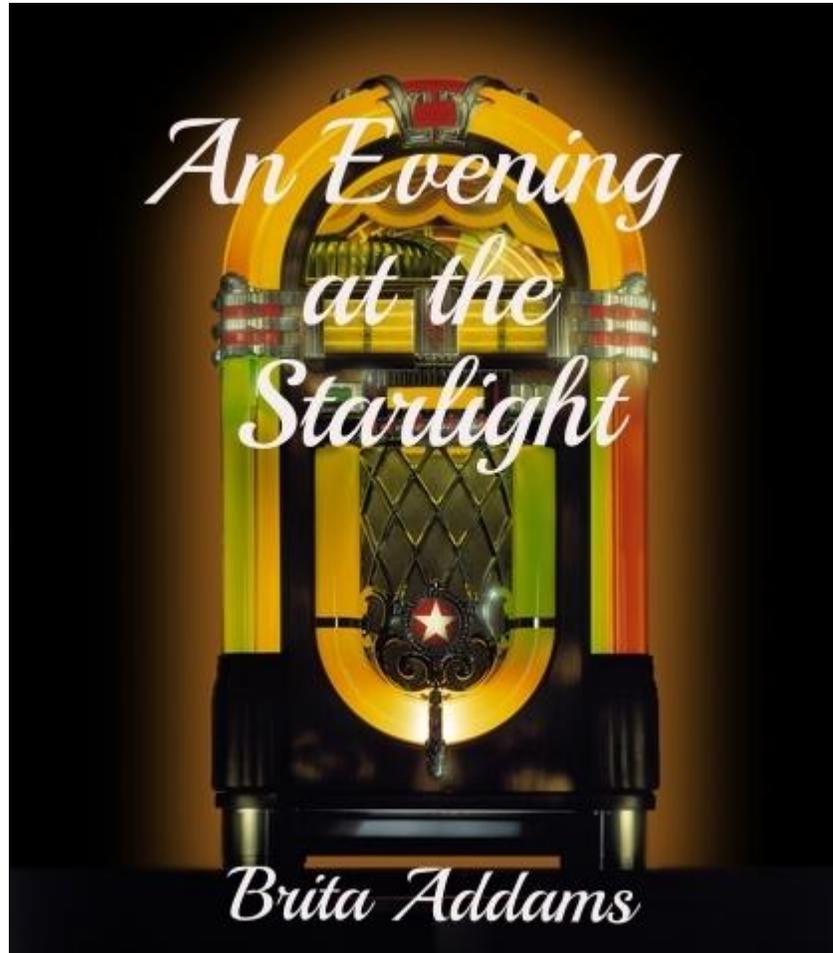


## An Evening at the Starlight – Brita Addams

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## **Blurb**

John has a hard time forgiving and forgetting, and his wife Christie's tired of trying.

Doe and Royal's love story reaches through the years and gives hope to a young man who's lost hope in his relationship. An Evening at the Starlight and a tale of a once in a lifetime love that wouldn't die might be exactly what John needs to move past the hurt and cherish the love he has.

*2001*

John

After a long day, I came home from work to find candles burning and the house smelled like my favorite meal. Christie met me at the door, wearing a scarlet teddy. God she looked great, but my gut turned over and I turned away.

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Christie frowned, the hurt of rejection written in the tiny lines on her forehead. “After two years, John, how many times do I have to say I’m sorry? I swear it’s never happened since and never will.”

As I looked at my wife, all the emotion I’d kept under control welled up inside me. I love her so much it hurts, yet I can’t touch her and haven’t since the day I found out she’d cheated on me.

We stopped arguing about it long ago, except on nights like our anniversary, when expectations ran high. At those times, she wants to show me that I’m her only one, and God, I do too, but...

I’ve often wondered if I want to punish her for fucking some stiff dick while I was off in Iraq, or myself for leaving her free to do it? I suppose we’ll never know, but the result’s the same.

I can’t say Christie isn’t as beautiful as ever, standing here in her scarlet teddy, my favorite, with her long, creamy legs guiding my eyes to the one place I’d love to bury myself and never leave. The fullness of her lips tempt me every day, but I haven’t enjoyed them since that long, seductive kiss at the airport the night I came back. Then, of course, the groping and hit and miss kisses led us to making love like rabbits, in every position we could think of, trying to get closer, I guess.

When we finally decided the chandelier was off limits, we lay back against the pillows and held each other. When I talked about my buddy Joe and how he’d gotten the dreaded “Dear John” letter while we waited in our quarters in the Green Zone for our next mission, Christie shed tears and she held me tighter. “Comin’ home to you is what kept me goin’,” I told her. “Thoughts of you waiting made every day more bearable.”

When her eyes no longer met mine, my heart sank.

I asked, point blank, “What happened?” All she ever told me was that it happened only twice. She begged for forgiveness, and I’ve given that, but it’s forgetfulness that stays my steps and keeps the barrier between us.

I can’t manage. That night, I pulled away, walled up my heart, and I’ve spent a lot of time with my dick in my hand since. She claims she got caught up in her loneliness, but son of a bitch, I was lonely too. There were women in our unit, but I didn’t fuck any of them.

I know she’s sorry—God, she’s said so often enough—not only with words, but with everything she does for me, but I can’t manage to erase the image of her in someone else’s arms, moving as she does in mine, moaning with every touch. Shit, we’ve been together forever, since high school for Christ’s sake. That should’ve counted for something.

I can’t bring myself to leave her, even if we live like this for the rest of our lives. Yet, I’m an ass, turning her away when she’s in front of me, all but naked and begging me to touch her. Wanting *me*, not someone else.

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My hands itch to grab her, hold her, and screw her brains out until we both forget, but...

She ambled into the bathroom, her shoulders slumped and her arms straight at her sides. My guilt mounted at hurting her yet again. Will I ever hurt her enough to make *me* forget.

Her crying tore my heart to shreds, and I've done my share. In need of perspective, I grab my coat and head out like I've done a million times. A million and one won't matter much. She's used to falling asleep alone, and I'm used to not sleeping at all.

\* \* \* \* \*

### *At the Starlight*

Bud

I looked up as the door creaked open. My little haven, the Starlight, wasn't very busy, more to my liking, truth be told. This place is my home and at my age, three cozy rooms upstairs and an old juke box to keep me company makes for a satisfactory life. My memories keep me going, even as the regulars come and go until closing, which is—whenever the last soul walks through the door.

“Hey, Bud.”

I look up at the sound of John's familiar voice, a frustration planted squarely between his eyes, as recognizable as my own.

“Hey, how's it goin'?” I continue to wipe down the scarred, wooden bar.

“Same old shit.”

“Sounds like you could use a beer. Something wrong?”

“Nothing a few brews can't cure, I suppose.”

I laugh and nod. “Felt that way myself more than once.” In my time, I've drowned my sorrows many a night, only to realize later that the sorrow was *me*. “Here, have a Michelob Light. Same story at home?”

“Yeah.”

John had told me about his precious Christie, and my heart went out to him. I've been him, in another life, another time. They ain't lying when they say war is hell, no matter when it's fought.

“Don't you think it's time you forgave, my friend?”

“Yeah, I do, and I have, a long time ago, but I don't know how to forget. The image of her with someone else tears me up inside. Sometimes, I wonder if it wouldn't be better for us to part ways, but I can't stand the thought of not having her.”

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“But you don’t have her, not really. You’ve got yourself all shut off, and even if you live in the same house, you aren’t livin’, are ya? Life has its ups and downs, but with the right *one*, the ups beat the downs by a mile.”

“What she did was a bit more than life’s ups and downs.” John shook his head.

Poor guy. Dark circles under his eyes, set jaw, and his stubborn streak glowing bright down his back.

“Got time for a story, my friend?”

John smiled and sipped his beer. “Sure, I always have time for your stories.”

I got myself a beer, sat on the high stool behind the bar, and leaned across the bar, my elbows perched on the smooth wood. I suppose I’m the only person alive who appreciates the age of this bar and all the action it’s seen. I chuckled to myself. If only this bar could talk... “Okay, now I want you to listen.”

John swigged his beer. “I’m listening.”

“See, there was this young couple. The guy I guess was about your age, and oh, yeah, they were in love to beat the band. Never saw anyone more so, and having run this place for a dog’s age, I’ve seen ‘em come and go.

“Well, with Sinatra on the Victrola, Royal took Doe in his arms and they’d dance around that floor, right over there.” I pointed to the place where the jukebox stood, the floor worn from so many years of people dancing on it. “Royal loved those slow songs, like *Embraceable You*. He’d wrap his arms around his girl and hold on for dear life. Jitter-buggin’ and all that was fine, but Royal, now he was a lover, and Doe, oh, good Lord, she was all he could see.”

I picked up my pilsner glass and drank deep, while I studied my friend’s face. “Ahh, can’t beat a Mich Light and a good story, hey John?”

“I suppose.”

“Oh, it gets better. Much better.”

“I’m listening.”

He stared past me with his vacant eyes.

“Royal used to come in here every Friday and Saturday night. The Starlight was owned by his daddy. Anyway, he was in the army at the time, and the soldiers gathered here. Pretty much every night had a good crowd and everyone got to know each other. We made this place our version of the USO. The local girls’d come in and dance with the fellas, all on the up and up, just company, you know.”

John raised his empty glass, and I scuffed over to the tap and filled it, giving him a perfect head of foam to go along with it.

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“Not bad for an old guy,” John teased.

“Yeah well, small triumphs are all I have at my age. Anyway, this one night, a new girl came in. Oh, my, Royal’s jaw dropped to the floor, along with every other guy’s in the place. See, Doe wasn’t flaunty or flirty, but her body spoke of sin, if you know what I mean.”

Memories of that night flooded my age-addled mind, and it felt like 1944 all over again...

“Yep, she comes in with the prettiest green dress on, her hair all done up like Rita Hayworth. You know those victory rolls she used to wear?”

“No, can’t say I do.”

I tried to explain, but given John’s age, I gave up and moved on. “No need, just listen. Well, every eye in the place was on this girl, especially Royal’s. One of his buddies had to close his mouth for him, cuz he’d forgotten ever’ bit of manners his mother’d ever taught him.”

“What’d he do?”

“Well, I’ll tell ya. See, Doe had never been in here before, and she looked kinda shy, so Roy—his friends called him Roy—Roy just gathered himself up and went over to the door. He bowed like a well-bred gentleman, crooked his elbow, and offered her his arm.

“All the guys, they were *ooing* and *aahing*, but old Roy, he just smiled and couldn’t take his eyes off the lady. He brought her right there, to where you’re sittin’. ‘What would you like to drink, miss?’ he asked, and in a voice that sounded like a choir of angels, she said, ‘A rum and coke please’.”

“Sounds like you might have been smitten, too.”

“Oh, yeah, there was so much to be smitten with. She was beautiful and sweet, you know. Her smile melted hearts, and it broke a few too—a real looker, she was.”

My mind wandered to the first time I saw her and all the times after that. I saw things others didn’t because I made it my business to. The way she looked at you from under half-closed eyelids, her sweet smile that was just wide enough so as not to show her two crooked teeth at the bottom. Oh, there was so much to her.

“Did she and Royal hit it off right away?”

John’s interruption made me laugh. “I’d say they did, yes indeed. Royal wasn’t the same after that night. She owned his heart, and it was hers to break. From that first night, they had eyes for only each other. They’d come in here and dance, real close. They never danced with anyone else, *ever*, at least not while Roy was stateside. She loved Sinatra and Bing Crosby. Roy always made sure he had dimes for the jukebox so he could play all her favorite songs.”

“A real romantic, huh?”

“Old Roy managed. Yeah, he had his moments.”

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“Tell me more about Doe. She sounds like an exceptional lady.”

My heart did a flip-flop. “Oh, my good Lord, exceptional doesn’t begin to describe her. She had long brown hair, wavy, you know, looked soft as silk. She wore it down all the time, said she liked the feel of it swayin’ when she danced. Biggest brown eyes you ever saw. Her name was Dorothy and with those eyes, I guess Doe was a natural nickname for her. She was slim and not too tall, came just under Roy’s chin.”

I took a swig of my beer, hopin’ to swallow down the memories. Doe was special, so tiny and frail lookin’.

“She loved to laugh. Lord, you could tell that woman a joke, and she’d laugh for hours over it. Bring it up a few days later, and she’d laugh all over again. A man couldn’t have asked for a better audience, believe you me. Yeah, she even liked an off-color joke, but back then so many of the girls did. Young people tend to grow up faster during wartime.

“I told her the one about the guy who had this seventeen-year-old girl madly in love with him. Well, she kept botherin’ him, so he played along. ‘Well, honey, when you turn eighteen, I’ll take you to Florida.’ She’s all excited, ya see, and the day she turned eighteen, she rushed over to the guy’s house. ‘Well, I’m eighteen now. Will you take me to Florida?’ The fella laughs his fool head off. ‘No, honey. I didn’t say I’d take ya to Florida. I told you I wanted to tampa wit’ ya’.

“Doe, she laughed until she nearly fell off the stool.”

John chuckled, giving me hope the old jokes still tickled a funny bone or two.

“Christie likes a dirty joke, too. She can tell ’em with the best of ’em.”

“There’s something to be said for a woman who isn’t all indignant when they come flyin’ at her. Doe wasn’t, and I admired that about her, along with any number of other things. She could cut a rug, as they used to say, and when Royal’d let her out of his arms, they jitterbugged like crazy. She’d throw her head back and laugh while she waved her finger at him.”

I got up and hobbled over to the old Wurlitzer. I don’t get around as well as I used to. I keep a few of the old tunes on there, for times when I’m alone and want to remember. That machine’s been fixed a million times, but I just can’t bear to part with it. All the lights blew out long ago, and the shine has dulled, but it works. It’s the same one that entertained Doe all those years ago, though some of the songs comin’ out of it these days, well, just say, even Doe wouldn’t have liked ‘em.

I’ve always kept the cost at a dime too. Shit, the machine’s paid for. I slid a dime into the slot and listened while it wound its way through. I hit *F3* and *In the Mood* fell into place. “Oh, yeah, Glenn Miller had it.” I shuffled along, holding my imaginary light-footed partner.

“Did you ever date Doe, Bud?”

I kept dancing.

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“One night, Doe invited a bunch of us over to her house. She lived over on Runnels Road, you know that old house with the wraparound porch?”

“Sure, the Humbolts live there now.”

“Yeah, they sure do. Well, anyway, a bunch of us went, and Doe’s mama made us a nice supper. As I recall, it was meatloaf, creamed potatoes, and corn on the cob. Oh man, that meal hit the spot. After dinner, we all helped clean up, and then Doe’s mama left us to each other’s company. The six of us, we had a ball. We talked and danced. Then we played spin the bottle. You ever play spin the bottle, John?”

“I think that was a bit before my time. What’s the purpose?”

“You see, ya get ya a Coke bottle and girls sit in a circle. Each guy gets a turn to spin the bottle, and whoever the neck points to, he gets to kiss ‘em.”

“Whoa, you’re kiddin?”

I raised my hand and laughed. “Nope, I swear it.”

“You ever get to kiss Doe?”

“We kissed all the girls, but then everyone went to a chair or the sofa and necked in the dark.”

“Necked?”

“Don’t they teach you young folks anything? Necked. You know, kissed, made out. Haven’t you ever copped a feel?”

That got a smile from him. “Yeah, Bud, I’ve copped a feel, though never knew that’s what you old timers called it.”

“We were smooth back in those days. Nothin’ like, ‘Hey baby, wanna fuck,’ like you young people do today.”

John shook his head and sipped his beer. “S’pose it is. So go on.”

“Well, we all sat around, while the Victrola played *Fools Rush In* in the background. Doe loved to have guests, and she’d gone all out. She was hotsy-totsy that night, and all us guys appreciated her efforts. I swear she looked like Rita Hayworth in one of those movie magazines she loved to read. She’d captured the essence of the glamour La Hayworth had comin’ out her pores.”

I went back behind the bar and sat down, after refilling our pilsners. I wish I had the words to describe what Doe looked like, but not being a fella of eloquence, words like hubba-hubba and wowsa had to do.

“I think I’ve heard of Rita Hayworth.”

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“Oh, son, she was the cat’s meow back in those days. Every girl wanted to be her, and every guy wanted to be *in* her—this one included.”

“You old dog, you,” John said, then took a drink.

I kinda puffed out my chest. “In those days, son, I was all dick and vinegar. Indeed I was. If a woman said yes, I was all over her. They never had to ask twice, no sir. That gives ‘em time to change their minds. I suspect it isn’t much different with young fellas these days, judging by the number of swollen bellies I see.

“Anyway, eventually we had enough neckin’ and not enough of anything else. I guess, it was about midnight or so. Doe’s lips were all swollen from kissin’ Roy, but not a hair was out of place. She was perfect. She refilled our Coca Colas and put some cookies on a plate, and the six of us sat around and talked till almost sun up. Her mama was good about that. She trusted Doe wouldn’t allow anything bad to go on in the house.

“When Royal said goodbye to her that night, or that morning, I should say, he told the fellas that his heart beat fast just looking at her, he wasn’t sure if he wouldn’t die before he touched her again.”

“I felt that way about Christie when we first started dating. That woman could fill out a pair of jeans. Perfection in denim.”

“What about now?”

John seemed to think for a moment and then nodded his head. “Yeah, now too.”

“See we didn’t have the advantage of such revealing clothes. Men had to imagine what a gal looked like under those cotton dresses they wore. Those infernal things hung down past to their shins and there wasn’t anything clingy about ‘em. Did keep the mystery going there, though. There’s nothing quite so thrilling as the first time you slide your lecherous hand up her leg.”

John groaned, but I ignored it, as I had to work at suppressing my own. As glamorous as Doe tried to look, she wore her sadly outdated and overworked cotton dress nearly every day. No one had much money back then, so there wasn’t anyone to fault her for making full use of that poor dress, and she wore it well.

“Doe wasn’t easy, no way. I don’t want you to get the wrong idea. She liked her fun and all, but she wasn’t one to give it up to just anyone. She was a good girl. Had she been so inclined, there’d have been a line outside her door. No, she lived with her mother, her father’d been dead for years by that time, and her mother trusted her to do the right thing. She was twenty-three when she first started coming into the Starlight.”

“Did she ever say why she came in?”

“Oh sure. Like most of the other girls, they’d heard about the USO and what some of the folks did to entertain the troops. Well, word had gotten around town here, how Royal’s father

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gave beers to the fellas, and there was music, and soon, some of the nice ladies around town came in to dance with the guys, you know, before they went off to war or while they were home on leave.”

“So Doe was one of those ladies?”

“Yeah, she sure was, and the men were sure glad to see her. She was popular, because she knew how to talk to ’em. She made ’em feel like she cared, without ’em getting’ any raw ideas.”

“You know, when some wounded guys came back from Afghanistan, Christie went by the Veteran’s Hospital and volunteered to write letters or read to the guys. I even kind of laughed at her doing it.”

“You’ve been out there, John, you know what it’s like. A friendly face and some concern goes a long way.”

“And it did.” John’s voice got cold.

Shouldn’t have poked a stick at the wound, so I covered it up by continuing my story. “Royal admired how the gals danced their feet off some nights, givin’ the guys a memory to take with ’em overseas. A pretty girl with a smile and a kind word. I suspect many of ’em wished they’d had a pin-up of the girls, cuz they was sure prettier than some of those movie stars.”

“Did they ever marry, Roy and Doe?”

“Well, see it went like this. Royal had a job with the government that kept him in the states, right close to here, a lot longer than most. That meant he could court the lady. He was big on red roses, when he could find a garden to filch ’em from.”

“Really?” John asked, with his eyebrows raised.

“There was a war on, son and everyone had to do their part.” I laughed, remembering how old widow Franklin chased a bunch of us down the street with her broom one night. We laughed our asses off at how the poor gal never stood a chance to catch us and retrieve her roses.

“You don’t think you young folks cornered the market on romance, do ya?”

“Hmm, stolen roses never makes me think romance, Bud. When I get roses for Christie, I go to FTD.”

I belly-laughed, and it felt good. “Well, Mrs. Franklin was *our* FTD.”

“Man, you’re something else.”

“So I was told once or twice in my day,” I said with a wink and a stroke of sadness. “But those days are long past, much to my regret.”

“So tell me more about Doe and Royal.”

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I nodded, then stalled. I hadn't told this story in a long while. No need really, but now, John needed to hear it.

“Royal romanced Doe, and they both were smitten.” I couldn't help but smile when I thought back on it. “Royal'd been hit by the love train, and he got razzed without mercy by his buddies. You know, crude shit, like ‘pussy whipped’ and such, but hell, he didn't mind, because he was in love. That little lady had him wrapped around her little finger, and no matter what his friends said, he always answered, ‘Yeah, and you don't have her’. They backed off then, because he was right. You know, you can always sense when someone is envious, and man, oh, man, they all were.

“Doe was one of those women all guys wanted to take home to mother. There wasn't anything coy about her, and when she looked at ya, ohh, she had a way of makin' ya wish you were as good as she made ya feel.”

“Christie used to look at me like that. I wanted to hang the moon and walk on water just to get one of those looks.”

“You're still you, John. You just need to find you again.”

“Is that possible? Really?”

I sucked in a deep breath. “Oh sure it is. You just have to want it bad enough.”

John nodded, as though he'd thought about that exact thing before.

“But wantin' it bad enough, well, as Will Shakespeare said, ‘therein lies the rub.’”

“You sound like you've had experience.”

“You could say that, but then at my age, I've had lots of experiences.”

“At mine, too.” His words dripped self-pity. He lifted his pilsner glass and drank deep. “Go on. Sorry for interrupting.”

I shook my head and held up a staying hand. “Ask your questions, make your comments. Helps me savor the story all the longer.

“Their romance was something of a fairy tale. They necked and cuddled, right over there in that booth.” I pointed to a darkened corner, still lit, after all these years, by a small amber bulb in the wall sconce. “That was ‘their place’, Doe said, and after a while, everyone knew to steer clear of it, in case they came in.

“And they always came in. They never wanted to go anywhere else. This was home to them. Royal would sweet-talk her and after a while, she couldn't resist his charms. He never mentioned to anyone what I'm about to tell ya, but considering you're so interested, I tell ya.”

John leaned forward.

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“One night, the place was almost empty, just a couplea fellas and their gals. See, no one paid any mind when things got quiet. The old Wurlitzer played, and everyone attended to their own business. Like I said, one night, they were over in the corner there, and Roy had Doe on his lap. Oh, she was gigglin’ as he kissed her neck. She had him right where he wanted to be, and being a man, you can imagine the effect she had on him.”

“Oh-h, yeah-h,” John said with a touch of longing in his voice.

“They’d been seein’ each other for a good while by then, but during the war, time was rushed, like you had to live a week in a day, never knowin’ what the new day would bring. Terrible way to live for young folks. Hell, terrible way for anyone to live. All that uncertainty. Well, anyway, Royal’d made up his mind that Doe would be his, and she had no eyes for anyone else but him. What a beautiful thing to see.”

I drank deep and blinked back the tears at the memories of those two young lovebirds.

“Royal was an honorable man, but that night, he decided he had to have Doe, had to make her truly his. He did use the line about ‘I may never come back from war,’ but he really didn’t need to. He whispered in her ear, ‘I want to have you alone,’ and it wasn’t a minute later, they walked out that door.”

“Where’d they go?”

“Royal had a place, one little room, not too far from here. The building’s not there anymore. The place was cheap and the woman who owned it, well, shall we say, she turned her head and ignored any comin’s and goin’s. Roy took Doe to his room, and there, their lives changed.”

“How do you mean?”

“You ever had one thing happen that changed the way you saw everything else?”

John bowed his head. When he raised his head again, he had tears in his eyes. “Yes.”

Then you’ll understand this next part. “Roy wasn’t just after what Doe had hidden under her skirts. No, he wanted more than that in the long run. He wanted her heart, her soul. He wanted all of her.

“When they walked into that room, they were a young couple all wrapped up in the heat of the moment. My God, Doe was a passionate woman and Roy wanted her more than he’d ever wanted anything in his life. She kissed him until his pants just fell off.”

“How do you know that?”

“Guys talk, young man. Don’t tell me you never told your best friend all about you and Christie.”

He blushed, and he nodded. “Yeah, I s’pose.” He took a long swig of his beer.

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“Anyway, he was so nervous. Like a boy who’d never seen a tit before. He was experienced, no doubt about that, but his nerves got the best of him, because he was with Doe. He knew she wouldn’t turn him down, hell, she’d gone to the room with him, but he wanted to make her first time something to remember him by. Up to then, they’d petted, you know, top and bottom, him on her. Doe was always kinda shy in that regard. But as they got to know each other, there were certain promises made, silent like, ya know?”

“Promises?”

“Oh, come on, boy, it hasn’t been that long, has it? When a young lady lets a man touch her like that, and doesn’t slap him into the next week, it kinda implies he could have more if he wanted it.”

John smiled and looked at me with a raised eyebrow.

“Okay, bad way to put it. Yes, promises. There was an understanding between ’em that they’d make love before Royal had to leave. See, things had escalated, and word had it that he’d be assigned to a unit and shipped overseas.

“They never knew when that would be. The damn fucking war kept ’em on their toes, so to speak. Doe worried it would be a sudden deployment, and it could’ve been in those days. They both felt the urgency of that night, strange how that was.”

“I remember when I got my orders to Iraq,” John interrupted. “Everything at home seemed more important, like we had to say everything at once in case we didn’t get another chance.” John stared off into the room, like a memory had grabbed him and wouldn’t let go. “Sometimes I think we just didn’t say enough, like I could have told her I loved her another hundred times or made love to her harder, so she’d understand how much I needed her. Shit, I don’t know, something, anything.”

My heart went out to my friend. He was goin’ through hell. “Sometimes it isn’t what we don’t do. Life’s full of regrets, you know? Makes every moment more important when you realize that. Say what you mean and mean what you say, then if the person you’re talkin’ to doesn’t get it, at least you tried.”

“What do you do with the ‘if onlys’?”

“Water under the bridge son, water under the bridge. What’s that they say, hindsight is 20/20? Old Blue Eyes used to sing, ‘Regrets, I’ve had a few’. Can’t live with ‘em though. They’ll eat ya alive.”

“Is that what’s gnawing my gut?”

“Could be.”

“I’m sorry again, for interrupting. Please, keep goin’.”

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“Okay, so Roy has her there in the room, and all he thought about was having her. Now, he never thought of it in terms of, well, you know, a piece of ass. No, he had too much respect for her. He wanted her because he loved her, and isn’t that what a guy wants when they love their gal?”

“Sure. Nothing else is more important.”

“Well said. So he wrapped his arms around her and pulled her close. She was nervous, shaking like a little leaf, but he told her he wouldn’t hurt her. He’d have sooner taken a bullet than hurt her.

“She told him, ‘I know you’d never hurt me.’ I can imagine her saying that, even now. That sweet voice of hers, those big, brown eyes, half-closed with...

“Uh-uh, such trust. Roy was all into that. He took that seriously, well, how could anyone not?”

“I do or did.”

I let John’s remark pass. No sense makin’ him say shit out loud that he’d rather not even think about.”

“Roy tried to be cool, having honed his love making skills in the balcony at the picture show. While he hugged Doe, he unbuttoned the back of her dress with one hand, all the while kissin’ the daylights out of her.

“When the dress slid down her body and onto the floor, old Roy couldn’t do anything but stare at the perfection he’d uncovered. Said he felt like a green boy caught readin’ his daddy’s dirty magazines.” I couldn’t help but laugh. “It was almost like he’d never been with a woman before, cuz Doe was, well, she was Doe.”

“Was Roy embarrassed?”

“Not sure. More like overwhelmed, I s’pose. See, he wanted Doe more than anything, but since he was the more experienced, he had to set the pace. What if he rushed her? You know, those things happen.”

John nodded and drank from his glass.

“Yeah, so Roy had to make a decision, all the while tryin’ to keep from droolin’.”

“Yeah, I’m sure Doe wouldn’t have appreciated that. So, what’d he do?”

“He sweet-talked her, what else. He told her, ‘You’re so beautiful,’ and other equally lame things, but poor guy, he couldn’t think of all his best lines, he was in such awe.”

“Well, did they do the deed?”

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A bit of indignation rose at the question. “My friend, Royal was a lover. Finesse was his strong suit. He worked it out. He calmed down and let nature take its course. Let’s suffice it to say, by the time they came out of that room, Doe was a woman and Royal was lookin’ for a preacher.”

“No details, Bud?”

“Nah, you don’t need all that. The mechanics have worked the same way for centuries, man. Let’s leave the rest to Roy and Doe.”

“I s’pose so, but it doesn’t seem right you get me revved up though and then close the door.”

I ignored his plea for details. Oh, I had ’em, but upon reflection, it didn’t seem right to divulge what I knew.

“So did Royal ever marry Doe?”

“Well, see that’s the thing. For days after their rendezvous, Roy hemmed and hawed about poppin’ the question. He wondered about the fairness to Doe to up and marry her, and then go get himself killed. Sure, he wanted to marry her, but why complicate matters.

“Then he thought about making an honest woman of her, that was his guilty conscience talkin’ there. That, and he didn’t want anyone else lookin’ at her.”

That would hit a sensitive spot with John, but he’s smart enough to have figured that out for himself.

“Well, he wanted to ask Doe to marry him, and just when he got serious, he got his orders to go overseas.”

“Ah, man, but they were expecting it, right?”

“Oh, yeah, but he’d hoped to get married before he got his orders. But he saw the writing on the wall. How couldn’t he? Everyone around him had gone and the clock was ticking.”

“Sad though. Back then, they never knew how long they’d be gone, right?”

“Sure enough. We signed on for the duration. There wasn’t any of this one year tour of duty business.”

I stopped. Stiff joints and an empty glass gave me the need to walk a bit.

I almost regretted getting started with this story. The whole thing closed in on me. I don’t like remembering being over there. I hadn’t thought about the war, in terms of the war itself, in years. Sure, every Veteran’s Day I’d go to the cemetery and put a flag on my buddy’s graves, but I don’t like thinkin’ about the fightin’. Such a long slog—three years of never knowin’ if we’d be alive for supper. If I spent any time mullin’ it over, everything got too real. I’m not one of those guys who tells war stories. I went over there and saw things that nightmares are made of. So

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much death and destruction, lives laid to waste. Damn! We all understood the why, but still, the price was too high.

I gathered myself and sat back on my stool. I put two more beers on the bar, pushing one in front of John. He looked like he needed it. “The war was rough going.”

“I understand. You know, I joined the Army for the money, the job security, but it didn’t take me long to see how important my job really was. One tour was enough to make me see how good we have life here in the good old *U S of A.*”

“Yeah, the soldiers are always the ones who discover those things, the rest just take it for granted. If only we could teach that to the young people, huh? Freedom ain’t free, as they say.”

John shook his head and picked up his fresh beer. He’d seen shit too. I saw it in his eyes, but I wasn’t askin’.

“So Royal went where?”

“Guadalcanal for one, but, well, yeah, that was one of the worst. We lost a lot of buddies there. Had to leave ’em. War ain’t polite. We kinda got used to sayin’ goodbye and movin’ on, coverin’ our own asses to not get picked off. Sounds crude, but you know that’s the way it is. You forget the nice things, kinda get used to the grit between your teeth, and lack of sweet smellin’ flowers and such.”

“So you were with him all the way? How long was he gone?”

“We were as close as we could be, yeah. Gone nearly three years.” *Three fucking years.* “Those three years played hell on the home front, I’m here to tell you.”

John got that distant look again. “Even a year away from home does that. What happened?”

“While we were over there fightin’, everyone able bodied person did their part back home. The women took care of the families and many took over the jobs the men had been doin’ in the factories and all. Now, I have no doubt, it was hard on ’em. Most of the gals I knew didn’t know anything about factory work, and you know this is a mill town, so that’s all there was back then.

“You know how hard it is to leave everything ya knew and go to some God forsaken pit.”

The memories had a way of coming back, no matter how hard I tried to push ‘em away. But that’s okay. I just keep tellin’ myself it’s over. That usually works, a little at least.

John bobbed his head and sipped his beer. “You know I always thought I’d want to travel to foreign countries and all, but after being in the Middle East, I’m happy to be right back here and to never go anywhere else.”

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“You’re not the only one.” I wondered if I sounded as convincing as I’d intended. Truth is, there was a time when I loved to travel. Went all over the United States and Europe. But had to give it up after my heart attack a couple of years back. That’s when I decided to stick close to home and the Starlight.

“Seems like we got off on a tangent. How long was it after Royal’s night with Doe did he get his orders to ship out?”

“That’s the sad part. The orders came in, and within a week, we were gone. Yep, just a week. Barely had enough warning to get our laundry done. We scrambled, all of us, to wrap up our business and get to the train station on time.” I chuckled. “There were a lot of sleepless nights that week. Stored up memories to last the duration.

“I remember that departure day, damn, sixty years ago. Mothers crying, fathers trying to comfort their wives, and fellas holding onto their gals as though that would somehow anchor ’em to home and hearth.

“The guys put on a brave face—they saved their cryin’ for the train. ‘We’ll get over there, kill ’em all, and some said we’d get back in time for Christmas. No one believed a word of it. Just tryin’ to make the ladies feel better. All false bravado mixed with a healthy dose of wishful thinkin’.”

I took a long sip of beer and scratched my head. I was one of those young fools who said it, hyped up on the rah-rah talk from our commander at the base. Didn’t take long to learn he was full of shit.

“Many of those guys never came back. I knew ’em all, the ones on that train that day. Young, freckle-faced boys most of ’em, sent off to fight a grown-ups war. Hell, I was barely old enough to shave and I’m not sure my voice had even changed yet.” I laughed. “Twenty-one years old is all I was.”

“I believe in my country, John, and I believe in the cause of freedom, but some things haven’t changed since the beginning of time. Our cause was just back then, they attacked us. They learned too late not to poke a sleeping tiger, but damn, we lost some of our best men.”

“I guess that hasn’t changed any, has it?”

“Doesn’t seem so, son. You drivin’ tonight?”

“Nah, I walked.”

“Good.” I got us a couple more beers and sat down to finish the story.

“Ole Royal, he held onto Doe while the other guys said their farewells. They were all hangin’ out the windows, blowin’ kisses, and yellin’ at Roy to get his ass on the train before it pulled out and he was AWOL.

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“He didn’t hear ’em yellin. He had eyes and ears only for Doe. Only when the conductor tugged on his uniform sleeve did he let her go. I swear, he didn’t take his eyes off her. He left Doe cryin’ on the platform and wavin’ frantically until he couldn’t see her anymore. He wasn’t fit for man or beast for days after that, his thoughts only on her. Some of the fellas, they kept tellin’ him he’d have to get in the game, put his personal life aside because everyone’s lives depended on his full concentration. He’d tell ’em to fuck off and leave him alone.

“After awhile though, he shook off his sadness. He didn’t want to get himself or anyone else killed. He kept a photograph of Doe tucked in his hat and by the time we landed overseas, he’d prepared himself to do his duty. ‘Every day is one day closer to getting back to Doe.’ Words to believe in.”

“Must have been hard, without email and stuff like that.”

“V-mail worked pretty well. The higher-ups preached about us writing home every day, and man, when we got mail, we felt like a million bucks. Doe wrote regularly, and Royal wrote back. He’d read his letters to the fellas, and everyone in our unit fell in love with her a bit. Most of the guys knew of her, but her letters made us feel like we were back home, right here, at the Starlight.

“She’d give us all the news from home, even wrote something like a newspaper, tellin’ us who died and who was born, who was down with illness and what everyone had for supper. Silly stuff, some of it, compared to what we were facin’, but it was normal, just a little normal in that crazy place.”

John smiled with understanding. “I lived for my letters and emails. Of course, we had webcams and stuff, so I saw Christie and heard her voice, but I know what you’re saying. I’d have gone crazy if I hadn’t had those things to look forward to. You just want something that’s not camouflage and smells like old sweat socks.”

“That’s it. Well, after two and a half years, Royal proposed, right in a letter, with all the guys hangin’ over his shoulder tellin’ ’im what to write. ‘I can’t live without you’, old Spunky Malone said, while Marty Shonnard wanted him to write a poem.

“Roy stood his ground, though, and as his hand shook, he wrote, *Will you marry me?* ‘That’s all I really want to say’. For a guy who could talk the ear off the town gossip, he kept it short and sweet. I swear, he’d never been so on top of the world as the day that letter went out.”

“I remember when I thought about proposing to Christie. Shit, I was so nervous, I had sweaty hands, and tongue got thick. I think Royal had it right, but I bet he still would have liked to see her reaction when he asked her.

“He had to make due, you know, and he wanted to make sure no fool at home swept her off her feet while he was gone. She was a looker, and any man would have done himself proud to marry her.”

John smiled. “So, of course, she said yes.”

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“Oh yeah, but it took forever, or it seemed like it. He gave it a couple weeks, then he haunted mail call. He knew she’d accept, but the wait was nearly as bad as the missions we went out on. But, she didn’t disappoint him. He got a letter back a month later, and from the words he read to the whole outfit, we almost saw her jumpin’ up and down for joy.

“Then everyone had to have a look at her picture, so he passed it around. Just a tiny thing, all wrinkled for all he’d put it through, but it was the possession he treasured the most. He was like a kid with a new electric train. That picture and that acceptance letter kept him going for the next six months. A lot went on then, men dying around us, left and right, but when all else turned to shit, he’d pull out that picture and Doe’s smiling face saw him through the day.”

“I carried Christie’s picture with me, just like Royal did with Doe’s. Yeah, it got me through many days, just her smile and the fact that I’d taken it, so she was really smiling at me.”

His voice hitched and he bowed his head. I hoped he’d turned a corner. I stopped for a few minutes and let him gather his thoughts. He didn’t share what they might be, but I suspected they involved something more important than the reason that’d brought him into the Starlight in the first place.

He cleared his throat, but the catch was still there. “So did you go to the wedding?”

I turned away from him, my turn to take a moment. “No, I didn’t. There wasn’t a wedding.”

John’s anticipatory look turned to a frown. “What do you mean, no wedding?”

“The war ended, and we all came home. Doe was waiting on the same platform where she’d stood as our train pulled away, and, my God, she was a sight for sore eyes. Royal grabbed her and swung her around and around till they were dizzy as hell. Her laughter was like tinkling bells, pleasant and warm, like home.

“We all left the station and came here, the lot of us, packed this place. The ole Wurlitzer worked overtime that day. Yeah, we all danced and drank and necked. I do believe a few of the fellas fucked their ladies out back or in the rest rooms, just couldn’t wait any longer. As much as everyone in the place wanted nothing more than to get naked with their wives or girlfriends, no one was ready to give up what had been so familiar for three years. Strangest thing. Just something interesting about how human nature works. Not all of us came back, and we mourned *them* that night too.”

“God, the night my unit got back, we got off that plane and held onto our ladies, I was so glad to hold Christie in my arms again. But we hung out at the airport for the longest time. My buddies and I, a part of us couldn’t say goodbye, yet we couldn’t wait for our ladies to take us home. I guess things don’t change all that much over time, do they?”

I had an intense sense of satisfaction when I heard John’s words. My point had hit home. “No, they don’t really, people being what they are. We eventually got drunk enough or horny enough and found our way to our homes. Doe took Royal to her house. Her mama had passed

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away while he was away, so Doe lived alone and supported herself. So much had happened during those three years. In many ways, they were strangers, even though they'd written nearly every day. But all was well."

"Must have been like fireworks, huh? Ours was."

"I suppose, in many ways. But it was like strangers coming together too. They were two strangers who had to get to know each other all over again. Three years changes people, makes you stronger and less dependent on the other one. Doe'd told him she'd had to learn about loss. He thought she had to think like that, in case he didn't come back, you know?"

John silently drank his beer.

"The next morning, Doe left Royal sleeping while she went to work. They were short-handed at the factory, and she'd been pullin' double shifts. The money was good, and she needed it, since she was supportin' the house and all.

"Royal went to see her for lunch, brought her sandwiches he made himself, and they had about an hour before she had to get back. They'd dock her for even a minute less than her shift. Anyway, she was scheduled to get off at eleven that night, and he told her he'd have dinner ready for her. He put together some spaghetti and meatballs. He let the romantic come out in him, and he bought all the candles he could find and put 'em all over the house. He waited for an hour or more, well past midnight, but she hadn't gotten home. He thought maybe she had to work even later, since so many men had come home and so many of their wives and girlfriends worked at the factory. After another hour, he went to the factory to see what was keepin' her."

I drank my beer down to the dregs and put the glass in the sink. "On the way to the mill, he came upon her car, and for a minute, he couldn't move. He checked the license plate, but somehow, his mind wouldn't let him accept what he saw."

John pushed his empty glass toward me and stood. "What did he see?"

I looked at him, my stomach knotted, but I was determined to finish. "Her car'd been hit by another. The driver's side was all stove in, and she was bleeding, her head lying on the steering wheel, her victory rolls still perfect, just like always.

"Whoever it was that hit her left her there alone. She was hurt really bad and she didn't respond to Roy when he called to her. He shouted for help, but being late at night, there was no one around. Shit, it was after one o'clock in the morning. Anyone with any sense was home in bed.

"She came around when Roy climbed into the passenger seat. He wanted nothing more than to get her out of that smashed up old jalopy, but he couldn't get her door open. Her head was bleeding bad, in a couple of places, but she said she wasn't in any pain, just cold. He asked her if she wanted his coat, and she said, 'No, I feel like I'm floating.'

"He tried to get her over the stickshift, wanted to get her to the hospital, but she cried out when he went to move her. 'No, please,' she said, 'let me sit here awhile, I'll be all right'.

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“He’d never felt so helpless in his life. The longer they sat, the less chance she had. Having seen so much death, he knew that much. But he did as she asked.

“Royal held Doe in his arms, as gently as he could, and said all the things he’d stored up for three years. He wouldn’t cry, didn’t want to upset her. He told her how much he loved her and only her. How he’d never thought of another girl since the moment he met her. He told her how they’d fix up her mama’s house, and how their kids would run round and drive them crazy.”

I stopped again, the telling more difficult than I thought it’d be, but I gathered myself and went on.

“They talked a bit. Doe said a few words, assurin’ Royal she’d be okay. He held her, and kept talkin’ for the longest time. Just talkin’ about anything he could think of. He kissed her head and talked. She closed her eyes, but he convinced himself she was listening. She’d moan every now and again and that was enough. Any sound was better than none.

“Roy told her he loved her, and when she didn’t answer, he knew. To keep from losing his mind, he held her for hours, till the sun came up. He was in such a state, he didn’t realize someone was poundin’ on the window, a policeman, askin’ if they were all right...but nothin’ would ever be all right again.”

Tears poured from John’s eyes. Better him than me, I said to myself, cuz I’d cried millions since that day long ago.

John shook his head. “How terrible for him to lose her like that. I can’t imagine ever losing Christie. I just can’t.”

I could have gotten angry at his words, but I didn’t. I’d wrenched this story from my memory for a reason, and now he’d opened the door for me to tell him what I’d meant to say all along. “Yet, you keep makin’ her pay for what she did.”

John stared, his vacant gaze searching the room, as though he calculated something. “But how do I get over it, Bud? The hurt I mean.” He swiped his hand across his face. “She hurt me bad.”

“That one’s easy, son. You don’t. Royal never did. But after a while, the pain of Doe’s death was like a comfortin’ blanket. His desire for her never faded. He lived on for both of them. Still does, and never once has he forgotten what she meant to him.”

“He’s still living? Did he ever marry?”

I laughed at the thought. Ludicrous, knowing Royal as I did, yet how would John know that? “Nah, he never did. Always said it wouldn’t be fair to another woman, constantly compared to the perfection of Doe. Oh, Royal knew she must have had faults, but his love for her meant more than worryin’ about petty things. And if you don’t mind me saying so, you’ve spend too much time holdin’ what Christie did against her. If you love her, son, let her know. Don’t waste time rehashing the past, you can’t change it.”

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“I want to forget about it and move on.”

“More important, you need to and Christie needs that to. Don’t be foolish or you’ll be an old man with nothing more to show for your life than memories. Now, you go on home and take that wife of yours to bed. Love her like you mean it, and tell her about Doe and Royal. Come back when you’ve fixed it and don’t waste your time on foolish pride.”

John walked toward the door, then turned back. “I forgot to pay you for the beers.”

“Fix your life and the beers are on me.”

“Night, Bud, and thanks.”

“None needed, I enjoyed the company.” I locked the door and stood with my back against it for the longest time. I gave the room the eye. The ghosts from the past danced by the Wurlitzer. A giggle came from the darkened corner. Two familiar smiling faces preserved for all time. She wearing victory rolls and her favorite green dress, he in his Army uniform, both young, at the beginning of their lives.

I cleaned up the bar, dropped a dime in the jukebox, and sat in that darkened corner, and listened to *There Will Never Be Another You*.

\* \* \* \* \*

A couple nights after our little chat, John walked into the Starlight with a beautiful lady on his arm. By the look on his face, I caught on right away that she was his Christie, and my heart did a leap. By the shit-eating grin on his face, it looked like he’d taken my advice, swallowed his pride and fixed things.

He and Christie bypassed the bar and went to the darkened corner, to Doe and Royal’s booth. John winked and nodded my way. After they settled, I hobbled on over.

“Bud, I’d like to introduce my wife, Christie. Honey, this is Bud, the man I told you about.”

Christie stuck her hand out, and I took it, kissing the back of it like the old-fashioned gentleman I am. “So nice to meet you, Christie. John has told me many nice things about you.”

“I believe I have you to thank for us finding our way back to each other. I don’t know how to repay you.”

“No need, I just told an old story is all.”

Christie eyed me with a big brown gaze. “I believe it was more than a story. When John repeated it to me, it touched me in ways I can’t describe.”

“If anything I said has brought about a reconciliation between the two of you, I know Royal and Doe would be happy about that. Now, what can I get you two lovebirds to drink?”

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“A Michelob Light, honey?” John asked his wife.

Christie nodded, and I ambled to the bar for two cold ones. I brought them back and placed the pilsners on napkins. “You enjoy now,” I said to them and turned to leave.

“John made Doe sound like a wonderful woman,” Christie said.

I smiled at the kind words. “That she was, my dear. That she was.”

Christie pointed to the picture on the wall behind John’s head. “Is that her?”

My eyes met those of the most amazing woman I’d ever known.

“Indeed, it is. That’s the blowup of that tiny picture Royal always carried. Remember John, I told you about that?”

“Yeah, I remember. Wow, she looks like I imagined her. Beautiful, like you said.”

I couldn’t say anything. She just looked like perfection to me. I turned to leave again, but John stopped me. “Ah, Bud, is Royal still with us?”

I knew he’d ask eventually. “Yeah, yeah, he is.”

“Really, oh, wow,” he said, his excitement beyond my imagining. “I’d love to meet him and thank him for being such an inspiration.”

I smiled. “No need to thank him. He was just a man in love with a woman. Nothing extraordinary about him at all.”

Christie looked at John with eyes that would melt the coldest heart. “I beg to differ, Mr. Bud. Royal and Doe’s story changed everything for us. We realize how important our love is and how what we have is rare.”

She placed her hand over John’s and I felt the grip as though she’d squeezed my heart. “We’d love to tell him ourselves—how he and Doe saved us.”

“I’ll be happy to tell him for you.”

“Please, can you take us to him?” Christie’s plea sounded so like Doe, who told me clear as day, “Don’t tease them, you silly man.”

I chuckled and tucked those timeless words back into my memory. “You’ve both already met Royal.”

John widened his eyes as his jaw dropped. “Where? When? Why didn’t you introduce us?”

I leaned in close and brushed my finger over Doe’s picture on the wall. “Well, son, let’s just say, you’re sittin’ in *my* seat.”

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~The End~

## Dedication

*Dedicated to my mom, one of the most beautiful 1940s women I've ever seen. And to the real Doe and Royal—my great-Aunt Dorothy and great-Uncle Roy. Their love story ended all too soon, when Roy died in a flood in 1945 at age 35.*

**A Note from the Author:** I met Aunt Dorothy when she was a frail woman of 82 years. She showed me the only photo she had of her, Roy, and their oldest child, taken shortly before Roy's death. The photo was in very bad condition, but she treasured the only image she had of "My precious Roy," as she called him. She allowed my husband to take that photo and blow it up for her. I'm told that when she died in 2005, that framed photo went into her casket. *An Evening at the Starlight*, Doe and Royal's story, was written to honor this real life timeless desire.

## About the Author

Born in a small town in upstate New York, Brita Addams has made her home in the sultry south for many years. In the Frog Capital of the World, Brita shares her home with her real-life hero—her husband, and a fat cat named Stormee. All their children are grown.

Given her love of history, Brita writes both het and gay historical romance. Many of her historicals have appeared on category bestseller lists at various online retailers.

Musa Publishing publishes Brita's heterosexual historical romances, including the rewritten and expanded, best-selling Sapphire Club series, each with new titles. Again, each of the titles have again hit the best-selling lists at various online vendors.

Tarnished Gold, the first in her gay romance Tarnished series for Dreamspinner Press, was a winner in the 2013 Rainbow Awards, Historical Romance category. The book also received nominations for Best Historical and Best Book of 2013 from the readers of the Goodreads M/M Romance Group.

A bit of trivia—Brita pronounces her name, Bree-ta, and not Brit-a, like the famous water filter. Brita Addams is a mash-up of her real middle name and her husband's middle name, with an additional d and s.

Readers can find more information about Brita Addams at any of the following places:

[Website/Blog](http://britaaddams.net) <http://britaaddams.net>  
[Twitter](http://www.twitter.com/britaaddams) <http://www.twitter.com/britaaddams>  
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