

Gone

By Jill Irving

Delia walked into her room and slammed the door. It had been a hard day. During her 4 a.m. workout with Raine, she was once again treated to an earful of “you shouldn’t rush into fights alone”. During school she got into it with some jock who thought it was okay to push around geeks. Then after school she spent several hours in full research mode for one of Jacqueline’s pet projects. When she got home, her mother was after her about the wardrobe changes she had made.

In the silence and comfort of her room, she glanced around. She hadn’t been here long, but it was starting to feel like her own place. She’d sent some of her most important possessions to her stall in Raine’s barn, but some things stayed here.

On a large board, she had posted pictures from different good memories in her life. The board was covered in pictures of her father, with his friends, with his students, and with Delia herself. There were scattered pictures of her with her friends from boot camp, T.J., Devil, Gray, Casper, and Green Bean; some were pictures of the group together during camp, and some were candid photos that they sent to her in their correspondence.

On her shelf there was a frame fitted with clean denim with all her father’s medals pinned to it. Her father’s cap hung on a hook above her bed. Rope and karabiners from her best boot camp mission were wrapped in a decorative pattern around the headboard of her double-sized bed. She had become accustomed to the moss green walls of her grandmother’s old guest room. She found them calming. Her grandmother’s taste ran to clean lines and functionality rather than prissiness. Delia appreciated that in her life.

Her room was neat and clean, everything put away carefully after use. Delia didn’t tolerate messes. Everything had place in her room and she cleaned frequently to keep things smelling good. She knew that with her workouts and such, her personal space and her things could very easily end up smelling like a locker room. She took meticulous care to make sure that never happened. She burned candles from time to time scented lightly of the outdoors, woodlands etc to help freshen the air.

She dropped her book bag on the floor in front of her desk. It was a small student’s desk that Dad had bought for her when they were in Maryland. It was one of the few pieces of furniture that had been kept when they vacated the house. It didn’t fit in with the rest of the furniture, but the room was big enough to house it.

Delia didn’t feel like starting her homework right away. She flipped on her CD player as she flung herself down on her window seat. The music came on softly as a background for her drifting thoughts.

There's another world inside of me that you may never see
There's secrets in this life that I can't hide
Well somewhere in this darkness there's a light that I can't find
Well maybe it's too far away
Or maybe I'm just blind
Maybe I'm just blind

Jack Hunter advised his student as he watched the sparring match “Simon, keep up your guard, remember Delia has reach on you.”

Four other students ranging from eighteen to forty gathered around the edge of the mat where Delia and Simon were sparring. Jack took a minute to examine each of their faces; all were sincerely interested in the match going on; studying the moves of their senior classmates to learn and also to critique.

When his family had arrived at Beaufort, he'd found out he was replacing the man who'd been teaching the only Martial Arts classes in town. Since he wanted Delia to have the opportunity to continue lessons, he'd found out what would be necessary to teach them himself and got his qualifications. Now he had a small class that met Tuesday and Thursday afternoons in the small base gym. Delia was his youngest student and only girl...but what a girl. She could outclass any of these men, even those significantly larger than her.

As he turned his attention back to the match, Simon got in a good blow to Delia's cheek; she'd have a bruise in an hour or so, but she snapped with it, shook it off and returned the favor with a solid kick to Simon's exposed side. It was her focus even more than her technique that he appreciated. So many people just couldn't put themselves into a state where the pain is secondary and so they start making mistakes. Not Delia, she could always hold it in. Of course, she'd also taken more blows than most ten year olds.

Sometimes he wished that she didn't always have to fight; but he knew how the bases worked and he knew that he'd trained her not to back down when it was a matter of principle. Despite the fighting that seemed inevitable as she reached each new place, she was a good student overall and she was a polite, easy-to-deal-with student. But she was never one to let it go if the underdog was being picked on, even if she wasn't much bigger than the underdog herself. It was funny how he could be proud of her and frustrated by it at the same time.

He saw Simon telegraphing his next attack, but if Simon was lucky Delia wouldn't. No such luck. Delia moved into the counter like lightning and was able to throw Simon down to the ground using his own effort as the force for the movement. It was a smooth move and couldn't have felt good. Simon's momentary lapse as he absorbed the pain gave Delia the second she needed to pull back his arm into a classic pinning stance. Jack suppressed his grin of pride in his flesh and blood and the skill he'd passed to her.

“Do you give?” She asked holding his arm at an awkward angle. She could keep him on the floor for a long time unless he was willing to break his own arm to get up.

“Yes.” Simon choked out. When Delia let go of his arm and offered her hand, he sat up slowly and rubbed his left shoulder with his right hand, ignoring the proffered hand. “How is it you always do that?” He asked in confusion.

Jack took control of his class again. “There’s a moment in the fight, every time, when you start to get tired and want to get the fight over with, it’s during that moment that you telegraph your attack plan. I saw it. Probably all the others saw.” He looked around at the rest of the students, some nodded their assent. “But most importantly, your opponent saw it.”

He turned to the group as a whole. “When you are facing an opponent who is faster than you, even if she’s half your size,” he nodded in Delia’s direction, “you can’t give that opponent any foreknowledge of your actions. With fast reflexes and the extra seconds you give by telegraphing, a good opponent can use your own move against you.” He turned back to Simon. “Which is exactly what Delia did. Okay, enough for today. I’ll see you all Thursday.”

As the class broke up, he joined Simon and rested his arm across the young man’s shoulders. “She’s not necessarily better than you.” He began, “but she’s better at ignoring the pain and she’s faster. If you could shake off the pain and stop telegraphing you could take her.”

Simon shook his head and pulled out from his mentor’s arm. “Great! If I work really hard at it, I could learn to take down a 10-year-old girl. Is that supposed to make me feel better about my skill?” He asked throwing his stuff into a duffel bag.

“It’s all in how you look at it. Delia’s been studying for six years. You’ve been at this only a couple. And she may be a girl, but she is mine!” He turned the full force of his personality on the teenager. “As long as you keep thinking of her as a little girl, you will never beat her. It’s all about focusing out those things that don’t help you.”

“Maybe if your little girl wasn’t here, the rest of us would do better.” Simon spat out.

“If it weren’t for Delia, I wouldn’t be teaching classes. I wanted her to have formal training and the only way to give her that here in Beaufort was to do it myself.” He sighed. “Simon, I like you. I think you’ve come a long way since you started. Quite frankly, Delia is the only person in the class who is a challenge for you. Whether you like it or not, fighting her is the best thing for you. Think about it.”

Jack turned and walked out the back door to meet up with Delia. She was sitting on the ground in Indian position, her feet sitting on her knees, meditating.

“Hey, kiddo” he tousled her short hair.

“Dad,” She snapped up and was standing instantly. “How’d I do?”

“You were great.”

“Is Simon mad?” She questioned her expression serious.

“Honey, Simon is having trouble coming to terms with his own problems. He likes being the best and he was in Capt Ryan’s old classes. You’ve been at this longer and take it more seriously, but still it bothers him.”

“Because I’m a girl.”

“...and because you’re ten.”

“I can’t change either of those things. Maybe I should let him win to gain his confidence.” She suggested.

“Throwing the match would mean that neither of you will learn anything from it, nor will any of the others students, for that matter. No, each time he loses to you, he learns something. He’ll get over it or he’ll leave; it’s his choice.” He nodded his head as if to say end of conversation.

After a couple of moments of quiet, “I saw you know,” she said sagely expecting her father to understand her meaning immediately, “it was like the world had slowed down for a moment. Suddenly I knew what his exact motion would be and how to use it to throw him.”

Jack just looked at her proud face for just a moment. “I know. You did exactly what you were supposed to.” He tousled her hair again. “I couldn’t be more proud of you.” The look on his face confirmed the statement.

“Even of a son?” she asked quietly.

“I have a ‘son’” Jack responded unhesitatingly, glancing at Delia’s shocked face, “who just happens to be female.” He tousled her hair and pushed her towards the jeep as she grinned back.

Delia got up from her perch on the window seat and walked across the room to her bureau. On top stood two candle holders made of resin carved into intricate oak leaves with tiny gold-painted veins running through them. She lifted the lid of a small old fashioned teak chest with brass fittings. Inside were several packages of candles and books of matches. She selected a box containing woodland green eight-inch tapers and slid two out of the box. She held the candles under her nose, sniffing delicately at the foresty scent as she pulled out a matchbook.

She lit a match and lightly melted the bottom of each candle to get them to stand properly in the holders. The scent brought her back. She lit the wicks and then stood a few moments staring at the flames, filling her head with pictures...as the song lyrics continued to provide a backdrop.

So hold me when I'm here
Right me when I'm wrong
Hold me when I'm scared
And love me when I'm gone
Everything I am
And everything in me
Wants to be the one you wanted me to be
I'll never let you down

Even if I could
I'd give up everything
If only for your good
So hold me when I'm here
Right me when I'm wrong
Hold me when I'm scared
You won't always be there
So love me when I'm gone
Love me when I'm gone

Thirteen-year old Delia rapped twice on the partially opened door. Peering in, she saw her father's head snap up and look her way. The room was his office, decorated in heavy furniture with rich masculine colors. The room smelled of the outdoors, a deep foresty scent that was emanating from green tapers sitting in leafy pattern candlesticks that sat on either end of his desk.

"Hey, kiddo" he smiled quickly, before turning his attention back to the checkbook and bills on his desk.

"I didn't want to disturb you...." Delia's voice was more uncertain than usual, which had Jack glancing up again. "It's just that Mom has started again."

Jack sighed, and then put his checkbook and pen away in the teak chest sitting on the front of his desk and signaled for her to come in and close the door.

"What is it this time?" he solicited, gearing his mind to figure out the best way to get around his wife.

"She is saying that I should use my acrobatic skills to join the cheerleaders." She spat out the word cheerleaders as if it were a swear-word.

Jack started to laugh at the idea of his no-nonsense Delia clad in one of those skimpy cheerleading uniforms. At thirteen, she was 5'7" with long, lithe limbs that could bristle with healthy muscle when she was working.

"Can you see me as cheerleader Barbie? Screaming and jumping around for those losers on the football team who haven't won one game this year?" Her scathing condemnation of these activities was evident in her tone.

"No. I can't see that at all. You're not the sit on the sidelines type." Jack agreed as he took a closer look at his girl.

She was starting to blossom, it was becoming harder to set aside the fact that she was a girl. Since the first time she'd said she wanted to work out with him rather than help her mother in the kitchen, he started to think of her as a son. She'd made him believe that her sex was irrelevant to things that really mattered about having a son, doing things together, bonding, and protecting others. Now her appearance was starting to change things. Would it change her?

"I don't know how to be the bubble-headed, bleached blonde who giggles at the slightest provocation. I don't want to know how to breathily tell a pimple-faced Neanderthal who's dropped four out of the last five passes that he's a great football player, a real hero."

“That’s not you.” Jack agreed still fighting the image that was starting to play in his head of Delia wearing a short skirt and a crop top, surrounded by football players. He didn’t like the image, but his girl was getting old enough that it could happen.

“Mom says if I made the team, maybe I would get popular and then I wouldn’t have to fight as much.” She sneered. “Hey, maybe, if I get one of those short skirts and I lift it for every guy on the team that would make me popular.”

Jack’s attention had focused back on her words. “DELIA!” He scolded.

“Well, it’s true!” She relented. “She seems to think I need to be popular at any cost. Having sex with all the popular guys...that could work.”

Jack sighed again tired of Amelia’s constant complaints and attempts to change Delia. He wished she’d just let him handle their daughter like everything else.

He waved her over. “She thinks that if you found a niche in school, you wouldn’t have to fight all the time. She thinks if you were popular, they wouldn’t want to fight you.”

“I don’t fight because people bother me. I fight to keep them from hurting others...underdogs.”

“I get it Delia, truly I do. You and I are both protectors, defenders. But your mother is...” He paused looking for the right word “...different. She’s not a fighter; not even for things she wants more than her next breath. She needs others to fight her battles. She needs to be protected.”

“Why doesn’t she understand that other people need that too? Someone needs to defend them?”

He slid his fingers through her short, dark hair. “Maybe she does. Maybe she just wants you helping her. She just doesn’t think it has to be you helping them...helping ALL of them.”

“You help them all. It’s why you are in the Marines. You can’t do anything but help them.” Her tone expressed her exasperation and her pride.

“She doesn’t get that either, but she knows she can’t change it. She’s hoping she can still change you.”

Delia scoffed “fat chance!”

Jack laughed. “It’s not hard to tell you are mine.” He tousled her hair affectionately. “I’ll talk to her.”

“You mean you’ll fight with her.” Delia interjected.

Jack nodded. “Probably” he admitted pulling her in to his shoulder.

“How do you do it?” Delia began softly. “How have you put up with her all these years? How can you keep protecting her, even from herself?”

Jack thought about telling her she shouldn't speak of her mother like that. He thought about lying and saying that that wasn't the way it worked. In the end, he just rested his chin on her head and breathed out. "It's what we do."

Delia walked over to her desk and picked up the backpack. From within she pulled a wadded piece of blue paper. Sitting at the desk, she reached into the bottom desk drawer and pulled out a large book. She opened the scrapbook to a page near the back and glanced at a similar sheet of blue paper taped into place. She quickly turned past the next page, which boasted yet another blue paper, to a blank page. She slid the top drawer open and pulled out some two-sided tape that she kept for her scrapbook. She fastened tape along all four sides of the page, and then she smoothed out the blue document on her desk. Her eyes scanned the letter as she carefully placed it in the scrapbook.

"Dear Mrs. Hunter, It is with no small amount of pleasure that I write to you today. Captain Jack Hunter is to be posthumously awarded the rank of Major in the United States Marine Corps. A small ceremony is to be held at Fort Meade next month when his unit has returned from Iraq to commemorate Jack's bravery and dedication to ..."

*When your education x-ray cannot see under my skin
I won't tell you a damn thing that I could not tell my friends
Roaming through this darkness, I'm alive but I'm alone
And part of me is fighting this
But part of me is gone*

Delia saw her father standing in the front yard as she finished up her run. She slowed down and started her cool down process while watching him. He was facing the house, his shoulders wide and proud, his back straight and his concentration appeared to be complete. She approached quietly while stretching her legs out to avoid cramping.

"Dad" She spoke softly not wanting to surprise him.

He turned and looked carefully at her. "How was your run?"

"Good, about six miles today. After that breakfast this morning, I felt the need..." she grinned.

Jack smiled at the memory of the breakfast he and Delia had shared that morning at the officer's dining room. Amelia had wanted to sleep in after a "hard" half-day of work. Things had been quieter since she'd taken a part-time job; he'd sort of tricked her into thinking it was her own idea. He was hoping working would give her more independence, but it was hard to say if it was working or not. However, it did serve to get her away from the house more and give her some of her own money to spend.

"How come you are outside?" Delia asked him dropped down to stretch out.

"Mom getting to you?"

“No, I came out to wait for you.” He set his hand on her shoulder as she stood back up. “I have some news for you.”

Delia stopped her stretching and immediately turned to look directly at him. “Good news or bad news?” her uneasiness was instantly detectable in her voice.

Jack looked up for a second, his face tight, and then looked back into her eyes. “There’s no easy way to tell you. I just found out my Unit is being deployed in Iraq. We’re flying to California next week for a couple days training and briefings; then we’re off.”

Delia’s eyes filled with horror. As many missions as her father had been in, even including Desert Storm, this was still the scariest thing she’d ever dealt with. “But...” she stopped as her voice broke. “I thought you were up for that promotion...you were going to end up in command rather than in the field.”

“Timing just wasn’t right.” He explained shaking his head. “My unit needs me anyway. It’ll be fine, Delia.”

She looked fragile all of a sudden. It was odd; Jack hadn’t seen her as fragile since he held her as a baby. “I won’t be gone long, just one cycle. Everything will be fine. I’m indestructible!” He smiled at her, willing her to relax and believe.

“You better be! How am I supposed to get along with you?” She asked. “Mom and I will drive each other batty.” She tried to smile, but a tear slipped down her cheek. “You know how she gets; she can’t deal without you.”

Jack couldn’t help but think she was right. He slid his thumb over the track of the tear, marveling at the softness of her skin; she always seemed so tough. He couldn’t think of the last time he’d seen her cry. “You’ll take care of her. I know you will. You’re a protector. I’ll be back.”

“I know...it’s just that I’ll be alone when you’re gone.” She threw herself in his arms for a minute in an uncharacteristic display of emotion.

“So will I” Jack whispered, pulling her tighter against him.

Delia turned back to the front page of the scrapbook and started flipping through the pictures; her eyes fell on a picture of her father standing holding her hand as they walked into one of the Twin Towers. She’d been twelve and he’d taken her to visit New York City while Amelia had been convalescing after a small breakdown. The two of them had taken the elevator up to the observation deck and checked out the view of the whole city from the heights. Another picture from the same trip had them standing in front of Lady Liberty.

Her thoughts were tangled as she looked at these gallant reminders of what her father stood for and why he had to go. But they also showed her what she had lost. In the last couple months the pain had diminished a bit as she’d dealt with other stuff, friends, demons, etc. Today she was reminded what had been best about her old life and what was gone.

So hold me when I'm here
Right me when I'm wrong
Hold me when I'm scared
And love me when I'm gone
Everything I am
And everything in me
Wants to be the one you wanted me to be
I'll never let you down
Even if I could
I'd give up everything
If only for your good
So hold me when I'm here
Right me when I'm wrong
Hold me when I'm scared
You won't always be there
So love me when I'm gone
Love me when I'm gone

Maybe I'm just blind

It had been long, rough night. Between her bad dream, her grandmother's middle-of-the-night phone call and her mother's subsequent fight with Grams, sleep had been elusive. Delia had given up the ghost around three a.m. and had made a pot of coffee. Still in her sleep shorts and tank top, she'd curled up in her father's office chair with a novel she'd been assigned in English. Several hours later she'd only managed to read about one chapter but drink half the pot.

The chiming of the doorbell broke her out of the trancelike state she'd fallen into. Since her mother had finally fallen in to a restless sleep, Delia rushed to the door to get it before she was woken. As she threw open the door, it occurred to her she wasn't not dressed for company. Her father's commanding officer and his aide, Gunnery Sergeant Max Willis, were waiting patiently at the door. It took only one glance at their faces to know.

Colonel Jeffrey Frost knew Delia well from her visits to Jack's office. The young woman had a lot of potential. He fully expected she would follow in her father's footsteps if she could just stay out of trouble. He was usually happy to see her, but this was one of those times that he couldn't make himself happy.

"Delia, I'm sorry it's so early. Is Amelia home?" His voice was calm and resolved.

"She's sleeping." Delia explained as bats started dive bombing in her belly.

Jeff reached up and touched the arm that she had rested on the door jamb.

"Perhaps you should wake her."

Delia swallowed once hard, and did what she knew was necessary. "Won't you come in and sit down while I get her?"

Max started to say refuse, but Jeff overrode him and replied. "Of course, thank you!"

As they stepped into the living room, Delia remembered the coffee. "Would you like some coffee?"

"Not at the moment. We'll be fine." Jeff responded.

"Okay...we'll be just a minute."

"No hurry. We can wait." Jeff sighed. This is one meeting he'd like to wait forever to have.

Delia ran down the hall to the master bedroom and rapped lightly before entering. Amelia had twisted the blankets to a mutilated mess. Obviously it hadn't been an easy night for her either.

Delia shook her mother's shoulder lightly. "Mom, you need to wake."

"It's still early. I don't have to work today." She argued without opening her eyes, her voice as petulant as a six year old child.

"Colonel Frost is here, Mom. You need to see him." Delia shook her more vehemently.

Amelia's eyes opened slowly. They were red from sleeplessness and perhaps concern over the night's events. As she looked at her daughter's face, she rose slowly and quickly threw on her house robe. Normally she would have taken the time to dress properly, but whatever Jeff was here for was going to be bad. There was little point in looking nice when one would only end up looking and feeling bad.

Delia and her mother walked slowly to the living room as if marching to the gallows. Their thoughts were, perhaps for the first time in their lives, in perfect accord.

Jeff was sitting on the edge of the couch, revolving his cap slowly around his hand. Max looked huge sitting in one of the dainty company chairs that Amelia had bought to go in the room. Neither woman had ever before seen Max without a smile on his face. Jeff looked up as if he felt their presence. He stood up and walked immediately to Amelia and, taking both her hands, drew her to a chair to sit.

Delia moved to a position behind her father's favorite chair. She braced both hands on the back and waited expectantly.

"Amelia, I wish there was some good way to tell you this." He took a deep breath. "I just received official word. Jack and his unit were in a building that was bombed. Most of them survived the original blast, but several were trapped inside. Jack went back to help them get out, he saved three of them, but was caught in a cave-in as the final building supports gave way." He swallowed hard over the frog in his throat. "I'm so sorry, he didn't survive."

"NO" Amelia yelled, tears pouring out of her eyes, her hands pulling away from Jeff. "No, he's indestructible. He can't be...He promised"

Jeff grabbed her hands again; she was getting very close to hysteria. “Amelia, you don’t know how sorry I am, but it is confirmed.” He shook her hands to get her attention and took a moment to glance at Delia. Delia stood ramrod straight behind Jack’s chair, she looked miserably sad and alone, but she hadn’t broken. “Jack is being posthumously awarded a silver star for saving his men.”

Amelia was shrieking by that point, “Do you think I care? Do you think it means something that he got himself killed saving those men? What am I supposed to do? How am I supposed to live without him?” She yanked her hands away from him and ran down the hall to her bedroom.

Jeff turned to Delia. She stepped out from behind the chair and walked over. “Who was it?” She asked quietly.

“Who was who?” He was puzzled.

“Who’d he give his life to save?” Her voice caught on the word life but she maintained eye contact.

Jeff turned to his aide for the details.

Max answered standing up and walking over. “Garcia, Martin and O’Donnell” “O’Donnell’s wife is pregnant, third trimester.” She breathed out, nodding her head as if it made perfect sense to her. “He couldn’t have let the baby never know its father.” Her voice was pitched barely above a whisper and a couple tears had tracked down her face, but she stood her ground before them. “I think mom needs some time...to sort things out.”

Jeff nodded. “Of course”

Max stepped forward and handed Delia the official letter of notice. “When’s she ready, maybe this will offer some comfort.” His voice was gentle and the faintest trace of his usual smile was visible.

Delia turned back to Jeff. “How long do we have?”

“Until...?” he asked surprised at the turn of the conversation.

“We both know base housing is only for base personnel.” She stated matter-of-factly.

“There’s no reason to rush this. Take some time to grieve. We’ll worry about those details after the funeral.”

“When?” She asked.

“His remains, as well as those of the two other’s in his unit, will sent back home in a couple days. They’ll be buried in Arlington National. Max will make arrangements for your mother and you to travel there. I will be attending with you.”

“Thanks.” Her eyes had dried up. She turned to Max. “Please direct all the communications to me for the time being. Mom won’t be up to dealing with details for a while.”

Jeff sighed knowing that it was all too true. Everything he knew about Jack's family suggested that Delia was going to have to be the adult for some time to come.

"If you need anything...." He offered.

"Thank you." She led them to the door and saw them out. She closed the door by the simple expedient of leaning against it, then slid down the door and cried her heart out.

Delia closed the scrapbook gently and put it back into the lower drawer of the desk. She rubbed her hands over her face and combed her hands back through her hair. It had gotten a bit longer in the past few months. It was now long enough she could tie it back. As she listened to the last lines of the song, she made a decision.

So hold me when I'm here
Right me when I'm wrong
Hold me when I'm scared
And love me when I'm gone
Everything I am
And everything in me
Wants to be the one you wanted me to be
I'll never let you down
Even if I could
I'd give up everything
If only for your good
So hold me when I'm here
Right me when I'm wrong
Hold me when I'm scared
You won't always be there
So love me when I'm gone
Love me when I'm gone,
Love me when I'm gone,
When I'm gone
When I'm gone
When I'm gone

As the final strains of the song faded away, she lifted the receiver carefully off the cradle, listened for a moment and started dialing. The phone rang only a couple times before a familiar voice answered.

"Hello."

"Hey, it's Delia. I was wondering....would you like to go on a road trip with me? I need to go to Maryland."

Tales of the New Slayers

*** Lyrics to **When I'm Gone** by 3 Doors Down off *Away from the Sun* CD