and the women--Barbie, Carrie, Jo, Frankie, and Jude--are sitting around a corner banquet table in a Stardust Beach diner on Saturday afternoon, forks poised to cut into the chocolate cake with chocolate frosting that Jo convinced the diner owner to let her bring into their establishment, which specializes in pie.

"Oh, thank you," Barbie says, ducking her head but smiling. Her birthday has always brought out a touch of shyness in her, and this occasion is no different, putting her at the center of attention as her friends grin and watch her take a piece of cake. "I can't believe I'm thirty."

Their waitress, a woman in her 60s wearing a starched, knee-length pink dress with a white apron, leans one hip against the booth as she tops off their coffees.

"Thirty? Honey," the waitress says with a voice thickened by years of cigarette smoke, "you're still a baby. Just wait until you're fifty." She finishes pouring more coffee in Jo's cup and then winks at the table before walking away.

"I wish I was turning thirty again," Jo says wistfully. "The closer I get to forty, the scarier it all is."

"Try being pregnant for the first time in your mid-thirties," Frankie says, with both hands on the sides of her belly. She rubs circles on her stomach, looking exhausted.

"Oh, Frankie," Jo says with a sympathetic laugh.

She puts one arm around her best friend's shoulders as Jude slices a piece of cake for each of them.

They've all finished eating sandwiches and bowls of the soup of the day, and the waitress has swept through, clearing empty plates and bowls and leaving a handful of fresh forks and napkins.

"You're going to be a great mom," Barbie assures Frankie as she takes a big slice of cake and picks up a clean fork. "I think you'll love it—as soon as you start sleeping again."

Frankie holds up one hand and closes her eyes. "Jo has already given me the most horrifying pep talk I've ever gotten, so no one needs to tell me the gory details here over cake."

Jude, Carrie, Barbie, and Jo all look at one another knowingly. "Everything is going to be wonderful," Carrie says soothingly. She cuts an extra big slice of cake for Frankie and passes it to her. "But go ahead and have as much dessert as you want now while you've got an excuse to eat for two."

The laughter and talking carries on for another half hour as Barbie tells the group about the first birthday she and Todd had ever spent together, when he'd taken her ice skating and told her he wanted to marry her someday, and the way she'd known instantly that any guy who could show up at her house and face her father head-on was the right man for her.

"We all met our husbands in such different ways," Frankie says, looking around at the other women as she licks frosting off her fork.

She truly looks like a glowing, rounded version of herself, and Barbie looks at her admiringly, remembering that feeling of just eating happily and knowing you can worry about it later, after the baby is born.

"Jude, did you know right away when you saw Vance? "

Jude smiles. "We met in a bar in Hollywood, and I thought he was handsome right away, but I think he knew before I did." Jude turns to Jo. "How about you, Jo?"

"Oh, definitely. Bill came into the dentist's office where I worked and I turned into a giggling mess. I had a huge crush on him. I mean, a man in uniform, you know?"

The other women nod and smile knowingly.

"How about you, Carrie?" Barbie asks her closest friend at the table. For all they know about one another, she knows very little about how Carrie and Jay met.

Carrie is about to put her fork into her mouth and she pauses, looking around the table. "He was dating my sister," she says, a devilish grin spreading across her face.

"Nooooo!" the women shout in unison. Their collective horror and laughter gets the attention of everyone else in the diner as Frankie slaps the table and cackles.

"Oh," Frankie says, the laughter on her face and in her voice dying quickly. "Oh, no." She drops her fork with a clatter and puts her hands to her stomach.

"Frank?" Jo says with concern, pushing away her own plate and scooting closer to Frankie on the banquette. "You okay?"

Frankie takes Jo's hand in hers and bends forward, her face in a grimace of pain. "No," she says in a strained voice. "I don't think I'm okay at all."

The women spring into action, and Carrie waves at their waitress. "We need the check, please," she says urgently, keeping an eye on Jo as she rubs Frankie's back.

Barbie slides out of the booth along with Jude, and Barbie rushes for the payphone, digging in her handbag for a dime.

"I'll call Ed," she says, reaching for the phonebook that's connected to the phone.

She flips through the white pages, looking for Ed Maxwell as her finger traces down the newsprint.

Jude stands in the middle of the diner, and for a moment, it's as if the women are putting on a play with the other customers as their audience.

Everyone has stopped drinking coffee and eating pie, and even the cooks behind the divider between the kitchen and the dining area have stopped flipping burgers and chopping onions.

The beating heart of the restaurant becomes Frankie's pain, and her anguish fills the air as Jo helps her out of the booth.

"We're driving to the hospital," Jo says with authority.

"I'm calling Ed!" Barbie shouts from the payphone, waiting as the ringing on the other end of the line goes on and on.

And then, in an instant, the bill gets paid, Jo has Frankie in her car, Jude and Carrie have boxed up the leftover cake, and Barbie hears Ed's voice on the line.

"Ed?" she says, trying to keep her voice neutral. "It's Barbara Roman. We're at the diner, and we think Frankie's gone into labor. Jo's driving her to Stardust General right now."

In the end, Barbie's thirtieth birthday is just as memorable and exciting as any birthday she's ever had, as Lucas William Maxwell enters the world just before midnight.

When the news comes, Barbie and Jo are sitting together in the waiting room of the hospital, holding paper cups of cold coffee from the vending machine.

There is a fluorescent light overhead that buzzes intermittently, and though Barbie has put her head on Jo's shoulder several times and tried to doze, the noise from the light has kept her awake.

"Hey there, stranger," a tall doctor in a white lab coat says. Barbie lifts her head from Jo's shoulder and looks up at the man. He's incredibly handsome and looks exhausted.

Jo sits up straighter, forcing Barbie to sit up, too.

"Dr. Chavez," Jo says breathlessly. Barbie turns to look at her friend curiously. She's never heard Jo sound this girly, and her cheeks flush instantly. "Hi."

Barbie smooths her skirt over her lap and rubs her lips together; she must look a fright. She clears her throat and smiles at the doctor.

"Oh, this is Barbara Roman," Jo says, patting Barbie's knee. "Barbie, this is Dr. Chavez. We work here together. Or, rather, he works here, and I volunteer here, but we know each other from the hospital, and Nick, I mean Dr. Chavez, and I--"

Barbie cuts her off to stop the verbal bloodshed. "It's lovely to meet you," she says,

smiling at him and hoping that she looks better than she feels, given the late hour and the long day behind them.

"You as well," Dr. Chavez says, nodding once. "Now, which one of you is waiting to deliver a baby?"

Jo laughs too loud at this, and Barbie glances her way again.

"Our friend, Frankie, just had a baby," Barbie explains as she nudges Jo gently with her elbow. "We're waiting to see if we can go in and meet the little guy, since we waited here for five hours for him to make his appearance."

"And it's Barbie's birthday," Jo adds, apropos of nothing. "We were out at a diner with our friends, and Frankie went into labor, so we thought she might have the baby."

"I see," Dr. Chavez says, putting on a mock-serious face. "Well, I'm not an obstetrician or anything, but I have heard that most pregnancies end in childbirth, so that's to be expected."

Jo laughs loudly again, and Barbie is starting to wonder whether she's suffering from a simple work crush, or a mild head injury.

"Anyway, happy birthday, Barbie," Dr. Chavez says, turning to her and giving a slight bow. "And now you get to share your day with your friend's little one, so that's special."

"It is," Barbie agrees. "I have three boys of my own at home, so I think boys are pretty wonderful."

"That they are," Dr. Chavez agrees. "Well, my rounds are nearly done."

" He pauses and glances at his watch. "So I'd better wrap things up here and get home for a few hours of sleep before they want me to come back and do it all over again.

Ladies," he says, smiling at Barbie and Jo, "have a wonderful evening, and congratulations to your friend and her husband. "

Dr. Chavez disappears with a last wave, and Barbie turns to Jo. "Are you okay?" she hisses, blinking at Jo like she's seeing her for the first time. "I have never seen you in action like that."

"In action?" Jo parrots. "Like what?"

"Flirting with a man ," Barbie whispers, leaning closer to her. "Holy Toledo, Jo."

Jo's mouth opens and closes and she says nothing, but she's saved once again by Ed, who comes out of the swinging doors with a grin on his face that's a mile wide.

"He's here!" Ed says, clapping his hands together. "We did it! Lucas is here."

Jo and Barbie both stand then, forgetting all about Dr. Chavez as they hug and congratulate the new father, assuring him that Lucas is, undoubtedly, the healthiest and most wonderful baby ever born.

"You two can go in and see her," Ed says, wiping away the tears on his face with a white handkerchief from his back pocket. "I'm going to call our parents now and let them know the wonderful news."

The hospital room is dim and peaceful. Frankie is tucked beneath a white sheet and blanket, and a swaddled bundle nestles in the crook of her arm. She smiles at the baby beatifically, looking totally at peace as Barbie trails Jo into the room.

"Hey there, Mama," Jo says softly, walking across the linoleum floor as softly as possible so as not to squeak and wake the patient sleeping on the other side of a drawn curtain.

She and Jo approach the bed and peer down at baby Lucas, with his tightly closed eyes and little rosebud pout.

He's wearing a knitted cap atop his small head.

"Oh, Frankie," Barbie says, tearing up instantly. "He's so gorgeous."

Frankie smiles up at her friends, and in her eyes it's clear that motherhood has changed her already. "He's got dark hair," she whispers back, tugging at the tiny cap and showing them the soft mop of baby hair. "Lots of it!"

"He's a good Italian boy," Jo says, beaming at the baby. "Are your parents coming down?"

"They said they'd come the minute we called, so I would imagine that Ed has already reached them and that they're halfway to the airport as we speak."

The women laugh softly in the pool of soft light that's cast by the lamp next to the bed.

There is a radio on at the nurse's station that's playing The Beach Boys, and someone turns the knob, moving through the scratchy static until they land on a Christmas song.

It's still early for holiday music—only November twenty-seventh—but Barbie smiles anyway.

"Sorry about going into labor in the middle of your birthday party," Frankie says, wrinkling her nose but looking tired and happy.

Barbie waves it off. "Eh, I probably deserve it."

Jo, who has been staring at the precious new baby, turns to look at Barbie. "How do you figure?"

Barbie leans over and bumps Jo with her shoulder. "Remember? I went into labor at your party!"

"You are so right," Jo says. "You did. All over my new floors." She makes an exaggerated face and Barbie bumps into her again.

"But truthfully," Barbie says, looking at baby Lucas as he puckers his tiny lips. "Having a baby born on your birthday is good luck. So I'm honored to share my day with Lucas."

Frankie looks up at her with a huge smile. "I'm so happy to have all of you in my life right now. I'm going to need all the help and advice I can get."

Jo runs her fingers lightly over the cap on top of the baby's head, looking a touch wistful. "We're here, Frankie," she promises. "You've always got us."

The radio at the nurse's station starts to play "Silent Night," and the women look at one another one more time before Barbie and Jo gather their things and slip out of the room quietly, waving at Frankie as they go.

barbie

. . .

"Surprise!"

Barbie stops short, looking around her. The restaurant is filled with everyone she knows in Stardust Beach--save for Frankie and Ed, who are still in the hospital with the baby--and at one table, she sees her father, her brother, his wife, and their children. Everyone is standing and cheering.

"What's going on?" Barbie turns to Todd. They had been, ostensibly, having dinner out a day late for her birthday, but now, standing in the entryway to Olives he's looking deeply into his own glass.

"Wait--you flew down here not for my birthday, but to discuss the foundation?"

George gives an amused chuckle. "Well. It's not really a foundation yet, Barbara. It's more of a concept--an idea--at this point."

Barbie makes a move to stand up; she's already had enough of this discussion.

"This is my birthday party," she says evenly, putting her fingertips on the table as she stands there, watching her brother take a swig of his whiskey.

"I think family discussions about money can take place at a different time and place."

“Now, Barbara.” George Mackey runs a hand over his knee as he sits there with one leg crossed over the other.

“I think what you’d like to do with your mother’s money is a lovely gesture.

I just think you can do it in a manner where you’re not throwing good money to the wind.

There’s a strategic and a right way to do things, and I think we can come up with that if we put our heads together. ”

“Barbie,” Ted says, speaking for the first time.

He leans forward in his chair and puts his elbows on the table, steepling his hands as he looks at his younger sister.

“Dad and I only have your best interests at heart here. You don’t necessarily have a mind for money, and that’s okay—no one expects you to.

But we do, and we have some vested interest here. ”

Across the room, Vance Majors slaps Todd on the back, and the two men talk as Jude and Carrie stand nearby, watching over the group of children. Barbie drags her eyes back to her brother. “What vested interest? It’s my money to spend as I wish.”

“Well, that right there, Barb,” Ted says, trying to sound brotherly, but instead just coming across as bossy.

“It is your money, and Mom would have wanted you to do something for yourself with it. She might have been less pleased to know you were just giving it away to poor people who can’t be bothered to do an honest day’s work for themselves. ”

Outrage grows in Barbie's chest and she blinks a few times, ready to say the things that are roiling inside of her.

Instead of yelling and making a scene at her own surprise party, Barbie lowers her voice, venom dripping from each word.

"Neither of you knew her at all," she says, hot tears stinging her eyes.

"She would have been completely behind my decision, and I know that for a fact."

George pulls a cigar and a lighter from the breast pocket of his jacket and holds them in his hands, preparing to light the cigar.

"Go compose yourself," he says to Barbie, sticking the end of the stogie in his mouth and glancing around for an ashtray.

As if on cue, a waiter appears with one, setting it on the table.

"Here you are, Senator," the waiter says genially, then vanishes.

Barbie stands. Her father isn't wrong about the fact that she needs to compose herself, because she's on the verge of losing her temper right here in front of everyone she knows.

"I'll be back," she says tersely, turning to make her way to the bathroom.

As she walks through the restaurant, Barbie spots her boys and smiles at them.

Todd is still engrossed in conversation, and everyone looks to be having a good time.

Servers in white shirts and black pants are ferrying covered trays from the kitchen,

and Barbie realizes that they're all going into the room that's been set aside for her party.

A buffet, she thinks. That's good. Informal.

The expense of things is always on her mind, and she doesn't want to be wasteful.

It never occurs to Barbie that her father might pay for this entire event, and instead she imagines Todd has put it all together, which makes her feel warm inside.

He's always been so good to Barbie—even when they were teenagers—so thoughtful and kind.

Of course Todd would have arranged a surprise party for her, and paid for a buffet dinner for her friends and family.

That would be so like him, and even though this is nothing she would have dreamed up for herself, she's committed to having a fabulous time in order to thank her husband for the effort.

But when she returns to the party room a few minutes later, it's clear that Todd is not the master of ceremonies at all. The moment she walks back in, George Mackey stands, setting his cigar in the ashtray and holding a fork to tap against his glass. The room quiets down.

It feels like slow motion to Barbie as the pieces fall together, and later she will think how stupid she was for not realizing before now how the evening was going to play out.

"Ah, Barbara," her father says, holding out a hand in her direction.

Barbie pauses in the doorway like a deer in headlights.

Every head in the room turns to her. “The woman of the hour.” George Mackey pauses as a smattering of applause fills the room.

“Happy birthday to my little girl, who is turning thirty and joining the rest of us at the grown-up table.” Polite applause comes from every table as the senator speaks in his booming voice.

“Barbara, you make me so proud, and your brother and I are more than happy to be here to celebrate a momentous occasion like this with you.”

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 10:59 am

As Barbie stands there, unsure what to do with her hands, a waiter approaches and offers her a glass of champagne. She glances around and sees that everyone else in the room already has one, and that even the children have small glasses of juice in front of them. Barbie smiles stiffly.

“Barbara Jean,” Senator Mackey says, “you have brought us all so much joy, and if your mother were here today, I know she would be just as proud of you as I am.” He lifts his glass higher.

“And she would be absolutely pleased to hear that you are going to be heading up the day-to-day operations of a new foundation that we’re forming in her honor. ”

Barbie’s smile—already false and cautious—slips further.

“It is my pleasure to announce to you all right here, for the very first time, that the Mackey Family Foundation, in support of young people who wish to go into politics, will open its doors in 1967.”

The applause is more underwhelming this time, though Barbie hears a few people congratulating her, and she can’t help but nod as though this has been the plan all along.

A foundation to assist young politicians?

What is this? What is her father even saying?

Barbie can scarcely fathom where he’s come up with this, but she’s wholly unable to

stop this train that apparently left the station while she was in the ladies' room.

"To Barbara, our Head of Operations," George says, lifting his glass in the air.

Everyone in the room follows suit. "Happy birthday, darling, and here's to a successful foundation launch, and to our future generations of young politicians.

Hey, some of them might even be here in this room with us right now.

" Senator Mackey nods toward several children in the room, including his own grandkids.

People clap again as soon as they've taken their sip of champagne.

Barbie, though she knows taking a sip of her drink is customary following a toast, scans the room instead, making eye contact first with Todd, who looks confused, and then with Carrie, who looks duped.

Barbie sets her untouched champagne on the nearest table and leaves the room just as laughter and discussion erupt once again.

"Barbara." Barbie turns at the sound of her father's deep, stern voice. "These people are here to see you, and to celebrate you, and you're hiding away in another room. We need you out there."

Barbie turns around to face her dad, looking at him with an anger she's never felt before. When she'd left the dining room, she'd gone directly into a small, unused storage room next to the kitchen, and she stands there now, seething as she glares at him.

"What do you need me for--to keep using as a prop in the bizarre play that you and

Ted are putting on?"

George Mackey has the courtesy to look confused--or perhaps maybe he actually is. Barbie is sure that he knows precisely what he's done, but there is a tiny chance that he believes everything is copasetic and that Barbie is just overreacting to some perceived slight.

Rather than answering right away, Senator Mackey paces around the small room, breathing audibly. When he pauses, he looks Barbie right in the eye as if he were addressing a politician on a major issue.

"Barbara," he says, standing still and putting one hand into his pocket. "You just don't understand."

"Understand what?"

Senator Mackey runs a hand over his face, measuring his words. "You don't understand finance. Strategy. Optics. This family runs on politics and on the way the world perceives us, and anything we can do to orchestrate that perception in our favor is incredibly important."

"Not to me," she says. "Not when it comes to this. That's my money--money that Mom left for me--and I know what I want to do with it."

"And you're doing it!" Senator Mackey says, flinging the hand he'd run over his face and indicating the big, wide world outside of the tiny storeroom. "You're going to be in charge of the daily operations of a major foundation, and it's going to help people to reach their goals and dreams."

Barbie stares at him, slack-jawed. "This is not at all what I wanted. I had plans to funnel donations and assistance to people in the community who needed it, not to line

the pockets of future politicians, Dad.”

Senator Mackey is about to respond when the door flies open. Ted is standing there, looking back and forth between his father and sister.

“We need you out there, Barbie,” Ted says, hooking a thumb over his shoulder. As always, he comes across to Barbie as completely out of touch with what’s going on around him. How a man as obtuse as her brother has ended up with a wife and two lovely daughters is beyond Barbie’s comprehension.

“What do you need me for, Teddy?” she asks, using his childhood nickname, which she knows he doesn’t like.

Ted bristles, as Barbie had assumed he would. “Photo op,” he says flatly.

Barbie looks at her father in disbelief. “A photo op? What does that even mean? You hired a photographer?”

Senator Mackey presses his lips together and then sighs. “The Orlando Sentinel is here.”

“No way,” Barbie says, folding her arms across her chest. “Absolutely not. I’m not turning a lovely event that my husband planned for me into some sort of circus sideshow for your political aspirations.” She looks at her brother with venomous eyes.

“Actually,” Ted says, looking at their father sheepishly. “Dad and I planned and paid for the party.”

“Theodore,” George says, shooting him a look.

Barbie's eyes dance back and forth between her dad and brother. "Are you serious? This party isn't Todd's doing?"

George, being a far superior and more experienced politician than his son, makes to say something that will smooth things over, but Barbie isn't having it.

"No," she says, pushing between her dad and brother, who are taking up a fair amount of space in the tiny room. "I'm leaving."

Before they can stop her, Barbie is out the door and down the hallway, ready to stop and whisper to Todd that she wants to leave.

But it's already too late to escape: Barbie's dad and brother have followed her, and they're flanking her from behind, creating an image that is, unbeknownst to her, completely camera-ready.

Flashbulbs pop as they enter, and Barbie blinks rapidly, not expecting it.

She very nearly holds up a hand in front of her face, but the minute she catches Todd's eye and sees that he's smiling at her, she lets the hand fall.

He's been feeling better lately, and the doctor is so positive about his recovery from his bout with vestibular dysfunction that Barbie doesn't want to be a wet blanket here in front of all their friends.

Her boys are sitting with their older cousins, and, on one side of the room, all of Barbie's friends are mingling and sipping champagne.

Without even realizing she's doing it, she relents.

There is no smile on her face as the flashbulbs pop, but when her father and brother

step up on either side of her and take her elbows, she lets it happen.

Just for tonight, she's going to swallow her pride and let the people around her be happy. But she's not happy, and this troubles Barbie. It's her party—her thirtieth birthday—and it's all she can do not to burst into tears.

As a waiter walks by, she takes another flute of champagne from his tray and downs it in one go. She'll get through this night, and she'll hold her head up high.

But this battle is not over yet. In fact, it's only just begun.

jo

...

The first draft of her book is coming along nicely, and as Christmas approaches, Jo is getting more and more excited to hand it over to Martin Snell, her literary agent, and see what he can do with it.

Her evening walks with Frankie have been curtailed for the time being as Frankie adjusts to motherhood and the whims of a newborn, and Jo has been using that time to be with her own kids, and to get more written than she normally does.

One evening in early December, after she's showed Nancy how to knit a scarf, talked to Jimmy about a book report he's doing for his sophomore English class on *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, and discussed the true meaning of Christmas with Kate (which, Jo has emphasized, is not getting a Barbie Dreamhouse or a pair of sparkly red shoes like Dorothy wears in *The Wizard of Oz*), she's setting her typewriter up at the kitchen table when Bill walks in.

He's missed dinner, though that's not unusual for him to do once or twice a week, and he looks like he's driven home with the top down.

His hair looks windblown, and his cheeks are ruddy.

"Jo," he says in a hoarse voice, setting his briefcase down by the door. He looks oddly guilty and also somewhat worried, which puts Jo on alert.

“Yes?” She sets a stack of fresh white paper next to her typewriter and stands there, looking at her husband.

“I think we should go and see Dr. Sheinbaum. Together.”

Jo is stunned; she isn’t sure what to say. When Dr. Sheinbaum had cleared Bill mid-year, she’d offered to see them as a couple, but Bill had been adamant that it was unnecessary. For her part, Jo had been on board with the idea.

“Really?” she asks, eyebrows lifted. Bill nods, but says nothing. “Alright,” Jo says, giving him a slight nod. “If that’s what you want.”

Bill returns her nod and then leaves the kitchen with no mention of dinner at all, leaving Jo standing there, listening to his footsteps as he walks down the hall towards their bedroom.

Well , she thinks. This is an interesting turn of events .

Baby Lucas is squalling and red-faced, and it’s obvious that each of the women is dying to step in and offer to take him; to walk him, soothe him, and offer Frankie advice. But they all bite their tongues as she switches him from one arm to the other, trying to calm him down.

“So,” Jo says to Barbie as they sit under an umbrella that they’ve wedged into the sand on the beach. “That was quite a party!”

Barbie is peeling an orange as she tilts her head to one side. “It was nice,” she says noncommittally.

“What a husband you have, throwing you a surprise party!” Jo goes on. She’s digging through a wicker picnic basket for individually wrapped peanut butter and jelly

sandwiches, which the kids will want as they come running up the sand after frolicking in the surf.

“Todd is wonderful,” Barbie agrees, but there is something in her eye that catches Jo’s attention; she seems lost in thought, and Jo lets the topic go.

“So,” Carrie interjects, slapping Barbie on her bare thigh lightly. “Barbie and I are doing a big Christmas event at the First Baptist Church of the Gospel, and you should all join us, if you can.”

“You’ve gotten really involved there,” Jude notes. She’s sipping Tab through a straw that she’s stuck into her glass bottle, and her eyes are on Barbie. “I think it’s really great what you’re doing there.”

“I’d like to do more,” Barbie says under her breath.

Jo arches one eyebrow at Carrie, who shrugs.

“Let me clarify,” Barbie goes on. “My plan has been to announce that I’m starting a foundation in my mother’s honor that will benefit people in need, but you were all at my surprise party, so you saw how that turned out.”

She explains to the women what her intentions had been, how she’d planned to fund the whole thing with the inheritance from her mother, and how it had all gone sideways.

“Wait, your dad co-opted the event to turn it into something that benefits him?” Jo asks, wrinkling her nose distastefully.

“That is exactly what he did.” Barbie tosses her orange rind onto the sand and eats a wedge of citrus as juice runs down her wrist.

“You can’t let him do that,” Frankie says, placing a lightweight blanket over her shoulder that shields Lucas from the group as she nurses him. “He can’t do that.”

Barbie looks down at the rest of the orange in her hand. “I’m not sure how to stop him.”

“We’ll help you,” Jo assures her. Barbie is one of the kindest souls she knows, and if her desire is to help others, then they can’t just sit by while her father and brother steamroll her and her ideas. There’s no way they’re going to let that happen.

“I don’t know how anyone can help me,” Barbie says. “I can’t even get a bank account without my husband signing on it, so who in the world is going to insist that my father hand a big chunk of money over to me?”

They all sit there for a beat as the ocean rushes in and out, lapping the shore. Frankie rocks Lucas, who has quieted and is contentedly having his meal. Carrie and Jude are watching the kids out at the shoreline. And Jo squints at the horizon, thinking.

“Who is going to insist that you get what’s yours? A lawyer,” Jo says definitively. “That’s who. And we’re going to make it happen.”

Bill and Jo’s first appointment with Dr. Sheinbaum is during the second week of December. Jo has a lot on her plate in terms of the children, the holiday shopping and planning, writing the first draft of her book, and worrying about Barbie’s situation, which she’s taken on like a personal mission.

“You ready for this?” Bill asks her as he swings the car into the parking lot of the building where Dr. Sheinbaum has her office. He turns off the car and they sit there as the engine clicks and cools down.

Jo is quiet. She worries at the edge of her skirt, plucking at a stray thread. “I think

so,” she says.

Initially, it had been her belief that by attending a sort of couple’s therapy, she and Bill might work through some things that feel like stumbling blocks between them.

His resistance to the idea had felt like a denial on his part, which had bothered Jo; was she the only one who felt the distance as they lay in bed next to each other in the dark?

Was he saying that she truly had no reason to worry about his friendship—or his work relationship or whatever it was—with Jeanie Florence?

“Look,” Bill says, putting both hands on the steering wheel as he stares at the palm tree right in front of the car.

“Dr. Sheinbaum will challenge you. She can ask questions that feel... uncomfortable. I want you to be prepared for that. But she is helpful. She’ll make you think. So don’t be afraid, okay?”

Jo turns just her head so that she’s looking at her husband’s profile. “I’m not afraid,” she says firmly. “Are you?”

Bill laughs so softly that it’s almost imperceptible. “I’m afraid almost every day of my life, Jo,” he says in a low, monotone voice. “And somehow I get through each day and wake up grateful that I’m still here, and that I have another chance to get it right.”

Jo watches him, searching his expression for clues. “Did it make you feel less afraid to talk to Dr. Sheinbaum?”

“Sometimes,” Bill says honestly. “And sometimes it made me more afraid.”

Jo nods. “Okay. That’s fair.”

Bill pulls the keys from the ignition and puts his hand on Jo’s knee. He finally meets her eye. “We should go in,” he says. “We’re here now, and it would be rude not to.”

Jo gathers her purse and opens the door to the slightly cooler December air.

The sky is a dusky blue, and though it’s five o’clock in the evening, they’re only about forty-five minutes from the sun setting.

She and Bill walk together through the parking lot, her hand in the crook of his arm, but the touch feels like it’s borne out of habit for him, and out of fear of the unknown for her.

Regardless, Jo hangs on tightly until they’re standing outside of Dr. Sheinbaum’s office.

Bill looks at her expectantly. “Shall we?” he asks, tipping his head at the closed door.

Jo nods. “Yes,” she says, feeling anxious. “We should.”

As they cross the threshold, it feels momentous—momentous, and also like the simplest thing they’ve ever done.

When they sit, Jo holds her purse in her lap, crossing her fingers beneath the folds of her skirt so that Bill won’t see her silly, childish gesture.

This has to help them understand one another better. It has to work, Jo thinks, because if it doesn’t, she’s worried that their marriage will crack right down the middle, and that they may never see eye to eye again.

At Dr. Sheinbaum's prompting, Jo takes a deep breath and starts talking.

barbie

...

The holidays are hard for anyone who has lost a loved one, but for Barbie, Christmas is always missing something with her mother gone.

The tree is twinkling, the kids are excited, and the music puts her in the right spirit, but Barbie's mother had always been the one to make the magic happen.

She'd planned dinners and made sure that cookies and treats came out of the giant house's kitchen as if on a conveyer belt, which Barbie took full advantage of.

Huck is old enough for Barbie to take the boys to see Santa Claus, and she's looking forward to doing that at the holiday party that NASA is throwing for families.

Todd is feeling almost entirely better than he had immediately after his return from space, which is an immense relief, as his stress over potentially needing surgery had grown.

Barbie realized while he was off work to recuperate that the version of Todd who wasn't involved in work and at NASA was an unsettled, unfocused version of her husband.

She isn't eager to revisit that again—ever.

And while the silent struggle between Barbie and her father and brother rages on,

she's keeping herself busy with volunteering alongside Carrie, and making her own plans for how a foundation might integrate into her new community.

Finding a lawyer who can help her has proven to be easy enough, and she's currently sitting in the lobby of her attorney's office in Cocoa Beach, waiting for him to usher her in.

At her feet, Barbie has a few bags of Christmas toys and gifts that she's purchased for the boys, who are playing at Carrie's house while she's talking to the lawyer, and she glances into the bag now, pleased that she's found Troll Dolls for Heath and Henry, who have come home from school talking of nothing else since a friend got one for his birthday.

"Mrs. Roman?" a young attorney in a navy-blue suit stands in the doorway smiling at her. Barbie looks up, surprised; she'd expected to be led in by a secretary, but Jasper Wilkins, Esquire stands there before her, smiling at Barbie and her bags of toys. "Would you like a hand with all of that?"

Barbie blushes. She should have dropped her things off in the trunk of her car, but she's parked a couple of blocks away and thought she might just shop her way to the lawyer's office—which it seems is just what she's done.

She laughs and hands two bags to Mr. Wilkins. "Thank you so much," she says, taking three more bags in her hands and putting her purse over her arm.

They walk down the hall to a closed office and Barbie sets all of her bags near the chair before sinking into it.

"Let's cut right to the chase, since you're paying me by the hour," Jasper Wilkins says, unbuttoning his suit jacket and sitting behind a large, polished wood desk. "I understand you want to discuss an inheritance that's being questioned, right?"

Barbie crosses her feet at the ankles and straightens her spine.

She knows that she's right in wanting what she wants here, and that what she's planning on doing with the money from her mother is a good and positive thing, but it's also clear that the road ahead of her is littered with landmines and hidden obstacles, and she wants Jasper Wilkins to understand this from the outset.

"So," Barbie says, folding her hands in her lap.

"I inherited a sum of money from my late mother when I turned thirty a few weeks ago, and my father has decided that, without my consent, he's going to take control of the funds.

" She holds up a hand before Mr. Wilkins can ask questions.

Barbie wants to get the whole story out.

"My father is Senator George Mackey from Connecticut, and he and my brother, Theodore, are planning on using the funds to start a foundation that will, in their words, 'benefit young people who want to go into politics.'" Barbie stops and inhales sharply as she stifles an eye-roll, then surges on.

"My intention was to start my own foundation called the Marion Foundation, in honor of my mother, Marion Mackey, and to use the funds to assist community organizations and to better the lives of my less fortunate neighbors."

"That sounds like a very impressive goal, Mrs. Roman," Jasper Wilkins says, picking up a pencil and scrawling something on the notepad on his desk. "Senator Mackey, you say?"

"Yes," Barbie confirms. "And I know there has to be a way to stop them. I don't want

my inheritance to be used so that some kid who went to Princeton can get into politics more easily. That's not what my mother would have wanted, either."

"I see." Jasper Wilkins puts the pencil down and looks at her seriously. "First, can we assume that there is a will?"

"Yes," Barbie says. "I think so."

Mr. Wilkins nods gravely. "You've never seen it?"

Barbie shakes her head slowly. "No... I guess I haven't.

I've just always known that she left money for me and for my brother to receive on our thirtieth birthdays.

Ted got his a few years ago, and now it's my turn.

"For the first time, Barbie considers something: "Do you think that there's some provision in the will that my father has to approve whatever we do with the funds?"

Jasper Wilkins sits back in his leather chair and puts both elbows on the armrests. Behind him, a large window looks out at the parking lot, which is filled with shiny cars and palm trees sprouting from grassy medians.

"I think that's possible," Mr. Wilkins says.

"Certainly. But if she'd wanted you both to wait until you turned thirty, then it's unlikely she would have added a stipulation like that.

However," he says gently, lowering his head like he's worried that Barbie might get angry and throw something at him.

“There might be enough fight in him that he’s willing to drag this through the courts and slow things down indefinitely.

I mean, a woman can’t even open a bank account without a co-signer, Mrs. Roman, so it’s possible a judge and jury might agree with the idea that you need a man to oversee your expenditures and plans for this money. ”

The attorney looks at her apologetically, and Barbie fumes. She very nearly stands up from her chair and paces the room, but instead she makes her hands into fists and pounds her own thighs. “No,” she says adamantly.

Jasper Wilkins raises his eyebrows. “No?” he repeats.

“Okay, yes, I understand women aren’t allowed to have their own bank accounts—or even their own brains—but that shouldn’t apply here, Mr. Wilkins. That money is mine,” Barbie says angrily, jabbing a finger at the giant wooden desk, “and I have plans that my mother would wholeheartedly approve of.”

He looks even more sad as she says this.

“Barbara—may I call you that?” Barbie nods; she hardly cares what he calls her as she’s being told that she’s incapable of inheriting and managing her own money.

“Unfortunately, your mother is not here to confirm her intentions, so all we can do is speculate at this point.”

Barbie feels the words like a knife in her belly, and she sinks back in her chair, deflated. “I know,” she says softly. “I know she’s not here.”

When Barbie leaves Jasper Wilkins’ office, it’s with a clutch of bags in each hand, and a frown on her face.

She's not defeated yet, but she's frustrated.

Mr. Wilkins has promised to get in touch with Senator Mackey's attorney and request a copy of the will and the inheritance paperwork, but with each passing day, it's feeling more and more like Barbie will have to smile cheerfully for the cameras as she fronts some dumb foundation that funds golf lessons for young fraternity boys who want to improve their games so they can hobnob better with other politicians. And that depresses her deeply.

Even the oversized bells and candy canes made of tinsel that hang from every lamppost on the main street don't cheer her up.

As Barbie loads presents into the trunk of her car, rather than thinking about how happy her boys will be to open them on Christmas morning, all she can think about is how disappointed her mother would be if she were alive to see this sad spectacle between her husband and children.

She drives home in silence, not even bothering to turn on the radio.

The next evening is the community holiday party at The First Baptist Church of the Gospel.

Barbie has worked all afternoon decorating the room where the children play during services, and she's thrilled now to walk down the aisle in the church's nave, taking in the greenery that she and Carrie have gotten as donations from a florist in Stardust Beach, and the way the tall pillar candles flicker on the altar.

It's all so beautiful and peaceful, and Barbie slides onto a pew in the silence, taking a moment for herself.

From the kitchen in the distance, she can hear people talking happily and prepping

food, but this time is hers, and she closes her eyes and says a silent prayer of gratitude for being welcomed into this community of people the way that she has.

“Mind if I join you?”

Barbie’s eyes fly open in surprise; it’s Father Watkins’ son, Sam. He stands a respectful distance away from Barbie, hands clasped in front of him. He’s dressed in sharply creased black slacks, and a white shirt with a tie.

“Yes, please,” Barbie says, sliding over in the pew. “Of course.”

Sam sits and they both face forward, eyes cast towards the giant wooden cross that hangs over the pulpit. The candles flicker and dance, warming the space with their glow.

“This is beautiful,” Sam says. Barbie turns her head and looks at him to see the way his eyes sparkle with gratitude. “Seeing everyone pull together for an event always touches my heart,” he says, looking right at her and not even trying to hide the tears of joy in his eyes.

“I feel really lucky to be here.” Barbie puts both hands between her knees and looks down at her lap. “I wasn’t sure if I’d be welcome here, and I have been. You have such a lovely church, and such generous and kind parishioners.”

“They are lambs of God,” Sam says with a firm nod. “All of them. Hard-working, good-hearted people who are humble and filled with the spirit.”

“I can see that.”

Sam frowns slightly, looking somehow confused and amused at the same time. “But let me ask you, why did you think you wouldn’t be welcome here?” He gives her a

long look. “Is it because of the color of your skin?”

Barbie’s cheeks flame hotly; she nods.

“I’m an outsider,” she says. “I don’t come to your church on Sundays, and I don’t know anyone here but Carrie.”

“You didn’t,” he says, scooting an inch or two closer to her on the wooden pew. “But you do know us now.”

“That’s true,” Barbie says. From the kitchen, they hear Eartha’s big, loud, joyous laughter erupt and echo throughout the church.

Sam tips his head toward the laughter. “Miss Eartha has welcomed you with open arms, and if Eartha says you’re one of us,” he says, lowering his chin, “then you’re one of us.”

Barbie smiles at him warmly. “I appreciate that, Sam.” Without thinking, she puts her hand on top of his as they sit there in the pew, the only people in the nave, with just candlelight and the smell of pine and greenery all around them.

For a moment, Sam holds her gaze and leaves his hand beneath hers.

In his eyes, Barbie sees desire and passion—though she knows it’s not for her.

Sam’s entire being radiates with the desire to help others, and every time she’s in his presence, she can feel him burning with a passion for service and communion.

In the same way her own brother has been following in her father’s footsteps, she can easily see Sam following in the big footsteps that Father Watkins has made here amongst their friends and neighbors.

“I wanted to talk to you about an idea I had, but I’m still working on it,” Barbie says as she slides her hand off of his and holds both hands in her lap again. “Do you think I could come back and meet with you after the holidays if it all comes together?”

“You can come back anytime, Barbara,” Sam says with a kind smile. “And I hope you will. You and your family are always invited to join us here, and I’d love to hear what ideas you have.”

Barbie is about to say more, but Carrie comes through the swinging doors at the end of the aisle then, wearing a wreath around her neck and holding a long string of tinsel over both shoulders as it streams down her arms and drags on the floor behind her.

“Barbie?” she calls out. “Oh, sorry.”

Barbie stands up, smoothing her hands down the front of her skirt. “No, please don’t be. Sam and I were just talking about some ideas I have. What do you need?”

Carrie looks mildly frazzled. “I wanted to decorate the front door of the church,” she says. “But I need a ladder and a few more hands.”

Sam jumps up and claps his hands together. “I’ll get the ladder, and I’ll bring more hands. Let’s get this party started.”

Barbie stands in the nave for another long minute after Carrie and Sam have exited through the swinging doors, and she looks up at the wooden cross and at the stained-glass windows that depict the Virgin Mary with her hands pressed together in prayer.

It’s as peaceful as she’s felt in weeks, and Barbie closes her eyes one more time, breathing it all in.

When she opens her eyes, she is indeed ready to get this party started, and so she

makes her way to the kitchen, ready to roll up her sleeves yet again and do whatever Miss Eartha asks her to do.

bill

. . .

The holiday music comes to him as if through a long tunnel. Bill is sitting at a round table in the hangar at NASA, watching the children run around excitedly as their parents mingle and drink in their semi-formal evening wear.

Normally, NASA does a big Christmas or New Year's party for adults only, but this year it's more like an amusement park, with kids of all ages there to see Santa Claus, eat the hamburgers being delivered to tables by waitstaff in black pants and white shirts, and dance to the band on the small raised stage as they play jazzy renditions of "Let It Snow" and "Jingle Bell Rock."

"Could you look any more glum?" Todd Roman stops next to Bill's chair, smoking a cigarette as he watches his three boys race around the dance floor.

"What are we doing?" Bill looks up at Todd, waving a hand to blow the cigarette smoke in another direction. "This is mayhem."

Todd shrugs. "We're doing a family event to show that we enjoy our wives and children." He watches with a smile as a girl of about ten or eleven picks up her younger brother and carries him piggyback-style to meet Santa.

"It looks like we're raising a generation of heathens," Bill says. "Do none of them have party manners?"

At this, Todd guffaws and pulls out a chair. He sits and reaches for the ashtray at the center of the table, tapping his ash into it. “Okay, Booker. What’s eating you?”

Bill puts his elbows on the table. “Nothing. I’m just in a terrible mood.”

Todd makes a faux shocked face and then shakes his head. “You don’t say.”

It occurs to Bill—briefly—that Todd might have concerns or problems of his own, but nothing in the way he acts at work ever lets on that the man has a dark side.

For all Bill knows, Todd rests his head on his pillow at night with a smile on his face, drifting off to sleep with a perfectly contented wife at his side, and children, who he feels like he never lets down, slumbering peacefully down the hall.

Bill sighs. “I’m sorry. I don’t mean to bring down the mood.” He forces himself to sit up straighter. He reaches for the vodka tonic on the table and takes a swig. “I’ve had a rough year.”

Todd bursts out laughing at this. “You know,” he says.

“I try to watch my language, especially when children are present, but no shit, Bill,” he says.

The volume of his voice drops as he grows serious.

“I know you’ve had a bad year. You know why?”

Because I have, too. You weren’t alone up there.

I was there with you, spinning and feeling like our numbers had been called,” Todd says, holding the hand with the cigarette between his fingers up to the sky as he keeps

his eyes on Bill's face.

"You're not the only one who stared death in the face and then came back to Earth to smile and act like nothing happened. You do know that, right?"

Bill blinks at him a few times. "Sure. I know that," he says, mildly chagrined.

"I understand that you lost your temper and punched my wife's brother at the New Year's party.

I know you got shipped off to therapy and had to spill your guts to some lady shrink.

" Todd's voice is even and it sounds edgier than Bill has ever heard it sound.

"And whatever the hell has been going on with you and Jeanie Florence isn't exactly top secret.

" Todd puts his cigarette to his lips and takes a long pull on it, then exhales smoke up towards the ceiling as he narrows his eyes at Bill. "But tell me more about you."

Bill's face goes slack and heat creeps up his neck. Just the mention of Jeanie is enough to push his buttons, so he makes an effort to close his mouth, to neutralize his features, and to change the subject.

"You're calling me an ass," Bill finally says, a smirk tugging at his mouth. "And I deserve that." He nods at Todd's cigarette. "You got another one of those?"

Todd pulls the pack and his lighter from the breast pocket of his jacket and sets them on the table with a loud thump . There's no way he's lighting Bill's cigarette, so he looks at the band on the stage and at the gleeful children as Bill pulls one from the pack and flicks the lighter.

Once Bill has done a full inhale and exhale, he speaks again: “Tell me about you, Roman. I want to hear how your year has been—other than the obvious.”

Todd sits back in the chair and cocks an eyebrow at Bill. “You’re asking me to tell you my troubles so that yours sound smaller? Or maybe misery just wants company?”

“Sure,” Bill allows. “Maybe both. What do you have?”

Todd crosses one leg over the other and looks up at the extremely high ceiling of the hangar. “Well,” he says, thinking about it. “First of all, my year started with you punching my brother-in-law at a work party, and I had to deal with the fallout from that. My wife was not pleased.”

Bill makes a hmph sound, but doesn’t apologize for punching Ted Mackey.

“Next, I waited on pins and needles to see if I’d get chosen for the docking mission, and when I did, I had to deal with how it felt to beat out Vance, who is arguably my best friend at NASA.

We always know that’s a chance, that we’ll knock a buddy off a mission, but it still doesn’t feel good, and then you’ve got all the inferiority stuff that plays in your brain.

” Todd circles a hand in the air as he talks, cigarette smoke wafting upwards as he does.

“So I went up to space, excited as all hell, and nearly died. Came back feeling like I was on a boat that was constantly pitching and rolling. That went on for a couple of months, so thanks for asking,” Todd says curtly, grinding his cigarette into the ashtray and then sitting back to look right at Bill.

“Saw some doctors, lost some time at work, ended up looking like a jackass who

can't handle space. ”

“Oh, come on,” Bill says, ready to argue this point. “That could have happened to anyone.”

Todd holds up a hand. “But it didn’t. It happened to me, and you’re asking about me.

I did the physical therapy and somehow avoided surgery, thank god, but I still wake up some mornings feeling like I don’t have my sea legs.

No one knows that, by the way, not even Barbie,” he says, giving Bill a sharp look.

The band starts to play “Winter Wonderland.”

“I’m sorry, Todd,” Bill says sincerely. “I didn’t know it was that bad.”

“Well, most of us can’t see past the end of our own noses, and I would say that you’re particularly bad at it, Booker.” Todd laughs at his own joke. “The only thing you can see beyond the tip of your own schnoz is Jeanie Florence.”

Bill taps his cigarette in the ashtray as he composes himself. Hearing--yet again--from a coworker about Jeanie is making him incredibly uncomfortable. And yet, he knows he's not in a position to dispute the allegation, or even to be angry at Todd for making it.

"Jo and I have been seeing my therapist together," he says instead, surprising himself as the words come out of his mouth.

He puts the cigarette to his lips and inhales again as he narrows his eyes.

"You're a military man yourself, Roman. And now you're an astronaut.

We've been through a lot of the same things--as well as some things that don't overlap. "

As he says this, he's thinking of the daughter he and his first wife, Margaret, had lost in the middle of their pregnancy.

He's also remembering the long years of worrying that he'd done the wrong thing by committing Margaret to a mental facility and ultimately divorcing her.

He'd done as right by her as he could, given the fact that he himself was a young man then, with a whole life ahead of him, and when she'd died by her own hand, it had taken yet another toll on Bill and on his psyche.

Todd is listening; he nods, but says nothing.

"I would also be willing to bet that your life hasn't always been a bed of roses," Bill goes on.

His gold watch taps against the glass ashtray on the table and his eyes never leave Todd's face.

"There have most likely been things that have happened, or choices you've made, that have left their mark.

None of us are perfect. And none of our choices are perfect, either. "

Todd clears his throat and nods again. "Fair enough."

"But I want you to hear it from me directly: Jo and I are addressing these issues, and I'm doing my best to be the kind of man I can look at in the mirror each day.

It's not always easy, and I've done plenty of things I'm not proud of, but.

.." He pauses here, looking at the women on the dance floor with their children. "All I can say is that I'm trying."

Todd nods and taps the table lightly with his knuckles as he stands.

"That's all anyone can ask for, Bill." He stands there a moment, giving Bill a look that's somewhere between admiration and pity, and then he walks off, leaving Bill to smoke the rest of his cigarette as his eyes skim the room, searching for Jeanie Florence.

"I think your mind is somewhere else," Jo says to Bill in Dr. Sheinbaum's office. "Or maybe it's your heart."

Bill can feel the brittle tension between them as they sit on the couch, facing Dr. Sheinbaum, who is behind her desk.

"Bill?" Dr. Sheinbaum prompts, waiting for his response.

"I've had a hard year," he offers as an excuse. "My mind has been all over the place. You know that, Dr. Sheinbaum." Bill looks at his therapist, hoping she'll corroborate this and help him move to safer ground.

Jo turns her head to him. There is hurt on her face. "Bill," she says softly. "You can't be married to someone for fifteen years without knowing them at least a little. And I know you a lot."

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 10:59 am

He can't deny that this is true; Jo does know him, perhaps better than anyone.

They don't just share a house and a bed and a few kids—they share a life and their hearts.

He'd abandoned his responsibility to stay married to Margaret to be with the gorgeous creature sitting next to him on the couch, and as he looks at her now, he feels the full impact of shirking his responsibilities to Jo in order to indulge in his feelings for Jeanie.

Bill reaches over and takes her hand, feeling inspired in the moment. "Let's go away together," he says earnestly as the idea builds momentum in his head. "I'll take you anywhere you want to go. I've got time I can take at work, and we need to reconnect. Just you and me, no kids."

Jo looks surprised; she's clearly expected something else. "But, Bill—" she protests.

Bill cuts her off. "A cruise," he says quickly. "We'll get on a boat together and float on the water. No work, no kids, no typewriter," he says with a lopsided grin, tapping her on the knee.

"But, Bill," Jo says again. "I have a deadline I need to meet."

"How far away are you from hitting it?"

Jo thinks about this. "I can finish my first draft by mid-January. I promised it by January thirty-first, at the latest."

A rush of pleasure fills Bill's body. This is it. This will work. A trip away to clear their heads, and to keep Jeanie out of his line of sight. A chance to reconnect and forget about everything.

"Great. Then I'll find a trip for us and book it while you finish that draft. What do you say?" He looks at her hopefully, his heart leaping from his chest as he waits for her to praise him for coming up with such a wonderful idea.

But Jo looks dubious. "I'm not sure, Bill... what about the kids? Who will watch them and get them up and out the door for school?"

"Your mom," Bill says simply. "We'll buy her a plane ticket to come and stay with them for a week."

Jo nearly sputters with laughter. "But, Bill. She has a life, too, you know. You can't just expect someone to drop everything and come running. We haven't even asked her yet."

Dr. Sheinbaum interrupts here. "So," she says, holding a pencil in one hand.

Her elbows are on the desk and she's been jotting notes as they speak.

"I hear Bill saying that he thinks getting away without distraction would be a great way to rebuild some connections that may be lacking at the moment, and I hear Jo saying that this is more challenging than just speaking it into reality. So let's bridge those two things.

Jo, do you want to go on a cruise with Bill? "

Jo takes a deep breath, and by the look on her face, it's clear that she's considering pina coladas and sunsets over the water instead of dinners and homework with the

kids, and that the idea is taking root with her.

“Well,” Jo says, sounding just mildly reluctant at this point. “Of course. Yes. I would love to take a vacation. It just feels decadent.”

“Why?” Dr. Sheinbaum drops her pencil. “Doing something for yourself and your marriage isn’t decadent, it’s necessary. Please tell us more about that thought.”

“Asking someone else to take over my responsibilities at home so that I can leave a vacation paradise,” she says, gesturing broadly around her to indicate the fact that they live in a state full of sunshine, beaches, and palm trees, “to go on vacation... I don’t know. It just feels unnecessary.”

Bill’s excitement wanes, and he moves around on the leather couch, trying not to look like he’s feeling petulant about Jo’s hesitation.

“I think it would be good for us,” Bill protests. “And I think it’s important.”

Jo nods. She looks at her hands in her lap.

It’s December twenty-third, and Bill knows that she still has a lot of things she needs to do before the kids go to bed tomorrow and wake up on Christmas morning to a tree with presents beneath it.

For a moment, he feels a deep, intense regret for anything he’s ever done to wrong her.

Jo is such a good, strong woman, and the things she does fill him with pride.

That the things he does could destroy her is almost more than Bill’s heart can bear.

“Please, Jojo,” he says softly, taking her hand again. Reluctantly, she unfurls her fingers and lets them curl around his. “I really want to be alone with you.”

Jo turns her head a quarter of the way in his direction and lets her eyes meet his for just a flicker of a moment. She nods, and he knows her well enough to see that she’s holding back tears.

“Okay,” Jo whispers. “Yes. Let’s go away. I’ll call my mother, and I’ll put in all the time I need to in order to get a draft of the book done, and we’ll go away. On a cruise. We’ll do it.”

The Christmas lights that the owners of the building have wound around the trunks of the palm trees outside the window catch Bill’s eye and he focuses on them as he nods.

Dr. Sheinbaum picks her pencil up off the desk and jots something on her notepad.

Jo swipes furtively at a tear that’s rolling down her cheek.

Bill squeezes her hand in his. This has to work. They have to get away, they have to become a team again, and he has to do right by her.

There are no other options.

barbie

. . .

Jasper Wilkins calls Barbie right after the holidays, catching her breathless as she carefully packs up the glass ornaments from her tree.

“Mrs. Roman?” the attorney asks.

“Yes, this is she,” Barbie says, setting down a small box with ornaments that she’d loved from her childhood. The kitchen is flooded with warm January light, and the older boys are at school as Huck takes his morning nap.

“I’m afraid I have some bad news,” he says. “Your father has retained an attorney who is prepared to drag this out. And I still have had no luck getting a copy of the paperwork to verify what your mother’s true intentions were.”

Barbie sinks onto a chair as she holds the phone with one hand.

“Her intentions were not this ,” Barbie says, almost to herself, as her eyes focus on a red, yellow, and blue beach ball floating aimlessly over the surface of her turquoise pool in the backyard.

“My mother would not have wanted him to fight me over money—he already has enough of it.” She pauses, laughing softly to herself.

“My grandfather, Victor Mackey, was an inventor. He held the patent for a piece that

is necessary in every vacuum cleaner. He also created the blades that most companies use in their disposable razors, and he invested in the right stocks. My father has never wanted for anything. Why can't he just give me this one thing? ”

Jasper Wilkins is so quiet that Barbie can hear the water lapping against the cement walls of the pool through her open patio door. When he finally speaks, it's with regret.

“I think you should talk to him, Mrs. Roman. I'm happy to pursue this further because that's what I do, and it's your dime, but until I have the paperwork, I don't know what I'm working with.

But before you go that route, maybe have a heart-to-heart with him.

You would be amazed how far family will go to fight over money, but you'd also be surprised to know how frequently it's held over someone's head just as a way to get them to sit down and talk. ”

Barbie's shoulders are slumped as she sits there, holding the phone and nodding. “Okay,” she says, resigned. “Thank you.” She stands up and puts the phone back on the receiver and then sits again, facing the pool and the thick blades of green St. Augustine grass outside.

The day is warming up nicely for January, and there isn't a single cloud in the sky.

Barbie stays at the kitchen table, too stunned to do anything else.

In a world where money was always plentiful, and no one ever had to question whether their needs or wants were met, Barbie had assumed that whatever sum of money her mother had left her would be hers without question.

After all, her father doesn't need this money—neither does Ted, for that matter.

If he wants to start a foundation of his own, he can.

Something nags at Barbie as she taps her pearly pink-polished fingernails against the table.

There's a catch here, and she isn't sure what it is.

It would be so easy for her father and brother to do this on their own and to let her have her own passion project, and nothing that she's doing would affect them negatively.

After all, an organization to help those less fortunate has positive implications, and could only shine a flattering light on the Mackey family.

There has to be some reason why Ted and her father don't want this.

Barbie is lost in thought as she looks out at her backyard, and, almost like a mirage, her mother appears there in a yellow and white bathing suit, walking across the pool deck with a book in hand.

Marion Mackey sits on a chair and stretches her legs out, leaning back so that her face turns up towards the sun. Her eyes are hidden behind sunglasses.

Barbie watches this as if she's seeing something real—it looks real, and in fact, the bathing suit is one she remembers her mother wearing on a vacation they'd taken to Palm Springs when she was a teenager.

Outside, Marion Mackey opens her book to a page in the middle and appears to start reading. This is what she'd done the entire trip to Palm Springs, but Barbie had spent

most of their time there looking at a cute, tanned lifeguard, who had winked at her their first day at the pool.

“Barbara,” Marion had said to her with a warning in her voice. “That’s never going to happen.”

Barbie, pure and innocent as the driven snow, had looked up at her mother from where she’d spread a white towel along the side of the pool, stretching her young, lithe body out on the cement as if that were a comfortable position.

She’d somehow envisioned that the lifeguard would find her alluring, lying there in a red one-piece and sunglasses, looking aloof as her body soaked up the warmth of the sun from above and the cement from below.

Barbie had sat back up, pushing her sunglasses up to look at her mother. “What’s not going to happen?”

Marion put her book in her lap and looked at Barbie through her tinted lenses. “You and the hired help.”

“Mom!” Barbie said, surprised. She was still two years from meeting Todd Roman in the halls of her high school, and two years from incurring the wrath of her father, who would not agree that Todd or his family were a good match for Barbie and, ultimately, for the Mackeys.

As yet, she had no concept of who was “good enough” for her, and of who was off-limits based on class and economics.

Marion set the book on her lap facedown and slipped off her sunglasses. The hotel they were staying at in Palm Springs was glamorous and populated by other rich families on vacation, and the entire resort was ringed by the San Jacinto mountains

and the tall, still palm trees.

“You should hear this sooner rather than later,” Marion said to her daughter, pulling her knees up to her chest as she sat there, looking down at Barbie on the ground. “The way you feel on the inside doesn’t always match up to your station in life, but there are ways you’re expected to behave.”

“What does that mean?”

Marion squinted out at the mountain range.

“It means that I was born into a family with not enough money or ambition for my taste. My family thought that I was putting on airs, but I knew I wanted to go to school and to be someone. I made that happen for myself. And when I ran out of resources, I found myself a man whose ambitions matched my own.” Marion stopped and pressed her lips together before going on.

“But, on the inside, I’m still a girl from a family with modest means.

I still root for the underdog. I’m just not allowed to do it publicly.

There are expectations for how I’ll behave, even if I feel like someone different on the inside.

There are always expectations, Barbara.”

Barbie was still sitting on the ground, her bony behind hurting as it pressed into the hard cement. The handsome lifeguard was nowhere to be found. She shook her head. “So you and Daddy expect me to only like boys who come from rich families?”

Marion chuckled softly, looking at her daughter with fondness.

“Well.” She stopped and looked out at the mountains again.

“We expect you to only marry a man from a solid and appropriate family, but sometimes the heart wants what it wants, you know?” Marion laid back against her chair, stretching her legs out in front of her again and picking up her book.

“You can have all the crushes you want inside your head, but don’t ever let your father catch you kissing a pool boy or the son of one of our staff members, or there’ll be hell to pay. ”

Barbie remembers sitting there for a long time after her mother had gone back to her book, thinking about her warning.

In truth, she’d barely liked any boys, and had been busy trying to do well in school and to meet her parents’ expectations, but at some point the hormones kicked in, and she started to find them all cute.

The lifeguard, a boy in her eighth-grade science class, several of the boys who Ted played tennis with, and—God forbid—the son of one of the kitchen workers at their house, who was tall and Black with warm eyes and a smile that kick-started Barbie’s heart every time she saw him.

But how had her mother known about that ?

Huck makes noises in the back bedroom and Barbie stands up now, pushing herself up from the kitchen table with both hands.

The vision of her mother at the pool is gone, but her words ring in Barbie’s head as she walks down the hall to get her fussy three-year-old out of bed after his midday nap: “There are expectations for how I’ll behave, even if I feel like someone different on the inside.

There are always expectations, Barbara.”

Barbie picks up the warm body of her toddler, burying her face in the sweet smell of his neck and hair as he wraps his arms around her, eyes still at half-mast.

Of course there are expectations , she thinks.

And that’s what’s troubling her father and brother: that things need to look a certain way.

Politically, they don’t need her to help the less fortunate people in her own community, they need to show the world that they’re thinking bigger, that they’re helping to breed more progress-minded politicians for the future.

Barbie sets a fussy Huck on a chair at the table and pours him a glass of milk to drink while she makes him a peanut butter sandwich with thin slices of banana squished into the middle just how he likes it.

She’s going to take Jasper Wilkins’ advice and talk to her father and her brother, even though what she wants to do is slap them silly, with their expectations and their public faces.

Barbie might have grown up in that world, but she’d mostly left it behind.

First, when she’d married Todd against her father’s wishes, and finally, when her mother—her closest ally—had died.

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 10:59 am

And now it's time for her to take another step towards leaving the family fold. This time, maybe for good.

"This is one hell of an expensive meeting, Barbara," George Mackey grumbles, settling into the large leather chair at one end of the table in his attorney's office in Hartford, Connecticut.

Barbie had assured Todd that she needed to have a face-to-face with her father, and had corralled Carrie into pitching in with the boys for forty-eight hours so that she could fly home for this family meeting.

At her request, Jasper Wilkins had referred her to an attorney he knows from New Haven, and the man—a tall, foreboding attorney who bears more than a passing resemblance to Clark Gable—has driven the hour to be there in Hartford.

"Harrison Black," the attorney says, nodding crisply at everyone at the table as he takes a seat next to Barbie. "My client, I presume?" he asks her, offering a hand and shaking hers more gently than he would have shaken a man's.

"Barbara Roman," she says, blushing at the way her hand feels tiny in his large, strong one. She feels a rush of confidence as she realizes that Harrison Black is a take-charge kind of man, and with a smile, Barbie sits back in her chair to make eye contact with her father and brother.

Above the long, shiny table is a chandelier that throws sparks of light onto the polished wood, and George Mackey sits forward, folding his hands as he leans his elbows on the table and glowers at Harrison Black.

"I trust our attorneys have given you the paperwork that you requested," Senator Mackey says. "And I'm sure, as you can see, that we're all understanding that I have final say over what happens with my money."

Harrison Black clears his throat and snaps open a briefcase, pulling out a file that he slaps on the table. "With all due respect, Senator, I've read the paperwork, and I think it leaves some gray areas that could be open to interpretation."

"Such as?" George Mackey thunders. At his left sits Ted, who is watching Barbie with a mildly amused expression on his face.

Barbie knows good and well that when he received his own inheritance three years prior, he'd spent it on a boat and taken that boat out into the Atlantic Ocean with a captain, a full-time butler, a chef, a casino dealer, countless boxes of Cuban cigars, five friends, and a bevy of women who'd gotten paid to join them and keep the men company.

All she's asking to do is to use her own inheritance how she wants to, and it's infuriating beyond belief to watch her brother look at her as though she's asking to do something wildly outrageous with the money.

"As you know," Harrison Black says, flipping open the file and turning the loose pages one by one until he gets to the page he wants. "Marion Mackey died unexpectedly and, correct me if I'm wrong, there are still lingering questions surrounding her passing."

Senator Mackey's face goes beet red. "She drowned. Marion got drunk, and she wandered out onto the beach and drowned."

Harrison Black leaves an unfilled pause that feels like a canyon has opened up in the center of the room. Everyone around the table, Barbie included, hangs on the edge of

this massive gulf, waiting to see whether they're going to fall in.

"I've requested the police reports," Harrison Black says, returning to casually flipping pages. "And apparently there were some questions about how a woman who had only two or three glasses of wine in her system might have stumbled out onto the beach and drowned in a shallow tide pool."

"She just did," George says loudly, spreading his palms to the sky as if this is the most obvious thing in the universe. "That's all there was to it."

"I beg to differ," Harrison Black says. "As luck would have it, my brother-in-law is on the police force in the next township over from where Mrs. Mackey drowned, and he was able to ask around. There were definite indications that the police had... backed away from the case, if you will."

Barbie's heart thumps wildly in her chest, and she feels faint. There were indications that the police backed away from finding out the true cause of her mother's death? Why would they ever leave a woman's untimely death a mystery?

"That's preposterous!" Senator Mackey shouts, slamming a meaty fist on the table and causing everyone to jump. "They determined that it was an accident. Case closed."

Harrison Black looks at George Mackey across the table and says nothing for the longest minute that Barbie has ever lived through. The ticking of a clock on the mantel of the room is audible as everyone sits there, waiting to see who will crack first.

But when Harrison Black finally speaks, it's not because he's folding—on the contrary, it's because he's making his next move.

He slides a paper across the table to George Mackey.

"I've written up a legally binding document for you to sign that releases the funds to Barbara Roman that were intended as her inheritance from her mother.

Marion Mackey set up these trust funds for her children to receive the money on their respective thirtieth birthdays, whether or not she was alive.

That she isn't with us anymore does not make the fund null and void, or put its delivery into question. "

"No," George Mackey says with wild eyes. "No. I think I'm a better judge of what's best for my daughter and for my family than you are, Mr. Black."

A slow, knowing smile spreads across Harrison Black's face.

"Well," he says, standing up and closing the file.

"There's no statute of limitations on murder or manslaughter in New Jersey, so perhaps we'll be seeing more of you in the press than you'd bargained for, Senator.

" Harrison Black drops the file into his briefcase and snaps it shut with finality and gives George Mackey a smile. "The ball is in your court, sir."

jo

. . .

They've done it: Bill and Jo have arranged the cruise, gotten her mother to fly down from Minnesota to stay with the children for five days, and gotten themselves to Miami to embark upon a cruise to the Bahamas.

"This is the smallest room I've ever seen," Jo says in wonder, turning around a few times inside a cabin the size of a closet. She isn't even sure where to put her suitcase, but it feels perfect.

"We won't be spending much time here," Bill says. He's stepped into one corner of the room and is assessing the porthole window and the bed that's smaller than the one they sleep in at home. "But I can ask about an upgrade if you want. I didn't know we'd be packed in here like sardines."

Jo laughs and shakes her head, feeling giddy excitement about the start of this adventure. It's never occurred to her to ask her mother to watch the children so that she and Bill can do something alone, and while she'd been hesitant at first, she's now thrilled with their decision to get away.

"I love it," Jo says. She walks over to Bill and puts her arms around his waist, letting the side of her head rest on his chest. "It's perfect."

Bill relaxes in her arms and puts his hands on her lower back. "Do you want to go upstairs and get a drink so we can wave goodbye to Miami as we set sail?"

“Oh, let’s!” Jo says, stepping away from him. She slips her feet back into the low heels that she’s worn for the occasion, and they head up to the bar on the top deck.

With two Harvey Wallbangers in hand, Bill finds Jo holding a spot for them at the railing overlooking the Port of Miami. The mood in the air is festive; the ship’s long, low foghorn blows above them, and ever so slowly, they push away from the dock.

“Cheers,” Bill says, putting the rim of his glass to Jo’s and clinking it. “To us, and to a few days of peace and quiet.”

Jo sips her cocktail and turns to face the open water.

She is, of course, happy to have this time with her husband, but there’s still a nagging part of her that isn’t sure whether five days together will be the balm that soothes all the little cuts and scrapes that they’ve incurred over the past few years.

All around them, people are cheering, and a speaker plays tropical steel drum music to put the crowd in a festive mood. Jo smiles at Bill and then looks out at the sea.

“Bill,” she says, resting her elbows on the railing and holding her drink in both hands. “This was a good idea. And I’m glad that you finally agreed to talk to Dr. Sheinbaum.”

“But?”

“But,” Jo says on a sigh. “I feel like a lot has happened, and I’m not sure how to bridge some of the gaps between us.”

“Isn’t this a start?” Bill says in a low voice, moving closer to her so that no one will overhear their conversation.

“Yes.” Jo nods. “It is. We’re making time for us now. But moving to Florida was hard, and finding my way here was hard too. I didn’t come here with a mission, like you did, and when I tell you that you dove into it and lost yourself in work, I mean it.”

Bill glances around; he’s clearly uncomfortable having this discussion amid a group of strangers.

“Don’t get me wrong, Bill—I’m proud of you. And so are the kids. You’re part of an elite group that gets to do things that others only dream of, but it doesn’t mean that those of us left on the ground don’t have feelings, too.”

Those feelings, which Jo deals with all the time, suddenly come spilling forth and she catches a sob before it escapes, putting the back of her hand to her lips and closing her eyes.

“Jojo,” Bill whispers, touching her arm.

He takes the drink from her other hand and leads her away from the railing to a quiet spot under an overhang.

Bill nods at a chair and Jo sits while he puts their drinks on a small, round table next to her.

He sits and leans forward in his chair so that their knees are nearly touching.

“I know this has been hard. And I admire all the things you’ve done to make Stardust Beach a home for us.

You really put yourself out there by jumping into volunteering at the hospital, and your writing...

” Bill looks out into the distance for a moment, blinks, and looks back at her.

“Your writing was hard for me at first. You’d found something that you clearly felt passionate about, and it kept you up at night until all hours.

I felt like you were going in a different direction—one that I couldn’t follow. ”

Jo is incredulous. “Seriously? You felt like I was going in a different direction? Bill, you were headed towards the moon . How do the kids and I compete with that?”

“You don’t have to,” Bill says simply. Their fellow cruise-goers wander by in dresses and slacks, talking cheerfully about what they’ll do in the Bahamas, stopping to pose for pictures with the ocean behind them, and debating how much they’ll be able to eat at the dinner buffet.

Bill waits for the knot of people to pass before he goes on.

“You don’t have to compete, Jo. Not you, not the children.

You’re my reason—if I go to the moon and come back to anything but the four of you, then what was the point? ”

Jo’s chest heaves; her intention all along has been to go on this cruise and reconnect with her husband, not to dump her feelings on Bill the moment they’ve left solid ground.

Jo suddenly feels like she can’t breathe. She bends at the waist, letting her head fall towards her knees. Bill looks around at the people walking by, then reaches over and puts a hand on her back.

“Jojo,” he whispers. “What’s going on? Are you okay?”

Jo nods, but doesn't lift her head. "I'm fine, Bill. I'm always fine. I have to be."

"You don't," he assures her. "It's okay not to be okay sometimes. Dr. Sheinbaum taught me that."

Jo laughs a little, and when she finally lifts her head and looks at Bill, he's startled.

"Oh," he says. "I thought you were crying."

"No," she says, laughing even more and feeling like she's been through an entire storm of emotions in less than five minutes. "I'm actually laughing."

Bill's eyes are dark with worry and concern. "But at what? What made you laugh all of a sudden?"

Jo breathes in deeply, straightens her shoulders, and wipes the tears off her cheeks. "I guess it was just the mention of Dr. Sheinbaum," she says. "So much of what we've been through now involves her, and it just struck me as funny that the three of us are in this together."

A deep frown creases Bill's brow. "It might feel that way," he says, "but in reality, it's just you and me, Jo."

"Oh, it is not," she says firmly, her smile fading. "It's not and it's never been." As they square off with one another, the ship pushes farther away from shore, and all they can see in the distance is blue water. "First there was Margaret—she was always there, even when she wasn't."

Bill drops his eyes and his shoulders visibly round as he slumps forward. "Jo," he says in weak protest. "Don't."

But Jo has just gotten started. “And then there was Jeanie Florence.” Bill is clearly about to say more as his head snaps up and he meets Jo’s gaze, but she goes on rapidly.

“And don’t you deny that, William Booker.

You’ve had eyes for her, and even a blind woman could see it.

I don’t know what’s gone on there, but it needs to stop. ”

Bill’s silence speaks volumes, and instead of replying, he puts his elbows on his knees and simply listens.

The deck has cleared—at least where they’re sitting—and so Jo stands, turning her back to Bill and her eyes to the water.

“And now we have Dr. Eve Sheinbaum in our business.” Jo glances back at her husband, folding her arms across her chest. Their Harvey Wallbangers have been sitting on the table and the ice is melting, leaving puddles of condensation as the maraschino cherries bob in the vodka and fresh orange juice.

“Are you blaming me for the fight last New Year’s Eve?

For getting us into a position where I’m required to have a therapist in order to keep my job?

” Bill asks incredulously. “Because, Jo, I can’t apologize again for losing my temper that night.

If I’d been able to reel it in, I would have.

” He looks like he’s begging her to understand.

Pleading for her forgiveness. “But you know what?” Bill asks, putting all ten fingertips to his own chest. “I think I’m becoming a better man because of it.

Going to therapy has shown me I have growing to do, and I’ve learned a lot.

I think you and I are going to grow, too. ”

“Which is why I wanted to go all along,” Jo says, turning around fully now to look down at her husband as he sits there.

On the horizon, the afternoon sun is sinking into a hazy pink-orange sky.

“I thought we’d learn something about our marriage, and, frankly, I saw how much you were changing just by going to talk to Dr. Sheinbaum on your own.

” Jo stops and bites her lower lip. “I think I was jealous.”

“Of Dr. Sheinbaum?” Bill asks, looking like he’s ready to defend himself against a wild accusation that he’s having an affair with the therapist.

But that’s not where Jo is going at all.

“Yes, of Dr. Sheinbaum,” she says, her tone and demeanor shifting again and becoming soft.

Jo sits back down in the chair that faces Bill’s, and this time she intentionally sits near the edge so that her knees will touch his.

“But not the way you think. I was jealous because she got to hear all the things you

were thinking and feeling. I wanted to be the person you could talk to, Bill.”

“You are,” he says hoarsely, his eyes wet. “You are , Jo.”

She holds his gaze before responding. “I was,” Jo says, reaching for her drink and taking a sip of the watered-down cocktail. “And I want to be again. I want you to feel safe with me. I want you to want me. I want to be the same woman you married.”

Page 30

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 10:59 am

“But you’re not,” Bill says vehemently. “You’re not her anymore, Jo. You’re someone better.”

Jo blinks back the unexpected tears that come as he says the words she’s wanted to hear for so long.

“You’re stronger, you’re a mother, you’re a writer, and you’ve been my partner for fifteen years.

You’re so much more than you were when I met you, and baby, you were a lot even then.

” Bill reaches for her hands and holds them in his.

In response, Jo knots her fingers through Bill’s.

A steel drum version of “Unchained Melody” comes over the speakers, and Bill stands, tugging Jo to a standing position. She looks at him with curiosity.

“Can I have this dance?” Bill asks, though all he really would need to do is to pull her into his arms and sway. Jo nods and slips her hand into his as he places one hand on the small of her back.

An elderly couple walks by, hand-in-hand, and the woman smiles at them as she sees them dancing. Jo smiles back and then rests her forehead against Bill’s collarbone.

“Jo?” he says into her ear as they move out into the open water. “It’s a new year, and

we're new people. We just need to work together, and I promise you, we'll be fine."

Jo doesn't look up at him; instead, she nods against his chest, not wanting him to see the questions in her eyes. Because Jo, for all of her imagination, is having a hard time picturing how everything is going to be okay in the blink of an eye. She can't even agree with him out loud.

"I love you," Bill says to her, pulling her even closer.

"I love you too," Jo says, still not looking at him. At least that much is true: she does love him. And when she says it, she means it with all her heart.

When the boat docks again at the Port of Miami five days later, Bill and Jo are tanned, relaxed, and more at ease with one another than they've been in a long time.

Jo wakes up that morning and stretches her arms in the narrow bed; she and Bill have quickly come to enjoy the forced proximity, and rather than tossing and turning, they've found their way into one another's arms each night, then rolled up like potato bugs around each other, cuddling until the sun peaks through the porthole window.

"Hi," Jo says sleepily, sitting up with the sheet over her naked body as she watches Bill step out of the tiny bathroom with a towel around his waist. He looks happy.

"Morning, Jojo," he says, holding the towel closed with one hand. "How'd you sleep?"

Jo reaches for the satin robe that she'd flung over the foot of the bed and puts her arms through it, belting it as she stands. "I slept like a baby being rocked in a cradle all night long. Something about being on the water has knocked me out every night."

"Are you sure it's not the cocktails and the things we've been getting up to after

dark?” He turns to her and wiggles an eyebrow suggestively.

Jo laughs. “Okay, possibly those things, too.” Jo walks around him, opening up the small chest of drawers and taking out a cotton dress, a bra, and a pair of underwear.

“I know we get back around eleven, but I was thinking I could shower and get dressed, and maybe we could have one last breakfast together before we dock.”

Bill is already stepping into a pair of shorts and zipping them over his white briefs. “Sounds good to me. Should I go ahead of you and get the newspaper and some mimosas going?”

Jo stands on tiptoes and kisses him. “Yes, please.”

They’ve sat by the railing each morning, sharing the paper, a carafe of coffee, and another carafe of mimosas, which has rapidly become how Jo wants to start every single day. She turns on the shower and steps out of her robe as the stateroom door clicks shut and Bill disappears.

Thirty minutes later, Jo walks through the dining room and spots Bill, sitting at a table for two like they’ve done each morning.

He’s got The Miami Herald opened on the table, with the Arts she’s been so busy working on her book, imagining the time travel between her main characters, crafting the romance, and getting the pages typed out and turned in, that she honestly hasn’t checked in with her children the way she likes to or knows that she should.

“What other ideas?” Jo asks cautiously. Knowing her children and their hopes and dreams is a big part of who Jo is, and she feels as though Bill knowing more than she does is a sign of her failure as a mother.

Bill won't look her in the eye. "He's talked about the military."

"When?" Jo huffs. Her voice has gone up an octave and a decibel, and Bill glances around before meeting her gaze.

Bill shrugs. "One evening when we were out playing catch together in the yard."

Jo is miffed. The idea that she'd been inside the house, cleaning up after they'd all eaten her meat loaf or her pork chops and green beans, while Bill got to be the one outside bonding with Jimmy just doesn't sit right with her.

She's the boy's mother, after all; shouldn't the years of kissing boo-boos, tying shoelaces, taking him to the dentist, and tucking him in at night while leaving the hall light on buy her some sort of first dibs when it comes to Jimmy's plans and dreams? Apparently not.

"No," Jo says without thinking. "Absolutely not."

A cloud passes over Bill's face. "Absolutely not what?"

"The military, Bill. No." Jo can feel vehemence rising in her chest. "I'm not letting our only son get shipped off to Vietnam," she says, putting her empty mimosa glass on the table between them. "It's out of the question."

"Jo," he says in a measured tone. "I served in Korea. Your dad was in the Second World War. We're a family of men who don't shy away from our duties."

"And I admire that," Jo says hotly. "But my son doesn't need to be a hero. He needs to be alive."

Bill leans forward across the table, dropping his voice so that only she can hear it.

“Jo,” he warns her. “We’re on a cruise with people our age and older. The majority of the men you see here fought for our freedom, and did so with honor. Don’t let them hear you denigrating their service.”

“I’m not,” Jo says. “I admire the people who’ve served our country, and you know I’m grateful, but...” Her eyes fill with tears and she reaches for her coffee as a distraction, holding the cup in both hands. “I can’t let Jimmy do that.”

This isn’t the time or the place for them to start talking about such things, and so instead of pushing the issue, Bill reaches out and takes her hand, and they sit there quietly together, watching the waves as they pass over them, making their way to shore.

There will be plenty of time to discuss the children and the things they agree and don’t agree on when it comes to the kids’ futures. On Tuesday, they’ll be back in Dr. Sheinbaum’s office.

Jo sits there in her chair until the very last possible moment, then goes back to the stateroom to pack her small suitcase with the dresses she’d worn dancing on the ship, the swimsuit she’s rinsed but that still smells like chlorine, and the tiny lingerie bag full of her unmentionables.

She knows it’s a trip she won’t forget, but she can’t help wondering whether these days with Bill have truly re-cemented their relationship, or whether they’ve just been a band-aid to hold things together while they wait for the next tidal wave to knock them down.

barbie

. . .

The needs of just her own community and its surrounding areas are staggering to Barbie. She's taken to spending Huck's naptime making phone calls, and with each day that passes, she has information on more programs that need funding, assistance, and volunteers.

"It's so much," Barbie says to Carrie breathlessly as they walk around the perimeter of Cape Kennedy.

It was Carrie's idea to start a Walk-a-thon to raise money for the library in the same neighborhood as the First Baptist Gospel Church, and the PR department at NASA had been on board with them doing the fundraiser on a Saturday by mapping a route around the edges of the property, so long as they could invite full press coverage of the event.

Carrie twists her long ponytail as they walk, tossing it back over her shoulder.

It's an overcast day in mid-February, and she and Barbie are walking a few yards behind Jo and Jude.

Frankie, who has baby Lucas with her, is pushing him in a pram with large wheels, wandering around the parking lot slowly and waving at them as they pass.

"You mean the needs of the people we've been working with?" Carrie says, guessing

the direction of Barbie's thoughts.

"Yes! Just from talking to Sam Watkins, I've realized that the things we do only scratch the surface of what their neighborhood needs."

Carrie pushes her sunglasses on top of her head and looks at Barbie. "You and Sam have really hit it off." It's not a suggestive comment, but Barbie is hyper-aware that she and Sam have forged a bond that could look, to outsiders, like something closer than it is.

"I respect him a lot," Barbie says. "And I think their church is really lovely. Warm and inviting."

Carrie has tied her lightweight sweater around her waist as they've walked and warmed up. She glances back over her shoulder to make sure no one is right behind them.

"But you think he's handsome, right? I mean, he is handsome. Everyone can see that."

"Sure," Barbie says carefully, remembering the way his profile had looked in candlelight. "He is a handsome man. But it's not like that—for either of us."

Carrie shoots her a knowing look. "Babe," she says, patting Barbie playfully on the arm. "It's always like that for men."

Barbie thinks about this as they walk on, trying to get in as many laps around the Cape as they can.

During the time that she'd taken pledges for the Walk-a-thon, Barbie had gotten enough financial commitments that she's earning over five dollars for every lap she

does, and her goal is to do ten laps, though that will take the better part of the morning and run through lunchtime.

As they approach the main building, they see Dave Huggins, NASA's official photographer, kneeling on the asphalt and getting shots of the ladies who pass him by.

Barbie and Carrie had roped in seventeen other wives of astronauts to take part, and with everyone's fundraising efforts, it's looking to be a fairly successful event.

Barbie can't wait to collect all the pledges, total up the funds they've earned, and deliver a check to the library that will allow them to buy more books and to hire an extra librarian so that they can keep their doors open longer and offer more programs.

"I'd like to think it's not always like that," Barbie says, smiling for Dave Huggins as they pass him by. His shutter clicks a few times, and she turns back to Carrie. "I think there are some cases where it's just mutual admiration, you know?"

Carrie shrugs. "I'd like to think that. For instance, if our husbands are working closely with other women, I want to believe that it's totally on the up and up, right?" She nudges Barbie with her elbow.

"Of course," Barbie says. "However, I know my own father didn't always work alongside other women without having a deeper interest in them. And that's always bothered me."

"Probably bothered your mom, too," Carrie says, then clamps a hand over her mouth. "Barbie, I'm sorry! I shouldn't have said that. It's not my place to make comments about your parents like that."

Barbie waves a hand at her. "Oh, you're fine."

We're friends, Carrie, you can comment." She walks along quietly for a bit, remembering the muffled accusations behind closed doors as her parents had fought during her childhood.

"I'm just saying that while I know some men can't keep it zipped, I think a lot of them have other things on their mind. "

Carrie nods and puts her sunglasses back on to cut the glare from the overcast sky.

She's chewing gum, and she blows a small bubble and pops it with a loud snap .

"Of course. And, to be fair, Sam is a particularly good guy. I think he really appreciates people being willing to help other people, so I don't want to talk badly about him and suggest he's after a married woman.

I'm just saying," she says, nudging Barbie again, "that he's pretty cute, and I figured you'd noticed. "

Barbie stays quiet as they walk on, and finally, rounding the edge of the fence line, she speaks up again. "You know, I really won't feel like I'm fulfilling my potential if I can't find a way to be of service--even if only financially--to people who are less fortunate than me."

Carrie glances at her, swinging her arms as they walk. "Amen, sister," she says. "I knew I liked you when we met, even if my first impression was that you were a cute cheerleader who married a Ken doll."

At this, Barbie laughs. "You think Todd looks like a Ken doll?"

"Oh, absolutely." Carrie snaps her gum again. "And I mean that in the very nicest way. He's like... Astronaut Ken."

Barbie laughs again. "He is handsome," she says, thinking of how cute Todd looks in the morning after he's showered and shaved and dressed for work. "But did you really think I was some bubblehead?"

"Barb, no--not a bubblehead. Just not quite as civically minded as you actually are. Have you always been this way?"

"No, not necessarily," Barbie admits. "I think, in my heart, I always cared about other people, but growing up with money, in a big house, with everything I ever wanted, it sort of let me live in blissful ignorance.

I knew that something I did when I was a very small girl got a staff member fired at my house, but it wasn't until fairly recently that I really understood the implications of that. "

Carrie looks at her with interest as they march on, starting their third lap together. "Go on."

"Well, I was sad that Neville, one of our butlers, got fired--"

"A butler ?" Carrie interrupts, eyebrows shooting towards the sky. "Sorry." She holds up a hand to stop herself.

"Yeah, we had a pretty good-sized staff around the house. And Neville got fired for going against my parents' wishes and getting me cookies when I wouldn't finish my dinner."

Carrie looks stricken. "Wow."

"It was absolutely a 'wow,'" Barbie admits.

"I was sad as a kid, but as an adult, I realized his job was what fed his family.

And that, as a colored person, his family was already operating in a different socioeconomic strata than my family.

Losing his job might have meant that finding new work was even harder--who wants to interview for a new job by admitting you got fired from your last one?

" Barbie clamps her mouth shut and shakes her head.

"I just didn't think about all of it for a really long time.

And once I realized how divided our country is--and how divided our communities are--I just knew that doing something productive with my inheritance was the only option. "

"And how is that looking now?"

"The meeting we had with the lawyers was... interesting." Barbie had come back from Connecticut and stayed pretty mum on the whole thing, but now that she and Carrie are alone and without the children underfoot to interrupt every few minutes, she feels more like talking.

"My father can be a bully when he wants to."

"And you feel like he's bullying you?"

Barbie shrugs one shoulder. "I guess so. Yes. He wants to intimidate me, and I feel like I have enough of my mother in me that I'm not going to just roll over because he says so."

“How far are you willing to take this? Like, will you go to trial?”

“I won’t have to.”

“You seem pretty sure about that.”

Barbie considers this, realizing as she does that she knows how her father will respond. “I am sure of it. My attorney made some great points, and actually, he kind of turned the tables and bullied George Mackey, which, I can tell you, doesn’t happen often.”

Carrie tosses her long hair over one shoulder and gives a sharp “Ha!”

“I’m serious. My whole life, he’s been the one who does the yelling. He makes the rules, and he decides what’s what. I’m sure me giving him pushback hasn’t sat right with him at all. For all I know, he’s writing me out of his will as we speak.”

“And how will that make you feel if he does?”

Up ahead, Jo and Jude stop for a water break and talk to Frankie, both of them peering into the pram at baby Lucas.

They’re far out of earshot, so Barbie goes on.

“I think I would feel okay with that. I’m a married woman and I don’t need him to support me by any means.

But I would feel bad for my kids, because I think he might punish them as well.

And my boys don’t deserve that. If he has money set aside for them to attend university, then that money should be theirs and not based on how he’s feeling about

me.”

“Do you really think he’d stoop that low?”

Barbie squints at the way the clouds are parting, revealing a tear of blue sky and a stream of warm sunlight. The hair on her arms stands on end. She nods. “I think he would,” she says. “I really do.”

Furthermore, she’s seen him do it before. As the women walk on, Barbie is hit like a lightning bolt with a memory that she’s tucked so far into her subconscious that it feels like it never happened.

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 10:59 am

It had been the month before the fateful trip to the Jersey shore with her family, the one that led to her mother's untimely death.

Barbie, spending her last weekend at home before she and Todd got married and moved into their own little home, had overheard her parents talking in one of the sitting rooms. She'd paused outside the door, although their voices were low and even; neither was shouting, and nothing in their tones jumped out at her.

Still, Barbie had paused, holding a stack of freshly laundered clothing that she'd intended to take to her room and pack for her move as a new bride, and listened briefly as her father spoke.

"You will do no such thing, Marion," he'd said. "Leaving this house means leaving me, and I have a career to think of. No politician of good moral standing has a wife who lives apart from him."

"It's not permanent," Marion Mackey had said. "Nothing concrete like that."

"Yet," George countered. "You mean nothing yet . But that's what you're telling me, isn't it? That you'd like to leave, set up your own house, and eventually divorce me, either legally or just unofficially, so that you can whore around and do whatever you damn well please?"

"No, George," Marion sputtered. "There's no one else."

"She'd paused, and Barbie stood outside the door, hugging her laundry to her chest as she held her breath.

“There’s no one else for me ,” Marion had gone on.

“But I understand that for you, there have been many other women. There’s probably another woman right now, for all I know. ”

“This is not part of the discussion,” Barbie’s father said. “Not part of it at all. The bottom line is that you’re going nowhere, and no one will see me living here alone like some sad divorcee. That’s not happening.”

There was a clatter from inside the room, and Barbie sucked in a sharp breath; her mother had undoubtedly given in to the fiery temper that always seemed to trip her up.

Barbie imagined her throwing a pillow from the couch and knocking over a glass figurine, or toppling an ashtray onto the Oriental rug with one brush of the hand across an end table.

“The children are grown, George. Barbara will be married in a month, and I’ve done my job here. You don’t need or want me anymore.”

“What’s gotten into you? Have you lost your damn mind?”

Marion sobbed inside the room, and Barbie nearly reached out to push the door open; she’d wanted to go to her mother in that moment, but instead, she pressed her body up against the striped wallpaper of the hallway and kept listening.

“You’ve treated me like a piece of furniture for years,” Marion Mackey sobbed, her voice sounding firm but soaked in tears. “You never loved me.”

“I never loved you?” George asked incredulously.

“You married me because you wanted comfort. Children. A life of ease. And you got all those things. And now you’re done with me?”

No way—you’re my wife, and your job doesn’t stop just because those children you wanted so badly have grown up and left.

” Barbie’s father had paused there, and she’d puzzled for a moment over this turn of phrase that her mother had used: had she been the only one to want children?

Hadn’t George even wanted to be a father?

But she didn’t have time to ponder it too deeply, as her mother had gone on.

“George,” she begged, “I can’t keep going on as the wife who pretends she doesn’t know what her husband is up to.

Every time you leave for the capitol, or to go to D.C.

, I know that you’re with another woman.

Do you know what that does to me?” Wisely, George said nothing.

“You stopped touching me long ago. As my body changed, you stopped wanting it. Do you know what that does to a woman?”

George cleared his throat, his words coming out with a tinge of hesitation. “I assumed you didn’t want me to. When you—when your?—“

“Menopause, George. It’s called menopause.”

“Right.” Barbie’s father cleared his throat again. “I assumed that meant you were...”

“Undesirable?”

“No, uninterested.”

“Well, I was still interested, and I am now. And there are plenty of men out there who are interested in me.”

Another scuffle ensued, and again, Barbie felt tempted to push open the door, as she knew her father well enough to imagine that perhaps her mother’s insouciance frustrated him enough that he might place his hands on her.

“You will not be leaving,” George said. “And that’s final.”

“Stop me,” Marion challenged.

There was a stony silence from behind the door, and Barbie once again held her breath as she waited.

“You came to me with nothing, Marion. Nothing. And you’ll leave the same way you came.”

“You would cut your own wife—the mother of your children—off at the knees? You would make no provisions for my safety, my shelter, or my happiness?” Marion asked, her words sad but also colored with the knowledge that she was speaking the truth: her husband would not pay for her to start again.

“Are you prepared to walk out of here with just the clothes on your back? To get a job, Marion?” George Mackey scoffed. “Are you going to work in an office somewhere? I don’t think old women get hired to do the work of beautiful, young secretaries,” he taunted.

This time there was no sound of things falling or being thrown, but the door was yanked open, and Marion stood in the doorway, halfway into the hall where she could face her husband with the anger that radiated off her in waves.

She had not looked yet to see her daughter standing just feet away, hand over her mouth, eyes wide in horror.

“You’ll regret this,” Marion said quietly, looking at George inside the room. “I will make your life a living hell if you don’t let me leave.”

Barbie could picture her father inside, examining his fingernails, or staring out the window. His tone was bitter. “You won’t,” he said calmly. “You won’t leave, and you won’t make my life a living hell. You can’t afford to.”

With that, Marion backed out of the room and hurried down the hall in the opposite direction, never looking back to see that Barbie was right there and had heard the entire thing.

“He will definitely stoop that low,” Barbie says of her father. “But I haven’t heard from him in the weeks since that meeting, so I guess I’ll just have to wait and see.”

Jo and Jude catch up with them then, and rather than talking about it anymore, Carrie just reaches over and squeezes Barbie’s hand quickly as they walk on, this time in a group of four.

“Oh, Barbara Sue, how I love you,” Todd croons, coming up behind Barbie in the kitchen and wrapping his arms around her waist as he tucks his chin into the crook between her neck and shoulder. He sways slightly while she has her hands in the soapy water, kissing her on the cheek.

“Todd,” Barbie says distractedly, forgetting her part in their little game.

Since high school, he's jokingly called her "Barbara Sue," though her name is actually Barbara Jean.

Sometimes he changes the tune from songs so that he can use her pretend name, and one of his favorites is to make "Peggy Sue" into a whole new song.

It's a silly and playful tradition between them, but Barbie's mind is elsewhere, so she forgoes her usual protesting, which is the part that Todd loves best.

"What's up, my love?" Todd releases her and goes to the refrigerator, where he takes out a beer and pops it open.

Barbie rinses the soap suds off her hands and dries them on a towel as she turns around.

She's wearing a red-and-white checked apron over her casual dress, and her hair is tucked behind both ears.

She can hear the boys playing with their trucks in the front room.

"Get me one of those?" she asks, lifting her chin at the bottle of beer as she wipes her hands.

Todd opens a beer for her. "You don't usually drink after dinner on a weeknight," he says.

"No, but I also don't usually hear from my lawyer to schedule a phone call about an important family matter, and I'm kind of on pins and needles."

"Barb!" Todd nearly chokes on the sip of beer he's just taken. "Why didn't you say anything?"

Barbie tosses the dishtowel on the counter and puts the bottle of beer to her lips. The cold liquid slides down her throat before she answers.

“I got the call right before you came home, and I thought we should get through dinner and talk about it.”

“Okay,” Todd says, leaning against the counter. “Let’s talk.”

The details have been running through Barbie’s mind all evening, and she isn’t sure what to make of it.

“Harrison Black, the attorney from New Haven, called and said that he wants to have a call tomorrow morning at nine o’clock, and that he would be with my father and his attorney.

I obviously don’t need to fly up for it,” Barbie says, holding the beer bottle between both hands, “but I need to be fully present, because I think it’s going to be big news. ”

Todd’s eyebrows go up. “You think he’s going to give in?”

Barbie gives a single shake of her head. A slow, thoughtful shake. “I’m not sure. That doesn’t seem like him.”

“Hmm,” Todd says. “Okay. Well, do you think he’s going to make you an offer of some sort?”

This makes Barbie want to laugh; her father isn’t one for offers or for meeting halfway. “That would surprise me,” she says. “I can’t picture him doing anything like that.”

“People can surprise you, you know,” Todd says. He taps his fingers absentmindedly

on his beer bottle and looks out the kitchen window. “So go into it thinking the best—if you can.”

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 10:59 am

Barbie smiles, but it's half-hearted. It's one of the things she loves most about Todd, his easy, glass-half-full mentality.

Even when he'd been having vertigo and seeing doctors, he'd worked to keep his sense of optimism, and though he'd been worried about work and his future, Barbie had appreciated the way he never lost his temper with her or the kids.

To her, Todd is and will always be the same guy she met in high school: easy, handsome, funny, and a true partner.

"I'll try to be open-minded," Barbie says, though her stomach is churning, and she feels like sleep will be hard to come by. "I'm going to ask Carrie if she'll take Huck for an hour or so in the morning just to make sure he's occupied while I'm on the call."

"Good thinking," Todd says. "And you'll call me at work after? Let me know how it goes?"

"Of course I will." Barbie sets her beer on the counter as Todd approaches, setting his right next to hers. He wraps his arms around her and pulls her close.

"I'm proud of you, Barbie," he whispers, holding her tightly. "You've got an idea, and you're willing to see it through, even if it means poking a hornets' nest."

Barbie laughs at this, but with no mirth or joy. "Yeah, my dad is a bit of a hornets' nest," she agrees, burying her face against her husband's chest. "But it's time that someone stood up to him."

Todd could say a million things here, as he isn't her father's biggest fan, but instead, he kisses her, making her forget for a moment that she's got troubles or worries at all. This, too, is Todd's gift—the ability to kiss her until she loses all her senses and forgets whatever is bothering her.

“Just to make sure we're all here and accounted for,” the attorney says on the other end of the line the next morning. “I have George and Theodore Mackey in my office, as well as Harrison Black, Mrs. Roman's attorney, and on the line here we have Barbara Roman, née Mackey.”

“Good morning,” Barbie says, trying to hold her voice as firm as she possibly can.

“Mrs. Roman,” her father's attorney says. “We have scheduled this call and this meeting with your attorney to solidify the terms of the arrangement going forward with regards to your inheritance.”

Barbie's heart is thumping so loudly in her chest that the blood rushes to her head, filling her ears with the sound of the ocean. She nods, then realizes that no one can see that. “Yes, sir,” she says, waiting to hear more.

“Your father,” the attorney goes on, “is willing to make a compromise.”

At the sound of the word compromise, Barbie's heart nearly stops its wild race. She's never known George Mackey to compromise, but she knows in her heart that, no matter what it is, it's not going to be what she wants.

“Your father is prepared to offer you ten percent of the total of your inheritance to use towards community betterment in whichever ways you choose, so long as you agree to do so with the express understanding that the foundation, henceforth called ‘The Mackey Foundation,’ will be monitored by an appointed board that needs to give final approval on all donations.”

“Wait,” Barbie interrupts. “Please tell me how needing board approval comes anywhere near me spending my money in ‘whichever way I choose.’”

“Mrs. Roman,” the attorney says, sounding as though he’s explaining something very obvious to a petulant teenage girl. “Your father isn’t willing to just hand over a lump sum of money to a woman and let her toss it to the wind. This is a family matter, and it needs to be handled by the family .”

“This is where I’d like to interrupt,” Harrison Black says, speaking before Barbie can.

“This isn’t a family matter at all. It’s a matter of a politician wanting to spin a situation in his favor, and of a father wanting to retain some control over his fully grown, married daughter.

Everything about this attempt to strike a deal flies in the face of legal protocol.

” He sounds frustrated. “I’ve done my legwork here, and there is no precedent for Senator Mackey to attempt to re-write his wife’s will, or to re-route the funds that she, quite legally, I might add, earmarked for her daughter. ”

“Mr. Black,” the other attorney says, sounding condescending. “A man simply wishes to guide his daughter in a financial matter that is, under the circumstances, more involved than she understands. Mrs. Roman is not prepared to oversee a sum of money on her own, and?—“

“What gives you the right to say that?” Harrison Black thunders. “What gives you the right to determine that my client isn’t prepared to oversee her own money?”

“Well,” the attorney says. “First, she’s going to need someone to co-sign on all of the bank accounts and paperwork.”

“That’s none of your concern,” Harrison Black counters. “She’s fully capable of handling and figuring out her own banking situation.”

The attorney changes tack. “Listen,” he says, speaking as though Barbie isn’t within earshot.

“I understand having a soft spot for the fairer sex, but handing what amounts to over a hundred thousand dollars over to a girl with no mind for business is the same thing as setting fire to a pile of money.”

Barbie stops herself from gasping audibly; she'd been unaware of the sum of money, and while she'd hoped it might be enough to build a new nursery at the church, or to fund a holiday meal for the war veterans who turned out in droves at the soup kitchens, she did not know that the amount of money left to her by her mother would make it possible for her to do so much good.

Barbie puts a hand to her mouth and holds back the tears, grateful that she's alone on her end of the phone line, and not sitting across from a table of stern men, including her father.

"My client has given me permission to request that the case of your wife's death be reopened in New Jersey," Harrison Black says, dropping the threat that he and Barbie had hoped they wouldn't have to use.

"Mrs. Roman has further questions about the death of Mrs. Mackey, and we'd like the police to take another look. "

Barbie hears a loud thump on the other end of the line, and she can picture her father's red, angry face as he pounds the table with a fist.

"Dammit, Barbara," George Mackey says. "Can't you leave well enough alone? Can't

you?"

At this, Barbie does start to cry, though the tears are muffled by her hand, and the only sound that's audible on the phone is her hiccuping.

"Can't you just accept the gift I'm trying to give you, and run the foundation the way I need you to run it, in the public eye, while you mind your own children and husband down there in Florida? Do you need to be so damn headstrong and like your mother?"

There they are--the words Barbie has dreaded hearing from her father all along: the accusation that she's too much like her mother.

As if it's a bad thing to be open-hearted and open-minded.

As if wanting to reach out to others and offer them a hand is such a fatal personality flaw.

As though seeing the world as it really is and not just through the filter of money and comfort were terrible character traits and that Barbie should want to overcome them immediately.

Finally, Barbie's crying tapers off, and she smooths her dress as she clears her throat. "Thank you," she says, trying to sound as firm as she can, "for comparing me to her. I hope I can be half the woman she was, though I'm not sure I'd ever be able to put up with all the things that she did."

George is fuming, his breath coming loud and heated down the line. "Barbara Jean," he says through gritted teeth. "You have no respect for this family. Your brother and I are the faces of the Mackey family, and you are, in essence, spitting on all that we do for you."

"All that you do for yourselves," Barbie corrects.

George takes a pause. "You are no longer welcome here if you insist on blackmailing me and taking my money."

"My money," Barbie says calmly, once again correcting herself. "To do with as I please--and what I please, is not to fund the political careers of wealthy boys from good families."

There is silence for a beat; absolute silence.

"I wish you all the best, Barbara. And I don't consider you an active member of the Mackey family anymore," George says coldly.

"Neither do I." Barbie smiles to herself as she sits at the kitchen table in her immaculate home, looking out at blue sky and blue pool and a bright yellow rubber duck that's floating peacefully and poetically across the still water. "I'm a Roman now. Good luck, Daddy."

And with that, she stands from her seat at the table, crosses the kitchen, and hangs up the phone.

jo

...

The backyard is full of people, and the paper streamers run along the house and the back fence from every direction, twisted and crisscrossing as the balloons that the children have blown up sway in the breeze along with the streamers.

It looks like a joyous madman decorated their yard, and Jo wouldn't have it any other way.

It's early April, and Bill is throwing a party for Jo to celebrate the sale of her first book, *Love In Time* , to a major publisher.

It had all happened so quickly: she'd sent the first draft to Martin Snell, her literary agent, right before leaving for the cruise with Bill, and within six weeks, Mr. Snell had called to tell her that HarperCollins wanted to buy the book for a sum of money that would have made Jo's parents faint, had she summoned up the nerve to tell them the actual amount.

Jo is standing near the table that's serving as a makeshift bar, watching as all her friends and neighbors circulate, cups and beer bottles in hand.

The children are running around, and some are in the pool, and Bill has dragged the turntable and a giant speaker into the yard so that he can play records.

Right now, "Cherry Cherry" by Neal Diamond fills in the gaps between the laughter

and the conversation all around Jo, and she stays as still as she can, taking it all in.

Florida , she thinks. Who would have ever dreamed up this life—these people ?

Leaving Minnesota in 1963, Jo had been distraught, convinced that she'd never make another friend, never have a holiday that felt right.

She couldn't picture herself truly living in the sun, being a "beach person," or fitting the mold of what she thought a good "astronaut wife" should be.

This makes her laugh now; who knew what the wife of anyone should be like?

Okay, maybe the wife of the president had some expectations on her, but other than being supportive and taking care of the house and the kids, her job as the wife of a NASA man was to just...

be herself. And that woman has turned out to be far more of a Florida girl than Jo had ever imagined.

"Quite the shindig," Barbie says, stopping at the drinks table and giving Jo a huge grin.

"We're so proud of you, Jo. You have no idea," Barbie gushes, turning to keep an eye on Huck as he races after the big kids.

"I can't imagine how you find the time to write, work at the hospital, and do everything else. "

Jo smiles at her friend. "Well, none of it would have happened when my kids were as young as yours. I can tell you that." Without being asked, Jo pours a cocktail for Barbie—heavy on the mixer, light on the tequila.

She hands the cup over and Barbie takes a sip.

“Just focus on them for now,” Jo says sagely. “It’ll go faster than you think.”

With that, Jo’s eyes search the yard for her own kids: Nancy is sitting in a chair on one side of the yard, holding a book up in the waning light so she can read the last chapter.

This makes Jo smile. Kate is sitting on a chair next to the pool, legs crossed at the ankles like a society lady, talking to the eleven-year-old son of one of the other families.

This makes Jo’s smile dim slightly with worry, as she knows in her heart that Kate will be her cheerleader, her boy crazy high school girl, her child who tries to filch cigarettes, sneak out of the house, and push the boundaries.

And, in the grass, shoving one of the other teenage boys playfully as they talk, is Jimmy.

He’s grown so tall and muscular in the four years they’ve been in Stardust Beach that she hardly recognizes him sometimes.

After Bill mentioned Jimmy’s interest in the military while they were on their cruise, Jo started to pay more attention.

She wants to see him—to know him. Jo has always been a hands-on mother, and the idea that Jimmy might suddenly prefer to go to Bill instead of to her chills her.

She can’t let herself get so wrapped up in the hospital and in her writing that she forgets who she truly is—what her most important job is: motherhood.

“Hey, Jim,” a boy whose voice has just deepened an octave shouts out from over where Nancy sits.

He pretends to lift up Nancy’s chair from behind, mimicking a run for the pool as though he might drop Jimmy’s bespectacled sister and her book right into the water.

Jimmy laughs and slaps his thigh, then shouts back: “Hey, leave my sister alone, man. She doesn’t like boys. ”

Nancy, for her part, rolls her eyes and pretends to go back to her book, though Jo knows her well enough to understand that she’s fully alert to her brother and his friends, if only so she can stay on guard and not get chunked into the swimming pool.

“She’s about to cross over, isn’t she?” Frankie says, appearing at the table with Lucas in the crook of her arm. He’s nearly six months old and a bubbly, cheerful little guy who kicks his bare feet and gives Jo a gummy smile.

Jo pours Frankie the same drink she’d just made for Barbie and hands it over. “How so?” Jo wipes her hands on a towel and picks up her drink, taking a dainty sip so that she won’t overdo it and get tipsy at her own party.

“Oh, you know,” Frankie says, eyeing Nancy as she crosses her legs and her dress hikes up, revealing her young, tanned knees and thighs. “She’s still a girl, but she’s on the cusp of opening up like a flower. The boys have started to notice her, even though she hasn’t paid them much attention yet.”

“That’s true,” Jo says, feeling a rush of relief at that. “She doesn’t seem to care about them at all.”

“Give it time,” Frankie says as she bounces Lucas without even realizing she’s doing it.

Watching her take to motherhood has been incredibly rewarding for Jo, who loves to see Frankie fuss over the baby and devote herself to his happiness.

She even takes him to the dance studio several times a week, letting the mothers who are there to watch their kids take classes pass him down the line and make faces at him.

“Oh, Frank,” Jo says on a sigh as she refills the cup of a woman who pauses at the table and then moves on, fresh drink in hand. “Life changes so quickly. It’s just amazing. And melancholy.”

Frankie stops bouncing the baby. “Are you being a dramatic writer right now, or are you just warning me about how fast babies grow up?”

“Both,” Jo decides. Her eyes skim the yard again as she glances at each of her three children. “They grow up in the blink of an eye. But the rest of it really is a little melancholy.”

“Hmm,” Frankie says. She keeps her eyes on Jo’s face as Lucas puts his arms out straight and tries to bend forward over his mother’s arm to grab his own bare toes. “You’re a little young to be going through the change of life, but...”

“It’s not that,” Jo assures her. “And I am a bit young, yes. I’ve got years between me and forty.

” She says this, but then pauses and bites her lower lip; with the way time is passing her by, she’ll be celebrating that milestone sooner rather than later.

“But I think I’m just looking back at all that’s happened since we moved here, and it’s kind of overwhelming. ”

“Oh, sure,” Frankie agrees, taking a sip of her drink and passing Lucas off to Ed as he passes by. “Here you go,” she says to her husband. “He wants some time with Daddy and the guys.”

Ed wanders off proudly, holding the baby outwards like Frankie has been doing, and smiling as he approaches his coworkers with his son in his arms.

“Come on,” Frankie says, taking Jo by the hand. She pulls her over to the patio door and slides it open, leading Jo inside.

“I can’t leave my party, Frankie,” Jo protests, though it’s not very fervent.

“Just give me five minutes.” Frankie is still holding her hand, and she leads her down the hallway to the main bedroom, pointing at the foot of the perfectly made bed as she closes the door. “Okay, now talk.”

Jo sits on the edge of the bed, hands resting sloppily in her lap, shoulders hunched. “Talk about what?”

Frankie sits next to her gingerly. “Anything. Everything. I’ve been busy keeping that chunky baby fed and entertained since Thanksgiving, and now we’re into a whole new season, and I want to know what’s going on with you.”

Jo exhales like she’s letting go of a heavy weight she’s been holding.

“Oh, gosh.” She looks up at the ceiling, trying to decide whether she should burden Frankie with any of the things that have been going on in her life.

Ever since Lucas was born, they’ve put their late evening walks on pause, which Jo totally understands.

They talk, sure, and they see one another, but most of their chatter is about diapers and feedings and sleep schedules, and Jo has purposely taken a backseat to talking about the important details of motherhood.

“How was the cruise?” Frankie asks.

Jo can feel her eyes on the side of her face as she waits for an answer. Outside the bedroom window, the party rages on, and Jo isn’t even sure whether anyone misses her. Right now, she doesn’t much care.

“The cruise was, overall, quite good,” Jo admits. “We talked about the kids and our marriage, and... I confronted him about Jeanie Florence.”

Frankie’s jaw drops and she shakes her head. “Whoa. I wasn’t expecting that. Did it ruin the trip?”

Jo looks up towards the window, which is framed by a pair of heavy, gold brocade drapes. The carpet is cream-colored, and the mirror over the dresser in front of them reflects the image of two pretty women in their thirties, sitting in a shaft of sunlight together.

“Strangely,” Jo says. “No, it didn’t. I got all my feelings on the table as we were leaving the port.”

Frankie snorts. “You mean you sat there while the horn was blowing, reaming him about some girl in the office?”

“Okay, when you put it that way... yes,” Jo says, a slow smile spreading over her face. “That’s almost exactly how it happened.”

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 10:59 am

Frankie starts to cackle as she leans sideways, bumping into Jo's shoulder. They laugh together at the ridiculousness of this image.

"But seriously," Jo says. "There were things I needed to get off my chest, and before we could relax and spend time together, I needed him to hear me."

"Did he?"

Jo shrugs. "Yeah. I think he did. He didn't deny anything about Jeanie, but he also didn't admit that anything had happened. I just wanted him to understand that I'm not an idiot." The last sentence comes out sounding far more angry than Jo had intended it to.

"No one thinks you're an idiot, Joey-girl," Frankie says gently. She reaches over and puts her hand on top of Jo's. "No one thinks that."

Jo is still staring up at the window. "Regardless, I feel like one. I understand that life is long, and that marriage has a lot of twists and turns, but I can't sit by and watch the man I love pull away from me without putting up a fight.

Would you, Frank? Would you let Ed just drift away without trying to bring him back? "

When Jo turns her head, Frankie is watching her with heat in her eyes.

"Listen. Speaking as someone who almost pushed her husband away, I can tell you that there comes a point that you have to decide whether or not you're all in.

And, for me, I was. I wanted my marriage to work out, and I wanted Ed to be happy with me.

Which meant I had to get happy with myself.

I had to let go of the things that hurt me in the past.” She pauses here, and Jo doesn’t look away from her friend.

“I know Bill has some things in his past that have hurt him, too, so it’s possible that he’s going to therapy to try to let go of those things.

And when he does, maybe he can get happy with himself, too. ”

Jo nods slowly. She has to admit, Frankie makes a good point. “You’re not wrong.”

“So let him.” Frankie says it with gravity, but it’s so simple and clean. “Let him find a way to be happy, and when he does, he’ll drop some of the weight that’s holding him down.”

Jo nods again. “Okay,” she says. “I’ve been patient this long. I can keep waiting.”

“Atta girl.” Instead of squeezing Jo’s hand, Frankie gives her knee a firm pat. “Now, let’s get back out to your party and dance, huh?”

Jo lets Frankie take her by the hand again and lead her back out to the backyard, where someone has put on Chubby Checker’s “The Twist.” Without giving it a moment’s thought, Jo follows Frankie over to the pool deck and they start to do The Twist, laughing and smiling as some of the kids join in.

Before too long, Jo loses herself in the party, pouring a second mixed drink and letting Bill throw an arm around her shoulders as he tells his coworkers a story about

a time they went rafting together in Minnesota before the kids were born.

By the time the stars come out, Jo has gotten good and soused, and her joy over her beautiful children, her strong and determined husband, and the book she's written purely from her own dedication and imagination have left her feeling giddy with joy.

The kids have gone inside to watch television while the grown ups slow dance drunkenly on the patio, and Jo looks up at Bill, arms around his neck as she lets her wet noodle weight lean against his firm body.

"Are you happy, Jojo?" he asks. She can feel the heat of his body through his shirt on this warm spring night as they sway to Percy Sledge singing "When A Man Loves A Woman."

Jo closes her eyes and immediately feels dizzy. "Right now?"

Bill tightens his grip on her. "Sure. Now is good."

Jo puts her head on his chest and nods. "Mmhmm. This was a good party."

Bill chuckles lightly. "It sure was. And I'm really proud of you, Jo. You wrote this book, and it's going to be published. That's a huge accomplishment."

"Well," Jo says sleepily, "I'm not going to the moon or anything."

Bill stops swaying abruptly and it forces Jo to open her eyes. "Hey," he says, giving her a light shake. "We're not competing for who can do the biggest or the most impressive thing. We're here to support each other, and to cheer one another on. Got it?"

Jo, feeling slightly sobered by his tone, nods. "Sure. I got it. I'm proud of you, too."

“I know,” Bill says, looking down into her eyes.

Around them on the pool deck, several other couples are dancing, and Ed kisses Frankie.

Baby Lucas is inside, napping in a playpen where the big kids can watch over him.

Jo smiles at their friends as they enjoy the early years of parenthood and the bliss of growing a family.

“I’m tired, Bill,” Jo says, leaning against him again. “I think I had too much to drink.”

Bill laughs again as he holds her. “You might have, but you’re my famous author, so you’re allowed one evening of excess and debauchery.”

Jo opens one eye and peers around the pool: piles of children’s shoes, empty glasses from their neighborhood friends; the swaying bodies of four other couples dancing in the moonlight—none of it feels terribly debauchorous, but it will undoubtedly feel less dreamy in the light of day, as Jo fights off a hangover and picks up the yard.

She sighs and tries to forget about tomorrow. For right now, all she wants is this moment, this feeling of being a writer with a success under her belt, this feeling of being safe—in her husband’s arms.

Most of their friends have gone home, and the lights are on in the neighbors’ houses, but Jo isn’t even tempted to turn down the volume on the speaker as they dance to “Stand By Me.” All she wants is this moment. Forever.

barbie

. . .

Barbie never truly believed that her father had anything to do with her mother's death, though a part of her believes it was an easy way to close the chapter on a marriage that had been, at many points, less than satisfactory to them both.

But she wants to leave room in her heart for the idea that, perhaps, things had started out so passionately between them that some part of that love and desire lingered over the years, carrying them through the hard times.

It's always been a dark spot on her heart, remembering the shocking way her mother had simply left them all, drowning in just inches of water, but it does seem plausible to her that Marion Mackey had had too much to drink that night, and had wandered off of her own accord.

For all her father's faults, Barbie can't imagine him doing anything to physically harm her mother, and that will always be her final determination—because it has to be.

Believing anything other than that will upend her carefully constructed narrative about who she is and where she comes from.

But now... now, Barbie is on her own. Since Marion's death, the bonds between Barbie and the men in her family have been tenuous, at best, but her father has given her an ultimatum that she actually kind of understands.

There's too much of Marion in Barbie—she brings too many reminders of her mother with her, and though her father presents himself to the world as strong and unflappable, his late wife was always able to get under his skin, and now Barbie does the same.

But it's hard, Barbie thinks, to know that the relationship she's always had with her family has changed irrevocably—and over money, which, in her mind, is no reason for a family to be divided.

But it's not just about money, and she knows that.

It's about control, about power, about prestige, about appearances...

the list goes on and on. And because Barbie didn't want to play into all those values that her father and brother hold dear, she's been cut out of the family.

With her inheritance, but still. They've washed their hands of her.

Looked at Todd with pity, as if to say: "She's your problem now.

" Told her she's not one of them anymore.

And now, as Barbie stands beneath the hot spring sun, handing out water and juice with a smile in the middle of a park in Palm Bay, she realizes that more than ever.

She is every inch her mother's daughter, kneeling down before a little girl in a plain dress, asking her if she's thirsty as she waits to see the doctors and dentists that Barbie has helped to gather for this event.

"What's your name?" Barbie asks the small girl with her hair in braids and her skinned knees.

“Althea,” the girl says softly. She is shy, maybe four years old, and standing next to a tired-looking woman who must be her mother.

“It’s nice to meet you, Althea. I’m Barbie. Do you want some juice?” Althea nods at her, and Barbie hands her a small paper cup. She looks at Althea’s mother. “We’re so happy you could make it today.”

In the way of many people Barbie has encountered who are on the receiving end of resources, the woman nods politely, remaining quiet.

Barbie has learned a lot about need and lack of resources and about people in general as she’s worked alongside Carrie and gotten her foundation up and running. It’s all been incredibly eye-opening.

“Hey, Barb?” Carrie is walking across the park now, a large hat shielding her face from the sun as she carries a box of animal crackers under one arm. She’s holding her daughter’s hand with the other. “Are there more snacks in the trunk of your car?”

Barbie smiles at Althea and her mother one last time and then turns to Carrie. “Sure. I have more. Do you want my keys?”

Carrie reaches her and the two women stand there for a moment, looking around the park at the activity that they’ve created.

After working with several local organizations, Barbie had come up with the idea for this children’s health fair, one that she hopes will meet a growing need for people with low incomes to have access to health care for their children.

“This is fabulous,” Carrie says, forgetting about the crackers as she lets go of her daughter’s hand and points at a tent where a doctor in a white lab coat is looking into the ears and eyes of a little boy who sits on a stool.

The doctor has a stuffed animal there for kids to hold on their laps as he examines them, and as soon as the children are done, a nurse in her uniform hands one a balloon.

Kids with different colored balloons tied to their small wrists wander around the park, stopping to see the dentist who is giving quick exams and cleanings, and then waiting in line for another nurse who has them bend forward while she checks their narrow spines for signs of scoliosis.

“It is pretty great,” Barbie agrees. She puts a hand to her forehead to shield her eyes from the sun as she watches people walk up to the edges of the park hesitantly.

That’s another thing she’s noticed: whenever she assists at an event, she finds people approach hesitantly, unsure of whether there will be any strings attached to the help that’s offered.

Barbie is just getting started with the ways she’s planning on helping her community, and she already has a million ideas for fundraisers that will refill the coffers of the foundation, but she’s taking it all one step at a time, and truly reveling in the successes of each event, and the feeling of doing something she knows her mother would approve of wholeheartedly.

“I heard that you and Sam have already planned the next phase of the new addition at the church,” Carrie says as she adjusts the brim of her hat. “I’m so excited. Just let me know where you want me on that—I’m here to help get it done.”

Barbie puts an arm around her friend’s shoulders and gives her a squeeze. “Thanks, Carrie. I’m so glad we’re working on all these projects. I feel like I’m doing something for people outside my home, and lord knows we spend enough hours of the day doing things for the people we live with.”

“Amen,” Carrie agrees. “We do. And I would do all of it without complaint, but we

both know that there are plenty of homes and families where the resources don't stretch enough to give the children the things that our kids get, and I think we're going to be able to do a lot of good in that area."

As they talk, three children who look to be eight or nine years old run past, squealing and giggling, balloons trailing behind them through the air. Carrie steps out of their way with a smile.

"At our board meeting next month, I want to project ahead to the holidays," Barbie says, looping her arm through Carrie's as they walk towards the doctor's tent.

Dave Huggins, NASA photographer, is there to snap some shots for the Cape Kennedy newsletter, and the women wave at him as they pass.

Barbie, no stranger to publicity and press—both good and bad—quickly gave herself over to the idea that Dave would pop up at their events and document them, and she actually sees the good in that; getting the word out about what their neighbors need is a great way to bring in more of the astronauts' wives as volunteers and potential board members.

"We're already thinking about Christmas?"

"Carrie asks, matching her footsteps to Barbie's as they walk slowly, admiring the carnival-like feeling of the event.

There's even a table where two local artists have agreed to do face-painting on the children, and several kids get up from their chairs to eagerly show their mothers and fathers the tiger stripes on their faces, or the rainbows that the artists have placed on their pink cheeks.

"Oh, we have to think about Christmas now," Barbie says with authority. We need to decide where to allocate our funds for that time of year, and I have a great idea for a

summer fundraiser that I think will be an excellent way to get people interested in what we're doing."

Carrie stops walking. "You know, I really admire you, Barbie. I always liked you, but I think what you're doing is remarkable.

" She looks at her friend's face as she talks, and her eyes grow serious.

"I'm sorry you had to go through so much with your family to make this happen, but I'm really proud of you. "

Barbie's eyes fill with tears at the sentiment, and she smiles. "Thank you," she says. "I appreciate that. But it was for the best."

Carrie looks hesitant. "You mean you don't regret losing touch with your father over this?"

Barbie looks out into the distance, where parents are mingling, waiting in line with their children to talk to the doctor, and at the kids who are playing happily under the trees in the center of the park.

Beneath one tall palm tree, she spots a woman who looks just like her mother, leaning against the base of the tree with her arms folded.

She's giving Barbie a long, knowing look, and Barbie actually does a double-take, squinting at the woman's face.

In response, the woman winks and gives her a little wave.

Mom , Barbie thinks. I should have known she'd be here. Of course.

Barbie looks back at Carrie, feeling a strength of conviction that she hasn't felt in a

long time.

“I’m not sorry,” she says with a shake of her head.

“Not at all. The Marion Foundation is going to do exactly what it’s supposed to do, and I know my mother would be proud of me.

I’d do it all again just to know that I was doing things the way she would, had she lived. ”

“I wish I could have met her,” Carrie says. “She sounds like a truly classy lady.”

“Oh, she was,” Barbie assures her. “She wasn’t perfect, but she was my mom, and I’ll miss her every day for the rest of my life.”

Barbie’s eyes trail back to the palm tree where she’d seen her mother leaning and watching her. The woman is still there, head tipped to one side as she assesses Barbie from a distance the way a mother might—a mixture of curiosity and pride. Barbie looks right back at her.

Finally, the woman nods—just once—and then, as she and Barbie hold one another’s gazes, she lifts an elegant hand in reluctant farewell. Without another look back, the woman turns and walks away, her familiar gait unmistakable, the sunlight swallowing her until she disappears like a mirage.