

Chapter 4 Impact

Saturday, June 14

Jack never took his eyes off the mirror as he worked with his necktie. “Over, around and back, then back around, and up through the top,” he recited just the way Brad showed him that first Easter he spent with his family. He had his first real tie, not a clip-on, and he wanted to surprise his parents.

It was worse than learning to tie his shoes, but after a long afternoon and dozens of failures, he got it. Kind of. If he had to do this everyday, he’d have to get up twenty minutes early just to tie the thing.

He adjusted the knot, then straightened his collar and his jacket. “There you go, Brad. Just like you showed me.” He heaved a deep sigh and dropped on his bed. “I can’t do this,” he whispered.

“Jack? You ready?” His dad eased the door open.

“Does it matter?”

“Of course, it matters.” He stepped inside, and shut the door behind him. “Is something else going on? You avoided me and everybody else yesterday and all day today.”

“It just hurts.” Jack barely got the words out before the tears started.

His dad sat on the bed with him and let him cry. “I know it hurts,” he said gently. “We’re all hurting, and it’s going to hurt for a long time.”

Jack twisted away and paced to the window. Being a blubbering crybaby wouldn’t help anything. “I fall apart every time I hear Brad’s name. How am I supposed to do this tonight?”

“Jack.” The bed squeaked as his dad stood. “The folks coming to the funeral home tonight, they’re grieving too. We need to help each other through this. They’re going to

want to talk about what Brad meant to them, and we need to soak that in. It's a special gift to see how many lives Brad touched, and how many people love us."

Jack nodded, and wiped his eyes once more. With his dad, it always came back to doing the right thing. "I guess I owe it to Brad, don't I?"

His dad patted his back. "It'll be tough, but I think it'll help you out."

"Yeah, I just don't want Mom to see me like this."

"I've got a news flash for you. Mom already knows you're like this."

Downstairs, Joel stood at the sliding glass door, staring out across his parents' backyard, wrestling with a newly realized responsibility. He was the oldest now. He was the big brother. His parents would be depending on him once they got up in years, and he had a duty to watch out for Shannon. Somehow, he also had to be there for Jack since he'd lost his hero. Joel let a deep breath go. How was he supposed to help Jack when he'd lost a hero, too?

"What are you thinking?" Abby slipped an arm around his waist and leaned against him.

Joel hugged her close and kissed her gently. "I feel kind of alone."

"You've still got Shannon and Jack."

"I know, but Brad and I grew up together. The little kids never knew Grandpa Jim, and they missed so much with Grandma. Growing up, it was me and Brad. I feel like I've lost some of my childhood, I guess. Does that make any sense?"

"Quite a bit."

"We went through Mom and Dad's separation together. Nobody else really knows what that was like." Then Joel couldn't resist a smile. "Of course, he was a jerk until he was about twenty." Abby returned the smile, and gave him a gentle shove. "We were

close, Abby. I confided in him, asked him for advice . . . I'm going to miss him." Joel wiped his eyes quickly, and glanced behind him. "I don't want Mom to see me."

"I don't think your mother expects you to be emotionless."

"She needs to do her own coping, and not worry about how the rest of us are doing."

Bobbi stood on the sidewalk of Bricker's Funeral Home waiting for Chuck to join her. What she wouldn't give to be one of the people in the cars driving by, scurrying to some appointment, untouched by a profound loss. Shannon and Jack stood ready to follow her inside. She straightened Jack's tie, and brushed his shoulders, before kissing him lightly on the cheek.

She turned to Shannon, and held her for just a moment. "We will get through this, I promise," she whispered. "I'm not sure how, but we will. You're a beautiful, strong young woman. You can do this, Baby."

"Thanks, Mom."

She felt Chuck's hand in the small of her back. "Are you ready?" he asked.

"No, but I never will be." He steadied her up the steps, and held the door for them. Don Bricker met them with a polite smile and directed them to the viewing hall. She pulled away from Chuck without looking back. "Give me just a minute."

She closed her eyes and stepped around the corner, met by the fragrances of lilies and roses. She forced her eyes open, forced herself to look at him at the other end of that narrow room, in a place where a son should never be. Her breath caught.

With each step toward him, images blitzed through her memory. That first smile of recognition. The triumph of getting his driver's license. The prayer offered at his graduation. The Mother's Day card spelled 'momy.' Tying his shoes. The football physical—'any broken bones?' the doctor asked. 'Not yet,' Brad said. The way he could

never remember which was a pumpkin and which was a pickle—that made Halloween interesting. The heartbreak when his first real girlfriend broke things off.

He changed her life. With every ‘first,’ he redefined her. He gave her a focus, a purpose and a confidence that she never found anywhere else.

She eased her hand around his, and the unnatural coolness prompted the first tear. The left side of his mouth was slightly drawn as if in an eternal private joke. The day’s stubble on his face was just as she remembered, and his hair flipped up in perfect spikes as if he’d combed it himself.

Such a fine young man. So handsome. This was so senseless. So wrong. She leaned over and caressed his cheek, then kissed him gently, her tears spotting the shoulder of his suit. “I love you, Brad.” Then she hung her head, and shuddered with great wrenching sobs.

Chuck watched Bobbi as long as he could bear, then he crossed the room to her. Wrapping his arms around her shoulders, he gently pulled her away from the casket and into his arms.

“This is so unfair,” she whispered.

“I know it is. I hate this for you. No mother should have to go through this.” He kissed her and held her tight.

“What am I gonna say to these people tonight?” She raised her head, and wiped her eyes.

“Tell them the truth. That it hurts more than anything we’ve ever experienced, and we can’t really comprehend the depth of loss.”

She took a deep breath and straightened up. “Just uh, just stick close to me tonight.”

“Tonight and every night.” He kissed her again, and squeezed her hand.

She glanced past him. “The kids are watching. I’ve got to get it together.”

“They expect you to be emotional.”

“But they need me to be in control. I need to show them how to be strong.” She pushed her hair behind her ear, and smoothed her dress against her hips. “There’s Rita.” She squeezed his hand one more time before walking away to meet her sister.

Chuck turned back to the casket, and gently laid his hand on top of Brad’s. “That woman gets all the credit, you know.” He swallowed hard. “A middle name was all you got from me. You have her eyes, her strength, her focus, her sense of calling . . . It was my profound honor to be your dad.”

After a long moment, he turned and was surprised to see Shannon. “I’m impressed,” he said. “With Grandma, you spent the evening in that corner over there.”

She dropped her eyes. “I figured it was time to grow up.”

“Don’t rush that.” He put his arm around her. “There’s plenty of time to grow up.”

She waved a finger toward the casket. “You know, the other night . . . I teased Brad about being middle-aged now.”

“At thirty-five?”

“Yeah, on those little check boxes when you fill out forms, it’s always thirty-five to fifty-five.”

“Fifty-five? Ouch. That makes me a . . . a senior citizen.”

“Truth hurts, Dad.” She smiled and laid her head against his shoulder. “When I was really little, like three or four, it blew my mind that some people had brothers that were kids. Brad was in college. He shaved.”

“Jack’s your age.”

“Yeah,” she mumbled. “Everybody thinks Brad’s all serious all the time, but he’s the only one who would play Barbies with me. And actually be Barbie.”

“Brad played Barbies?”

“Yeah, I had this one brown-haired one. That was his. Her name was Carmen. He did the voice and everything.”

“Pretty secure in his manhood, apparently.”

“Secure in everything.”

“You’re a lot like him, you know?”

“Uh, no.”

“Sweetheart, you’re very goal-oriented, like Brad. You have that same sense of justice.”

She smiled, and blinked back a tear. “Thanks, Dad. That’s about the best compliment you could give me right now.”

“Hey, there’s Katelyn.” Chuck pointed toward the door where Kara Isaac and her daughters were signing the guestbook.

“So is it okay if I hang out with her tonight?”

“Of course.”

“Thanks, Dad.”

Chuck watched Shannon and Katelyn distance themselves from everyone else, and he thanked God Shannon had a confidante right now. He hoped Jack could find someone. Abby’s son was a quiet, thoughtful kid. Maybe Ryan could be Jack’s sounding board.

“I guess this is where I’m supposed to be,” Bobbi said, rejoining him. “Was Shannon okay?”

“She’s a strong young woman. Just like her mother.”

“Her mother is a fine actress.”

The crowd seemed to part for a young man in dress blues, making his way toward them.

“Danny . . .” Bobbi said softly. “This wasn’t the homecoming I wanted for you.”

He hugged her gently, then shook Chuck's hand. "I'm glad I could be here."

"You're not alone, are you?"

"No, Rachel and the kids are in the foyer. Aunt Bobbi . . . When Mom told me . . . I can't imagine what this is like for you. I'm so sorry."

"Thank you. He loved you like a brother."

"Yeah, I talked to him, oh, one day last week, trying to firm up a time when we could get together. I was going to meet him down at the mission. He was doing amazing things down there. Changing lives."

"He's an amazing young man."

"I won't monopolize your time tonight. We'll talk later." Danny kissed Bobbi's cheek and shook Chuck's hand again.

"He looks more like Brad's brother than Joel," Chuck said, as Danny walked away.

"Always has. Genes are funny things sometimes." Bobbi took Chuck's hand. "Cooper DeWitt, I never would have dreamed . . ." Brad's youth minister was in his mid-forties now, but still had a boyish smile. He hugged Chuck, then Bobbi, and Amy DeWitt followed her husband's lead.

"We were stunned when we heard about Brad," Cooper said softly.

"Thank you," Bobbi said. "He thought the world of you."

"I think you played a big role in Brad's choice of seminary over law school," Chuck said.

"I don't know about that," Cooper said. "It was a privilege to watch him mature."

As Bobbi chatted with the DeWitts, Chuck marveled at her dignity and grace. She had an unmatched elegance even in the face of such devastating grief. Small wonder her children rose to great heights. He couldn't help but fall in love with her one more time, just a little deeper.

Not long after, David Shannon, Phil and Donna's oldest son, came in the funeral home. He shook Chuck's hand and then Bobbi's. "Mom wanted to come," he said, "but Neil is failing fast, and she's afraid to leave him."

"David, I'm sorry to hear that," Bobbi said. "I didn't realize Dr. Craig was that ill."

"It's been a battle, and Mom doesn't drive anymore so I left Jan home with her."

"Give her our love, and tell her thank you for thinking of us," Bobbi said. Once David had left, Bobbi looked to Chuck, and said, "Donna must be getting close to eighty by now." She shook her head. "Listening to David makes me feel old."

"You don't look it," Chuck answered with a smile.

"Looks can be deceiving," Bobbi replied.

Chuck saw John Isaac slip in, and even though his split with Kara had been amicable, he hung back, waiting for his opportunity to speak to them privately. Bobbi smiled and extended her hand to him.

He took her hand and leaned in to hug her. "I'm really sorry about Brad."

"Thank you," Bobbi said.

Chuck shook John's hand, and said, "Good to see you, John. Thanks for coming."

"You know, I've always thought the world of you and Bobbi," John said, glancing past. "When Kara and I couldn't work things out, I felt like a real failure considering what you all were able to overcome."

"It takes both of you," Chuck said.

"Yeah, I don't think we had the energy to do what it was going to take to rebuild things." He glanced around the room again. "I should speak to Joel, and the rest of my family."

"John, take care," Bobbi said, reaching for his hand again. "You're still one of us."

"Thank you," John said quietly, with a gentle smile. "You're in my prayers."

John stopped and talked to Rita and Gavin briefly, then Joel before moving on to see his girls. “I miss him,” Bobbi said just loud enough for Chuck to hear her.

“I think Kara is too much like her mother,” Chuck said, with a wink.

“Granted, but like you said, it takes two to reconcile.”

Jack spent the evening eavesdropping as partners, clients and co-workers from his dad’s law firm, schoolteachers, doctors, classmates, church members, and extended family all offered condolences and shared memories with his parents. He hung on every word, but each story deepened his sense of loss. Needing a break, he found a chair in the corner and slumped into it, resting his elbows on his knees, with his face in his hands.

“It’s a lot to process, isn’t it?”

Jack looked up slowly. Joel had pulled up a chair next to him. “Yeah,” he said. He leaned back and stretched his legs out. “This wasn’t part of my plan.”

“I doubt it was part of anybody’s plan, even the shooter.”

“Yeah, but I mean, I planned on following Brad to seminary, and maybe the mission.” His eyes began to brim with tears. “What do I do now?”

Joel turned to face him. “Jack, you won’t hear this right now, but file it. You’re Jack, not Brad. God’s got something for you, that only you can do. Find that.”

“How?”

He grinned broadly. “The same way the rest of us figure that out. The hard way.”

“Thanks,” Jack said, with mock aggravation.

“Looks like everybody’s gone home.” Joel stood and stretched.

“Finally,” Jack said with a sigh.

“It’ll be easier tomorrow.”

“In theory.” He saw Shannon look his direction, then turn her back. “Joel, I gotta check something. Thanks, man.” He crossed the room, and tapped his sister on the shoulder. “Shannon?”

“What?” She whipped around to face him.

“Did I do something wrong? Are you mad at me for something?”

“Jack, do you understand what happened here tonight? You’re the whole reason Brad was out on that street.”

“You think I don’t know that?” Jack jabbed at his temple. “I haven’t slept because I can’t get that out of my head.” Then he added quietly, “I wish it had been me instead.”

“Brad gave his life to protect *you*.”

“I know, I know.” Jack glanced at his parents, thankful they were talking to Rita and Gavin, unaware of their conversation. Shannon must have seen him.

“Of course, it’s Dad’s fault you were even born,” Shannon said with disgust.

“You wouldn’t have been born either if Dad hadn’t had the affair.”

“You don’t know that.” Shannon leaned in close to him. “But *you* certainly wouldn’t have, and if your mother hadn’t been such a head case, we would have never had to take you in.” Shannon walked away, leaving Jack feeling like he had been punched in the stomach. Did his mom and dad feel the same way? Did everybody else?

Did Brad regret throwing him down and out of the line of fire? He shuffled over and stood at the foot of the casket, almost afraid to look. It was Brad’s idea to follow the old man, wasn’t it?

“Son, are you ready to go?” His dad put a hand on his shoulder, and gave it a gentle squeeze. He still hated that.

Jack sidestepped him. “Do you think Uncle Gavin would give me a ride home?”

“Why don’t you want to ride with us?”

“Can we talk about it later? It’s a long story.”

“Did somebody say something or do something?”

“Dad, please. Not now.”

Against his better judgment, Chuck gave in and sent Jack home with the Heatleys. When Bobbi questioned him about it, he gave her the same answer he’d gotten—we’ll talk about it later. Shannon, alone in the backseat, never gave the slightest indication that she knew anything about it, but Chuck suspected she was the instigator. He’d seen the two of them talking moments before he approached Jack.

Later that evening, Chuck knocked on Shannon’s bedroom door. “Can I talk to you for a minute?” After a long pause, she opened the door without speaking to him, and climbed back on her bed. “Is something going on between you and Jack?”

“Is that what Jack said?”

“I asked you,” Chuck said firmly.

Shannon fixed her eyes on him, and spoke with uncharacteristic deliberation.

“Jack and I had a discussion about Brad’s murder.”

“And?” She was holding something back.

Shannon sighed. “Okay, this was gonna come out sooner or later anyway.” She twisted around, and sat up on her bed, facing him. “Dad, what happened the night Brad died?”

“What are you getting at?”

“Brad and Jack were out on the street in that neighborhood because they were on some ridiculous search for Jack’s grandfather. It’s Jack’s fault they were there. It’s Jack’s fault that Brad is dead.”

“You’re wrong, Shannon,” Chuck said sharply, his voice rising. “You’re upset, and you’re trying to find some way to deal with it, but Brad’s death was an accident.”

“Of course,” Shannon said, rolling her eyes. “Poor Jack could never do anything wrong. He’s had such a hard life. His mother was crazy—”

“What?”

“Dad, you’ve always made excuses for Jack. It’s like—”

“We’ve never expected any less of Jack than we have from you.”

“Whatever,” she muttered.

“Give me an example.”

“I am not arguing with a lawyer. Thanks, anyway.” She leaned back against the headboard. “Brad was innocent. If it wasn’t for somebody else, he’d still be here.”

“What about the guy with the gun? How can you ignore him, and just blame your brother?”

“That guy was not after Brad. Jack put Brad in that position. And he knows it was his fault! Why do you think he’s avoided us for three days?”

“Grief.”

“Guilt. And you let him ride home with Uncle Gavin.”

“That’s . . . This is ridiculous. I don’t want to hear any more about this.” He pointed directly at Shannon, his jaw set. “You don’t mention this to your mother, and you lay off Jack.”

“You’re mad because you know I’m right.”

“I’m not mad, and you’re absolutely wrong. I’m going to overlook your disrespect because of the circumstances, but we don’t need this undercurrent running through our family. I’m not going to put up with it.” Shannon glared at him, but said nothing.

“Goodnight,” he said at last, leaving her alone in her room.

“So what’s going on?” Bobbi asked when Chuck returned to their bedroom.

“Nothing,” he said, untying his tie. “Teenager stuff.”

“Look me in the eyes and tell me that.”

“Both kids have very strong emotions right now. It will all blow over, and I don’t think you should worry about it.”

“Shannon is blaming Jack for this, isn’t she?”

Chuck smiled and sat on the bed beside his wife. “Do they know you can do that?”

“No, it’s my secret weapon. I’m right?”

“Completely. How’d you know?”

“Shannon is cut from the same fabric as Brad, Rita, and my mother. Somebody has to be responsible. There has to be someone to blame, someone to punish. Remember how Brad was after your affair? He just wanted you to pay.”

“Yeah . . . and Jack is all too ready to take that blame.”

“It’s a dangerous combination.”

“So what do we do?”

“Reassure him. Let her vent. Keep telling her it’s not Jack’s fault, but she’ll have to come to that realization by herself.”