



CHOICES

The Beginning
of the Sheridan Saga

Tom Huser

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By
Tom Huser



Strategic Book Group

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Strategic Book Group

P.O. Box 333

Durham, Ct. 06422

www.StrategicBookClub.com

ISBN: 978-1-61897-820-2

Book Design: Prepress-Solutions.com

Dedication

To my wife, Shirley, whose loving support gave me the strength to finish CHOICES, and whose considerable computer skills made it possible for the book to get beyond my study.

Acknowledgements

I am deeply indebted to many family members and friends. Their love and care, their encouragement and support, have contributed richly to my writing experience. I am deeply grateful to them.

Kathy Quick and Pat Leary are formative influences in my budding writing career. They are both accomplished authors themselves, but they also excel at offering constructive criticism in the context of continuous affirmation. I am especially indebted to Kathy for reading and critiquing my work over a sustained period of time. Her keen eye and wise counsel have been valuable beyond estimation.

In particular, I want to thank Nancy and Kelly Giles for sharing stories with me of life on a family ranch. Their stories inspired and enriched the book.

Joan Knoll was another friend who shared a story from her life on a ranch. Her story made it more than obvious that rustlers are not confined to the past.

I am indebted to Dr. Ernie Davis for introducing me to the ranch intern program at Texas A&M University. I am also indebted to Ernie and his wife Marilyn for sharing with me their experiences with the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo. They provided me with a wonderful window into this marvelous event that has benefited so many young people over the years. They also gave me a helpful glimpse into the workings of the Texas and Southwestern Cattle Raisers Association.

Steve Haverlah, a longtime friend and Texas rancher, made clear to me the need for present day ranchers to see beyond the romance of ranching into the realities of operating a ranch as a business. I thank him for his insights and his patience in fielding my myriad of questions.

I would be remiss if I did not extend my deep appreciation to the very special people in West Texas who are living out their legacy as part of the West Texas ranch aristocracy. They are a special breed, and much to be admired.

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Prologue

The building ice and snow on an already wet highway only served to confirm the weatherman's prediction of increasingly bad weather. With the blissful days of Daylight Savings Time just a memory, the storm had made the hour seem later and the darkness even more ominous. Despite the weather, Jackie Hardaway drove about ten miles over the speed limit. Her theory was that the state troopers would give her about five miles an hour over the limit. She would take her chances on the other five.

Jackie looked at her watch. She knew that they had gotten a late start, but she had been too busy to calculate the implications. Now reality was beginning to set in on her. They'd have to make really good time to have even a chance of making the party. She eased the accelerator down a little more. A few miles an hour would make a huge difference. It began to rain harder. The rain turned to sleet, sticking to everything and putting a thin glaze of ice on the road. Other drivers were beginning to slow down in deference to the conditions. Jackie passed another eighteen-wheeler. It seemed that they were everywhere she wanted to be. "Why the hell can't these truckers just pull over and stop for the night? Why do they have to stay out here and hold up the traffic for the rest of us?" Jackie said with growing frustration.

"Maybe they're goin' to a party too," Carolyn said, and laughed just enough to show that she was proud of her comment. "Just relax," she added. "It'll all work out fine."

Jackie passed another truck, then a car. She was making good time now. She loved it when they had long downhill runs. She could let the Corvette take advantage of the traffic in these stretches, with its lighter body and powerful engine.

It was on one of those downhill stretches when it happened. Jackie left another eighteen-wheeler in her wake and was hurtling forward at an even ninety miles per hour. Suddenly the car began to hydroplane on the slick surface. Before she realized what was taking place, she lost control of her car. It was no longer rolling as much as it was sliding. She stepped hard on the brake pedal. The left front fender of the Corvette caught the concrete railing of the entry to the bridge. The speed and impact caused the car to swerve to the right and go airborne. Jackie and Carolyn were in the air roughly perpendicular to the bridge, on their way toward a creek so small that no one had bothered to give it a name. The car landed on the passenger side on the far bank, then slipped slowly down the bank into the frigid muddy water. The passenger side was embedded in the wet bank of the far side of the creek. The ice-cold water seeped into the car and began to crawl up the door panels. A half-conscious Jackie struggled with her air bag and seat belt and managed to turn her head enough to see Carolyn slumped forward, her head buried in her own air bag. Jackie couldn't move. Panic and hysteria gripped her as she surveyed the cocoon of shattered plastic, broken glass, limbs and leaves from low-hanging willow trees and muddy water that now imprisoned her and Carolyn. The coppery smell of blood and acrid odor of urine attacked Jackie's nostrils and mingled with the rising water that was slowly filling the car. The steam from the ruptured radiator filled the air with the pungent odor of engine coolant, floating on a ghastly fog.

Jackie's last memory before losing consciousness was of Carolyn's hair floating on the surface of the rising water.

CHAPTER 1

The Burden of Guilt

Jackie woke up Friday morning after Thanksgiving, smelling the pungent odor of a hospital. She struggled to open her eyes and make them focus on her surroundings. She tried to move, but her efforts met with pain and restriction. Her breathing was labored, and she paid the price for deep breaths with sharp pains throughout her rib cage. Her right leg felt like it was buried in concrete. She pushed back the sheets and saw that her leg was encased in a huge cast. She surveyed the medical machinery that dominated the room, and scanned the tent like barrier that guaranteed her isolation.

She was alone. She felt alone. She tried to remember. Rain. Yes, rain. And ice. And sleet. A bridge. And darkness. Yes, a terrible darkness. And Carolyn. A rush of panic imploded in her head and sent tremors throughout her body. What about Carolyn? Where was she? How was she?

A nurse wearing a big smile pulled back one wall of the tent as one would sweep back a huge drapery to let the morning light into a family room. “Well, well,” the nurse gushed as she saw that Jackie had regained consciousness. “Good morning, Miss Hardaway. I’m delighted to see you awake this fine morning. Your parents will be glad to see you awake, too.”

“My parents? They’re here? Where, where am I?” Jackie whispered to the nurse in a voice that was barely audible.

“You’re in the intensive care unit of Parkland Hospital,” the nurse responded.

“Parkland Hospital where?” Jackie said, squinting her eyes.

“Parkland in Dallas,” the nurse said quickly.

“Come closer,” Jackie whispered, her voice beginning to fade. The nurse moved closer and leaned down to hear her young patient. Jackie asked in a husky voice, “Where’s Carolyn?”

“Carolyn?” the nurse responded. “Carolyn who?”

“Carolyn Steadman. Carolyn, my friend, where is she?”

“I’m sorry, Miss Hardaway, but we don’t have anyone by that name in here. Could there be some mistake?”

Jackie’s heart was pounding. Her breathing became labored. Her eyes grew large as she looked around the room. “She has to be here! She was in the car with me!” she cried as a horrible suffocating feeling began to encase her.

The nurse paused and then shook her head. “No, no Carolyn here. You know, you hit your head pretty hard in the crash. Could you be mistaken?”

Jackie shuddered. Her body grew tense. She began to tremble. Then she screamed, “Oh, God! Yes, there’s a mistake, a terrible mistake, a horrible mistake, and I made it!”

The nurse, seeing that her patient was becoming visibly upset, simply smiled sweetly and said, “I’m so sorry, honey,” while increasing Jackie’s morphine. Jackie faded away almost immediately into a deep sleep.

J.C. and Irene Hardaway were in the ICU waiting room. They had been there since just after midnight. The party they had planned for Jackie, Carolyn and other friends was cancelled when the call came from the department of public safety. They watched and waited. They slept in fitful spurts in the waiting room. They kept the appointed visitation hours for the ICU, but their visits so far were limited to watching their daughter sleep. They were content at this point just to see that she was breathing. And they were deeply grateful that she was alive! Just before the Friday morning visit for the family, Liz Hardaway walked into the ICU waiting room. She had cut short her ski trip to Red River, New Mexico, when she got the call from her brother. She

had never heard J.C. sound as he did on the phone. And she could tell that he was crying. She had neither seen nor heard him cry since they were children growing up in San Angelo.

She'd left Red River as soon as she could get her things together, dropping her friend off at her home in Amarillo, slept a couple of hours and drove to Dallas. It was a hard trip in every way. The early winter weather that had blessed Red River, New Mexico's skiing industry had added a burden to her trip to join her family at the bed of her favorite niece. "Oh, Liz, thank God you're here," Irene said as she embraced Liz with a big hug. "I am so glad to see you, but you must be exhausted! How about some coffee?"

"Thanks, Irene, but I'm about coffee'd out. How is she?"

"Well," J.C. drawled, "I guess the best thing we can say is that she's still alive, and she's in pretty good shape for the shape she's in. It was a terrible crash, and she's got some serious injuries."

"What kind of serious injuries?" Liz asked, her trained medical mind already beginning an inventory of possibilities.

"Her right leg is badly broken," Irene reported.

"Compound fracture?"

"Yes, and some broken ribs and she looks like hell. Her face looks like a Texas road map," J.C. said in his own inimitable way. "Liz, you need to know before you see her that she's really bugged up. Cuts, bruises, her eyes are swollen nearly shut."

"They took her right into surgery as soon as she got here." Irene added. "The doctor said that with the compound fracture that could threaten the circulation in her leg, he just couldn't wait. It's her right leg, not that it makes all that much difference, I suppose, but it will be a while before she can drive."

"That's true," Liz said. "Healing will take some time, but she's young and strong and, as we all know too well, has the drive and determination of ten people. She wouldn't have been able to do everything she's already done in her young life had she not been blessed with a special kind of stubbornness."

“Oh, yeah!” J.C. said, tilting his chin every so slightly to the right. “She’s got stubborn down pat.”

“Well,” Liz said, gathering herself for what lay ahead. “It could have been a lot worse. I mean she could have, well, you know what I mean.” Irene’s eyes welled up with tears. She swallowed hard and pursed her lips. “Was there another car involved?” Liz asked.

“No, no other cars,” J.C. answered.

“Well, was anyone else in the car with her?” Liz continued.

The blood rushed from Irene’s face. She lowered her head. Her eyes were fixed on the floor. She nodded her head up and down in short repetitions. She tried to talk, but her voice wouldn’t work. Finally, she just held out her arms to Liz. Liz responded instantly, taking Irene in her arms, patting her ever so gently on the back.

“Carolyn?” Liz whispered softly, knowing somehow that she already had the answer to her question. “Carolyn was with her?”

“Yes, Carolyn was with her,” J.C. said, his voicing cracking and rasping the way it had on the phone. “And Carolyn’s, well, she, I mean, oh God, Liz, Carolyn’s dead! She died in the ambulance on the way to Dallas. The paramedics who came with them on the Life Flight said Jackie and Carolyn were both unconscious. They said,” and his voice began to leave him again, “They didn’t think either one of them would even make it to Dallas.” The three embraced. They began to sob in concert.

“I’m sorry. I am so sorry,” Liz said, brushing tears back from her own eyes. “Jackie and Carolyn were so close. Does Jackie know?”

“We don’t think so. She’s been asleep every time we’ve been in to see her. I don’t see how she could know,” Irene said.

J.C. straightened up, took a couple of deep breaths and looked dutifully at his watch. “It’s about that time,” he said. “We’ll be able to see her in a few minutes.” He tucked his shirttail in one more time.

A nurse met them at the door of the ICU. “Just two at a time,” she said bluntly. “You can trade off, if you want to.”

“I’ll just wait outside,” Liz offered.

J.C. and Irene walked quietly into Room 7. They were already resigned to the fact that Jackie would be sleeping, but Jackie was awake. She was also crying, sobbing uncontrollably.

“Honey, what’s the matter?” Irene asked immediately. “Do you need a nurse?”

“No, Mom, I don’t need a nurse! I need Carolyn! I need for Carolyn to walk in here and say, ‘Well, Miss Jackie Hardaway, how are you doin’ this fine morning? But she’s not gonna walk in here this morning or any other morning. She’s not ever coming in because she’s dead, and I killed her!’”

“Jackie, honey, don’t talk like that! Don’t blame yourself for what happened. It was an accident. You can read the police report. It was an accident, plain and simple,” Irene said as she smothered Jackie’s left hand with both of her hands.

“Don’t try to sugarcoat it, Mom!” Jackie said, her eyes flashing with anger. “The police can call it whatever the hell they want to. I don’t care, but whatever it was, it was my fault! I caused it!” And I killed my best friend!”

“Honey, it was cold and wet. The road was icy. You just lost control. It could have happened to anyone.”

“But it didn’t just happen! I made it happen! It happened, Mom, because I was driving too fast. I always drive too fast. You know that. You’ve lectured me a thousand times about not driving so fast. Well, I was driving too fast. Other people were slowing down because of the conditions. But, no, hell no, not me, not Jackie Hardaway, I had to keep driving over the speed limit. I had to take chances they weren’t willing to take. It would have never happened, if only I had slowed down and driven like everybody else. It was my fault! And Carolyn is dead because of me. Don’t you understand? I killed her!”

J.C. remained silent, but inside he was a whirlpool of emotions. He heard Jackie loud and clear. He knew that her tough

mind would not make excuses or accept them. He knew firsthand that hardheadedness that would not yield to persuasion. He knew that Jackie's propensity for driving too fast was something she had both inherited and learned from him. He was beginning to feel shame and guilt himself.

J.C. and Irene were paralyzed by Jackie's barrage of confession. Irene had tried to comfort her, but she had failed miserably. J.C. was a victim of his own feelings of complicity in Jackie's tragedy. They stood by their daughter's bed like statues, unable to find the words to ease the tension, much less to explain the horrible dilemma that was now encasing them in the tentacles of despair.

"Time's up," the nurse said quietly. "We need to let our patients rest now."

J.C. and Irene stared helplessly at Jackie. Their eyes again filled with more tears. They moved simultaneously to her side. Each kissed her on the cheek. Each said, "Jackie, we love you. You're gonna be okay," as if it had been choreographed. They walked out of the room.

Liz met them. Before Liz could ask another of her penetrating questions, Irene blurted out, "Oh, Liz, I'm so sorry. We didn't let you have your turn. Please forgive us."

"It's okay. Don't worry about it. I'll get my turn. Oh, there're some people here to see you."

"Oh? Who?" Irene asked, looking surprised.

"Carolyn's parents. They want to talk with you. They're in the waiting room."

J.C. and Irene stared at each other in disbelief. "The Steadmans are here? They're here?" Irene asked.

Liz nodded and said, "They want to see you."

Jack and Elaine Steadman were sitting on one of those brown leather sofas that serve as both a chair and a bed in an ICU waiting room. They looked up and smiled weakly when J.C. and Irene walked through the door. The room was unoccupied except for the four grieving parents.

“I don’t know what to say,” J.C. began.

“I know. I know. How’s Jackie?” Jack said.

“Jackie’s okay or at least she’s gonna be okay. She’s got a broken right leg and some broken ribs and a lot of cuts and bruises, but she’s gonna be all right.”

“We’re so glad. She’ll mend. It may take a while, but she’ll get well,” Elaine said for both of them.

Irene was speechless. She reached out to Elaine Steadman. The two women embraced and began to cry uncontrollably. The two men followed suit. Finally, J.C. said, “We’re so sorry about Carolyn. Is there anything we can do?”

“I don’t know that there’s much anyone can do at this point. It is the way it is. What’s happened has happened. We can’t change anything,” Jack said, his face expressionless.

“When’s the funeral?” Irene asked.

“Tuesday,” Elaine responded.

“Where? When?” J.C. asked.

“It’ll be at the First United Methodist Church in Killeen at eleven o’clock in the morning. Actually, it’s just gonna be a memorial service. We’re having a small graveside service for just the family earlier at the cemetery in Killeen.”

“We’ll be there, if it’s all right with you,” J.C. said.

“Don’t you need to be here with Jackie?” Jack asked.

“We’ll be there,” J.C. said, never batting an eye. “We need to come.”

“Then come early enough to be at the graveside service. We want you to be part of our family. Come the night before and be our guests in our home,” Jack said.

J.C. and Irene both breathed a huge sigh of relief. They looked at each other. They were crying and grinning at the same time.

CHAPTER 2

Solace and Serendipity

Jackie couldn't stop thinking about Carolyn. They had not only worked together, they lived together. And they had been friends since their days at The University of Texas.

Jackie remembered how they met. They were wide-eyed freshmen, looking for the same building on the University of Texas campus when they ran into each other. Both were lost. Both were intimidated by the sheer magnitude of the campus. They stumbled into each other as they walked, staring at the tops of the huge buildings, trying to get their bearings from the maze of educational icons that engulfed them. For a moment, they stared helplessly at each other, then gave into necessity and shared their ignorance, decided to abandon their pride and ask someone for directions. They got directions, found their destination and also found a new friendship in each other.

They began rooming together their sophomore year. It went well, once they accepted each other's little idiosyncrasies. Jackie snored, a little, not much, but some. Carolyn liked to stay up later than Jackie. Her late hours made her vulnerable to the snoring. Jackie presented Carolyn with a pair of her very own earplugs. A crisis was averted.

Jackie, on the other hand, was bothered by Carolyn's reading lamp, which often was on well into the night. Carolyn went shopping also. She presented Jackie with her very own Zorro mask. Jackie tried it on and reported to Carolyn, "With my new

Zorro mask on, I could sleep in an operating room.” Carolyn became the sister Jackie never had. Jackie was an only child, and she thrived on her friendship with Carolyn. When Jackie and Carolyn graduated, Jackie took a position as a trainer with Southwestern Bell in Dallas. She needed an assistant. It was only natural for Jackie to think of Carolyn. “Carolyn, I really need you! Really! I’m up to my ears in alligators, and I need some help. Please!”

“Well,” Carolyn drawled. “You know, Jackie, I’ve got all these tremendous offers, and I just don’t know which one to take, and, you know, I’ll need time to think this through. And it might take me three or four months to sort out all of my wonderful options.”

“Three or four months! Hell! I need help Monday!”

“Well, in that case, I guess I’ll just have to forego all these terrific life-changing opportunities and come and help you,” Carolyn said, unable to hold back her laughter any longer.

“So you’ll come? You’ll be my assistant? You’ll save me one more time?”

“Oh, hell, of course! You don’t really think I could turn you down, do you?”

“Well, just for the record, you scared the hell out of me!”

“Good! Mission accomplished. There’s nothing like a little appreciation to make someone feel better.”

“Damn!” Jackie said. “I don’t know whether to hug you or kill you.”

“Now, don’t get ugly, Jackie, I might just change my mind,” Carolyn said, having the time of her life.

When Carolyn came to work for Jackie, they thrived on the work and their friendship. They made a terrific team. Jackie’s memory fast-forwarded to the last few days. She had almost forgotten the bind she and Carolyn were in before their fateful trip began. Jackie was scheduled to do a training program at the Holiday Inn in Irving the Monday after Thanksgiving. The manager of the Holiday Inn called on Wednesday, the day before

Thanksgiving, to tell Jackie that they had just experienced a fire in the area that included the conference facilities Jackie had reserved. The manager went into great detail to explain to Jackie that the fire had come from the adjacent kitchen. Jackie didn't care where the fire had come from. As far as she was concerned, it was the fire from hell. And it was wreaking havoc with her weekend plans, not to mention her training session scheduled for Monday.

Carolyn came to her rescue. In her own calm way, she said, "Okay, Miss Jackie Hardaway, let's choose up sides. Make a list of what needs to be done and who needs to be called and we'll just do it." Jackie blinked and nodded her agreement. The cavalry was up and running. After a whole string of frantic calls, the Best Western at Grapevine came through for her. Yes, they had rooms available. No, it would be no trouble. How many did she anticipate would attend? Would she like to discuss the menus?

Jackie couldn't have cared less about the menus. She was just ecstatic to have a home for her training session. Once Jackie gave Carolyn the word, she was all over the guest list. She was calling people as fast as humanly possible, and, strangely enough, seemed to be enjoying it. Carolyn was like that. She thrived on a challenge. And emergencies were right in her wheelhouse. By five p.m. on Wednesday, they had it all put back together. They had called everyone. Some they talked to, but others were already gone and got only messages. Jackie was delighted and relieved. She said to Carolyn, "Well, friend Carolyn, there's not any more we can do at this point. We're gonna have to pray and trust the good Lord for the rest of this to work out okay."

Jackie sank deeper and deeper into depression. She hated what had happened, and she hated herself for causing it. She started crying again. As she was awash in her own tears again, the door to her room opened. Having been dismissed from ICU the previous evening, she now enjoyed the luxury of a private room.

Aunt Liz walked in, flowers in hand and a smile on her face. “How’s my favorite patient ever?”

Jackie grabbed another wad of Kleenex, dabbed her eyes and wiped her nose. “Just ducky,” she said, knowing Liz could hear the sarcasm in her voice.

Liz replaced some wilting flowers that had seen better days with the new bouquet she brought with her. Jackie said “thanks” in a voice that bespoke duty more than gratitude.

After removing her scarf and coat, Liz moved a chair up to the edge of Jackie’s bed. She deliberately positioned herself near the head of the bed. “Well, how are you doin’?” she asked.

“Terrible, just terrible, thank you,” Jackie replied.

“How long do you think it’ll last?”

“What do you mean how long?”

“How long? You know, how long? How long will feeling terrible last, the rest of the day, a week, a month, a year, from now on? The rest of your life? How long?”

“Forever and ever!” Jackie said, her eyes flashing with anger. “I’m gonna carry this burden the rest of my life. Carolyn’s dead, and I killed her! If I hadn’t been driving too fast on a slick highway, Carolyn would still be alive. It’s just that simple!”

“Why were you driving so fast, Jackie? Why were you in such a hurry?”

“Because we were running late. Mom had planned and prepared a party at our house for us. Some of my high school and college friends were gonna be there. She’d gone to a lot of trouble, as she always does, and I didn’t want to be late.”

“So, you weren’t driving fast to show off?”

“No, of course not!”

“And you weren’t trying to set some kind of record for driving time from Dallas to San Angelo?”

“No, you know I wouldn’t do something like that!”

“But you were trying hard not to disappoint your mother? Right?”

“I guess so.”

“I know so! Jackie, I’ve known you and loved you for a long time. And I know you pretty well. You always do your best and then some. You’re what we call in nursing a ‘hundred-and-ten-percenter.’ And you’ll do anything within your power not to disappoint someone else.”

“Well, I guess there is some truth in all that,” Jackie said, wiping her nose for the umpteenth time.

“Some? Hell! I think there’s a lot of truth in all that. I think you’re a victim of your own conscience. I think your sin is that you just try too hard. You’re a perfectionist, and that’s why your mistake hurts so much. You’re not just grieving your loss of Carolyn, you’re grieving your loss of perfection.”

“But I’m still gonna carry this guilt the rest of my life. What you say may be true, but it doesn’t take away the burden. Besides, what do you know about burdens anyway? You live a charmed life. You’re beautiful, smart, talented, competent, and the best nurse in the hospital, and affluent, and you spend your days making people well. What do you know about burdens?”

“The truth of any or all of that is a question for another day and discussion. I believe your question was what do I know about burdens? Let me answer your question in three ways.

First, I know it’s not healthy to decide to punish yourself for the rest of your life. All that’s gonna do is hurt you and add you to the world’s list of victims. And we don’t need any more victims.

“Secondly, you want to talk about burdens? We can talk about burdens. Burdens are universal. Everybody’s got ’em. And there’s not a person alive who doesn’t bear the burden of regret. That, by the way, is your particular burden. Regret. It haunts all of us. The reason we have it is that we are human, and we’ve all made mistakes. There are things we’ve all said and done that we’d like to change. But we can’t, and we live with the regrets. You’re right in one respect. You can’t change what happened, and you will have some regret all your life.

“Third, burdens come with choices. We can’t alter the nature of the burdens, but we do have a choice as to how we deal with

them. Even more important, we have a choice to make every day as to how much influence the burdens are goin' to have in our lives. It's up to us. Jackie, life's a long trip. Nobody makes this trip without a lot of baggage and some scar tissue. But we don't have to let the baggage become the focal point of the trip, nor do we have to let it weigh us down to the point that we can't get where we're goin'. And we sure as hell don't have to wear the scar tissue so that people can't see the person we want them to see!"

Jackie stopped crying. Her eyes were clearing up, and they were the size of dinner plates as she began to absorb what Aunt Liz had just told her.

"There's something else I want to tell you. I want to tell you about my burden. My life is not quite as charmed as you think."

Jackie was mesmerized. "Okay," Jackie said in a soft voice and nodded her assent.

Liz paused. She took a deep breath. Her face became a little flushed. She said, "Jackie, I'm gay. That's my burden. It's not a matter of choice. I didn't decide to be gay. But it is my choice when I decide every day how I'm going to deal with who I am as a person. And, yes, I have a partner, my friend Ann Jernigan, who, as you know, lives in Amarillo. We have been partners for sixteen years. And we love each other very much. We also understand that most of the world around us is not ready to accept us for who we are. So, yes, I do know something about burdens."

Jackie extended both arms in an invitation to Liz to share in a big hug. Liz stepped forward and joined Jackie in an embrace that was gentle but firm. Liz's eyes filled with tears.

"I don't care, Aunt Liz. I don't care whether you're gay or straight. You're the best aunt a girl could have! I love you, and I always will!"

Liz struggled uncharacteristically with her composure. "Thank you, honey. I'm sure you understand how important it is to me to keep my full identity a private matter."

"I do," Jackie said and breathed deeply.

“Have I helped you at all?” Liz asked.

“Yes, you have, but I know that my guilt will never totally go away.”

“No, it probably won’t. But it won’t ruin your life either. The question is not, ‘how do we never feel guilty?’ We all feel guilty about some things. The question is whether we can manage our guilt so that it is not destructive in our lives.”

“I’ll work on that. I promise.”

“That’s all I’m asking,” Liz said. “In fact, no one can ask any more of you than that.”

“Thanks for coming,” Jackie said. “You brought the kind of medicine I needed.”

“You’re welcome,” Liz said, as though she had just been thanked for pouring someone a cup of coffee. “I’m goin’ now. By the way, young lady, I have just one parting shot.”

“What’s that?”

“You’re the one who’s lived the charmed life!”

Jackie was speechless. Liz smiled broadly and said, “I’ve gotta go now. See you soon. I love you.” Liz stepped into high gear, as though she had rounds to make and not enough time to do it.

“I love you, too.”

Liz closed the door gently behind her. Jackie could hear her footsteps for the first few feet down the hall. Then there was silence. She closed her eyes, breathed deeply, and thought about what her Aunt Liz had said. For the first time since the accident, she felt warm, not just physically warm, but warm all the way through. She inhaled the friendly breaths of an unexpected calm.

Jackie had lived a charmed life. Her parents provided the theatre and set the stage, and she was the star.

The J.C. Hardaways were married four years before their daughter Jackie (Jacquelyn Marie) was born. J.C. had held off the impatient Irene by telling her that he needed some time “to get my feet on the ground in the business world.” Irene knew that

the argument was an exercise in absurdity. J.C.'s feet had never been anywhere else but on the ground in the business world. His father Cal had made sure of that. And, by this time, a good bit of the ground under J.C.'s feet, he owned anyway. But Irene was willing to let J.C. get comfortable with the idea of having children. His happiness was her paramount concern. She was willing to wait until he was ready.

The pregnancy was difficult. Irene spent the last seven weeks in bed at home. The delivery was even more difficult. Irene was sure she had set a new hospital record when Jackie took twenty-two hours to make her grand entry. But the worst was yet to come. There were complications in the delivery. When all was said and done, Irene had given birth to a beautiful seven-pound, ten-ounce healthy baby girl. Yet her delivery had not been without a price.

J.C. and Irene had a beautiful child. But, short of adoption, she would be the only child they would ever have. Dr. Ron Chambers, the obstetrician who delivered Jackie, put it bluntly but beautifully when he said, "Well, guys, there's bad news and good news. Irene, you're not gonna be able to give birth to any more children. That's the bad news. The good news is that you couldn't improve on this little girl if you had babies from now on."

J.C. and Irene were disappointed. Irene was especially concerned for J.C. She knew that this meant that J.C. would never have a son of his own. She was crying when she told him "Honey, I'm sorry. I wish I could have given you a son."

"Whoa, Irene! Don't talk like that! You've given us a beautiful little girl. I couldn't be happier. I'm no fool either. I know, and so do you, that I could have lost both of you. I don't want to hear any more of that kind of talk, ever!" The subject never came up again.

Jackie was the new center of attention for the family. There was her baptism, then her first birthday, then her first tooth and her first step. Every occasion was marked by a display of family

unity and enthusiasm. Jackie was not just family; she was the family treasure. She could not have been loved more.

Jackie was given every opportunity available for growth and development. There were dance lessons. She hated them. Then there were piano lessons. She lasted a full two months longer at piano lessons than she had at dance lessons.

About the time Irene was ready to pull out her hair, Jackie discovered soccer. She fell in love with soccer immediately. She loved to run. She loved to maneuver among the other players. She loved to anticipate where the ball was going next. She played with reckless abandon, much to her parents' chagrin. Most of all, she liked to score goals. She liked to win! Soccer nurtured her competitive spirit.

"Honey," Irene said to J.C. one evening when he came in from work. "Has it ever occurred to you that our beautiful baby girl has become a jock?"

J.C., in a response typical of both his clarity and brevity, said, "Is she happy?"

"Well, yes, of course, she's happy. She'd rather play soccer than eat."

"Good! That's all that counts."

Jackie was a good student. In fact, she was an outstanding student. As long as the subject was not dance or piano, she demonstrated a genuine desire to learn. She also had that innate self-discipline that could be traced back through several generations of Hardaways.

Aunt Liz made sure that Jackie was going to grow up computer literate. Liz was a computer buff herself, and she delighted in sharing her passion with her niece. Jackie loved Liz, and admired her, and was thrilled by all the special attention. It was not long before Jackie was also infected with the computer bug.

Jackie graduated near the top of her class at San Angelo Central High School. Irene said, with fire in her eyes, that she could have been valedictorian had it not been for soccer. J.C.

countered by saying that without soccer Jackie wouldn't be Jackie and added, "Besides, outside of the parents, grandparents and a few close friends, who remembers the valedictorian's name six months after graduation anyway?"

"Mom," Jackie said, "I want to go to the University of Texas."

"Oh, honey, that's wonderful. Your dad and I both graduated from UT, as you well know, and we're so proud of you, and, well, that's just wonderful! Your dad will be so pleased."

"Mom," Jackie continued. "I want to graduate in three years. I know I can do it by goin' to summer school. I can get some of my basic courses here at Angelo State, and I won't have to be in Austin the whole time. What do you think about that?"

"Well, Jackie, I suppose that's okay. But what's your hurry?"

"I'm not really in all that big a hurry. I just don't see any reason to spend any more time getting a college education than is necessary. Besides, I've got other things I want to do besides go to school."

"Other things? Like what other things?" Irene responded, bewildered again by this baby of hers who was rapidly becoming a young woman.

"I want to get a job, a good job. I want to prove myself. Women are getting better jobs all the time now, and I want to be one of those women who rises to the top of a company."

"Oh, my, you've got it, don't you? You've got that Hardaway drive! You're not gonna be happy unless and until you go out and prove yourself to the world."

"No, and I'll do it. You'll see. And you and Dad will be really proud of me."

"Jackie, your dad and I are already so proud of you that we are about to pop. I don't see how we could be any prouder."

"Well, you can, and you will!"

Jackie's college days were a whirlwind of activity. She loved the University of Texas, and was proud to call herself a Longhorn. She loved Bevo and burnt orange. She loved *Texas Fight* and *The Eyes of Texas*. She loved Austin, and she was

convinced that it should be the capital of the United States, if not the world. She loved her roommate, Carolyn, and all the new friends she made. She loved her classes. She dated a variety of boys, but didn't meet anyone who could even begin to challenge her career focus. She pursued a degree in business administration and knew that she was on the career path of her dreams. But, as much as she enjoyed college life, she could hardly wait to try out her new knowledge and skills in the business world.

J.C. and Irene could not believe that Jackie was already graduating from college. It seemed like only yesterday when they had moved her and her belongings into Scottish Rite Dormitory. Now she was going to be making another big move in her life. She was moving to Dallas. She had a job waiting for her with Southwestern Bell. She would be a trainer. Her proud parents delighted in telling their friends that Jackie was going to be a trainer.

One night, not long after Jackie's graduation, Irene rolled over on her pillow and said to J.C., "Honey, what's a trainer?"

J.C. yawned, and then responded, "I don't have a clue, sweetheart. But we know one, and that oughta be worth something."

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