

“NUMBER, PLEASE”

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Author's Note: "Number Please" is another story in my series, The Saunders House Rules. It is for the character of William G. Kirby, and for the actor who so profoundly played the part, Jack Hogan.

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Chicago

Taking a long drag off his sixth cigarette in an hour, the man looked over his shoulder, eyeing the woman exiting the phone booth. She gave him a cursory glance as she passed by him at the bar, the heavy, cheap perfume leaving a trail in her wake. Her thick makeup was smeared in places and her dark hair was a disarray of limp curls. She was dressed in a manner he used to think of as sharp, but now regarded as sadly unfortunate. Time was when he would have considered such a woman a 'real dish', desirable despite her tousled appearance. But not anymore. He offered her a brief smile in response to the wink she gave him, feeling sorry for whatever hardship life had thrust upon her to make her resort to selling herself for a few dollars. When, he wondered, had he become so sympathetic? He hadn't always been that way. But he already knew the answer; he'd changed during the War. Once back home, in Chicago, he figured he'd just return to the same old friends and the same old routines, but things hadn't quite worked out that way. He'd been quick to get a job, took pride in being the main breadwinner for his mom, sister and teenaged brother. And yet, recent events made him loathe living in Chicago, made him hate himself for wasting all those years before the War, behaving like a damned punk. With each day that passed, he wondered more and more who he was and where he was going.

He took another long draw on what was left of his cigarette, and resumed watching the woman as she made her way to the door, then climbed into the first car to stop and give her a ride. Suddenly, he imagined his sister getting into that car, cheap perfume wafting off her, along with the stench of even cheaper booze. The very thought made his throat burn with bile, and a cold shiver ran up his spine. Instantly, he turned and looked at the phone booth, dug into his jacket pocket, withdrawing the worn, crumpled note paper he'd carried since the day he received it. Sliding off the bar stool, he finished the last of his beer, crushed the cigarette butt into the overflowing ashtray on the bar, and walked to the back of the room.

Once there, he hesitated, nervously rumpling the note between his fingers, then entered the phone booth and shut the door. Opening the folded paper, he placed it on the shelf below the phone box. Carefully smoothing out the edges so he could better read the name and number penned there, he began shaking. It seemed a lifetime ago since he'd been given this paper, though in reality it had been barely a year. Slowly, he dialed the operator.

"Number, please," came the cheerful voice at the other end of the receiver.

"Um, yeah," he said, trying to calm the nervousness in his voice. "I'd like to make a call. I think I have the right change."

Within moments, his call was connected.

One ring.

He glanced at his watch. *After six. Someone ought to be there.*

Two rings.

His heart hammered in his chest, and he swiped away the beads of sweat forming along his forehead. *Dammit! I shoulda called at least once after I got back to the States!*

Three rings.

He nearly jumped when he heard the receiver finally lift.

"Hello?"

The familiar voice was somehow comforting, and the caller was suddenly overwhelmed with relief. Although he tried with everything he could muster to make his words sound optimistic, he failed miserably, and his usual guard completely collapsed. "Sarge? It's me, Kirby."

There was no pause whatsoever on the other end of the line; the response was split-second swift, as the caller knew it would be. "Kirby? What's the trouble?"

"Trouble?" *Why would he think anything else? After all, I haven't called, haven't talked to him since the day he left the platoon to go home.* "C'mon Sarge, why would you think I'd be in any trouble?"

"Kirby..."

The obvious skepticism in the other man's voice made him cringe more than a little. "Okay, okay," he laughed with false jocularity. "I guess I walked right into that, huh?" He immediately imagined the incredulous expression that must be on Saunders' face at this moment. "No, really Sarge, there's no trouble ---"

"Because if there was, it'd be okay for you to call."

"Yeah," Kirby answered soberly, pushing down the rise of emotions that made his gut feel tight. "I, uh, I meant to get in touch once I got back to the States, but things've been busy. You know how it is?" He didn't give the other man time to answer. "So, you been doin' okay? What have ya been doin' with yourself?"

"Staying busy. Working full time for a construction company."

"Oh yeah? That sounds real good."

"It's working out. I made foreman a few months back ---"

"Yeah? I bet you keep that crew on their toes!"

"They're a good ---"

"Just like havin' a squad again, huh, Sarge?"

"Well, not exactly---"

"Hey! Speaking of the squad, have you heard from the rest of the guys?"

"I hear from 'em off and on. They're all doing pretty good. Things here are fine too, especially now that both of my brothers are home ---"

"Oh, that's great! Boy! I bet you all must be glad about that! Your mom especially."

"Yeah, she's really happy to finally have us all back together again."

"Well, I'm real glad for ya, Sarge, uh, for the whole family, I mean."

"Thanks."

He felt like a heel, ashamed that he'd never contacted any of his friends, never returned phone calls or written even a short response to letters asking how he was doing. His hesitation gave Saunders cause to ask if he was still on the line. "Oh yeah! Sorry. I was gettin' a smoke." *Great. Now I'm lying to the one person who is gonna see through it! Nice work Kirby!* "Listen, I, uh, I just wanted to give ya call, 'cos I'm comin' down your way."

"You're coming to Peoria?"

"Yeah. I got an interview for a job down there. Can you b'lieve that?"

"Have you been out of work, Kirby?"

"Oh, no." He kneaded his brow with his free hand, kicking himself mentally again for not being truthful. "No. I been workin' steady up here, makin' it okay, ya know. But, well, I read in the paper that there were jobs with Caterpillar ---"

"Yeah, I heard they're hiring quite a few people. My brother, Joey, works there."

"You're kiddin' me?" he answered enthusiastically. The conversational tone of the other man's voice was taking the edge off his nerves, and he was relieved at that. But his anger with himself at never contacting his friends might remain with him always. *If so, I got only me to blame for it.*

"So," Saunders was saying, "do you know who it is you're supposed to interview with?"

"A guy by the name of Sam Conrad."

"Oh, I know Sam. He's an old friend of the family. He's a fair guy, won't give you a run around on anything."

"That sounds real great. I hear the company's good to work for."

"It is."

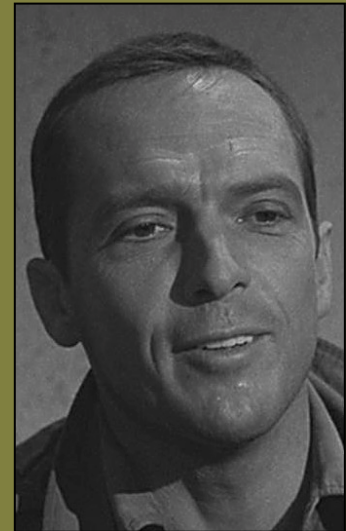
"That's why I was so interested in gettin' on with 'em, ya know. And the pay's pretty good too, from what I hear. Anyways, Sarge, I thought since I'm gonna be down that way, maybe we could get together, have a beer?"

"Sure, Kirby, that'd be great. Uh, when will you be in town?"

"I'm comin' in Friday afternoon."

"Tomorrow?"

"Sorry about the short notice. I just found out about this job opportunity today, and I didn't want to waste any time gettin' down there. I'm supposed to see Mr. Conrad at three o'clock. My train should pull in about two."



"Well listen, don't worry about getting over to the plant. I can give you a ride."

"No, no. I don't want to put ya out ---"

"If I was 'put out', Kirby, you'd know it."

Yeah, no doubt about that! "Where should I---"

"I'll be watching for you in front of the station."

Kirby thought he heard his own voice shake a little as he replied, "I'll be there. And listen, Sarge, that beer is gonna be on me. There ain't no if, 'ands' or 'buts' about it. Okay? "

There was just a hint of laughter as Saunders said, "Alright. I'll see you tomorrow then."

"Sure thing," he acknowledged. "Uh, Sarge?"

"Yeah?"

"Thanks."

"It's okay, Kirby."

The phone receiver 'clicked' in the cradle as he hung it up. He took a deep breath to steady his nerves and then let it out slowly as he fished his wallet out of his back pants pocket. The worn leather was smooth against his palm, and he briefly recalled his mom giving it to him just before he'd left for basic training --- a lifetime ago. Once again, he thought about how much he'd changed. His hands shook slightly as he opened the wallet, fanned one thumb over the assortment of bills within and quickly added them up in his head. He'd given his mom the remainder of his final salary for the rent and groceries. With what was left, there'd barely be enough for the train ticket he now needed to buy. *No beer for the Sarge tomorrow. Damn!*



Peoria

William G. Kirby took the remaining slice of home-baked bread and promptly soaked up the last little puddle of gravy on his plate --- which he'd now cleaned for the second time. Eyes closed, he smiled contentedly as he plopped the morsel into his mouth, savoring the flavor of the pot roast, the mashed potatoes, the green beans, and of course, the rich, brown gravy.

"Would you like some more?" Marjorie Saunders asked.

Kirby opened his eyes and swallowed audibly. Embarrassment clearly showed on his face as he suddenly realized everyone else at the table had long since finished eating. He hastily pulled his napkin from the collar of his shirt and wiped his mouth. "Oh, no ma'am," he answered meekly, "I believe I've had enough."

Across the table, Marjorie's father-in-law, fondly referred to as 'Pops', gave Kirby a dubious look. "Don't be shy, son."

Against an immediate outburst of laughter around the table, Marjorie gently chided the old man, then turned her attention directly to their guest. "Don't you mind him, Bill," she instructed, her gaze traveling warningly to her daughter and sons, "or the rest of this rowdy bunch, for that matter. If you want more to eat, you're welcome to it."

"Thanks, Mrs. Saunders ---"

"It's Margie, Bill."

To Kirby's right, Chip placed his elbows on the table and propped his chin on his interlaced fingers, effectively hiding a smile as he suddenly recalled the cause of Kirby's hesitation. One day in the summer of '44, the squad had been dug into their foxholes, relaxing during a lull in the fighting. Neslon had been reading a letter from home when one of the replacements noticed the name on the envelope and mentioned that his mother had the same first name as Billy's. That had started everyone sharing their mother's first names. Believing Saunders to be dozing, Kirby boldly wondered aloud what the Sarge's mother's name might be. With his camo-covered helmet pulled over his eyes, the non-com remained motionless, then gave Kirby the fright of his life when he quietly, but very directly, instructed, "*That'd be 'Mrs. Saunders' for you, Kirby.*" Kirby had never lived that one down. And now, ever since he'd arrived at the Saunders' home, and been told repeatedly to call everyone by their first name, Kirby could not bring himself to call Marjorie anything other than, 'Mrs. Saunders, or, 'Ma'am'.

"Oh, yeah..." Kirby smiled against his embarrassment. "I forgot. Anyways, I'm so full right now, ma'am, that if I ate another bite I'd probably blow up!"

Marjorie's smile reached her eyes. "Well, I'm glad you enjoyed the dinner."

"Thanks again for invitin' me. I was just gonna grab somethin' at one of the diner's close to the train station."

"Oh, for crying out loud! We couldn't possibly let you eat at some old greasy spoon. It just wouldn't be right." She rose from her seat and, joined by the others, started to clear the table. As Kirby got up to help, Margie waved him back down. "Now Bill, you stay right there."

"Yes, ma'am." He felt awkward, just sitting there. Considering he'd not expected to be invited to dinner, he thought that helping out was the least he could do. He began to make a remark about that, but the words were barely out of his mouth when Pops slapped him on the shoulder, nearly knocking the wind right out of him. "Guests don't help with the dishes around here, son."

"That's a house rule, Bill," Joey informed him.

"Yeah," Louise added, "and you don't want to go against *those*."

"House rules'?" Kirby inquired.

"Saunders House Rules," Chip explained. "If you're gonna be around here ---"

"--- and you will," Louise interjected.

"---then you better learn 'em," Pops finished.

"By then," Chris was quick to remark, "you'll just be one of us."

"And expected to help," Joey added in good humor.

Chip smiled easily and added, "Yeah, Kirby. Relax while you can, because after this you'll have your own dish towel --- with your name on it."

Kirby beamed. "Well now, that's a deal!" It felt good to smile, to laugh, to be swept up by the genuine hospitality of this family. He couldn't help but feel envious of the ease with which these people related to one another. Neither could he help but remind himself of the reasons that had brought him here in the first place --- reasons he knew he would have to reveal sooner than later.

Suddenly his train of thought was broken as Louise asked, "I hope you'll have room for dessert later Mr. Kirby?"

"You'd better," added Chip. "The Brat makes a wonderful apple cobbler."

"It rivals her mother's," Pops boasted as he placed a gentle kiss on his granddaughter's head, "and that's no easy feat."

Louise's cheeks blushed fiercely and she elbowed the man playfully in the ribs. Pops! Cut it out. Nobody bakes better than Mom does."

Pops tilted his head toward Marjorie. "You going to let her talk to me that way?"

"I certainly am." She handed him a cup of coffee. "Now, off you go," she ordered kindheartedly, shoos him out her kitchen, "or you'll miss your programs. I'll call you when it's time for dessert."

Pops headed into the living room and soon the sound of the radio stations being changed filtered into the kitchen.

Marjorie turned to her guest. "Bill, Louise put some of the cobbler up for you take home to your family."

Kirby directed his attention to the girl. "Oh, you ain't gotta trouble yourself ---"

"It's no trouble," Louise remarked.

"Well...thank you very much," Kirby said in a lively tone, then added, "Hey, if that cobbler is as good as those cookies you used to send to the Sarge, then I bet it's gotta be the best around."

"You liked the cookies I sent?"

"Sure did! Man! Any time the Sarge got 'em, the whole squad would be practically fightin' over 'em."

Chip's expression was grim. "Kirby," he said, with a warning shake of his head.

"Now admit it, Sarge, those cookies'd disappear so fast it made your head spin!"

Louise folded her arms across her chest and cocked her head. Her blonde pony tail swung slightly as she looked from Kirby to her eldest brother, and back again. "Which ones did you like best?"



"Oh, I didn't have no favorites," Kirby boasted, 'cos I liked 'em all! Now, Littlejohn and Nelson, they fought over the chocolate chip. Doc's favorites where the cinnamon sugar."

"The Snickerdoodles."

"Yeah. Heck, he even tried to buy Cajé's share, but never got nowhere by it! Now, Lieutenant Hanley, he always managed to get most of the oatmeal raisin ones. But I don't think it woulda mattered what kind you sent -- we liked 'em all." Kirby struck the end of one index finger against the surface of the table for emphasis. "And that there's a fact!" His words were accompanied by the barking of Jack, the family dog.

Louise looked over at her mother. "Did you hear that, Mom? My cookies were all the rage!"

Standing at the sink, her mother raised an eyebrow. "I'm sure the whole block knows about it now, sweetheart."

Louise's cheeks grew a little pinker as she took her mother's hint about bragging. "Sorry." Still, her eyes and her smile were as bright as ever as she told Kirby, in a more subdued tone, "I'm glad they were such a hit! With the mail being what it was then, I was never sure how good they'd be by the time Chip got them."

"Well, I'm here to tell ya, they made it just fine, little lady!" Kirby took in her innocent, sweet smile and thought in contrast how bleak were the faces of his squad mates during the winter of '45. Heavy casualties, bitter cold and aching hunger had all combined into a nightmare that shred even the most seasoned soldiers of nearly all their strength and morale. He was sure Sarge would agree that, aside from D-Day, it had been the worst memory of the War, especially since the squad had lost two of its most vital members: Doc and Cajé. They had been sent home with serious injuries received during a mission that had gone terribly awry.* Kirby would never forget the 'care package' Sarge had received that winter, not long after Doc and Cajé had left. Several dozen cookies were packed within it, and although it was such a simple thing, it had boosted the morale of what remained of First Squad, if not all of Second Platoon, more than anything had in weeks. "Yeah," Kirby added quietly, more to himself than to anyone, "they made it just fine."

Feeling the atmosphere in the kitchen grow eerily quiet, Kirby looked up, suddenly, embarrassed, as if his memories had been inadvertently exposed to everyone present. But the others were occupied with clearing the table, and cleaning up. He saw Chip eyeing him from the counter, but his expression was unreadable.

"Coffee, Kirby?" he said, effectively breaking the silence.

Kirby nodded and Chip took two cups from the cabinet and filled them from the fresh-brewed pot on the stove. He handed one to Kirby, gesturing with a nod of his head to the screen door. "Let's go have a smoke, huh?" As he headed outside, Jack followed alongside him.

Kirby stopped briefly before stepping outside and turned to face Marjorie Saunders. "That was the best meal I've had in a long time, ma'am." He stopped short and mentally back-pedaled as fast as he could manage. "I mean, uh, aside from my mom's cookin' that is."

"You're very welcome Bill. I hope you won't be a stranger around here."

He ducked his chin and smiled genuinely. "Yes, ma'am."



On the porch, Kirby sat lengthwise, a couple of steps down from Saunders. He waved off the offer of a cigarette and dug into his shirt pocket to retrieve a pack of Chesterfields. He did, however, accept a light when he couldn't locate the book of matches he knew he'd had that afternoon. "Thanks," he said, inhaling the taste of the tobacco, then blowing the smoke out against the glow of the kitchen light that illuminated part of the back yard. For a time, neither man spoke. There was only the sound of the radio filtering from the living room, and the song of crickets mingled with the occasional, intermittent voices heard through the raised windows of neighboring homes. It was a peaceful setting, one very different from the noise and corruption that Kirby had come to view as part of everyday life in Chicago. It made him loathe the city more than ever.

Another sip of coffee, and he let his gaze travel toward the flowers that grew in a wooden planter at the kitchen window, then over to the old tire swing that hung from a huge oak tree, to the vegetable garden and the apple tree --- the one that obviously provided the fruit for Louise's prize cobbler. "This is a good place," he said quietly. "You're family's real nice, Sarge. You sure musta missed 'em a lot during the War."

"Yeah," Saunders replied. He scratched Jack behind the ears and the dog sighed and shifted against him so he could settle his chin on his master's lap. "It's good to be home."

"You won't get any argument from me there," Kirby answered a little too cheerfully.

"No siree! Nothin' better in the world."

Another moment of silence fell between them. Finally, Kirby chimed in about his new job.

"Hey, I think that job is gonna work out real fine for me." He took another pull from his smoke and added, "Thanks again for puttin' in a good word for me. You didn't have to."

"It's okay, Kirby. I'm glad I could help out. So, you start on Monday, huh?"

"Bright and early. And hey, that Sam Conrad, you were right, he seems like a fair man to work for. You two go back a ways, right?"

Chip nodded and his gaze dropped to the remainder of the black coffee in his cup. "Sam's an old friend of the family. He and my dad...well, they worked together for a long time, so I've known him since I was a kid."

The words had a somber tone, yet, for all of Kirby's curiosity, he understood well that a man's private business was his own, so he didn't ask more about Sam or about what had happened to Sarge's father; obviously, as the pictures on the fireplace mantle attested, "Mac" Saunders had been, and still was, much loved by his family. "By the way," he said, effectively changing the subject, "thanks for the tip on that boarding house. Mrs. Hawes seems like a pretty nice old lady."

"She'll be expecting you on Monday?"

"Yeah, I told her I was goin' back to Chicago for the weekend. I'll need some things while I'm stayin' down here."

"Well, she runs a nice place," Saunders said with slight smile, "but she won't put up with any guff, so behave yourself, huh?"

"Aw, no worries there, Sarge. I figure to be pulling as many extra hours on the job as I can get, so I'll probably be pretty whipped at the end of the day."

Kirby finished the last of his coffee, swallowing hard as Saunders asked if his family would be okay while he was away from Chicago. "Yeah." He'd wanted that to sound casual, giving no hint of the trouble going on his life. But when he risked a glance at the man across from him, he wasn't at all surprised to see a certain blunt expression staring right back at him. Kirby knew that look, had become very familiar with it during the War; sometimes it had communicated impatience, others times reprimand, but always it had proclaimed that the time for games was over.

"I guess you figured out, even when I talked to you on the phone, that somethin' was wrong."

"Kirby, I didn't spend nearly a year of my life fighting right alongside you without learning anything."

Kirby took his last drag on the Chesterfield, scuffed the butt out under the toe of his shoe. "I didn't have an interview set up before I came down here. I only got Sam's name 'cos it was the contact given in the newspaper ad I read." He rubbed the palms of his hands together and looked out across the yard.

"Hell, Sarge, I didn't even have a train ticket until after I called you yesterday." Impatient with himself, he rose, stuffing his hands in his pants pockets, and walked a few steps onto the lawn. "And I wasn't workin' a job in Chicago either. Least ways, not for a while. I lost the one I had nearly a month ago because I hit some punk kid who mouthed off about GI's comin' back from the War being nothing but thugs and killers."

"That's just a lot of empty talk Kirby, so why'd you let it get to you?"

He looked over one shoulder. "Wouldn't you?"

"We aren't talking about *me*."



Kirby sighed and looked at the evening sky. He knew his voice was beginning to sound a little thick with emotion, but he couldn't stop it, no matter how hard he tried. "Doesn't change the fact that I *did* let it get to me. Trouble was, that punk ass kid's dad owned the business and I got fired." He turned around then. "I been too much of a damned chicken to tell anyone, especially my mother." Saunders' steady gaze was still focused on him, but in it he saw no sign of pity or anger, or reproach. "I always thought when I got back home that everything'd be great, everything'd be different. Only thing is, Chicago didn't change, I did."

Saunders glanced away, squashing the last of his Lucky out on the step and ran one hand through his hair. "The War changed all of us, Kirby."

"Doesn't make it easy though. Ya know, Sarge, I never minded what anyone thought of me before, I was always just a punk." He laughed caustically. "I guess bein' around you, Caje, Doc...hell, even the Lieutenant, it made me think about some things differently than I used to. I can't go back to hanging out in pool halls and bars. I don't want to." He grew quiet for a moment. "I had a kid once. Did ya know that?"

"No. But it's not my business --- "

"His name's Michael. 'Bout a year before I got drafted, I'd been seein' this girl. She was real nice. Deserved better than me, that's for sure. Anyways, when she told me she was gonna have a kid...the whole thing scared me to death, but I said I'd marry her, ya know, do right by the whole situation. Trouble is, I didn't have the guts to go through with it."

"What happened to her?"

"She got married while I was in the Army. Anyway, after I got home, I looked her up. Wanted to tell her I was sorry for runnin' out and all. Her husband's an alright guy, he's good to her. He even adopted Michael. Still, I told 'em that I didn't want to ruin anything for anyone. Especially the boy. I just wanted to do the right thing as best as I could now, ya know, give some of my paycheck toward the kid, maybe help set him up some sort of savings account, for when he wants to go college or something. Guess I shouldn't have been surprised that they didn't want any of that, just wanted me to leave 'em be. I guess I had that comin'. I said I was sorry, and that if Michael ever needed anything...Well, maybe if I hadn't been such a loser before..."

"Kirby, I'd be the last person to ever say you couldn't be a real pain in the ass at times, but like I said, we all changed."

"Yeah, I changed *real good*, didn't I? Lost my kid, my job and in the meantime things at home are --- well, they ain't good!"

"Because you lost your job?"

"That, plus there's more. My little brother, Georgie, is startin' to hang around with the wrong crowd, just like I used to do. I've tried talkin' to him, but he's not listenin'. I guess if I'd been a better brother..."

"Georgie's what, fourteen?" Kirby nodded at that.

"So, you start being what he needs now."

"And if it's too late?"

"It won't be. You just have to believe that, Kirby."

"You want to tell me how to do that, Sarge?"

Because I don't know where to start!"

Saunders noticed Kirby's hands were balled into tight fists. "This isn't just about Georgie, is it?" His words nearly echoed in the silence. "Kirby?"

For a man who was rarely at a loss for something to say, Kirby struggled now to find his voice. "A few months ago, my sister was workin' late. Most times when she did that, I'd meet her at the bus stop so she wouldn't be walkin' home alone. There's a little diner close by, so sometimes we'd go in, have a cup of coffee, just talk about things. Anyway, this time, I went to meet her, but I was running a few minutes late. It was rainin' so hard that night...I was about a half a block away when I saw the bus pulling out, so when I got there, I went straight into the diner, thinkin' Ruthie would be there. But she wasn't."

Saunders sat forward. "Hadn't she left work?"



"Yeah, but it turned out, she left earlier than planned. She tried to call home to let us know, but...we've never had a phone of our own, just use the one out on the landing. Friday night, there's always lots of folks using it. You know how it is."

"Yeah, I know." Saunders cleared his throat a little, then asked, "So, why didn't she wait for you in the diner?"

"She thought she'd get home before I left. Wanted to save me the trouble of gettin' out in the rain." He laughed derisively. "Like I never been out in the rain before! Can ya believe that? I laid in foxholes, up to my eyeballs in the mud and the rain ---" his voice caught there and he blinked, fought back tears and swallowed the knot in his throat down hard. "Save me a walk in the rain...What the f---"

"Kirby, just take it easy, huh?"

Kirby shook his head, walked slowly to the oak tree and leaned heavily against it. "I called where she works, but there wasn't any answer. Callin' home was no good either. I got worried that something was wrong. Maybe she never caught the bus at work, ya know? Anyways, I figured I better get over there. I left the diner, was standing outside hailin' a cab when the next thing I knew, I heard a noise just a couple of doors down, in the alley. I don't know why, but somethin' told me to check it out. And there she was. I almost didn't recognize her, Sarge. I never saw anyone look so scared, not even after all the stuff I saw in the War. She didn't know who I was at first, tried to fight me off. I can still hear her screamin' and cryin', beggin' me not to hurt her. I swear to God, I never felt so cold in all my life."

"Christ," Saunders breathed. He ran one hand over his face, sickened by the imagery that formed in his mind. He'd suspected Kirby had been keeping something buried; the man had been acting a little too cheerful since he'd arrived, a little too over-confident, and all the while Chip had heard the undercurrent of nervousness in his voice. As much he wanted to know what was wrong, he'd given Kirby some space, knowing that he'd eventually open up. The situation with Georgie was bad enough, but this, well, he fully understood Kirby's feelings. After all, he had a sister, too. "Did you find out who did this?"

"Ruthie wasn't able to give good enough descriptions, just that it was a couple of guys. *LOUSY BASTARDS...*" he hissed, held his breath until it hurt, then said, "Jesus, Sarge, they took turns!"

"Kirby---"

"She fought back and..." The image in his mind nearly made him gag. For a moment he held the back of one hand against his mouth, trembling, until he could manage to continue. "They took a blade to her, here ---" He pulled his thumb in a diagonal line from his left earlobe toward his cheekbone. "---and here," he added, indicating the area over right side of his chest. "Why didn't she go into the diner?" he whispered harshly to himself. "She would've been safe. In a little while I'd have been there, and she'd be okay. Maybe if I'd left home a little sooner..."

Saunders understood Kirby's guilt. Years ago, he'd harbored that same type of feeling over his father's senseless death, believing that if he'd not been present at the scene, things would been all right. "Kirby," Saunders reasoned, "it's not your fault, and it's not Ruthie's either. Sometimes...sometimes we just make a decision, not knowing it'll put us in the wrong place at the wrong time."

But if Kirby heard those words, he did not acknowledge them. "She stays home now," he related. "Can't put one foot out the door 'cause she's too scared." Kirby struck a fist hard against the tree bark. After a moment, he looked at his friend. "So, now you know why I want to leave Chicago. That's all of it, Sarge. I got nothing else. I'm sorry I didn't level with you about it all before now. I need to make a fresh start for my family. I don't care about how many hours I gotta work, I'll do whatever I have to, just to get them settled somewhere else, somewhere besides livin' four flights up, never getting away from the noise and the...I gotta get my family outta there. Especially Ruthie. She's a decent girl, and she don't deserve to have people whisperin' behind her back about bein' ---" He couldn't bring himself to say the word, it made him too sick.



Saunders tossed the dregs of his coffee onto the grass and said, "It'll all work out okay, Kirby. For what it's worth, I think you're making the right decision. You'll need to find a place down here to move into pretty soon. I can help you look for something."

Kirby stepped toward the other man. "I ain't beggin' for help ---"

"No one's saying you are."

"I'm sorry, Sarge. I never meant to bother ya with all this."

"Kirby, that's what friends are for."

Just then Jack rose, stretched and wagged his tail. "Must be time for dessert," Saunders observed, and as soon as he stood up, his mother's voice called everyone into the kitchen.

"Smart dog," said Kirby, glad for the change in conversation.

"Yeah. Louise says he's psychic. I just think he's a smart dog."

Kirby glanced at his watch and noticed the time. "Aw, no! I'm gonna miss my train. Damn!"

Saunders shrugged his shoulders indifferently. "So you'll catch another one tomorrow. Call home and tell 'em you're stayin' here for the night."

"That's long distance ---"

"So you'll pay it back when things are better. Along with that beer you were gonna buy me."

"I can't stay, Sarge. I can't put your family out like this."

"You're not puttin' anyone out, Kirby. We got a roll away bed, clean sheets and extra blankets. Oh, and uh, breakfast is at seven sharp on Saturday's here. Sleep in late and you're on your own."

"Listen Sarge, I really can't ---"

Saunders tilted his head and gave him a dubious look. "Kirby, shut up. What you *can't* do is sleep on a bench at the train station."

"Slept in worse places."

"Well not tonight. Fresh start, remember?"

Kirby ducked his head, nodded and then looked at Saunders with new confidence in himself. "Okay." He held his hand out, and Saunders took it, returning a firm handshake. "Thanks Sarge. For everything."



After dessert, while Marjorie refilled the coffee cups, Kirby asked to use the phone. He was anxious to hear his mother's voice and to tell her about his new job, and the plans they could soon be making. It would all work out. He knew that. His mom wouldn't have to worry so much about her family anymore. Georgie would make new friends and keep out of trouble. And given time and patience, Ruthie would be all right too. He took a deep breath and dialed the operator.

"Number, please."

The End

* "Snow Blind", by Doc II, *Combat Journal* 2008