

# *The Card*

*by Brit*

I have no idea what I was doing here. You know when you're heading somewhere and you just get to thinking about something, and the next thing you know you're at wherever it was you were heading...and you have no idea how you got there?

Only I really hadn't planned on ending up here.

That's kind of how I found myself standing in front of this rack of greeting cards at the Stop-N-Shop. I just walked in the door, said 'hi' to Bob, the counter guy, and headed for the beer. Was gonna pick up some chips and bean dip for the game on the tube tonight for the start of the weekend.

I'm clueless—Hutch would laugh at hearing me admit that in any circumstances—as to how I ended up looking at the pictures on these cards.

Father's Day cards.

Man, I haven't even looked at a Father's Day card since...well, since I was thirteen. That was the last time I bought one. Bought it, but my Pop never got it.

There's one particular card that caught my eye. I'd swear it was the same picture as the one on the card I had bought some fifteen-odd years ago. The one that's in a cigar box in the bottom drawer of my dresser.

The cover has a clipper ship in full sail cutting through the water. The first time I saw it, I knew it was the perfect card for Pop. That May, he had taken a Friday afternoon off, and me, Nicky, and him had gone down to the docks. Some group had sponsored a tall ship event and the bay had been filled with these absolutely huge wooden vessels. Pop had led us through the crowds and pointed out the different types of ships and filled our heads with these stories of the high seas. And pirates...oh, man! I thought I'd just burst with the stories of their battles, and storms, and treasures! What thirteen-year-old wouldn't?

The rest of that weekend Nicky and I converted our brownstone stoop into a pirate ship, complete with makeshift cannons made of some filched pipe from a deserted tenement and a captain's wheel mounted to the railing. Boy, was Ma hot when she learned that the captain's wheel was made from the front wheel of Nicky's bike we'd removed and her only wooden rolling pin. Hey, the handles made great grips when we duct-taped them onto the bike tire! Ma was mad enough to use that rolling pin for another purpose, but Pop only laughed and called us his scalawags. Even after the stoop was cleared off, I still dreamed of the high seas and those huge ships. One night Pop brought me home a copy of "Treasure Island," and we poured over it every night.

The card was perfect for Father's Day, especially that year. If only—

Awh, Pop. Do you realize how much I miss you still? No matter how many great times we had together, I still feel like I was cheated. I can't help but miss what we'll never share together.

You should have been there when I graduated from high school. I never thought I would make it, because I just didn't care.

It should have been you I called when I got my acceptance letter into the academy. Telling Ma only made her cry. You would have understood.

I needed you to hold me the first time I killed a man in the line of duty.

I needed you to meet my best friend and know that I had someone to watch my back. You would have known that he was worth giving my own life for.

I needed you to be around for Hutch. His dad brought him home books to make him smarter, but he never taught him the important stuff, like how to be a pirate. You could have been his Pop, too.

I needed you to pray for me when it looked like I didn't stand a chance.

I needed you to stand by my side when we put Terry in the ground.

You should have been there to receive that Father's Day card from me and every one since.

I realize that I've got tears in my eyes while I'm standing there in the Stop-N-Shop holding a case of beer and a crushed bag of chips staring at a Father's Day card. I look around quickly, hoping no one's noticed me getting ready to bawl in the middle of the store, and wipe my eyes.

I can't explain why I included that card with my other stuff at the checkout. Bob takes my money, and doesn't seem to notice what's going on inside my head. I grab the bag and haul my butt out of the store before I embarrass myself....

...and try to figure out what the heck my partner's doing leaning on my car, watching the sunset. He's still in his jogging clothes and the sweat's drying in his hair.

"You jog over here?"

"Brilliant deduction, Holmes." He gives me that smirky grin of his and snags the beer out of my hand. Hutch opens the passenger side door to get in, but pauses and looks at me with an eyebrow raised. "You coming?"

I shrug and get in, start her up. "What are you doing here? I only dropped you off 20 minutes ago."

"Thirty. Felt like a run, headed this way, and saw the Tomato."

I grunt in response. "I thought you had plans for the weekend."

It's his turn to shrug. "Plans change. You just gonna sit here or what?"

I put her in gear with a grin and pull out into traffic. The weekend's looking better. Hutch takes a look in the bag and sees the Father's Day card nestled between the chips and the bean dip. He doesn't say anything, doesn't have to, but reaches over and gives my shoulder a quick squeeze. Maybe we'll talk about it sometime over the weekend, maybe not. Either way, it's okay—he's there, he understands, and that's enough.