

The fathers' faces remained with her as she crossed the threshold from sleep to waking. Their presence was so oddly comforting, Miranda was reluctant to let them leave. She lay with her eyes shut, trying to hold onto the image of two young men in pilots' uniforms for as long as she could.

The cheerful noise that had woken her was stubbornly persistent. Alan came out of the bathroom, singing a song that had been a favorite when they first met. As usual, he had the lyrics all wrong and the melody pitch perfect. Unable to withstand the competition, the fathers slipped away and Miranda opened her eyes.

Her husband paused mid-tune, eyeing the untouched cup on the bedside table with surprise.

“You’ve let your coffee go cold. No walk this morning?”

She had to smile. When they first met, Alan used to tease her about her complete lack of exercise and warn that she wouldn't always be able to rely on metabolism to keep her slim. He'd been right. Now she religiously covered five miles every day – all the way to the tip of the Battery and back.

She knew she should get up, but the memory of the gift she'd received in her sleep held her captive.

“I had the most amazing, vivid dream.” She stretched in an effort to get herself moving. “About our fathers.”

“Which ones? Real or step?”

“Our real fathers.”

“Interesting. Both of them together, huh? So what were they doing?”

“That’s just it. Nobody was really *doing* anything. We were sitting in a room. I don’t know where it was, but it had a cozy feeling, as if it was familiar to me. They were both in leather armchairs and I was on a couch, looking at them. At first, I felt restless, like there was something I should be doing, somewhere I needed to go, and I was a little annoyed that they were there, stopping me from doing it.

“I said, ‘I didn’t know you knew each other’ and they just looked at each other and smiled. Then my father said, ‘Oh, we always get together at this time of year. This time, we thought we’d pay you a visit. But we can’t stay long, so relax and stay here with us for a little while.’ Then this peaceful, warm feeling came over me and, suddenly, I didn’t want to get up and leave. If you hadn’t woken me up with your singing, I’d probably still be dreaming about them.”

Alan picked up the silver-framed wedding portrait of his parents from its place on the bedroom dresser. She watched as he took a handkerchief from the breast pocket of his suit and automatically wiped an imaginary smudge from the glass. Satisfied, he glanced across at the identical frame containing a picture of Miranda’s parents on their wedding day. Taken three years apart, the similarities between the photographs were striking. Both men wore uniforms and the faces of their brides reflected the glow of their heavy satin gowns.

Alan's father's white U.S. naval pilot's cap was tucked beneath his arm and, although Miranda's father's head was bare, she could imagine his best man standing off to the side, holding the cap that went with his RAF uniform. The photographer had captured the lanky flier and his petite new wife as they emerged, wreathed in smiles, from beneath the arched vestibule of a centuries-old English church.

"God, they were all so young," Alan said. A brief frown produced deep lines among his boyish freckles.

"And it was so long ago. If my father had lived, my parents would have been married ... what?" Miranda squeezed her eyelids shut to do the mental arithmetic. "Fifty-four years this month." Her eyes flew open. "Of course! That must be why I was dreaming about the fathers. I just realized. It's September."

Alan put his parents' portrait back on the dresser, carefully angling the frame into its original position.

"You know," he said, "I still find the coincidence unbelievable."

The shadow that remained on his face brought to mind more recent sorrows.

"Hey, stop," Miranda said softly. "You're making me sad, and I was feeling so good. Besides, it was one of the things that drew us together ... remember? But I know what you mean ... it's funny how much we can miss people we didn't even know."

"Well, at least I have a couple of memories." Alan put the photograph back in its place but stayed where he was, looking down at it. "I can clearly remember my father taking a splinter out of my finger when I was three. And I'll never forget sitting in the back seat of the car with him, holding his head in my lap, while my mother drove to the hospital."

The senior Alan had died of polio in September of 1949, leaving his young wife an embittered woman who had burdened her five year-old son with the title of “man of the house”. When her own father died in the same month of the same year, Miranda had been only nine months old, and she had no memories to share. Still, as she listened to Alan tell the familiar story, she found it hard to suppress a tiny chuckle.

He fixed her with a look of mock horror. “You’re laughing at me and my tragic tale?”

“I’m sorry, darling, I didn’t mean to – I hate to think of poor, little you in that car – it’s just that you’re so predictable. I can count on you telling me that exact same story every time the subject of your father comes up. You’ve been doing it for twenty-five years.”

“Oh, well. That’s me. Mr. Predictable.”

Miranda seized the moment. “So, Mr. Predictable, does that mean I can count on you to be home by six?”

“Uh, no. That would be Mr. Reliable. Why? Is something going on tonight?”

She grabbed a pillow and aimed it at his head.

“I know. I know.” He had sidestepped the missile, but his hands were still raised in surrender. “Tonight’s the night of our incredible extravaganza of a birthday dinner for Rani. And we have to be there at six-thirty. The Trade Center’s only two minutes away, for Chrissake. I could get home at six-twenty-five and it would be fine.”

“You know perfectly well it’s not just a birthday dinner, Alan. How many times do I have to explain that it’s important for Rani’s parents to meet some of her friends before the wedding?”

He tucked the errant pillow behind her back and kissed the top of her head.

“I’m just teasing, my angel. You know I’m happy to go along with whatever you want to do. You’re the world’s most thoughtful woman and I’m honored to be your husband and humble servant.”

Miranda snorted. “Humble, my ass. Seriously, Alan, I’m wearing four-inch heels tonight and, even if it is only six blocks, I won’t be able to walk in them, so we’ll have to get a taxi. And you know it’ll be a problem at that hour.”

“Okay. Okay. I’ll be home by six at the latest.”

“Thank you, Mr. Considerate. I’m looking forward to tonight so much.” She held out her arms. “It will be one more thing we can add to the good column for ‘Things that have happened in September’.”

Alan bent over, brushing aside a few wisps of her short, dark hair to kiss her forehead. “You’re right, of course. We need to put as many of those as we can on that side of the ledger.”

After all the years, she still felt a momentary pang whenever he left her, even if it was only to go to his Midtown office. The elevator shaft was right behind the headboard of the bed and, when Alan pressed the call button, Miranda could hear it rumbling upwards towards the third floor. When they first moved in, it had seemed like a glamorous feature to be able to step off the elevator straight into the quintessential Tribeca loft; but the damn thing made a dreadful racket, especially when Kenny, the trust fund baby who lived in one of the penthouses on the fifth floor, took it into his head to invite a bunch of fellow clubbers home at three in the morning.

The doors squeaked as they closed behind her husband, and Miranda turned to look at the photographs once more. The sliver of sky visible through the narrow window next to the dresser caught her eye. It was an unusually intense blue. The Hudson River would be shimmering in the sunlight, awaiting her arrival.

She knew she should get out of bed, especially if she wanted to walk this morning. Instead, she stretched again and curled her toes around the bottom of the mattress.

*I get my long legs from my father.* The thought was a timeworn mantra. *And the shape of my chin.*

Since early childhood, it had been a habit to remind herself of the ways in which they would have been alike. Occasionally, she also allowed herself to think about how different things might have been if her father had been there to help her grow up.

It had taken many years to realize that the paths she'd chosen in her life had too often been dictated by a desire to replace the lost love of her father. To her regret, the compulsion had sometimes been strong enough to cause her to hurt others.

She shuddered, and pushed the guilt aside to reconsider the dream. It had been so startlingly real. She wondered if it meant she had never needed to search for her father after all. Perhaps he had always been an unseen companion, observing the triumphs and tragedies along the complicated road that had been her life.

Thinking about it, she could easily have stayed in bed all morning, but it was already eight-thirty. Usually, she would be crossing the West Side Highway by now, heading for the path along the river.

“Okay then, Daddy. If you’re there, it’s time we went for our walk,” she said to the air.

She walked barefoot down the hallway, a pair of socks in her hand. Her sneakers were where she’d left them the previous morning, under the desk in the library. It was a lifelong habit, acquired when she could not wait to rid herself of the brown leather lace-ups she’d worn to school in South Australia, to kick off her shoes the moment she got home.

She sat down at the desk to put on her socks but, instead, her index finger hovered over the power button on her laptop.

As usual, she was unable to resist the possibility that, among the inevitable junk mail, there might be something meaningful. With the practiced eye of a speed-reader, she scanned the list of messages. The only one worthy of attention was from her sister, Jemma. The subject line contained one word: *MUMMY*

*Hi Love –*

*Want to update you on Mummy’s knee surgery. I took her to the specialist today and she’s scheduled for the op in early November. Seems a long time to wait when you’re in pain, but it’s the earliest available date. So much for the British public health system. In the meantime, she’s being her usual non-complaining self and is managing to shuffle around the house with the walker but refuses to take it outside. Says she doesn’t want people to think she’s a little old lady. Typical Cleo!*

*Lots of love, Jxxx*

Miranda sighed. At times like this, the distance that separated her from her family seemed especially vast. Since her stepfather’s death five years earlier, her mother had

lived by herself and was as stubbornly independent as she could possibly be. But she would need help while she was recovering, and Jemma was the only one there to provide it.

The digital clock on the computer screen read 8:45 AM.

“Damn! We’re late, Daddy,” she said out loud.

She switched off the computer, reached under the chair for a sneaker, and smiled as she wondered how her father would have felt about the swearing that came so naturally after all her years in America.