

December 8, 1951  
USMC Camp Pendleton, California

Jackson entered their house with a copy of his enlistment papers. He had just left the US Army recruiter's office in Oceanside. Since he was only seventeen, he hoped his mother would sign the permission form. But why wouldn't she? He'd worked his butt off to graduate a year early from high school for this purpose. She knew his plans, his dreams of going to West Point. This was the first stepping stone, enlisting during a time of war.

"Mom, I'm home," Jackson yelled in the entry hall.

"I'm in the kitchen, honey," his mother called.

Jackson went into the kitchen and watched his mother at the stove. He sniffed the air. She was cooking one of his favorite meals, pot roast with carrots, onions, and potatoes with green beans and corn. On the table, three place settings instead of two. Him, his mother...and maybe his older brother, Jim, in his first year at the Naval Academy.

"When's Jim getting home for winter break?"

His mother checked her watch. "Ten minutes. He called this morning to say his train would be late."

"Yeah, heard on the radio there were snowstorms in Maryland."

"Now..." His mother turned around. "Where have you been?"

Jackson held out the permission form. "Recruiter's office. Will you sign this for me, please?"

"Hmmm...so you went without me."

"Yes, ma'am. I wanted to get it done." He didn't want his mother going with him. No way did he want the recruiter thinking he was a mama's boy.

Mom took the paper and looked at it. Her expression didn't change. She wasn't happy with him. "So you chose infantry as a primary MOS? With the option to attend Airborne School?"

"Yes, I want to jump out of planes."

She tapped her finger on her lips. "Like your dad. James loves it too. I don't know, JJ, you just turned seventeen yesterday. Don't you want to wait and enjoy yourself for a few months? Be home for Christmas with your brother. You've done nothing but study and train at the gym."

Jackson wasn't sure she would sign it. "Mom..."

His mother's expression didn't change then she smiled. "Hand me a pen."

"Thanks." Jackson rummaged around in the kitchen junk drawer until he found a pen and gave it to her.

"When would you have to report for basic training?"

"The train leaves for Fort Benning on Tuesday...December 12th. I start basic on the 18th."

Before his mother could respond, someone knocked on the door.

"Wonder who that could be?" she said.

Jackson smiled. "Sergeant First Class Mason, my recruiter. I told him to give me thirty minutes then come by the house to get the form. That way, I can be on that train next week."

"Jackson Joseph MacKenzie, you are a brat...and I love you."

Jackson came to attention, chin tucked, back straight, hand cupped on the seams of his jeans. "Yes, ma'am."

"JJ...before you answer the door, I want you to think about something. With your dad in Korea, Jim at Annapolis, and you at basic, what would you think of me...seeing if the Army needs one more nurse? I can't sit in this house alone."

"Mom, that's up to you." Jackson hoped she wouldn't, but he understood why. Her father rode in the 7th Calvary in Indian Territory, Cuba, and the Philippines, and she adored him. Serving was in her blood.