

# LOVE'S LANDSCAPES



Don't Read in the Closet 2014

## PAST THE HORIZON

D.C. Williams

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# Love's Landscapes

*An M/M Romance series*

## PAST THE HORIZON

By D.C. Williams

### Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love's Landscapes* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a gift to you.

### What Is Love's Landscapes?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what these authors do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love's Landscapes*.

No matter if you are a long-time devotee to M/M Romance, just new to the genre or fall somewhere in between, you are in for a delicious treat.

### Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

This story is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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## Photo Description

Two very young men in WWII era uniforms stand in a field, gazing at each other with their hands clasped. I'm always aware that prior to about 1950, men were much less self-conscious about that kind of pose than became the norm later, but there's something about this photo, the absorbed way they look into each other's eyes and smile shyly, that makes it hard to believe they are not in love. The second photo is of two older men, obviously affectionate with each other, sitting at a table or a counter among what looks like the aftermath of a really good party.

I initially assumed that the two men were Army Air Corps, and that they were enlisted, not officers, and that they were flight crew. Two out of three, right. It was actually very difficult to get the uniforms identified, but it turns out they are Luftwaffe. That's a very different story from the one that popped into my head and that Kat's excellent prompt inspired. Maybe I'll write that one someday, but this one is about Buck and Joe.

## Story Letter

*Dear Author,*

*Meeting him was one of the best and worst things happening to me... why? Well, the best, because I met him and he was him... the worst, because our fate was more than uncertain, we didn't know what would and could happen next, where would we end up and would we survive? It made us desperate and I always knew losing him was a distinct possibility and although I've only known him a very short time I knew it would gut me.*

*The funny thing was that I didn't really like him in the beginning; he was one of those funny guys, always grinning, always in a good mood and a total morning person which annoyed me no end. But underneath all that there was a decent guy, a loyal friend and a strong man. I was drawn to him like to no other... I was afraid he would send me away or laugh at me or worse, tell the others or beat me up should he ever learn about my feelings for him... but in the end he was so tender, so understanding of all my insecurities and fears and I loved him even more. He was the center of my world and would always be*

*even if I should never see him again after this war. We got separated in the end and what we had together it was over way too soon, our time together was so short.*

*I came home changed, not broken but a different man. It was hard to go on with life but I knew he would have wanted me to try and so I did. I found a job, had a small apartment and lived... at first minute to minute, then day to day... for him I lived and tried to be the good man he always said he knew I was. I didn't know where he was, there was nobody I could ask, but one day, out of the blue, his sister contacted me. She had tried to find me, she only had that one photo of us and my name, but it's a fairly common name and I was hard to find. But she's like him in that sense, never give up, always fighting and going on and so she found me. She knew of him and me, what we meant to each other, I was shocked he had told her but when I got to know her better, I learned that she loved her younger brother and supported us. She didn't know where he was either... he was MIA... but that's not dead, right. So it's not silly or unrealistic of me to still have hope? It wasn't easy to keep on hoping, not to lose faith and believe I'd see him again one day. In the dark of the night I often lay awake and worried with our fate, cried hot tears about the unfairness of it all, I missed him terribly, even his perkiness in the mornings... but in the end hope won out... and I was right never to give up.*

*Dear author, can you work with that?? I don't like cheating, bitchy females or post-apocalypse but a strong, supporting female character that would be fab!! And I'm a hopeless romantic so a HEA would be perfect. :)*

*Thank you!*

*Kat*

## **Story Info**

**Genre:** historical

**Tags:** World War II, Battle of Britain, sweet/no sex, family life, whole life through, B-17, bomber crew

**Word Count:** 7,510

Author's Note

When writing historical works I'm always conscious of the line by L.P. Hartley "*The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there.*" America was a very different place seventy years ago. I try to reflect that in my work and as a result, my characters do and say things that moderns wouldn't. This probably doesn't cover everything, but WWII servicemen freely used phrases like Kraut and Jap. "Negro" was a polite term for African-Americans in 1947. Pregnant women weren't advised to avoid alcohol until the early 1980's. "Monkey Ward" is an old nickname for Montgomery Ward, and has no racial connotations that I'm aware of. And Monmouth County was "South" Jersey when I was a child.

# PAST THE HORIZON

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One, two, three, oh fuck. A callous hand gave Buck a hard shove and he was out, ten thousand feet over England. Double and triple fuck whichever goddamn colonel had thought this was a good idea, to give them a taste of what it was like to bail out. Buck counted patiently, because what else was he going to do, and then he pulled the cord, and he was floating. It was better than sex, just like that crazy paratrooper had said, even if no little doll ever got Buck going.

Nice and easy and down, and as Buck landed he could hear some hollering from an apple tree. Apparently, they weren't all that different here from the ones in Jersey. Real Jersey, not that semi-tropical island in the Channel the Jerries had taken over. Buck wandered into the orchard and looked up. Christ almighty, there was the new radioman. He was a pain in the butt, and now he was dangling from the parachute, caught in the branches like a Christmas tree ornament. Buck suppressed a snort at that idea, and called, "What the fuck are you doing up there?"

The new guy yelled. "What do you think? If you get me down, I'll buy you a beer."

He grinned and Buck couldn't help grinning back. "English beer is piss," he yelled.

"Two beers!"

"Still piss," replied Buck as he started to climb.

\*\*\*\*\*

"Aw hell, fellas, go ahead and make it a good one, there ain't no brass here," Ray drawled, camera in hand. Buck didn't know where the heck the pilot had gotten film for the old Kodak Brownie, but Ray was determined to get pictures of every soul he could round up on this particular drizzly Sunday morning in November of 1943. Starting with his very own B-17 crew, even if all he could find were Buck and Joe, who'd been behind the hangar sneaking a cigarette and a quiet word or two with each other.



Buck reached out and grabbed for Joe's mitt, trying to make it look like they were shaking each others' paws in a manly way, but Joe grabbed on and held. Ray, grinning like the madman he was, snapped the photo of them holding hands like sweethearts. Not that Ray would care. The Texan was legend. He'd fuck anything that moved and probably a few things that didn't. Buck knew Ray had pretty much figured out that his radioman and waist gunner were an item and had dropped more'n a couple of hints that he wouldn't mind fooling around with the pair of NCOs, but he took a quiet rebuff gracefully.

Buck figured if anyone else saw that photo, he could pass it off as Joe being the smart aleck they all knew he was. Perky first damn thing in the morning, full of jokes, he'd pissed Buck off the first couple of weeks they'd known each other because he never shut up. Then they'd gotten drunk on lukewarm English beer and ended up fucking in a haystack. Buck hadn't been any virgin, but he still wasn't sure how that had happened since he hadn't pegged the guy as being bent, and swore he didn't know which of them had made the first move.

He thanked his lucky stars every day. He'd found one good thing out of this damn war, and Buck didn't like to think about how long he might have it. Or what would happen afterwards if they both made it out in one piece.

\*\*\*\*

Ray might be plumb crazy, but he was definitely one of the good guys. Buck thought the Captain might have gotten some whiff that Joe was being transferred out, because when he got those pictures developed, he got two made of the one with Buck and Joe and gave a copy to each of them. Buck knew he didn't want to think about the markers Ray must have had to call in for the chemicals and photo paper.

Three days later Joe got the orders to go to an airfield in West Bumfuck, Yorkshire. No liberty, no privacy for anything more than a single crushing kiss in a munitions locker. They didn't usually take that kind of risk, because they weren't stupid, but neither of them needed to say this could be the last time they ever touched each other, and fuck the court martial that was waiting for them if any officer other than Ray strolled in.

\*\*\*\*

Buck wrote as often as he dared, which was once a week or so. They would've had to be discreet anyway, but Buck was always conscious that the censors saw everything. He knew his letters would arrive at the tiny base in

Yorkshire that didn't show up on maps with black blocks all over and not the half of it making sense, the way Joe's did to him.

In March, they took a nasty hit over the Netherlands coming back from a "precision" raid on someplace in Germany that Buck tried to pretend had no schools or homes or anything but S.S. officers and munitions factories. Crazy Ray got them over the Channel trailing smoke and dodging opportunistic Luftwaffe pilots and down sort of safe in a cow field somewhere in Kent. Hendricks broke his collarbone. Gallibrandi had taken some shrapnel and was already dead. He'd bled to death in the tail gunner's station, but the rest of them walked away.

Buck wrangled some leave after that one, probably with the good word of Captain Hansell, otherwise known as Ray, and made it up to Yorkshire hitching rides on transports. He turned up outside the enlisted mess, such as it was in that dismal place, figuring he could get someone to tell him where Joe was.

The first man out the door was Joe, cigarette dangling from his mouth, cap pushed back as always. Buck knew his lover wasn't technically a handsome guy, not with that big Roman beak of a nose, but he never, ever got tired of looking at that face, even when he hadn't seen it in four months.

"Crap, Buck, is that you?" Joe said, cigarette dropping from his mouth.

"Yeah," Buck nodded, thinking he should have found some way to let Joe know he was coming, wondering if he was even welcome, if Joe was fucking someone else.

Joe said, "Oh fuck, not here, can't even touch you, the goddamn walls have eyes. Give me a few. Weather has us grounded anyway... I'll talk to the LT and tell him my buddy just came all the way up here to catch up. See if I can get off-base, at least find somewhere to sit for a minute."

Buck nodded mutely and huddled by the side of the Quonset hut while Joe strode off and came back.

"I'm clear until midnight," he said. "This way," he indicated a path, "there's a pub down this way. It's not much, but it's dry, and they sometimes have beer."

"Don't suppose they have rooms to let?"

"A couple, but we'll find someplace for you to camp out. Don't spend your money."

“You know what I was thinking.”

Joe winked at Buck. “I know, not worth the brig.” Buck was suddenly reminded of the brand new shiny sergeant fresh out of radio school who had turned up back when they were first assigned to Blighty. He couldn't even remember what had happened to their original radioman, but he hadn't liked the new guy at first. Now he couldn't imagine living without him.

“You sure about that?”

“Now that you mention it, maybe not.” Joe laughed, then suddenly serious, “You know we're winning.”

“Yeah,” said Buck. He'd been getting an increasing sense of optimism since Christmas or thereabouts.

“Maybe there'll be an after.” Joe inhaled sharply on the fresh cigarette he had lit. “No reason a couple of old army buddies can't bunk in together.”

“No reason at all,” replied Buck.

Later, much later, after they had drunk as much beer as they could persuade the landlord to sell to them, their bodies moved silently in the shadow of an ancient stone wall, grateful for the utter darkness of blackout.

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Just after D-Day, they took another hit, and this time Ray didn't make it across the channel, putting the big bomber down in a field in Normandy. Buck could see pissed off looking Germans piling out of what looked like a broken down tank as they just cleared the hedgerow and bumped down. Hennessy was slumped in the co-pilot's seat, but Ray, bulletproof as always, was up and ready to go the minute the old bird stopped shuddering. “Fucking Krauts are on top of us. It's every man for himself, and I'll see you all behind Allied lines.”

Buck was almost as quick as Ray, Kowalcki behind him. He hoped the goddamn Germans would at least get a medic to the guys they left behind.

Buck made it halfway across the second field before a skinny French teenager jumped out of nowhere, grabbed his arm, pulled him into a barn, and shoved him under a load of rotting hay and manure. After the manure, he spent two days in a farmer's cart under a bunch of turnips and was delivered to a sentry post outside of Bayeux. Buck wasn't what you would call conversational, but Keyport High had attempted to drum French into him for

two straight years, and he was amused when the farmer successfully demanded three packs of cigarettes and a fifth of bourbon for him.

Kowalcki never made it back and Buck never did know what happened to him. Ray had hightailed it in a full day before Buck arrived with the turnips, and they were both sent back to Britain, assigned to different crews on new bases.

By the end of August with Paris liberated Buck was starting to think it might really be over soon. When the Allied advance ground to a halt at the end of September, Buck hardly noticed. Mail call yielded his last three letters to Joe, unopened, with a lazy "no addressee here" scrawled across the top. His new captain was a dour Bible thumper that Buck did not ever want to begin to explain the situation to, and the co-pilot was wet behind the ears and drunk when he wasn't in the air. He had crazy Ray's new posting, and wrote to the man, figuring if anyone could pull some strings, it'd be him.

Just before Christmas, Ray turned up in the hangar one day with a bottle of scotch just as Buck was shucking himself out of his electric flight suit. Buck took one look at his face and knew it wasn't good news, and probably not anything Ray had trusted to get past the censors either.

Ray lazily saluted Buck's new captain and said. "I need to borrow your waist gunner here, sir."

Sour as he was, Captain Wapnell didn't know what to say to that. Fraternization be damned, Ray had wrangled himself some private quarters and took Buck straight there. After he told Buck that Joe's plane had gone down somewhere outside Arnhem and no one knew a goddamn thing, he proceeded to get Buck drunk and made love to him, sweet and slow, letting Buck cry some and not saying a thing when Buck called him by Joe's name.

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Buck spent the rest of the war trying not to be a sad sack, because anyone might be cut up at losing a buddy, but well... Sometimes he almost persuaded himself he hadn't been in love with Joe.

In early '46 he found himself on a transport back to the good old U.S.A. and demobbed. He went home to see his folks, and a week of that was more than enough. Apartments were like hen's teeth and rents were three times higher in New York than the sleepy South Jersey town where he'd grown up. Buck figured he'd never get laid again if he stayed home, and he still had a raw place

in his soul when he thought about Joe or looked at the now dog-eared photo Ray had taken of them holding hands. He wasn't going to hide that photo away or pretend to be looking for a nice girl to settle down with.

Buck spent a week at the Y on 47<sup>th</sup>, having sex in the bathrooms late at night while looking for work and a place to stay by day. A friend of a friend hooked him up stocking bar and mopping tables down at an Irish place on the edge of Hell's Kitchen, and another guy told him about a room to let, up in Riverdale. It wasn't much, but it beat the hell out of growing tomatoes and listening to his old man. Every now and then he'd hit the bathhouses and tell himself that was enough. Buck knew men like him paired up sometimes, but mostly just settled for getting laid.

He thought about Joe sometimes, but figured lightning didn't strike twice. He got a card from Ray every once in a while. He'd gone back to Texas and gotten married, but probably not settled down.

It was just before Thanksgiving, and Buck was putting his tie on, ready to go to work when Mrs. Mooney, his landlady, yelled through the door. "Mr. Jennings, you have a phone call. I told you to only give out this number for business purposes. There is a woman on the phone."

Buck tried not to roll his eyes. "Right there, Mrs. Mooney. I'm sure it's important." He walked into the small kitchen and took the instrument from his very affronted-looking landlady.

"Hello, Buck Jennings here," he said.

A flat Midwestern voice said hesitantly, "Is this the Buck Jennings who served in the Army Air Force with Joe Willis?"

Buck took a deep breath, willing that the woman on the phone wasn't Joe's wife. He'd said he wasn't married, but he wouldn't be the first or last guy to lie about that. "Yes, it is."

"This is Darla Willis, Joe's sister." Buck exhaled. "I've been trying to find you, but the army isn't helpful. There are an awful lot of Jennings out there, and I didn't know if Buck was your given name or a nickname."

"Given," said Buck. "It's nice to hear from you, Miss Willis."

"Darla, call me Darla," she said firmly. "You and my brother were... close." She hesitated a little on the last word, her intonation a little odd.

Suddenly wary, Buck answered, "We were crewmates."

Darla sighed. "The photo of the two of you was in the things the army sent me, after. There was a letter for me, too. Joe and I never had any secrets."

"Oh." Buck had to know. "The army confirmed it, then? I had a buddy ask some questions, but he couldn't get much past that your brother's plane was shot down. It was part of some hush-hush secret thing."

"Missing, presumed dead. I hoped, you know, for a long time, we'd hear something. That he'd turn up as a prisoner of war, or even..." Her voice broke. *That someone had actually confirmed that Joe was dead. Made it possible for that tiny, crazy nugget of hope to die and let some of the raw places scab over and heal.*

"Hey, I know, it's hard." He had to say something. "He was my best pal."

"You're not alone?"

"No, I'm in my landlady's kitchen." And probably the operator was listening in, and for all he knew this was a party line.

She sighed again. "Can I have your address, Mr. Jennings?"

"Buck, and of course." He recited it to her.

\*\*\*\*

She sent his letters back to him, carefully rubber banded and packed into a shoebox. She would have sent him the photo, too, but he'd let her know that he had a copy of it. Darla Willis wrote a lot, and Buck wrote back.

He knew she was twelve or thirteen years older than Joe, never married, and responsible for caring for their mother, who was getting on in years. Buck figured she was lonely, and he enjoyed the letters. If he hadn't already known she and Joe were related, he'd have figured it out just reading the stuff she sent him. The woman could turn a trip to the beauty parlor with her mother into a howler of a story that had him laughing so hard Mrs. Mooney knocked on his door to see if he was alright.

Thanksgiving at home was so miserable he let Mrs. Mooney feed him overcooked chicken for Christmas. When Darla wrote him in February to come out to Indiana for Easter, he figured why not? There was no way in hell he was going to Jersey for his father to pick apart everything he'd done wrong since he got out of the army and his mother to sit there silently. Not to mention his brother James and a few pointed words about queers and faggots who thought they were too good to live at home.

\*\*\*\*

The ticket was expensive enough, even without springing for the Pullman car, but Buck had never been a big spender and he had money in the bank, mostly saved from his army pay. Darla Willis had offered, but there was no way Buck was going to have a woman pay his way, even Joe's sister.

Buck still couldn't believe that she had gone looking for him, instead of just burning the picture of him and Joe together and trying to pretend her brother hadn't been *like that*.

Twenty hours on a train had left him pretty well wrung out when he stepped out of the station into that soft spring morning. He stepped towards the faded woman in the blue dress and straw hat who was standing by the cabstand when another woman, no spring chicken but good looking still, waved at him from against the passenger side of a gleaming Packard. She was wearing a wine-colored hat covered with flowers that definitely hadn't come from Sears or Monkey Ward, and she had a piece of pasteboard in her hand with "Buck Jennings" carefully lettered on it.

Buck had figured that Joe's people were decently off, and knew he'd been a freshman at Purdue when the Japs had bombed Pearl Harbor, but that had not prepared Buck for this. The car was a '34 or '35, not brand new, but its black enamel gleamed, and a grizzled Negro sat at the wheel.

Miss Willis stepped forward and said, "Buck, is that you?" and enveloped him in a bear hug before he'd finished saying yes. She smelled expensive, and a tear rolled down her cheek, making marks in the powder.

The chauffeur opened the door for them, and they sat in the back, Buck's army duffel carefully stowed in the trunk as they drove to the Willis house. Joe had grown up in a big outdated Victorian, homely but well-cared for, white painted and intimidating enough to Buck, who had grown up in a shotgun with a couple of extra rooms tacked on and a cold-water WC off the kitchen.

The Willises weren't ostentatious about it all, and Buck was pretty sure they were a far cry from Rockefellers. The expansive house with its comfortable furniture, staffed with the man who drove and did heavy work and his wife who ruled the kitchen, was as alien to his existence as the French people who had hidden him in their barn.

They welcomed him with open arms. Not just Darla, but the old lady who had cried when she embraced him and asked him to tell her about Joe, and then the rest of them. Joe's brothers and sister all came to dinner to meet him, and exhausted as he was, Buck reveled in their company.

All of those Willises acted like he'd every right to be there with them at the big mahogany table with the white cloth and the roast pork loin with applesauce and new potatoes. After they'd all gone to their own homes he sat in the front parlor with Darla Willis and drank sherry.

"All you folks have been so good to me and you don't even know me. I can't begin to thank you."

Darla shook her head. "Thanks are completely unnecessary. As far as we're concerned, you're part of the family." She hesitated, "He was a hundred percent honest with me, but we pretty much all knew he wasn't going to get married. How we are with you is the same as if you'd been Joe's girl."

Buck shook his head softly. "That's how you've treated me, for sure. It's just not the way it's been for me."

"Your family didn't know about Joe?"

Buck shook his head again. "No. Don't really even know about me, and don't want to. I sure wouldn't be welcome there if it was out in the open." He hadn't realized he was feeling bitter about it until he opened his mouth.

Darla sighed. "That's a pity. Family is family, and it shouldn't matter. I'll take you to see Uncle Art tomorrow. Joe was always his particular favorite and he'd love to meet you. He'd have been here tonight, but the whole crew is kind of overwhelming, and he's nearly ninety."

\*\*\*\*\*

The next afternoon Buck dressed carefully and got into the big black Packard with Darla and her mother. He wasn't entirely sure who Uncle Art was, or why the Willises were so sure he wanted to meet Buck, but he was game for pretty much anything. He was also going to get fat if they didn't stop feeding him.

After about a half hour's drive, they pulled up in front of a little white-painted cottage. There was a sly smile on Darla's face as she rang the doorbell.

An old man answered and Buck instantly understood Darla's mischievous look. For all his advanced age, the man was a thoroughly "artistic" type, floppy purple tie and all. He embraced Darla, kissed her on both cheeks and her hand as well, and gave the same treatment to Mrs. Willis. Then he put his hands on Buck's arms, holding him at length.

"So this is my Joe's dear friend." Buck had never heard so much innuendo put into a relatively innocent statement in his life. "What a strapping young



man.” Some of the affectation dropped and Uncle Art said, “I am so very glad to meet you. Thank you for coming here.”

Buck stammered, “Of course.”

Darla said, “Of course we were going to bring him to you, Uncle Art. Do you think we’d forget you?”

“Why wouldn’t you forget me? I’m old, I’m all alone here, and Missy,” Art indicated Darla and winked at Buck, “only comes every couple of weeks.”

Darla sighed in obviously fond exasperation. “As often as I can. Did your girl make coffee before she left?”

“In the electric pot in the kitchen. Hopefully she remembered to plug it in this time, and she said there were sandwiches. I told her to leave cookies out.”

Darla settled her mother into a chair and went into the kitchen to investigate.

“She’s not really my niece, you know, although you’d never know it from the way she takes care of me.”

“My husband’s uncle,” said Mrs. Willis, “was an um...”

“Very good friend of mine,” supplied Uncle Art. “Michael. We lived here together for, oh...”

“Forever,” said Darla, carrying in a tray with a coffeepot on it. “Since before Mom and Dad were married, anyway.”

“I was married in oh-two,” said Mrs. Willis, “and Uncle Michael was in that little place on Railroad Street, and you were certainly there with him. My Harold brought me to visit his favorite uncle and his good friend.”

“After thoroughly warning her about theatrical types. Michael brought me here from Chicago, where I was on the stage, although not with any great success, and I taught drama here for many years. I had a little studio downtown.” Art’s smile grew a little sad. “Michael was a writer. He had a couple of good books, and he bought this place, and here I am.”

“Yes, you are.” Darla reached over and patted the old man’s knee. “Uncle Michael died in thirty-five.”

“Yes,” said Art, “I miss him every day, but these ladies,” he smiled at Darla and her mother, “treat me like their very own family.”

It was just the three of them for dinner that night, but the rest of the family was in and out all week, and Buck started to get to know them. There was Rob, a year older than Darla and a successful doctor with a surgical practice, three children, and a thin, nervous wife. Addie, one down from Darla, plump and comfortable with four children and a husband who indulged her in everything and looked at her as if she was Betty Grable. Walter, who sold insurance, and his fiancée, Lola, who peroxided her hair and was the only member of the whole crew who seemed to be a little confused by why Buck was there. Jenny—whose husband hadn't come back either—was also engaged to a loud young guy who sold Cadillacs and made Mrs. Willis cringe a little. Joe had been the youngest, except for a baby who died of diphtheria.

Buck had a ticket to leave on Easter Monday and as he got dressed on Sunday for church, he reflected that he was going to miss this place and these people. Darla had made it clear that he had a standing invitation for holidays, and Buck knew he'd like to make it back for Christmas, but Indiana was an awfully long way from New York City.

After Easter Sunday Service in the pretty Methodist church, Darla introduced him around as "Joe's army buddy, who was good enough to come all the way out here so we could meet him". The whole gang had come for dinner, of course, and Betty the cook was clearing the dishes from the pear salad when the doorbell rang.

"Who can that be?" said Mrs. Willis.

"I don't know," said Darla. "We're all here, and it can't be a delivery on Easter Sunday. I'll get it, though."

She rose and told Betty that she had it and Betty should concentrate on the dinner and not worry about the door.

Buck heard her muffled yelp, and was first up and through the hallway. Darla stood there in the pretty lilac dress she'd worn all day, holding a yellow envelope in her hand, her face completely wrecked. A kid in a Western Union uniform stood on the step.

Buck took charge. He fished in his pocket for two-bits, gave it to the kid, and said, "No reply," closing the door. He turned to Darla and took the envelope gently from her hands, still unopened. "We'll know now," he said, working the slip of paper free.

Darla nodded. "It's probably from some company telling us we won a lifetime supply of flour or something and I'm getting worked up over nothing."

Buck smiled softly and looked at the slip of telegram paper in his hand. Then he looked at it again. No "regret to inform" you. It made no goddamn sense, but there it was in black and white.

"He's alive," said Buck, unable to completely trust his own voice.

"What?" responded Darla. A murmur rustled through the Willises clustered in the doorway.

"He's alive," repeated Buck, clearer and firmer this time. "Go-Goldarned Germans had him prisoner, and he was stuck in the Russian sector and there's some craziness about the Russkies deciding he was an Austrian citizen and he's alive, and they're sending him home, and there's a letter to follow." Buck became aware he was babbling and tears were running down his face.

Darla hugged him, and Addie and Jenny clustered in and joined her. Rob went down to the basement and busted out some champagne they'd been saving. It didn't work out to more than a thimble full apiece but they all toasted to Joe's still being alive, even the kids.

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Buck knew damn well that Joe might not still want him after all he'd been through, but he called his job up to quit anyway, and when he went back to New York he settled up with Mrs. Mooney and gave her notice.

Darla rode the train out from Indiana the day before the troop ship with Joe on it was due to arrive, and they were both there on the dock when Joe stepped off the gangplank. He was too thin and there was something a little haunted in his eyes, but he grinned wide when he saw them and said, "Darla, Buck, my two favorite people here to meet me. I see you've made each other's acquaintance."

"Yeah," said Darla, "I told this big lug he's family now. Can't get rid of us."

"Is that so?" said Joe, looking Buck in the eye. Buck nodded and Joe grinned wide again.

Darla had gotten them a room next to hers in the same hotel, and after they'd taken Joe out for a steak and she'd said goodnight to them, they went in and closed the door.

"I am going to take the longest shower ever," said Joe. "All the hot water I want." Buck nodded.

Joe wasn't kidding, and while he was bathing, Buck put on his pajamas and got into one of the beds with the tattered copy of *The Glass Key* he'd been reading off and on.

Joe appeared in the bathroom door wearing just a towel around his hips nearly three-quarters of an hour after he'd started to shower. "You can't believe how good that was. Never thought I'd see hot water again." He ducked his head. "Never thought I'd see you again."

"No," said Buck, putting the book down. "I thought you were dead."

"I figured. Gussed you'd moved on to someone else, maybe?" Joe shrugged.

"No," said Buck. "No one else. I got laid a few times, and I should tell you I let Ray fuck me once, when I was broke up that you went missing, but that's all."

Joe nodded. "A couple guys. I'd still be in East Buttfuck, Germany learning how to be a good Communist if it weren't for one of them, but nothing..."

Buck nodded, because Joe didn't have to come out and say that it was nothing that meant anything. "We can take it slow," said Buck, just because he had to.

"Do you want to?"

"No," replied Buck. Joe looked mighty fine in that towel, even if he was too thin. Buck figured Betty and Darla would take care of that, and right now Joe was all his.

They'd never really had a bed before. Not like this anyway, with the smooth cool sheets and just the two of them. There was a little hesitation the first time, since it had been a little over three years, and Buck was afraid of hurting Joe, fragile as he looked, and then everything was as it had ever been. Better, because the war was over and they had all the time in the world.

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Buck went to Jersey by himself on the day Joe and Darla went to wrangle with the army. His father was frankly hostile when Buck told them he was moving to Indiana with an army buddy, and Buck figured that was the end of that.

He rode back in the Pullman with Darla and Joe since they seemed to just assume he was coming with them, and he couldn't see why not.

And after that?

Well, they had a life.

Joe went back to Purdue and got an engineering degree. Buck got a job tending bar. None of the Willises ever said anything about it to him, but he knew they must have thought that strange. Uncle Art died in '51 when he was ninety-two, and left the little cottage Michael had bought for him to Buck and Joe.

Joe found a job, and then another one. Every now and then, he'd lose an interview for being a bachelor rather than a married man, but they lived quietly and never had much trouble. Addie had three more children. Jenny got married, and divorced, and married again. Walter's Lola ran off with a mailman. Mrs. Willis died in '54.

In the summer of 1957, Darla showed up at their cottage one night, and after they'd all had three highballs apiece said, "I'm pregnant."

Buck just looked at her; Joe was choking on rye and ginger ale. She didn't look it, but Buck knew Darla had to be nearly fifty, unmarried, and had never kept company with anyone in the time he had known her.

Joe caught his breath and said, "Married man?"

Darla nodded.

"Do I want to know who?"

"No, and his wife certainly doesn't."

"Do you want me to ask Rob if he knows a doctor? Someone who won't have trouble with a hospital board?"

Darla shook her head no. "I actually wanted to ask Buck if he'd marry me."

Once Buck stopped choking on his drink, they all discussed it rationally and decided it made sense. No Willis in his or her right mind was ever going to believe that Buck and Darla were actually man and wife, but it would stem at least some gossip, and make things easier if anything ever happened to Darla.

So Buck and Darla went down to city hall with Joe and Addie. None of them could keep a straight face, but the mayor married them according to the laws of the state of Indiana. Buck went home with Joe while Darla went home alone to the big white house. In January of 1958 when she was forty-nine years old, she gave birth to Josephine Willa Jennings, who was healthy despite all of the dire things the OB had said about advanced maternal age.

Betty's husband Hank died later that same year. Darla put the big house on the market and it got divided up into offices.

Buck's mother and father died six months apart in 1962 and his brother James called him so he could fly back for the funerals. Joe stayed in Indiana, and Buck figured that was the last time he'd ever go to Jersey.

Rob's youngest, who'd been a freckle faced five-year-old on that Easter of 1947 went to Vietnam and didn't come back. Addie's second oldest went to Canada instead and her oldest got married. Rob refused to go to the wedding, and the two of them spent years ducking in and out of family gatherings to avoid each other.

Jo grew up tall and pretty. Buck never knew exactly how Darla explained it, but she always knew he was her uncle, despite being on her birth certificate and very theoretically married to her mother. Rob and Addie started talking again around the time President Carter signed the pardon for draft dodgers.

Darla was diagnosed with lung cancer during Jo's senior year in high school, and hung on long enough to see her graduate. The neat little house she'd moved into was sold, and all through college, Jo regarded Buck and Joe's as the place she came home to.

Walter, who'd moved to Chicago after Lola left him, came home for Christmas of 1982 with a slender mustachioed man twenty years his junior and announced he was gay.

Jo got married in '83 and Buck and Joe gave her away. Rob fell asleep one night and didn't wake up. Jenny got lymphoma. Buck retired and then Joe did. Jo had babies. Addie's oldest had grandchildren. Addie's husband got Alzheimer's and went into care and died in '93. Walter died in '94, and his partner buried him outside of Chicago. Jo drove Buck and Joe up to the funeral because that was starting to be more of a drive than they were up to. Addie kept going strong, but fell and broke her hip a few months after 9/11 and never really recovered.

Through it all, Buck was there for Joe, and Joe was there for Buck.

As marriage began to look like a possibility, they started to discuss it, but it never seemed worth the effort, and the State of Indiana didn't seem like it was going to pass it anytime soon. By the summer of '13, Buck walked with two canes or a rollator and Joe sometimes forgot small details, like the name of Jo's youngest, now married and a father himself. By then, any ceremony seemed to

Buck like an affront to all those years they'd had together, but he wanted to have an anniversary party, for all of those seventy years.

And they did.

**The End**

## **Author Bio**

*D.C. Williams is a funny little middle-aged woman who lives in Pennsylvania with one spouse and one child and writes romance novels you wouldn't expect*

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