

Exclusive, unpublished short story by Jane Harvey-Berrick

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Chapter 2

A Rocky Road

Working for the *New York Times*, MJ Buckman goes wherever the biggest story takes with her. Following up a lead in Afghanistan, she is attacked by a murderous mob—and saved by US Marine Jackson Connor.

When he takes up her offer to meet in NYC, no one is more surprised than MJ. Could this be the start of something special, or is she hitching her heart to a sailing ship?

“So, where do you want to go?” I asked.

Jackson smiled and shook his head.

“I’m just a lil ole country boy let loose in the big city. I might get taken advantage of. I’m countin’ on you to keep me safe, Ms. Journalist.”

“Hmm, I can see that. An innocent in the big, bad city.”

“Waal now, I wouldn’t say *innocent* exactly,” he drawled, his eyes glinting with amusement.

No, there was nothing innocent about Jackson Connor.

“Don’t worry,” I said, patting his arm. “I’ll protect you. You’re on my turf now.”

His eyes crinkled and I could see him holding back a smile. He was so different from the angry, intense Marine that I’d met in Afghanistan.

He walked with an easy grace, a long-legged stride, confident in his body, owning the space around him. I’d seen his calm competence in an emergency first hand. This was a restrained version of it—a certainty that he could face anything.

But as we walked along the street, I picked up on several non-verbal cues that he’d probably rather I didn’t notice. I’d spent time with enough military personnel that I recognized the signs.

His eyes roved constantly, even as he maintained a light-hearted conversation. I saw him swiftly assessing everyone who passed us, automatically estimating the potential level of threat. No one was excluded: shoppers, office workers, mothers with strollers, even an elderly lady with a walking cane was analyzed before being dismissed from his automatic threat triage. He glanced upwards frequently, checking the skyline, for snipers, I guessed. A street vendor made him frown, and his right hand twitched, as if seeking an absent weapon.

He was friendly but he was alert, not truly relaxing until we entered *Walter's Bar*, a small, low-key hangout that I liked to go to. It had a dart board where I played with some of my colleagues from work, and ESPN blared from the flatscreens around the room.

It was early evening, and the bar was getting busy with the after-work crowd, so I led the way to my favorite booth opposite the horseshoe-shaped bar and plopped onto the cracked leather bench seat. It offered a little more privacy than one of the tables in the center.

Jackson took a position where he could see everyone who entered, then, apparently satisfied with our seats, picked up the menu.

“What’s good?”

“Pepperoni pizza or wings,” I answered immediately.

Walter’s had a small menu that served basic bar food, but I liked it because it was friendly and unpretentious, not because the food was great.

Jackson licked his lips and a small shiver of anticipation ran through him.

“Man, I can’t tell you the number of times I dreamed of buffalo chicken wings while I was in the sandbox,” he murmured.

“My treat,” I reminded him.

“That wasn’t part of the deal.”

“I can buy you an \$8 pizza,” I smiled.

“Not exactly the going rate for saving someone’s life, but it’s a start.”

“Is that so?”

“Hell, I’ll even let you get a side of fries, if you like,” I winked at him.

He nodded eagerly.

“And a cold draft beer?” I suggested, knowing how much the guys at Leatherneck longed for an ice cold, crystal clear beer on each and every one of those hot, dusty, draining days.

He groaned, an expression of yearning washing over his face which I took as a ‘yes’.

I placed our order with the server and sat back in the booth.

Jackson fiddled with a paper napkin,

absently shredding it, a small frown on his face as his eyes checked out the entrance for the third time in five minutes.

“Relax, Sergeant,” I said, smiling to soften my words. “No insurgents here.”

His chin jerked up as his eyes narrowed with irritation, but then he blew out a long breath, and I saw the set of his shoulders loosen.

“Occupational hazard,” he nodded with a wry smile. “I’ve only been stateside a couple of days—not long enough to switch it all off.” And then he murmured softly, “If it ever switches off...”

I smiled reassuringly. I knew that he couldn’t switch it off, but maybe I could help him relax a little more. I understood how he felt. Once you’ve experienced something life-threatening, you’re more aware, you can’t help it. You’ll always be watching even if it’s unconsciously.

“I get that. I felt like I was on the biggest rollercoaster for the first two weeks I was back. Every time I heard a loud noise, I jumped. I’m better now. Although sometimes...” and I shrugged.

He nodded with understanding, and maybe a little relief.

“But if you’re interested, there’s another exit out the back, although Walter is a little picky about who he lets walk through his

kitchen.”

Jackson grinned.

“Sounds like you’ve done a few covert ops in here.”

“Something like that,” I smiled, happy to see him begin to relax. “Dart competitions can get pretty intense.”

He chuckled quietly, but then he went back to shredding his napkin and an uncomfortable silence started to settle. Just as it was verging on awkward, he looked up.

“Did you find that girl? The one you were interviewing?”

“Anoosheh,” I sighed. “No, I didn’t. I heard a vague rumor that her family had made it to Pakistan, but ... it’s just a rumor. I’m still hopeful ... or maybe I should say I’m still hoping...”

He nodded, his expression closed off.

I let my journalism training kick in—I was used to getting people talking; it was part of the job.

“So,” I began, “what part of the south does this country boy come from?”

“Gulfport, Mississippi.”

“Oh, my gosh! Don’t tell me your parents named you after Jackson Mississippi!”

He gave a low chuckle.

“No, ma’am. My grandpappy on my mother’s side. But I can’t say for sure where

his name came from. What about you?

Where do you hail from?"

"I'm a Philly girl."

"Good football team."

"You follow the Eagles?"

His expression hardened as he swallowed and looked down. "My buddy did."

It didn't escape my notice that he'd used the past tense.

Luckily, the food arrived, and Jackson inhaled his meal with barely a glance in my direction, although his moans and groans as he ate his chicken wings bordered on pornographic—certainly to my mind.

"Hungry?" I asked, lifting an eyebrow as I idly chewed on a French fry.

His tanned cheeks reddened with a faint blush and he looked up sheepishly.

"I'm just teasing you, Jack. But I promise, no one is going to try and take those wings away from you."

He muttered something under his breath and I watched with fascination as the tips of his ears turned pink. But then he leaned back in his seat and fixed me with an amused stare.

"So, havin' saved your life an' all, does that mean I get dessert, too?"

"Wow, you're pushing your luck now, Sergeant. Hmm, let me think about that. Yes, saving-of-life would definitely merit a portion of ice cream."

“Huh, is that right? I was thinking more of the waffles with banana, brownies, chocolate sauce and chocolate ice cream.”

“Well, you’re out of luck because *Walter’s* has vanilla, chocolate or strawberry ice cream.”

“Damn! I was really craving hot chocolate sauce.”

“Why, Sergeant! I’m sensing that someone has a sweet tooth!”

“I sure do like my sugar,” he smiled right back at me.

And then he licked his lips. Those full, pink, sensuous lips.

The man was a darned tease.

And a flirt.

But he was only in town for a short visit, and hot as he was, I didn’t do one-night stands. Not for a couple of years now. I wasn’t cut out for it. No matter if I only slept with a guy once, my heart always seemed to get involved. Although something told me that making an exception for Jackson would be a memory worth having. But still...

“What are your plans while you’re in town?” I asked, changing the subject.

He finished up the last of his food, wiping his mouth on the napkin while he chewed thoughtfully.

"I've got a buddy up in Scranton that I'm

gonna go see. But other than that..." He shrugged casually. "Guess I'll take a look at the Big Apple, see what all the fuss is about."

"You've never been here before?"

"Nope," he said, popping the 'p'. "Like I said, I'm a country boy at heart."

"Well, I'm sure your friend will really appreciate the visit."

His expression was amused and quizzical as he nodded.

Instead of trying to figure out what it meant, I ordered the man his chocolate ice cream, watching with fascination as four scoops disappeared in double-quick time. I could feel the pounds piling on my thighs just by watching him. I'd swear some calories are carried by air, like a virus.

When his dish was clean, I ordered coffee—black for both of us. I took mine with sugar; Jackson didn't bother with it. Honestly, he'd already had so much sugar, I was relieved that he hadn't fallen into a diabetic coma. Although he hadn't been living on MREs the whole time he was overseas, the man had obviously missed pub grub.

Chatting with Jackson was easy once he'd relaxed, but I started to realize that we had almost nothing in common. He liked Country music, and I liked anything with a

Latin beat; he loved action movies, and I liked weird and emotional European films; I'd gotten my Masters in Journalism, and he'd graduated high school at 18; I'd lived in New York my whole life, and this was his first visit and he wasn't thrilled so far.

And yet ... and yet ... there was a pull, a draw, a something in his eyes that said he found our differences intriguing, maybe an invitation or a challenge. I wasn't foolish enough to think that his visit was simply to take me up on my offer to buy him a drink ... and yet...

I couldn't put my finger on it.

He was attractive—no one with eyeballs could deny that. But there was a self-sufficiency, a commanding quietness that drew me in. He moved effortlessly through his space, a man at ease with himself, a man who knew that he'd accomplished things beyond the ken of most people. It wasn't arrogance, but simply confidence in his abilities and his place in the world.

And he made me laugh.

Who would have thought that the intense, aggressive Marine that I'd met under such trying circumstances could tell jokes and tease and flirt.

It was the most fun dinner I'd had in forever.

We'd had something of a tussle for the

check before it came, and I'd cheated by paying when I went to the bathroom.

Jackson hadn't taken it well and brooded for at least 30 seconds.

"Well, I suppose I'd better get going. One of us has to get up for work tomorrow," I said at last. "Thank you for a very entertaining evening. I'm glad you came by."

"So am I—best chicken wings I've had in nine months. And the company wasn't bad," he teased.

"Why, Sergeant Connor! You're in danger of paying me a compliment."

He laughed lightly.

"Is that a fact? Waal, my grandpappy always told me to treat a pretty girl like a lady. And he'd damn well kick my ass for letting you pay. But I can't say as I've gotten a lot of chances to mind my manners lately with any sort of female."

"*Any sort of female?*" I raised my eyebrows. "You're in danger of sweeping off my feet with all that sweet-talk, Sergeant."

"Aw, you're not just any sort of female," he grinned at me. Then he leaned in closer. "In fact, I'd say you're mighty easy on the eyes."

"Thank you very much," I laughed. "Let me know when you've taken off your rose-

tinted desert glasses.”

“Why MJ! Are you fishin’ for compliments, girl?”

I rolled my eyes. “If I was, it would be a very short fishing trip.”

He laughed happily.

“I don’t suppose there’s any time in that busy city-girl schedule to escort this lil ole country boy for lunch tomorrow?”

“Good grief, Jack! You’re laying it on pretty thick! Have you turned into Garth Brooks over a plate of chicken wings?”

“Is that a yes?” he asked, his eyes crinkling as he smiled hopefully.

Oh yeah, that was definitely a yes. Even as my heart whispered warnings, I knew there was no way I’d say no to another meal with Jackson Connor.

“I thought you were going up to see your friend in Scranton.”

“He’ll still be there Sunday.”

“Fine, I’ll sacrifice another few hours to keeping you safe in the big, bad city,” I pretended to sigh.

“Why, thank you, ma’am!”

He nodded and stood up, holding out his hand to me as I slid awkwardly out of the booth.

“I have to work for a few hours tomorrow morning,” I warned him. “That’s eleven-hundred hours to you. Sorry it’s so late, but

I'm interviewing someone in Australia and that's the time that works for them."

"No worries," he said, shrugging easily.

"It'll give me a chance to do some tourist stuff first. What would you recommend? All I've got on my list right now is: collect free lunch—which I've done—" and he winked at me, "and the World Trade Center Memorial."

We shared a moment as we looked at each other.

I was 15 when it happened. We were in the middle of Algebra. One of the teachers interrupted our lesson to share the news. It didn't seem real, didn't seem possible. We all stared out the windows, because the school went on lockdown once the first tower was hit. And even though we were fifty miles away, we could see clouds of dark smoke hanging in the sky over the city.

It was the reason I'd become a journalist—to always ask the question *why*, to report, to search, to seek to understand.

Jackson had also told me that it was why he'd joined the Marines. I'd heard a lot of men and women say that about the military.

I nodded, offering a solemn smile.

"Well, you might want to take a trip out to the Ellis Island Museum, as well. The Holocaust Museum—that's really interesting. And who doesn't want to see the

Statue of Liberty? Then there's always loads to see in Central Park if you just want to hang out. I don't see you as a Barneys or Saks kind of guy."

"You call yourself a reporter and you go and make assumptions like that?" he laughed. "Would you be surprised if I told you that Bergdorf Goodman is on my to-do list?"

"Hmm, and that wouldn't have anything to do with a sister who's studying textile design, would it?"

I already knew that his younger sister Lucy was in school at Ole Miss.

He held up his hands in surrender.

"It might," he admitted. "Sheesh, you remember everything a guy tells you?"

I tapped the side of my head and winked at him. "Locked and loaded."

He laughed out loud. "Noted, Ms. Journalist. I guess I'd better watch my mouth doesn't run away with itself."

Oh God, I'd love his mouth to do that and a lot more.

I shook the thought away.

"I'll see you at 11 o'clock, Jack."

"You surely will, MJ," he smiled.

We were just about to leave the pub when the news came on. Jackson turned to watch, his mouth flattening as the presenter described a scene of carnage. In

Afghanistan.

“Last week, the relief organization Médecins Sans Frontières, known here as Doctors Without Borders, reported that 16 people, including nine of its volunteer staff, were killed in an overnight bombing raid in the embattled city of Kunduz in northern Afghanistan.

“Three children were among the fatalities and today General John Campbell, head of the US-led forces has apologized, admitting that, ‘The strike may have resulted in collateral damage to a nearby medical facility as we launched an airstrike against individuals threatening the coalition force’.”

*

Jackson swore under his breath, anger and frustration on his face.

There’s nothing pretty about war. We both knew that mistakes happened and it was grim and chaotic. One of the ugliest phrases was ‘collateral damage’, because it was a sanitized way of saying that someone had died for no reason. Civilian, military, children: people dying because they were in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Journalists weren’t immune to that—as I knew all too well.

Jackson had already turned to leave when a guy standing next to me shook his head at the TV and said loudly, “Fucking meathead

military. They should get some guys with brains over there, not mindless grunts who are so trigger-happy they don't know what the fuck they're doing. Waste of taxpayers' dollars."

Jackson froze. I tried to get him to keep moving even though I felt like punching the guy myself, but it was as fruitful as trying to move a mountain.

His eyes hardened as he turned to stare at the guy.

"What did you say?"

The man swung around, surprised. He took in Jackson's stance and furious eyes and stepped back, more guarded now.

"You heard," he said, his voice wary.

"They killed doctors, for God's sake."

"Jack, let's go," I said quietly, tugging on his arm again.

I saw the rage rush through him, and I saw him struggle to keep it under control.

"Time to go," I urged again.

He took a deep breath, turning to look at me, hearing me, listening to me.

"Come with me," I said, taking his hand in mine.

He followed slowly, as if his boots were filled with lead.

Outside, he put his hands on his hips, staring upwards, trying to catch a glimpse of the night sky among all the towering

buildings. He breathed deeply, taking calming breaths before he spoke again.

“That guy ... these people have no fucking clue what it’s like out there. Do they really think we don’t care? That those guys who ordered the strike ... the ones who flew the goddam planes ... that they won’t be haunted by that for the rest of their lives? Doctors and children...”

I nodded, watching him carefully.

“I know. I get it. That’s why I do what I do—I report on the places no one wants to care about. And sometimes I get my ass in a sling and have to be rescued by the cavalry. Did I say thank you for that, by the way?”

His expression softened and he smiled ruefully.

“God, MJ, I’m sorry about that back there,” and he jerked his thumb at the pub behind us. “It’s hard to hear shit like that sometimes, when guys are still out there and friends of mine...” He paused. “It’s not the greatest end to a date, is it?”

I blinked several times. He thought this was a date?

His casual words sent a rocket through all my plans to stay detached, to refuse to have my head turned by an attractive man whose ass looked great in camo.

If Jackson Connor, the man who’d saved my life, who’d sought me out in New York,

even though he hated cities—if a man like that wanted to call this a date, how the hell could I protect myself against the assault on my good sense?

I tried to gather my scattered wits.

“Oh, I don’t know,” I said as casually as I could manage. “A bit of action, a potentially life-threatening situation—that’s par for the course for us, don’t you think? All of our encounters have a little drama.”

“You’re calling this an encounter?”

“A date implies that there’ll be kissing involved.”

“Kissing?”

“It’s in the small print.”

“I guess I must have missed that memo.”

“Your loss.”

“I’m a fast learner.”

His eyes darkened as we stared across the empty space at each other, trying to read what this would mean.

He leaned toward me, his lips soft and tentative at first. But when I didn’t back away, when my hands slipped around his neck and my body pressed up against his hard chest, Jackson’s kiss became more urgent, more desperate.

My fingers tangled in the thin chain around his neck and I realized that he was wearing his dog tags under his t-shirt.

My mind skittered back, remembering



Written exclusively for newsletter
readers

By Jane Harvey-Berrick

USMC Sergeant Jackson
Connor doesn't do
commitment. Life is too
uncertain when you could be
deployed anywhere in the
world in the next 90
minutes.

But dammit, if there isn't something
about *New York Times* journalist MJ
Buckman that makes him want to
break all his rules.





If you want to support the men and women who work to keep us safe, my two favourite charities are www.felixfund.or.uk (UK) and www.eodwarriorfoundation.org (US)



There are lots of ways you can find out what I'm up to...

Pinterest!

You'll find loads of pix from photoshoots and signings, as well as FAN ART which is one of my favourite things to upload.

Track me down at

www.pinterest.com/jharveyberrick

Instagram!

A recent convert to IG, i post pix of books, boys, boys with books, places I've been and people I've met. And if you've seen my IG account, you'll know that my cute-as-a-button dog Pip, is often a star.

Watch my world at

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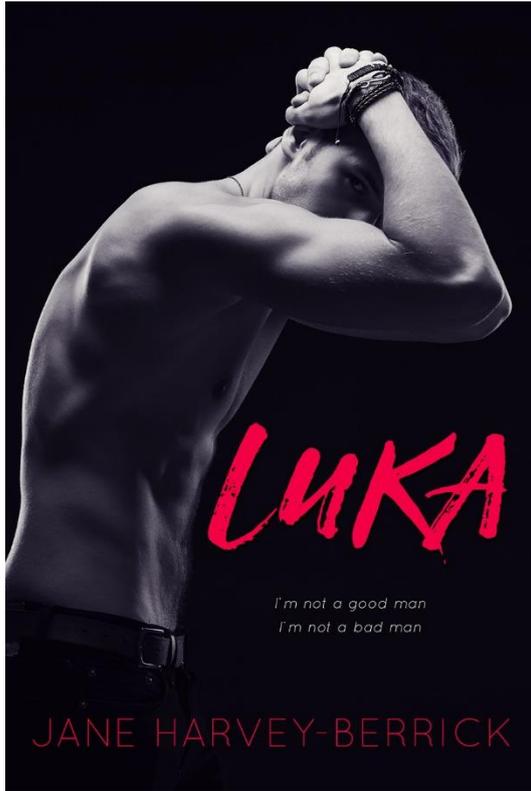
Yes, the old faithful social media is alive and well, despite reports of its demise. It's a good place to find out where and when I'll be for blog take-overs, and you'll get my IG feed, too.

Follow the yellow brick road at

www.twitter.com/jharveyberrick



ALL my books are now available
on Amazon's KINDLE UNLIMITED!



Published on 15 June

د.د. •**• ♪♪☆•HATE•☆♪♪•**• د.د.

I love two people.

I love them differently.

One is a man.

One is a woman.

And they are brother and sister.

د.د. •**• ♪♪☆•LOVE•☆♪♪•**• د.د.

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