

“To everyone who was here for the last set and decided to stick around for this one,” he said, “thanks. And to those of you who wandered over here during the break, welcome. I’m Jesse, and I’ll be here until a little bit before midnight, so I hope you stick around.”

He began playing a song that, to Deanna, was both familiar and unfamiliar at the same time. Unfamiliar, because she didn’t recognize it from satellite radio or any of the streaming music services she regularly listened to. Quickly, she realized why the song still sounded familiar: it was the one that Jesse had been playing Sunday night just as Deanna and Tracy settled in with their cabernets; the song that had prompted Tracy to opine to Deanna that “he’s pretty good.”

Deanna settled back into the comfortable chair, intently watching and listening. Each note seemed to release a touch more of the stress that had been building in her since the early evening when she finally had to begin getting ready for her reluctant date with Terry Kingsley. By the time that song gave way to another partly recognizable, partly unfamiliar one, Deanna was in much better spirits. She felt more relaxed than she had been since early this morning, before the trivia game encounter with the Kingsley brothers that had led to the less-than-enjoyable dinner date that, in turn, cast a cloud over this first full day aboard the *Jubilee*.

This final set went on for a full hour. The size of the crowd stayed fairly constant as the clock ticked toward midnight. Some people departed as the night slipped by, but were quickly replaced by others who had just left the ship’s early comedy show, or wanted to unwind with a final drink after an early night at *Twilight*. Other more energetic cruisers stopped by to listen to the lounge singer for a bit before taking in *Twilight* after the club *really* got going, or before lining up for the *Jubilee’s* second, much raunchier comedy show that began at twelve fifteen.

Jesse continued playing what Deanna was now convinced were his own songs, before switching back to a final trio of popular ballads. Finally, at around eleven forty-five, Jesse announced:

“Thanks to all of you who have stuck around to the very end. Don’t forget that here on the *Jubilee* we have plenty for you to do, for as long as you want to stay awake.” He briefly plugged the second comedy show and *Twilight* before adding:

“And of course there’s the casino just behind me” – Jesse nodded over his right shoulder – “for those of you who want to pretend that you’re in Vegas.”

A few chuckles were offered in response to Jesse’s “Vegas” comment.

“So now, I’m gonna finish up my final set for tonight with some James Blunt.”

Deanna instantly recognized the opening acoustic notes of “You’re Beautiful” and was immediately awash with bittersweet memories. The music instantly transported her back in time almost fifteen years now, to a charming bistro in Virginia Beach. Jake had made it back from his latest deployment just in time for her birthday, and they drove the half hour from the Norfolk Naval Air Station for a weekend getaway at a bed-and-breakfast in Virginia Beach. The bistro was next door to the B&B, and had been recommended to Deanna by more than a dozen other wives of Navy pilots (several of them also serving in the Navy themselves, as Deanna was) as the *absolutely perfect place* for that very first dinner together after many months apart from each other.

As if precisely timed for the bottle of cabernet being opened and poured, “You’re Beautiful” became the next song softly played on the dining room’s piped-in music system. Even Jake took note of the stirring notes and the poignant, heart-tugging words as he mouthed the words “you’re beautiful” to the wife he hadn’t seen for more than nine months.

As always, the memory brought the slightest touch of tears to Deanna's eyes. She wasn't weeping, or even noticeably crying. But anyone sitting close to her who might happen to lock eyes with Deanna at that very moment would clearly see that her eyes were now watery.

All the while Jesse continued playing and singing, Deanna's thoughts continued to take flight across both time and space. For the first time, Deanna was struck by the immutable realization that an entire segment of her life, dating back close to twenty years, was now abruptly and irreversibly concluded. She and Jake had divorced more than two years earlier, and shortly afterward she had reclaimed "Cooper" as her last name; but there was something about the continuation of Deanna's own Navy career that seemed to keep her stuck in that same chapter of her life, divorce notwithstanding. Maybe it was also their daughter still being in high school and the necessity of shared parenting (such as it was, with Jake still deployed much of the time) that also contributed to that feeling of continuity between present and past.

Now, though, Brittany was eighteen and very soon off to college. Deanna had – not surprisingly – found herself as the "parent in charge" of Brittany's college preparation with almost no input or assistance from Jake; and she fully expected that unless their daughter stumbled into an especially problematic situation of some kind, even less communication between Deanna and her former husband would now be necessary. Adding into the equation Deanna's early retirement from the Navy, and she was suddenly, uncomfortably face to face with the reality that this lengthy phase covering almost all of her adult life had slipped into the past for all eternity. Deanna had enough self-awareness that her sorrow was the result of an unsettling combination of conjured ponderings of what might have been different along

the way in addition to the loss of what had actually occurred, which saddened her even more.