



swe1ter

by molly burkhart

SWELTER
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-1-

The heat's enough to make a man crazy.

It doesn't help that I'm halfway there already. My life plays like a country song. All I need is a beer to cry into.

If it weren't so damn *hot*...

They tell me it's not the heat; it's the humidity. I tell them to shove it. Hot is hot. True, Missouri in summertime resembles forced incarceration in a sauna, but after a certain point, heat is just heat, whether wet or dry. Try telling someone lost in the Sahara Desert that they should be grateful it's a dry heat.

Why do I stay in Missouri? Because this is where I lived with *her*. Mrs. Jack Murphy, my wife of twenty-four years, the mother of two beautiful boys. My Evvie--not the only woman I ever loved, but the only one I liked enough to want to wake up to every morning.

She died of heat stroke.

Standing straight, I take off my t-shirt and scrub at the back of my neck. It doesn't do much good; the shirt's almost as sweat-soaked as I am. My vision swims for a second, and I'm pretty sure I'm swaying like a drunk. Standing up so fast wasn't such a great idea.

I look up at the angle of the sun, squinting against the glare, and guess it's about half past two. No wonder I'm woozy; I haven't had so much as a sip of water since ten this morning. How did I lose so much time?

And what the hell was I thinking? Hoeing the garden under the noonday sun while heat lightning prowls across the thunderheads on the horizon. It's about as bright as giving an empty canteen to that poor fella wandering the Sahara. I should have started earlier this morning or waited until the slightly less oppressive evening.

If I keep this up, I'll kill myself.

-2-

It's dark inside, but not particularly cool. I forgot to kick on the air conditioner this morning. Smooth move, Ex-Lax, as my boys would have said.

Worse, I can't see a damn thing. My eyes won't adjust to the dark, and if I bark my shin on one more piece of furniture, I swear to God I'll break something just to do it. Little swirls and bursts of white light flash in my vision, making the dimness inside the house darker still. Shoulda worn my sunglasses. Evvie would have my hide.

I can almost hear her. *Jack*, she'd say in that half-amused, half-annoyed voice of hers, *use the sense God gave you! You'd think you were one of the boys.*

God, I loved that woman.

The kitchen is a little brighter than the living room, or maybe my eyes have finally adjusted. Either way, I don't trip over the old blood hound lying in a spot of shade by the table. Damn dog. Doesn't even look up as I step over him. He just huffs a dog grunt and whisks his tail across the floor in greeting.

"Conan, get the hell out of the way."

He rolls his eyes up to mine without lifting his head. *What?* those brown, innocent puppy eyes ask. *What'd I do?*

"You're just lucky I can see better in here, lazy mutt. Otherwise, I'da likely kicked in your ribs." I grunt. "Might ought to, just on general principles."

He doesn't seem disturbed by the threat. I grunt again and open the fridge. It's all but empty. A half-empty package of sandwich meat and three gallon-sized jugs of water huddle together on the middle shelf. Pitiful. Thank God I get paid this week.

At least I wasn't totally laid off, like most people at the plant. Apparently being the head lineman won me a little consideration in the company-wide cutbacks. I put twenty-five years into that factory, so I got cut back to half the hours instead of dropped outright.

Now that I think of it, I guess that's a good thing about losing an entire family. I still make enough, even at half income, to take care of myself, though it's damn slim pickings. If I still had Evvie and the boys here, I'd have claimed bankruptcy by now and likely lost the farm.

The water from the fridge is painfully cold. It cuts into my throat like a blade of ice, and I almost choke on it. Conan rolls his eyes up again at my sputtering, then thumps his tail on the floor in sympathy. I get ahold of myself and take another drink, blinking back tears at the almost immediate brain freeze. I should probably slow down, but that first taste of water hit me like rain in the desert, despite the pain. I can't keep myself from gulping, even when it hurts.

After a few minutes of doubt, my throat and chest settle down and my stomach quits clenching. I take another long swig of water, then stare at the magnets on the freezer door. The blast of cool air from the still-open fridge dries some of the sweat off my bare chest, and I shiver. How close did I come to overheating out there? To keeling over in the row between the peas and the beans?

Shaky now, I put the jug back in the fridge and shut the door, feeling the humidity settle about my shoulders again. God, it's just so *thick*. It's like wearing a wet fur coat. I catch a whiff of my overripe scent and wrinkle my nose in disgust. I kinda smell like a wet fur coat.

"Conan."

The dog's eyes open again at the harsh tone, but he doesn't move. Lazy cur. Too bad he's such a good dog. He was always so good with the boys.

"Make yourself useful, mutt. Go bring in the paper."

He lifts his eyebrows, and if I didn't know better, I'd swear he looks incredulous. Can dogs be incredulous?

"Go on, now. Get."

With a low sound suspiciously like a whine, he drags himself to his feet and ambles out of the kitchen. The screen door bangs closed behind him, and I can't keep a little smirk off my face. By God, at least I won't suffer the heat alone. Damn dog lazing in the shade while I bust my hump out in the garden. What kind of loyalty is that?

I catch another whiff of myself. It's long past time for a shower. I can almost picture Evvie's face if she could smell me now. She'd wrinkle her nose, a gesture I always found so damn precious, and shake her head.

Jack Murphy, you reek worse than week-old trash! Oh, but she'd be smiling. Get your sorry butt in the shower before your clothes start to crawl by themselves.

I hardly notice the burst of pain as my knee barks against the corner of the armoire in the hall, but I certainly notice when Evvie's picture jitters and topples. Faster than can be possible, I reach

out and snatch it out of the air, panic tripling my heartbeat until I realize the photo is safe in my hands a good three feet off the hardwoods.

God, I'd have never forgiven myself if I'd let her hit the floor.

My fingers trace over that lovely face as my heart rate slows. She was as beautiful the day she died as she was the day I met her. She made models in Penthouse look overblown and cheap. Made angels weep with jealousy and shame.

I carefully sit her picture back on the armoire, arranging it just so. As I walk on, I trace her chin with the tip of my finger, with my lingering eyes.

Oh, Evvie.

-3-

The shower wakes me up a bit, and a lazy nap in the porch swing fixes most of the rest of what ails me. Most of it, anyway. I feel more at peace, less hounded by the past. Porch swings are good that way.

Conan lifts his head and whuffs softly through his nose. A car is trundling up the road. Rare, but not unheard of. I'm not the only person living on this old dirt track.

The car pulls into my driveway and pauses. Now, *that's* rare. No one comes to see me anymore. I kinda miss the boys' friends running around, whoopin' and hollerin' as they played tag or Cowboys and Injuns. I even miss the occasional friend of Evvie's stopping by to swap recipes.

None of that anymore, of course. Now, it's just me.

I sit up straight as the car rolls forward again. By the time it's halfway to the house, I know who my visitor is, and I lean back with something like a grin. It's been a long time since young John Buckner came out for a poker game. New sheriffs don't have much time for gambling.

He climbs out of the black-and-white with a genuine smile, clapping his sheriff's hat on his head as he trots up the steps. "Jack Murphy! You look like death warmed over, but by God, it's good to see you."

I raise an eyebrow. "Lookin' mighty official, there, kiddo, but I guess you'll have to do."

Laughing, he reaches out and takes my offered hand, shaking it with gusto. "Still can't outgrow that 'kiddo' tag? Hell, I got three kids of my own."

"Buckner, you could have ten kids and still be wet behind the ears." I stand and give his hand a good squeeze before letting go and clapping him on the shoulder. "I'll call you 'kiddo' until you quit tryin' to fill that inside straight."

He chuckles and leans against the porch rail, gesturing for me to sit down. "How ya been, Jack?"

I study him as he gets cozy. There's a world of curiosity in that simple question. "Been better, but I suppose we all have. You?"

"Busy. Seems like I spend more time bustin' drunk kids at the campground than anything else these days, but someone's gotta do it." His grin never changes, but his eyes sharpen. Cop eyes. "I hear they laid you off over at the plant."

I shrug. "You're a good four months too late for that to be news, kiddo. And I'm not fully laid off--just to half time."

He shakes his head, those cop eyes never shifting. "Damn wrong of 'em, if you ask me. After all the time you put into that place." He scowls. "Hell, you didn't even miss work for the funerals."

I swallow hard as he winces. No, I didn't miss work for either the boys or my Evvie. It wasn't dedication--just coincidence. Both funerals were on a Saturday.

"I--I'm sorry, Jack. That was stupid." He looks like he just shot my dog, and his sincere disgust at himself shadows and finally softens the hard edge of his cop eyes.

I summon up a snort at the hangdog expression. He didn't mean to remind me. I won't hold it against him.

"Don't worry about it, kid. You're not the only person to mention them. Hell, it's been a year." I sigh and rub my forehead where a headache is starting up. "It don't hurt so bad as it used to."

He manages a nod, and an awkward silence falls between us. Finally, I shift, gaining his attention.

"Evelyn always had a soft spot for you, Buckner. It was good to see you again."

He nods, neither young or stupid enough to not recognize the dismissal. Extending his hand, he lets a little of that cold observation seep back into his eyes, reminding me that he's not the rookie deputy I used to fleece every Thursday night.

"I'll be out to check on you every now and then, Jack. I'm sorry I wasn't out before now, but it just gets so hectic, ya know."

I wave him off, though I'm sure my eyes are every bit as hard as his. "I don't need a nursemaid, kid. Pay attention to your own family. I got enough to do around here to keep me busy, and I finally got time to see to some of it. I'm fine."

He nods, and I finally shake the offered hand.

"You need anything, you know where to find me."

I grunt. "Get on out before I fetch a pry bar."

A laugh sneaks past his cop defenses, and real amusement lights his eyes, taking me back to those Thursday night poker games, to beers with friends and Evvie's apple cobbler with vanilla ice cream melting down over the sides. Was that really so long ago?

He goes finally, waving before he drops into the driver's seat. I wave back, more for propriety's sake than anything else. John Buckner brings too many memories with him, and I think I hate him for it. Just a little, and it's not his fault, but I can't help myself.

-4-

Another godawfully hot day. I'd pray for rain if I thought God gave a rat's ass.

Every day, thunderheads climb high on the horizon, heat lightning flashes a vicious promise, and the humidity builds so thick you can almost wring water out of the air, but by the end of the day, it's just as stifling as ever without a drop of relief in sight. If the temperature fell even ten degrees, it'd be a downpour to rival Noah's flood.

A deep, aching sunburn kept me from even thinking of hoeing the garden again this morning, but the tractor has a canopy, so I figure I'd best get some of that brush-hogging done. I promised myself I'd do it last month, but even when I have nothing to do, time gets away from me.

Plus, driving the tractor in mindless circles gives me time to think. Damn that John Buckner. He just had to mention the funerals, didn't he? Had to come around with his laughing and his prying and the ghosts of years past clinging to his broad shoulders.

He didn't mean anything by it, Jack. The mediating voice is Evvie's, of course. She always did try to calm me down when I flew off the handle. *He meant well.*

"I know that." Did I say that out loud? "Don't mean he couldn't keep his fool mouth shut for once."

His heart's in the right place.

My scowl softens. I can feel it go. "Dammit, Evvie. Quit stealin' my vinegar."

Guess that shut her up. A smirk quirks my lips, the small movement pulling at the burned skin around my mouth. I guess she had to die before I could get one up on her.

No one did one-up-manship like Evvie. She had a sharp tongue, though she never indulged in cussing like I did, and she could put anyone in their place with a single sentence. She was as sweet as cream, but get on her wrong side, and God help the hindmost.

But she was never the same after the boys died. Her heart just went out of her. Our boys were the joy of her life. No mother should ever outlive her young.

"Dammit! Quit thinkin' about it!"

A headache digs deep into the meat of my brain. It's been there a while, but I guess I just now noticed it. I've probably been squinting against the glare too long. Forgot my damn sunglasses again.

What am I gonna do with you, Jack? You'd forget your head if it wasn't screwed on.

I will her voice away, pleased as I am to remember it so well. I think about her all the time. When it's not Evvie, it's the boys. Our strong, handsome gifts from a loving God.

The twins were the best of both of us--my size and strength, Evvie's looks and sweet temper. Their daddy's will and their mamma's intelligence. Trevor and Travis. Born on the same day.

Died on the same day.

I guess that's one small comfort. Neither had to live without the other.

The tractor lurches over a stump hidden in the high grass, and the engine chugs unsteadily. I'm too surprised to stop fast, and the brush hog clangs and rocks as a wheel thumps up over the stump and down the other side. The wheel well catches, the blades ringing as they try to take on the sturdy mass of old tree. The tractor lurches and jerks to a halt as the brush hog hangs up, the engine revving choppily.

"Come on, old girl. Come on, baby. You've taken worse than a long stump without breakin'!"

The tractor engine cycles up to a roar as I goose the gas. The hitch between tractor and brush hog groans with strain, and I back off, putting the rig in reverse. The blades ring out again as they attack from a new angle, the wheel bumping back up over the stump.

I maneuver, craning my neck around to see how much leeway I need. Just a little more to the left.

I put her back in first and ease off the brake, letting the tractor creep forward. The wheel well tries to catch again, but I've moved it too close to the edge of the stump, and the frame falls off with a grating, grinding crunch. I pull forward a few dozen feet just to be sure, then shut off the tractor and bury my face in my shaking hands.

How can I be so stupid? Good God, I'm driving tons of machinery! I can't just gray out, thinking about things that can't be changed. I'm damn lucky the tractor didn't flip, that the brush hog didn't throw a blade. What the hell is wrong with me?

I sit a while, waiting for my heartbeat to go back to normal.

You should get in out of the heat, Jack. It's hard to function when it's so hot.

Evvie's voice is right, but it's no excuse. I've never been so careless before. What if someone had been passing by along the road? What if Conan wasn't back at the house, lazing in the shade? What if one of the boys had walked out to see me--

The boys haven't walked out for two years, Jack. Her voice is soft and slightly amused. No one comes here anymore, remember? You won't hurt anyone but yourself if something goes wrong.

And that's the cold, hard truth. God, does she have to just lay it out like that? It's like she drove a shaft of ice right through my heart.

"Damn, Evvie. Twist the blade next time, won't ya?"

My voice is barely a croak, and I suddenly realize how hot and tired and thirsty I am. The heat is getting to me, wearing me out and leaving me dry. I take my hands away from my sweat-streaming face and blink in the afternoon light.

It's a lot later than it should be. How long have I been here? Good Lord, it's almost evening. I've been sitting here talking to myself for, what, two hours? Three?

My clothes are stuck to me, soaked through with sweat. My mouth feels like I swallowed a handful of cotton balls, and I have to piss something fierce.

A shiver shoots up my spine, despite the oppressive heat trapped under the tractor's canopy. This can't be good, losing time like this. In fact, this is damn close to what crazy people do. Hell, didn't I even talk out loud to myself?

Goddamn heat's gonna drive me insane.

-5-

I'm not hungry.

I'm thirsty as hell, though, and I drain nearly half a gallon of ice-cold water in one painful

draught. My whole system clenches, and I run for the sink as all that water comes back up. God, that was stupid. And it *hurt*.

Baby sips, Jack. You're dehydrated.

When I'm done hurling up all that water and most of the bile in my stomach, I take Evvie's advice and drink more slowly. The first couple of swallows threaten to come right back up again, but after a few moments' fight, they reluctantly stay put.

A cold headache settles like an ice pick in my brain, but I ignore it. My head throbs with too much blood and there's a loud buzzing in my ears, but it's nothing I can't handle if I can just get some more water to stay down. A few more swallows. Stop and breathe. Another swallow.

Better. My stomach doesn't lurch as soon as I tip the jug to my mouth, and my head's a little clearer.

You ought to pay closer attention to the time. I can't watch you every second, you know.

"I know, Evvie. You always said I'd work myself to death one of these days."

She'd come strolling out into the field with a big glass of iced tea and flag me down to take a break. Sometimes she'd even bring me half a sandwich to tide me over until dinner. I'd work all day if she didn't remind me of the time.

I miss that glass of tea, miss her bright chatter while the tractor engine ticks and cools and the bugs chir in the grass. I miss it like breathing.

I took care of you, Jack. That's what wives do.

"I miss you, Evvie. Sometimes, so much I can't bear it."

I swallow hard, my eyes trying to water but too dry to manage it. I'd give anything for her to walk up to me right now and put her arms around me. Anything at all.

-6-

The porch swing creaks comfortably. I love that sound. It's a good, homey sound. I can almost feel Evvie curled up next to me, her bare feet tucked up under her skirt and her head heavy on my shoulder.

Look, the first star! Make a wish.

"I wish you were here."

Oh, Jack. Don't spoil the mood.

I can't help myself. I stare at that first star and wish with all my heart that my Evvie and my boys were safe and sound. I'd trade my life for theirs in a heartbeat. If I could just switch places with them.

The tears finally come in a scalding, choking wave, and I wonder if I'll drown before I can cry them all out.

-7-

By ten in the morning, it's hotter than the pits of Hell, and the humidity holds steady at ninety-three percent. This isn't funny, God.

No gardening and no brush-hogging. I *can* be taught.

I won't do anything I don't have to concentrate on. Free thinking isn't a good pastime for me anymore. I think about things best left alone.

So, I fix fence. It's out in the sun and my sun burn is kicking up dickens, but I remembered sunblock and a hat this time. And my sunglasses.

You remembered sunglasses and forgot breakfast?

"Hush it, Evvie. I'm busy."

Besides, I'm not hungry. Probably a good thing, since there's not much to eat in the fridge. Good thing I get paid this week. Or was that last week?

I stop tugging on the barbed wire for a second and cock my head to one side. Today is...Friday. Right? So I actually got paid yesterday. Huh.

I shrug and go back to work. I can pick up my check any time. I probably ought to get out today, anyway. I'll finish laying out this row, then run by the plant and into town.

You remembered sunglasses, but not your paycheck?

"Shut it, Evvie. A man can't remember everything."

I know. Oh, that smile of hers. Always took the wind right out of my fuss. That's what I was for,

Jack. I took care of you.

Boy, did she ever. A grin quirks my mouth as I work, laying the guide wire from corner post to corner post and going back to pound in the smaller poles. Evvie certainly did take care of her boys--all three of us.

I did my best to take care of her, too, but we all knew who really ran the family. She was just too damn good at it.

Halfway through the row, I pause and arm sweat out of my eyes, smudging my sunglasses. The heat sits on my shoulders. My sunburn aches. My arms are already tired and my shirt's soaked through, but it's a relatively short row. I should be done in an hour or so.

The heat is hard to breathe. I'd pay good money right now for one of those little handheld fans. This is like doing twice the work and only getting half of it done. And suffering with the discrepancy, to boot.

I stretch a little, looking around at my property, actually seeing it instead of just working it. It's a nice spread. Scenic in its way. I'd hoped to pass it on to the boys some day, but I guess it'll go to my nephew over in the next county.

He'll probably sell it and use the cash to expand his own property. He's a good kid, but he's not Trevor, not Travis. My poor boys.

Against my will, my eyes creep to the east, picking out the wink and glimmer of harsh sunlight on the ever-moving water of the stream. It's a good ways off, but I can still see it meandering in and around the low hills of my property. Wider than a creek but not wide enough to count as a river, it looks as harmless and inviting as I suppose a Venus flytrap looks to a fly.

"Dammit, I *won't!*"

I go back to my fence with a will, concentrating on nothing more than driving down those narrow, green supports in a straight line, not too close but not too far apart. It works. For a while. Until Evvie speaks up.

They just wanted to cool off.

Stop it. Just stop it. Pay attention to the work.

It was so hot that day, Jack. They picked the shallow side. They were strong swimmers. Surely a little wading wouldn't hurt.

"Stop it."

How could they know it had been raining upstream for the last two days?

"Stop it!"

How could they guess that those little sprinkles they'd so looked forward to could turn into a wall of water because a stupid blockage upstream broke through--

"Stop it, goddammit, stop it!"

My voice echoes back to me as the slumbrous buzz of nature goes silent. Even the slight, steamy breeze seems to pause as my shout cycles back. Better still, Evvie is silent, and I can breathe again.

"Just stop," I whisper, my throat sore from the shout.

-8-

I stare at my reflection in the bathroom mirror and frown. Everyone looked at me funny in town. I thought it was the sunburn, but it's not really *that* bad, is it? I'm not even peeling yet.

Shrugging, I open the medicine cabinet and pull out a bottle of ibuprofen. My headache hasn't let up since this morning, and my shoulders ache like rotted teeth from all that post-pounding earlier.

And it's still damn hot.

I watched the weather earlier this evening. I hadn't had my television on for a week. The weather guy predicted thundershowers by dark, but I can already tell it won't happen. Unless the temperature drops off fast, we'll never hit the dew point by sunset. I'll be surprised if it even gets down to the nineties by then.

I should probably eat something before taking the ibuprofen, but I'm not hungry. I'll risk ulcers just this once, though Evvie would turn over in her grave if she knew.

I stare at myself for a long moment before realizing that I'm waiting for her comment on the subject. I shake myself and wonder how dotty I've really become. Is that why people looked at me so strangely today? Do I look crazy?

I try to take a more objective look at myself. My eyes do look a little...starey, but that's probably because I'm studying myself so closely. The deep, sullen red of my sun burn doesn't look particularly healthy, but I hardly look like a raving lunatic. Hair's thinning, but that's natural at my age.

I cock my head and frown. I don't look crazy.

Grunting, I take the ibuprofen and wash it down with a big glass of water. It's sweet and cold and good, and I savor every drop. No ice picks in the brain this time. I learned my lesson about drinking too much too fast.

I amble outside and flop down on the porch swing, listening to its rhythmic squeak as the lightning bugs wink on and off in the gathering dark. It's still as hot as a blast furnace, but there's a little more breeze, and the sunset is worth the sullen sweat breaking out on my skin.

Pink and orange and fire engine red reflect off the tops of the thunderheads, contrasting against the heavy, grey undersides. It might very well rain in the next county if that angry, glowering grey is any indication, but it won't so much as drip here. The nearest thunderheads have already moved off, crouching on the horizon with their burden of rain and lightning. No rain for me. No relief from the heat.

Conan ambles out through the screen door and flops down at my feet. I ignore him and rock back and forth, back and forth. The night is quiet, and I can almost hear the boys laughing in the yard, chasing lightning bugs.

They used to tear off the glowing butts and stick them on each other's foreheads or swipe them up their cheeks like luminous warpaint. Evvie always threw up her hands and sent them to wash, claiming bug guts ought to be poisonous. Especially glow-in-the-dark bug guts.

I don't know which is worse, the fact that you two would stick innards on your faces or the idea that you're so fascinated by an insect's butt.

I grin, putting my arm around her. "Aw, let 'em play, Evvie. You're only young once."

She snorts and cuddles closer, and I lean my face down into her hair, breathing in her shampoo. She always smells so clean and fresh, no matter how hot it gets.

I smile at her, but she's not there. Of course she isn't. She's been dead a year.

-9-

I pack a picnic lunch of beer and potato chips. Every man deserves a day of rest, and it's pretty damn obvious I've been working too hard lately. I'm gonna spend the morning sitting in the grass, relaxing and *not* thinking of what's gone before.

I lean against the stump that nearly tipped me over the day before yesterday, my back to the line of high grass. It's peaceful here, quiet.

Not cool, of course. No place is cool. But it's certainly restful.

Something tells me I should probably have bought lunch meat instead of beer, but I haven't really felt like eating much, anyway. And beer's kinda like bread, if I count hops as yeast.

I munch on potato chips and drink my way through a six-pack while the thunderheads build up, disperse, build up again. I start on the second six-pack as the temperature plateaus over a hundred degrees and simmers the day.

When I started drinking earlier, I half-hoped for a buzz, but I guess I'm sweating the alcohol out faster I'm putting it in. I'm still sober as a judge when my watch informs me it's after noon. I've been out here for hours, and I still have a beer left. And I haven't thought of Evvie and the boys once.

Sure, I haven't.

Maybe I should save that last beer, though I have two more sixes in the fridge. This was a nice way to spend a morning, and I feel more relaxed than I have in weeks. I think I'll do it again tomorrow.

A car horn breaks the stillness of the day, and I twitch out of a near-doze. Craning my neck around, I see a black-and-white rolling slowly through the grass, bottoming out once before breaking through the line of longer grass and stopping in my little clearing.

Buckner is the last person I expect to see. Hell, he hasn't been around for years, and he puts in two appearances in three days? But that's definitely his face I see peering out the rolled-down window at me from behind mirrored sunglasses

"What brings you out to the boonies, kid? Already missing my vivacious company?"

He climbs out of the car, takes off his sunglasses, and looks me over with cop eyes. I'm sun-fuzzled and feeling a little slow from my almost-nap, but I can see that hard edge, even over the ten feet or so that separate us. His grin is a little forced.

"Mind if I drag up a rock?"

"'Course not. Make yourself comfortable." I squint up at him, then look away. I can't hold his eyes today. "Look at those hills, Buckner. Have you ever seen them lookin' so dry this early?"

I can feel those cop eyes on me, studying me carefully. "Is that what you're doin' out here, Jack? Takin' in the sights?"

I shrug, snatching a glance at him before looking away again. "Just kickin' back. Think I been workin' too hard the last few days. I got a little dizzy on the tractor the other day."

"Glad to hear it. Truth be told, I'm a little worried about you. Ya look like you've lost some

weight. In two days. When's the last time you ate?"

I frown up at him and realize that the cop eyes have softened with concern. I grudgingly hold up the empty chip bag for his inspection. He doesn't even look at it.

"You shouldn't be out in this heat. Especially drinkin' beer. It dehydrates you."

My eyes narrow, and now I have no trouble meeting his gaze. "You sound like my wife. No, you sound like my mother."

"I'm not tryin' to mother you, Jack, but someone's gotta look after you. You're out here on the ass end of town, workin' yourself to death with no one to notice it."

I start to interrupt, but he talks right over me. He means to have his say.

"And somethin' tells me that your *little dizzy* is anyone else's *passed out*." He sighs and squats down to eye level with me, his fingers restless on the earpieces of his sunglasses. "Look, I talked to ol' Bob at the grocery store, and he said you came in yesterday lookin' like a horse ridden too hard and put away wet. I'm worried about you."

He's worse than I ever was.

Her voice has the hint of amusement that usually makes me smile, but I ignore her.

"I'd just laid down a guide wire and a good twenty posts for that new fence, Buckner. I hadn't had a shower. Let's see how good you look after a hard day's work in this heat."

"Damn it, that's just what I'm talkin' about." He shakes his head. "You shouldn't be workin' so hard when it's up in the hundreds like this. Nothin' needs done that bad. Let it wait for a break in the heat."

"What do ya think I'm doin' now?" I spread my hands and lean back against the stump.

"Bakin'." He frowns. "It's too hot to sit out here in the field."

I grunt. "My air conditionin's broken, kid. It's just as hot inside as out."

"Maybe I can take a look at it."

Now it's my turn to frown. "What's blown up your skirt, Buckner? You're flutterin' around like a mother hen. Don't you got better things to do than fuss over an old coot like me?"

He shifts and looks away, and I wonder how bad I really looked yesterday.

Bad enough for people to comment. Bad enough to make him worried. Better put him off your scent, Jack.

Good advice, as usual.

"Look, kiddo, I appreciate the concern, but there's nothin' wrong that a little rest won't fix. I'm tired, yeah, but I'm also takin' the day off. You're worried over nothin'."

His eyes fix on mine again, but the cop edge is gone. For a moment, he's just John Buckner again. The happy-go-lucky pup I could always count on to bid high on a pair of tens and who always thanked Evvie for the goodies she baked for us poker goats.

"All right, Jack." He sighs, then stands and squints up at the sun. "It'd sure make me feel better if you went back inside the house, though. It may not be any cooler, but you got one helluva sun burn goin' already, and it's just too damn hot to be outside."

I roll my eyes and shove to my feet, then bend over to grab my trash. Dizziness hits me like a thrown brick, and I have to concentrate damn hard to keep from falling flat on my face. I blindly reach for my cooler, buying time until my vision clears.

Don't pass out now, Jack. You've just about got him rolled, so don't pass out now.

She's right, of course. She usually is.

"I think you got it all, Jack."

Standing up slowly, I fix him with what I sincerely hope is a steely glare. "I just brush-hogged this field, Buckner. No chance in hell am I leavin' beer cans out here to screw up the serenity."

He laughs, and the dizziness fades in a wave of relief. He didn't notice. I'm safe.

"Some things never change. I remember you chewin' out all the local kids for droppin' candy wrappers off the Halloween hay ride."

Oh, that hurts. I haven't sponsored the local hay ride since the boys died. Keeping the wince off my face takes more effort than anything since attending that first funeral.

My poor Jack. Can't go a day without someone ripping out your heart.

"Shut it, Evvie."

My eyes widen. Did I say that out loud? Oh, God, did he notice?

He doesn't seem to. In fact, he isn't even looking at me, and I wonder what put that guilty, furtive look on his face. Oh, yeah. The hay ride.

"Contrary to popular opinion, kid, you *can* talk to me about my family without sendin' me into a ravin' pit of hysterics."

He winces, and it's small of me, but I like that wince. I can't help it. I'm only a man.

"I gotta get, Jack. I'm sorry I keep blurtin' stupid stuff. No wonder you looked like a skunk crawled in your lap when I drove up."

"You been here twice, Buckner. I've hardly set precedent."

He smiles briefly at that, but he's in a hurry to go now. Again, I'm glad.

But when he's gone, I turn to her and scowl. She gives me that grin she knows I can't resist, and I forgive her for trying to get me in trouble with the law. I always forgive her. It's her power over me, and it seems it won't die like she has.

-10-

I really intend to go back to the house, but it's nice in the field, even in the heat. Evvie suggests I relax a little longer, knowing how hard I worked the last few days. She takes such good care of me.

"It's so quiet out here, Jack."

God, I miss her voice. I've missed it more than anything. The boys' laughter is probably next on the list, but that voice....

"Evvie, I miss you. Please come back to me."

"Hush, Jack. You'll spoil the mood."

I lean back against her, settling into her arms and heaving a sigh. I always feel closer to her out here. We spent so many days lazing in the sun, wanting so much to have a family to share this land with. We spent many more nights out here, trying our best to make that family happen.

I turn my head to say it, but she already knows.

"Just enjoy the afternoon, Jack. You talk too much."

I do enjoy the afternoon and that last beer. It's the best time I've had since she died. No, since the boys died. She was never the same after that, never herself. She still breathed and baked, but it wasn't all of her.

I relax into her, and as the sun inches down in the sky, painting the thunderheads with burnished

gold, it's like nothing ever went wrong.

-11-

The sun hovers like a squashed, angry red ball on the horizon, but I don't feel like going in just yet. Her arms are warm--a good kind of warm that negates the godawful heat of the evening. Her arms are home.

"Jack, what are you thinking about?"

You, Evvie. Always you.

"You still feel bad that I worked myself so hard after the boys died, don't you?"

Well, I didn't exactly set a good example.

In fact, I cleared five acres of timber when the boys died, despite working full time at the plant and despite the worst heat wave in the last decade. Until this one, of course.

"I just needed something to do, Jack. It wasn't your fault. We both handled it our own way."

I tilt my head back to look up into her eyes. *Why did you tackle that damn garden on your own, Evvie? If you'd just waited a few hours, I'da been home to help. Hell, you coulda waited a few days for it to cool off.*

"Sounds familiar, Jack. Buckner got to you, didn't he?"

I always try to listen to good advice. You know that.

She strokes my sunburned forehead, smiling softly. "Now, don't get all huffy. Lay back down, my love, and relax. Sunset is only a moment away."

I do as she says. I always do as she says.

You haven't called me 'my love' since before the boys died.

"Drink your beer and kick back, my love. You work too hard."

They say you don't know you're dehydrated until it's too late, Evvie. I don't need another beer.

"He really got to you, didn't he?"

She's incredulous in that sweet, honestly surprised way of hers. She's always surprised when I actually listen to what someone else says, though I've never been half as stubborn as she.

"I'm tired, Evvie." My voice is rusty, and I wish I'd thought to bring a jug of water. "I should go inside. It's too hot out here."

Silence. She's gone again, but it doesn't hurt so bad this time. She was never really here, anyway.

-12-

I didn't sleep last night. The headache settled back into the middle of my brain, and even pajamas were too hot to bear. I couldn't even toss and turn. It took too much effort with the sheets sticking to me.

But she's patient with me this morning. I bring the last two six-packs and my fishing gear to the stream, and she sits on the rocky bank, stroking Conan's floppy ears and watching me waste the day.

The water is cool compared to the day, the current strong and deep. I'm waist deep and loving every minute of it. I haven't fished in an age. I've been avoiding the stream, but it's okay to admit it now.

"You're over that, Jack."

I know, Evvie. I'm over lots of things. In fact, I've never felt better. It's like a great weight lifted off my shoulders in the night. I spent it thinking, since I couldn't sleep.

"You forgave yourself, Jack." She smiles. "It's easier to breathe when you can hold your head up."

I feel damn near giddy with relief. The beer tastes like heaven, and before too long, I'm sitting next to her on the rocks, the rod jammed between a tree root and a small boulder. We're halfway through the second six-pack. I flirt with her, and she responds with that innocent charm that caught my attention so many years ago.

God, I love you, Evvie.

"Come take a swim with me, Jack. You're sweating like a pig, and you could use a cool down. Look, even Conan's taking a dip."

The water is fresh and cool, and for the first time since this damn hot spell started, I think I actually feel normal. She swims further downstream, and I laugh and speed up my strokes,

leaving Conan behind, catching up and taking her into my arms. Her lips are sweet, and I roll her under me in the water, not caring that we slip below the surface.

Oh, God, I missed you, Evvie. Never leave me again.

"Never, Jack."

I won't let you go this time. They made me bury you once. I can't do it again.

"You won't have to. Not anymore."

I hold you close, wondering how it's so cool after such a long hot stretch. Did you do it, Evvie? Did you make it cool and wet and wonderful again?

"Hush, my love. Just hold me. Never let go."

I roll you over again, looking up at your blue, blue eyes, and the surface of the stream ripples with the first drop of rain. I wait, wide-eyed, and another drop falls, sending concentric circles across the veil between us and the heat. Another. And another.

Do you see, Evvie? Did you do it?

"I see, Jack. It's over now. Just lie here and hold me close, my love."

Forever, Evvie. I'll hold you forever, and we'll watch the rain.

It's about goddamned time.

THE END