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One Summer

Written by David Baldacci

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DAVID BALDACCI

One Summer

MACMILLAN



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To Spencer, my little girl all grown up.
And I couldn't be prouder of the
person you've become.

One Summer

1

Jack Armstrong sat up in the secondhand hospital bed that had been wedged into a corner of the den in his home in Cleveland. A father at nineteen, he and his wife, Lizzie, had conceived their second child when he'd been home on leave from the army. Jack had been in the military for five years when the war in the Middle East started. He'd survived his first tour in Afghanistan and earned a Purple Heart for taking one in the arm. After that he'd weathered several tours of duty in Iraq, one of which included the destruction of his Humvee while he was still inside. That injury had won him his second Purple. And he had a Bronze Star on top of that for rescuing three ambushed grunts from his unit and nearly getting killed in the process. After all that, here he was, dying fast in his cheaply paneled den in Ohio's Rust Belt.

His goal was simple: just hang on until Christmas. He sucked greedily on the oxygen coming from the line in his nose. The converter that stayed in the corner of the small room was on maximum production, and Jack knew that one

day soon it would be turned off because he'd be dead. Before Thanksgiving he was certain he could last another month. Now Jack was not sure he could make another day.

But he would.

I have to.

In high school the six-foot-two, good-looking Jack had varsity lettered in three sports, quarterbacked the football team, and had his pick of the ladies. But from the first time he'd seen Elizabeth "Lizzie" O'Toole, it was all over for him in the falling-in-love department. His heart had been won perhaps even before he quite realized it. His mouth curled into a smile at the memory of seeing her for the first time. Her family had come from South Carolina. Jack had often wondered why the O'Tooles had moved to Cleveland, where there was no ocean, a lot less sun, a lot more snow and ice, and not a palm tree in sight. Later, he'd learned it was because of a job change for Lizzie's father.

She'd come into class that first day, tall, with long auburn hair and vibrant green eyes, her face already mature and lovely. They had started going together in high school and had never been separated since, except long enough for Jack to fight in two wars.

"Jack; Jack honey?"

Lizzie was crouched down in front of him. In her hand was a syringe. She was still beautiful, though her looks had taken on a fragile edge. There were dark circles under her eyes and recently stamped worry lines on her face. The glow had gone from her skin, and her body was harder, less supple than it had been. Jack was the one dying, but in a way she was too.

"It's time for your pain meds."

He nodded, and she shot the drugs directly into an access

line cut right below his collarbone. That way the medicine flowed directly into his bloodstream and started working faster. Fast was good when the pain felt like every nerve in his body was being incinerated.

After she finished, Lizzie sat and hugged him. The doctors had a long name for what was wrong with him, one that Jack still could not pronounce or even spell. It was rare, they had said; one in a million. When he'd asked about his odds of survival, the docs had looked at each other before one finally answered.

"There's really nothing we can do. I'm sorry."

"Do the things you've always wanted to do," another had advised him, "but never had the chance."

"I have three kids and a mortgage," Jack had shot back, still reeling from this sudden death sentence. "I don't have the luxury of filling out some end-of-life bucket list."

"How long?" he'd finally asked, though part of him didn't really want to know.

"You're young and strong," said one. "And the disease is in its early stages."

Jack had survived the Taliban and Al-Qaeda. He could maybe hold on and see his oldest child graduate from college. "So how long?" he'd asked again.

The doctor said, "Six months. Maybe eight if you're lucky."

Jack did not feel very lucky.

He vividly remembered the morning he started feeling not quite right. It was an ache in his forearm and a stab of pain in his right leg. He was a building contractor by trade, so aches and pains were to be expected. But things soon carried to a new level. His limbs would grow tired from three hours of physical labor as opposed to ten. The stabs of pain became

more frequent, and his balance began to deteriorate. His back finally couldn't make it up the ladder with the stacks of shingles. Then it hurt to carry his youngest son around after ten minutes. Then the fire in his nerves started, and his legs felt like an old man's. And one morning he woke up and his lungs were like balloons filled with water. Everything had accelerated after that, as though his body had simply given way to whatever was invading it.

His youngest child, Jack Jr., whom everyone called Jackie, toddled in and climbed on his dad's lap, resting his head against his father's sunken chest. Jackie's hair was long and inky black, curled up at the ends. His eyes were the color of toast; his thick eyebrows nearly met in the middle, like a burly woolen thread. Jackie had been their little surprise. Their other kids were much older.

Jack slowly slid his arm around his two-year-old son. Chubby fingers gripped his forearm, and warm breath touched his skin. It felt like the pierce of needles, but Jack simply gritted his teeth and didn't move his arm because there wouldn't be many more of these embraces. He slowly turned his head and looked out the window, where the snow was steadily falling. South Carolina and palm trees had nothing on Cleveland when it came to the holidays. It was truly beautiful.

He took his wife's hand.

"Christmas," Jack said in a wheezy voice. "I'll be there."

"Promise?" said Lizzie, her voice beginning to crack.

"Promise."

2

Jack awoke, looked around, and didn't know where he was. He could feel nothing, wasn't even sure if he was still breathing.

Am I dead? Was this it?

"Pop-pop," said Jackie as he slid next to his father on the bed. Jack turned and saw the chubby cheeks and light brown eyes.

Jack stroked his son's hair. Good, thick strands, like he used to have before the disease had stolen that too. Curious, Jackie tried to pull out the oxygen line from his father's nose, but he redirected his son's hand and cupped it with his own.

Lizzie walked in with his meds and shot them into the access line. An IV drip took care of Jack's nutrition and hydration needs. Solid foods were beyond him now.

"I just dropped the kids off at school," she told him.

"Mikki?" said Jack.

Lizzie made a face. Their daughter, Michelle, would be turning sixteen next summer, and her rebellious streak had been going strong since she'd become a teenager. She was into playing her guitar and working on her music, wearing junky

clothes, sneaking out at night, and ignoring the books. "At least she showed up for the math test. I suppose actually passing it would've been asking too much. On the bright side, she received an A in music theory."

Jackie got down and ran into the other room, probably for a toy. Jack watched him go with an unwieldy mixture of pride and sorrow. He would never see his son as a man. He would never even see him start kindergarten. That cut against the natural order of things. But it was what it was.

Jack had experienced an exceptionally long phase of denial after being told he had little time left. That was partially because he had always been a survivor. A rocky childhood and two wars had not done him in, so he had initially felt confident that despite the doctors' fatal verdict, his disease was beatable. As time went by, however, and his body continued to fail, it had become clear that this battle was not winnable. It had reached a point where making the most of his time left was more important to him than trying to beat his head against an impenetrable wall. Most significantly, he wanted his kids' memories of his final days to be as positive as possible. Jack had concluded that if he had to die prematurely, that was about as good a way to do so as there was. It beat being depressed and making everyone else around him miserable, waiting for him to die.

Before he'd gotten sick, Jack had talked to his daughter many times about making good life choices, about the importance of school, but nothing seemed to make a difference to the young woman. There was a clear disconnect now between father and daughter. When she'd been a little girl, Mikki had unconditionally loved her dad, wanted to be around him all the time. Now he rarely saw her. To her, it seemed to Jack, he might as well have been already dead.

"Mikki seems lost around me," he said slowly.

Lizzie sat next to him, held his hand. "She's scared and confused, honey. Some of it has to do with her age. Most of it has to do with . . ."

"Me." Jack couldn't look at her when he made this admission.

"She and I have talked about it. Well, I talked and she didn't say much. She's a smart kid, but she really doesn't understand why this is happening, Jack. And her defense mechanism is to just detach herself from it. It's not the healthiest way to cope with things, though."

"I can understand," said Jack.

She looked at him. "Because of your dad?"

He nodded and rubbed her hand with his fingers, his eyes moistening as he remembered his father's painful death. He took several long pulls on the oxygen. "If I could change things, I would, Lizzie."

She rested her body next to his, wrapped her arms around his shoulders, and kissed him. When she spoke, her voice was husky and seemed right on the edge of failing. "Jack, this is hard on everyone. But it's hardest on you. You have been so brave; no one could have handled—" She couldn't continue. Lizzie laid her head next to his and wept softly. Jack held her with what little strength he had left.

"I love you, Lizzie. No matter what happens, nothing will ever change that."

He'd been sleeping in the hospital bed because he couldn't make it up the stairs to their bedroom even with assistance. He'd fought against that the hardest because as his life dwindled away he had desperately wanted to feel Lizzie's warm body against his. It was another piece of his life taken from him, like he was being dismantled, brick by brick.

And I am, brick by brick.

After a few minutes, she composed herself and wiped her eyes. "Cory is playing the Grinch in the class play at the school on Christmas Eve, remember?"

Jack nodded. "I remember."

"I'll film it for you."

Cory was the middle child, twelve years old and the ham in the family.

Jack smiled and said, "Grinch!"

Lizzie smiled back, then said, "I've got a conference call in an hour, and then I'll be in the kitchen working after I give Jackie his breakfast."

She'd become a telecommuter when Jack had gotten ill. When she had to go out, a neighbor would come over or Lizzie's parents would stop by to help.

After Lizzie left, Jack sat up, slowly reached under the pillow, and pulled out the calendar and pen. He looked at the dates in December, all of which had been crossed out up to December twentieth. Over three decades of life, marriage, fatherhood, defending his country, and working hard, it had come down to him marking off the few days left. He looked out the window and to the street beyond. The snow had stopped, but he'd heard on the news that another wintry blast was expected, with more ice than snow.

There was a knock at the door, and a few moments later Sammy Duvall appeared. He was in his early sixties, with longish salt-and-pepper hair and a trim beard. Sammy was as tall as Jack, but leaner, though his arms and shoulders bulged with muscles from all the manual labor he'd done. He was far stronger than most men half his age and tougher than anyone Jack had ever met. He'd spent twenty years in the military and

fought in Vietnam and done some things after that around the world that he never talked about. A first-rate, self-taught carpenter and all-around handyman, Sammy was the reason Jack had joined the service. After Jack left the army, he and Sammy had started the contracting business. Lacking a family of his own, Sammy had adopted the Armstrongs.

The military vets shared a glance, and then Sammy looked over all the equipment helping to keep his friend alive. He shook his head slightly and his mouth twitched. This was as close as stoic Sammy ever came to showing emotion.

"How's work?" Jack asked, and then he took a long pull of oxygen.

"No worries. Stuff's getting done and the money's coming in."

Jack knew that Sammy had been completing all the jobs pretty much on his own and then bringing all the payments to Lizzie. "At least half of that money is yours, Sammy. You're doing all the work."

"I got my Uncle Sam pension, and it's more than I need. That changes, I'll let you know."

Sammy lived in a converted one-car garage with his enormous Bernese mountain dog, Sam Jr. His needs were simple, his wants apparently nonexistent.

Sammy combed Jack's hair and even gave him a shave. Then the friends talked for a while. At least Sammy said a few words and Jack listened. The rest of the time they sat in silence. Jack didn't mind; just being with Sammy made him feel better.

After Sammy left, Jack lifted the pen and crossed out December twenty-first. That was being optimistic, Jack knew, since the day had really just begun. He put the calendar and pen away.

And then it happened.

He couldn't breathe. He sat up, convulsing, but that just made it worse. He could feel his heart racing, his lungs squeezing, his face first growing red and then pale as the oxygen left his body and nothing replenished it.

December twenty-first, he thought, *my last day.*

"Pop-pop?"

Jack looked up to see his son holding the end of the oxygen line that attached to the converter. He held it up higher, as though he were giving it back to his dad.

"Jackie!"

A horrified Lizzie appeared in the doorway, snatched the line from her son's hand, and rushed to reattach the oxygen line to the converter. A few moments later, the oxygen started to flow into the line and Jack fell back on the bed, breathing hard, trying to fill his lungs.

Lizzie raced past her youngest son and was by Jack's side in an instant. "Oh my God, Jack, oh my God." Her whole body was trembling.

He held up his hand to show he was okay.

Lizzie whirled around and snapped, "That was bad, Jackie, bad."

Jackie's face crumbled, and he started to bawl.

She snatched up Jackie and carried him out. The little boy was struggling to free himself, staring at Jack over her shoulder, reaching his arms out to his father. His son's look was pleading.

"Pop-pop," wailed Jackie.

The tears trickled down Jack's face as his son's cries faded away. But then Jack heard Lizzie sobbing and pictured her crying her heart out and wondering what the hell she'd done to deserve all this.

Sometimes, Jack thought, living was far harder than dying.

3

Jack awoke from a nap late the next day in time to see his daughter opening the front door, guitar case in hand. He motioned to her to come see him. She closed the door and dutifully trudged to his room.

Mikki had auburn hair like her mother's. However, she had dyed it several different colors, and Jack had no idea what it would be called now. She was shooting up in height, her legs long and slender and her hips and bosom filling out. Though she acted like she was totally grown up now, her face was caught in that time thread that was firmly past the little-girl stage but not yet a woman. She would be a junior in high school next year. Where had the time gone?

"Yeah, Dad?" she said, not looking at him.

He thought about what to say. In truth, they didn't have much to talk about. Even when he'd been healthy, their lives lately had taken separate paths. *That was my fault,* he thought. *Not hers.*

"Your A." He took a long breath, tried to smile.

She smirked. "Right. Music theory. My only one. I'm sure Mom told you that too. Right?"

"Still an A."

"Thanks for mentioning it." She looked at the floor, an awkward expression on her features. "Look, Dad, I gotta go. People are waiting. We're rehearsing."

She was in a band, Jack knew, though he couldn't recall the name of it just now.

"Okay, be careful."

She turned to leave, and then hesitated. Her fingers fiddled with the guitar case handle. She glanced back but still didn't meet his gaze. "Just so you know, when you were asleep I duct taped your oxygen line onto the converter so it can't be pulled off again. Jackie didn't know what he was doing. Mom didn't have to give him such a hard time."

Jack gathered more oxygen and said, "Thanks."

A part of him wanted her to look at him, and another part of him didn't. He didn't want to see pity in her eyes. Her big, strong father reduced to this. He wondered whom she would marry. Where would they live? Would it be far from Cleveland?

Will she visit my grave?

"Mikki?"

"Dad, I really got to go. I'm already late."

"I hope you have a great . . . day, sweetie."

He thought he saw her lips quiver for a moment, but then she turned and left. A few moments later, the front door closed behind her. He peered out the window. She hopped across the snow and climbed into a car that one of her guy friends was driving. Jack had never felt more disconnected from life.

After dinner that night, Cory, in full costume, performed

his Grinch role for his father. Cory was a chunky twelve-year-old, though his long feet and lanky limbs promised height later. His hair was a mop of brown cowlicks, the same look Jack had had at that age. Lizzie's parents had come over for dinner and to watch the show and had brought Lizzie's grandmother. Cecilia was a stylish lady in her eighties who used a walker and had her own portable oxygen tank. She'd grown up and lived most of her life in South Carolina. She'd come to live with her daughter in Cleveland after her husband died and her health started failing. Her laugh was infectious and her speech was mellifluous, like water trickling over smooth rocks.

Cecilia joked that Jack and she should start their own oxygen business since they had so much of the stuff. She was dying too, only not quite as fast as Jack. This probably would also be her last Christmas, but she had lived a good long life and had apparently made peace with her fate. She was uniformly upbeat, talking about her life in the South, the tea parties and the debutante balls, sneaking smokes and drinking hooch behind the local Baptist church at night. Yet every once in a while Jack would catch her staring at him, and he could sense the sadness the old lady held in her heart for his plight.

After Cory finished his performance, Cecilia leaned down and whispered into Jack's ear. "It's Christmas. The time of miracles." This was not the first time she'd said this. Yet for some reason Jack's spirits sparked for a moment.

But then the doctor's pronouncement sobered this feeling.

Six months, eight if you're lucky.

Science, it seemed, always trumped hope.

At eleven o'clock he heard the front door open, and Mikki slipped in. Jack thought he saw her glance his way, but she didn't come into the den. When Jack was healthy they had kept

a strict watch over her comings and goings. And for months after he'd become ill, Lizzie had kept up that vigil. Now she barely had time to shower or snatch a meal, and Mikki had taken advantage of this lack of oversight to do as she pleased.

When everyone was asleep, Jack reached under his pillow and took out his pen. This time he wasn't crossing off dates on a calendar. He took out the piece of paper and carefully unfolded it. He spread it out on a book he kept next to the bed. Pen poised over the paper, he began to write. It took him a long time, at least an hour to write less than one page. His handwriting was poor because he was so weak, but his thoughts were clear. Eventually there would be seven of these letters. One for each day of the last week of his life, the date neatly printed at the top of the page—or as neatly as Jack's trembling hand could manage. Each letter began with "Dear Lizzie," and ended with "Love, Jack." In the body of the letter he did his best to convey to his wife all that he felt for her. That though he would no longer be alive, he would always be there for her.

These letters, he'd come to realize, were the most important thing he would ever do in his life. And he labored to make sure every word was the right one. Finished, he put the letter in an envelope, marked it with a number, and slipped it in the nightstand next to his bed.

He would write the seventh and last letter on Christmas Eve, after everyone had gone to bed.

Jack turned his head and looked out the window. Even in the darkness he could see the snow coming down hard.

He now knew how a condemned man felt though he had committed no crime. The time left to him was precious. But there was only so much he could do with it.

4

Jack marked off December twenty-fourth on his calendar. He had one letter left to write. It would go into the drawer with the number seven written on the envelope. After he was gone, Lizzie would read them, and Jack hoped they would provide some comfort to her. Actually, writing them had provided some comfort for Jack. It made him focus on what was really important in life.

Jack's mother-in-law, Bonnie, had stayed with him while the rest of the family went to see Cory in the school play. Lizzie had put her foot down and made Mikki go as well. Bonnie had made a cup of tea and had settled herself down with a book, while Jack was perched in a chair by the window waiting for the van to pull up with Lizzie and the others.

Sammy came by, stomping snow off his boots and tugging off his knit cap to let his long, shaggy hair fall out. He sat next to Jack and handed him a gift. When Jack opened it he looked up in surprise.

It was five passes to Disney World, good for the upcoming year.

Sammy gripped Jack by the shoulder. "I expect you and the family to get there."

Jack glanced over to see Bonnie shaking her head in mild reproach. Bonnie O'Toole was not a woman who believed in miracles. Yet Jack knew the man well enough to realize that Sammy fully believed he would use those tickets. He patted Sammy on the arm, smiled, and nodded.

After Sammy left, Jack glanced at the tickets. He appreciated his friend's confidence, but Jack was the only one who knew how close he was to the end. He had fought as hard as he could. He didn't want to die and leave his family, but he couldn't live like this either. His mind focused totally on the last letter he would ever compose. He knew when his pen had finished writing the words and the paper was safely in the envelope, he could go peacefully. It was a small yet obviously important benchmark. But he would wait until Christmas was over, when presents were opened and a new day had dawned. It was some comfort to know that he had a little control left over his fate, even if it was simply the specific timing of his passing.

He saw the headlights of the oncoming van flick across the window. Bonnie went to open the front door, and Jack watched anxiously from the window as the kids piled out of the vehicle. Lizzie's dad led them up the driveway, carrying Jackie because it was so slick out. The snow was still coming down, although the latest weather report had said that with the temperatures staying where they were, it was more ice than snow at this point, making driving treacherous.

His gaze held on Lizzie as she closed up the van, and then

turned, not toward the house, but away from it. Jack hadn't noticed the person approach her because his attention had been on his wife. The man came into focus; it was Bill Miller. They'd all gone to school together. Bill had blocked on the line for Jack the quarterback. He'd attended Jack and Lizzie's wedding. Bill was single, in the plumbing business, and doing well.

Jack pressed his face to the glass when he saw Bill draw close to his wife. Lizzie slipped her purse over her shoulder and swiped the hair out of her eyes. They were so close to one another, Jack couldn't find even a sliver of darkness between them. His breath was fogging the glass, he was so near it. He watched Bill lean in toward Lizzie. He saw his wife rise up on tiptoe. And then Bill staggered back as Lizzie slapped him across the face. Though he was weak, Jack reared up in his chair as though he wanted to go and defend his wife's honor. Yet there was no need. Bill Miller stumbled off into the darkness as Lizzie turned away and marched toward the house.

A minute later he heard Lizzie come in, knocking snow off her boots.

Lizzie strode into the den, first pulling off her scarf and then rubbing her hands together because of the cold. Her face was flushed, and she didn't look at him like she normally did. "Time for the presents; then Mom and Dad are going to take off. They'll be back tomorrow, okay, sweetie? It'll be a great day."

"How's your hand?"

She glanced at him. "What?"

He pointed to the window. "I think Bill's lucky he's still conscious."

"He was also drunk, or I don't think he would've tried that. Idiot."

Jack started to say something, but then stopped and looked away. Lizzie quickly picked up on this and sat next to him.

"Jack, you don't think that Bill and I—"

He gripped her hand. "Of course not. Don't be crazy." He kissed her cheek.

"So what then? Something's bothering you."

"You're young, and you have three kids."

"That I get." She attempted a smile that flickered out when she saw the earnest look on his face.

"You need somebody in your life."

"I don't want to talk about this." She tried to rise, but he held her back.

"Lizzie, look at me. Look at me."

She turned to face him, her eyes glimmering with tears.

"You will find someone else."

"No."

"You will."

"I've got a full life. I've got no room for—"

"Yes, you do."

"Do we have to talk about this now? It's Christmas Eve."

"I can't be picky about timing, Lizzie," he said, a little out of breath.

Her face flushed. "I didn't mean that. I . . . you look better tonight. Maybe . . . the doctors—"

"No, Lizzie. No," he said firmly. "That can't happen. We're past that stage, honey." He sucked on his air, his gaze resolutely on her.

She put a hand to her eyes. "If I think about things like that, then it means, I don't want to . . . You might . . ."

He held her. "Things will work out all right. Just take it

slow. And be happy." He made her look at him, and he brushed the tears from her eyes. He took a long pull on his oxygen and managed a grin. "And for God's sake, don't pick Bill."

She laughed. And then it turned into a sob as he held her.

When they pulled away a few moments later, Lizzie wiped her nose with a tissue and said, "I was actually thinking about next summer. And I wanted to talk to you about it."

Jack's heart was buoyed by the fact that she still sought out his opinion. "What about it?"

"You'll probably think it's silly."

"Tell me."

"I was thinking I would take the kids to the Palace."

"The Palace? You haven't been back there since—"

"I know. I know. I just think it's time. It's in bad shape from what I heard. I know it needs a lot of work. But just for one summer it should be fine."

"I know how hard that was for you."

She reached in her pocket and pulled out a photo. She showed it to Jack. "Haven't looked at that in years. Do you remember me showing it to you?"

It was a photo of the O'Tooles when the kids were all little.

"That's Tillie next to you. Your twin sister."

"Mom said she never could tell us apart."

Jack had to sit back against his pillow and drew several long breaths on his line while Lizzie patiently waited.

Finally he said, "She was five when she died?"

"Almost six. Meningitis. Nothing the doctors could do." She glanced briefly at Jack, and then looked away. Her unspoken thought could have been, *Just like you*.

"I remember my parents telling me that Tillie had gone to

Heaven." She smiled at the same time a couple of tears slid down her cheeks. "There's an old lighthouse on the property down there. It was so beautiful."

"I remember you telling me about it. Your grandmother . . . still owns the Palace, right?"

"Yes. I was going to ask her if it would be all right if we went down there this summer."

"The O'Tooles exchanging the sunny ocean for cold Cleveland?" He coughed several times, and Lizzie went to adjust his air level. When she did so he started breathing easier.

She said, "Well, I think leaving the Palace was because of me."

"What do you mean?"

"I never really told you about this before, and maybe I'd forgotten it myself. But I've been thinking about Tillie lately." She faltered.

"Lizzie, please tell me."

She turned to face him. "When my parents told me my sister had gone to Heaven, I . . . I wanted to find her. I didn't really understand that she was dead. I knew that Heaven was in the sky. So I started looking for, well, looking for Heaven to find Tillie."

"You were just a little kid."

"I would go up in the lighthouse. Back then it still worked. And I'd look for Heaven, for Tillie really, with the help of the light." She paused and let out a little sob. "Never found either one."

Jack held her. "It's okay, Lizzie; it's okay," he said softly.

She wiped her eyes on his shirt and said, "It became a sort of obsession, I guess. I don't know why. But every day that went by and I couldn't find her, it just hurt so bad. And when

I got older, my parents told me that Tillie was dead. Well, it didn't help much." She paused. "I can't believe I never told you all this before. But I guess I was a little ashamed."

His wife's distress was taking a toll on Jack. He breathed deeply for several seconds before saying, "You lost your twin. You were just a little kid."

"By the time we moved to Ohio, I knew I would never find her by looking at the sky. I knew she was gone. And the lighthouse wasn't working anymore anyway. But I think my parents, my mom especially, wanted to get me away from the place. She didn't think it was good for me. But it was just… silly."

"It was what you were feeling, Lizzie." He touched his chest. "Here."

"I know. So I thought I'd go back there. See the place. Let the kids experience how I grew up." She looked at him.

"Great idea," Jack gasped.

She rubbed his shoulder. "You might enjoy it too. You could really fix the place up. Even make the lighthouse work again." It was so evident she desperately wanted to believe this could actually happen.

He attempted a smile. "Yeah."

The looks on both their faces were clear despite the hopeful words.

Jack would never see the Palace.