



INTRODUCTION

THE CHIP'S STORY BEGINS...

The Chip's story, although spectacular, begins in the same unspectacular way all of our stories do, with a man and a woman—his parents, Jane and James Ross. It is impossible to tell his tale without telling theirs, for they gave him life, in all of its incredible, painful, and spectacular strangeness. The love he felt for his parents, however, gave him his life's purpose, one he would fulfill not as the person he was born as, the lovely boy Mr. and Mrs. Ross named Stanley, but as The Chip, a 21st century superhero this boy would become...

The attractive, young couple stood facing each other on the courthouse steps. On this sunny spring Friday they were both dressed in what might have been referred to as their “church clothes,” if they had been the kind of people who attended church. James Ross was sporting his best suit, the one he wore to his high school graduation four years earlier. His shoes and tie were borrowed from his younger brother, as his own were too plain and outdated for this occasion. The soon-to-be Mrs. James Ross, defying tradition as usual, was donning a very fashionable gold sheath dress with matching jacket. The outfit

was new, but unlike James she had nothing borrowed, and blue, she insisted, was not her color.

James was holding both of his fiancé's porcelain hands in his, entwining her long, graceful fingers with his fatter, clumsier ones and pulling her close enough so that they could speak to each other in a tone just above a whisper. His earnest brown eyes were intently searching her smiling green ones.

"Are you sure you want to do this?" James asked in such a serious manner that Jane found it impossible to take him seriously.

"The only reason I'd change my mind is if you put that question to me one more time!" she responded, her smile betraying the reprimand.

"I want you to be sure. You're giving up so much..."

"No, I'm not. I'm *gaining* so much," Jane interrupted. "You're talking about things. Things are nothing compared to love," she said, disengaging herself from his grasp in order to throw her arms around his neck, suddenly serious herself.

Jane nestled her head on James's shoulder. In her heels, they were almost the same height. Not because James was terribly short—he was a respectable five foot ten—but Jane was almost that tall herself. She cut, everyone said, a striking figure.

"But your family and friends back in England. The life you knew," James continued, pulling Jane close to him and burying his head in her thick, auburn hair.

"*You* are my life now," she said, taking his face in her hands and looking directly into his eyes with unmistakable love.

Jane's eyes were James's favorite thing about her. On their first date he teased her that they belonged in his martini because their size and color so closely resembled the green olives in his glass. He was taken in by those giant, olive-colored eyes the first time he met Jane, when she walked into his family's hardware

store well after closing time looking for supplies to make a dress, of all things.

James had stayed at the store late to try to straighten out the accounting ledger his father had for so long neglected. He became absorbed in the numbers, none of which added up, and forgot to lock the door. He was startled when he heard the jingling of the bells that signified the coming and going of customers, and even more bewildered when he looked up from the counter and saw a beautiful young woman striding towards him with a determined look on her face. She was questioning him in the Queen's English.

"Pardon me, sir, but I'm in a terrific hurry and I must get service straight away. Now, do you have in stock fishing line and electrical wire, please?"

"I'm sorry—what?" James was too distracted by Jane's good looks and accent to pay any attention to her question.

"I told you, I'm in a terrific hurry. I must complete a sewing project, and the hem of the gown requires fishing line and the bodice simply will not work without wire. Now, either you have these items or you do not. Which is it?" Jane was clearly exasperated. James, still behind the counter, threw down his pencil and straightened his posture. No matter how attractive this woman was, he would not stand for being condescended to by her.

"Listen, lady—it's 10:30 p.m. We're closed. You'll have to take your business elsewhere, if you can find anyplace open to take it, that is."

"The door isn't locked and the lights are on. You're here." Jane stood with her arms folded, clearly not contemplating leaving. "Besides, I haven't been able to find any other establishment that is open."

"Well, you still haven't found one! The door may be unlocked, but try reading the sign hanging on it. Our hours are 8:00 a.m. to 8:00 p.m."

“You realize,” Jane said, her hands now on her hips, “that in the time you’re taking to dictate to me you could’ve made yourself a sale.”

James was appalled and at the same time amused by her tenacity. He shook his head and smiled as he surrendered to her. “Okay,” he said, throwing his hands up. “What is it you need again?”

Jane sighed loudly, thoroughly irritated at having to repeat herself for a third time, but she complied.

There was no polite chitchat—not even a casual exchange of names. James got her what she asked for and even though for the life of him he couldn’t figure out why these things were necessary to make a dress, he decided it was best to not ask. When Jane handed him the money for the materials, their fingertips touched briefly, and for the first time James was close enough to her to look directly into her eyes. He was struck by how beautiful they were. He momentarily forgot himself and just stood there staring, his hand paused in midair holding her cash.

“My change, please,” Jane prodded him. Even though she’d gotten what she needed, she was no less exasperated.

“Here,” James said as he snapped out of it and went into the register to get her what she was due. Instead of reaching out to meet her hand, he tossed the coins on the counter for her to scoop up.

“I hope you have a fine evening,” Jane said as she slid the money into her purse, clearly not meaning it. And with that she turned and marched out of the store.

James quickly followed and locked the door behind her. He didn’t imagine they would ever meet again, but later that night, lying in bed, when he closed his eyes it was her face that he saw. So despite their mostly unpleasant encounter, he was not at

all disappointed when she appeared before him at the store two nights later—this time at a respectable time of 7:30 p.m.—and asked him to go for a drink with her.

“I was terribly rude, I’m afraid. And you were kind to help me. I was just under so much stress, to finish the gown—I’m getting marked on it. And I got on the wrong bus somehow and ended up on the opposite side of the river. I live in the city, you know.”

“No, I don’t know,” James responded. “I don’t even know your name.”

“It’s Jane,” she said, extending her hand to him. “Jane Beckwith. And yours?”

“James Ross,” he replied, reciprocating the handshake.

“Oh, as in *Ross Family Hardware!* I did read the door, you see. Where’s the rest of your clan?”

“I’m it at the moment. My father’s ill. My brother’s at school.”

“And your mother?”

“My mother died about three years ago.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry,” Jane said, touching her hand to her mouth. “I can be so thoughtless, and I should really know better. Both of my parents were killed in a wreck when I was ten.”

“Gee, that’s a rough break, Jane. I’m sorry.”

This open and intimate exchange of information, which took place so matter-of-factly, dissipated whatever tension had been left over from their initial meeting.

“Please, let me buy you a cocktail to make up for my poor manners. You obviously work very hard. It seems that a reprieve would be welcome, no? Unless there’s a girl in your life who wouldn’t appreciate us going out?” Jane asked coyly.

James blushed. “No, nothing like that, I’m afraid. I mean, I’m glad because it means I’m free to accept your offer. But I do have to wait until 8:00 p.m. House rules.”

“You’re really a stickler about those hours,” Jane teased him. “But all right. May I sit behind the counter with you? We can chat some more.”

By the time James was served his martini an hour later at the only bar in town he thought might be nice enough to bring her to, he knew a good deal about Jane’s life back in England, how she came from a prominent family and was raised under the custodianship of her maternal grandmother after her parents passed away. She was careful to point out that the ones who really brought her up were the headmistresses of boarding schools. She had no siblings, so her close friends became her family.

Jane had followed her closest friend, Fiona, to New York so they could study fashion together. Her grandmother detested the idea, but as Jane had come into a significant part of her father’s estate when she turned eighteen, and was technically no longer her grandmother’s charge, there was little the older woman could do but voice her disapproval, which at this point Jane was used to. Jane had been in New York two years already, and had only flown home once during that time. She was, it seemed, a bit rebellious, so much so that it had been necessary for her to attend three different boarding schools between the ages of thirteen and sixteen. All of her infractions had been minor—smoking, playing practical jokes on her teachers. Normal teenage shenanigans.

“What I really wanted,” she confided in James, “was to be sent home for good. Or at least to feel like I had one to go to that wasn’t a dormitory.”

James, on the other hand, as Jane learned while sipping her sidecar (even her choice of cocktails was fashionable), was more the straight and narrow type. She had sensed this when they first met—he had an aura of dependability about him. She was also not surprised to hear, based on her initial impression of his

brawny physique, that he had played sports in high school. He was hoping for a football scholarship, but he injured his knee rather seriously in a game his senior year.

“The injury kept me out of college and out of Vietnam,” James said. “It was really for the best. I was needed here. My mom was sick for a while, and my pop didn’t handle it too well. When she died he just couldn’t cope. I was helping out at the store part-time, taking business classes at night. But about six months ago I had to take over full-time. My father’s drinking...” But James stopped there, not feeling it was appropriate to discuss his father’s alcoholism in polite company. Jane put her hand on his.

“It seems we’ve both had our share of rough breaks,” she said softly.

“Yes, well, my kid brother, Jeff—he’s the one who’s really college material anyway,” James said, clearing his throat and taking a sip of his drink. “He’s a genius, a real mad scientist type. He’s studying in Cambridge, but he comes home on weekends to help out when he can. He’s a little odd, but he’s a real good kid.”

“It seems you’re very proud of him.”

“I am very proud. My mother was happy she got to see me graduate from high school, but she’d be over the moon if she knew that Jeff was going to be the first one in the family to graduate from college. I just wish she were here to see it.”

James got quiet, suddenly embarrassed by his emotion. He didn’t mean to be revealing so much of himself to this woman, who was practically a stranger. But there was something about her, something about her eyes especially, that made it seem natural to do so. And Jane, although she thought James to be quite handsome, found herself intensely drawn to his loyalty and sense of family. *Here is a man*, she thought, *who will always do what is*

right—who will always be there. Constancy and family were two things Jane had never really had, and subsequently were what she longed for.

Six months later they were holding each other on the courthouse steps, Jane's eyes once again convincing James to give himself over to her.

"Now stop being so silly," Jane said, stepping back from him and fussing with his tie. "You asked me to marry you in quite a lovely and endearing manner—on *both* knees, nonetheless. And I said yes. And now you're trying to talk me out of it! Total nonsense." Jane reached into her purse and took out her gloves.

"Well, I knew your grandmother wouldn't do back flips when she heard the news, but I didn't think she'd disown you."

"That's because you possess too good of a heart to understand that to some people, marriage is a matter of business, not love. The way she sees it, I'm the one who turned my back on the family. She had what she believed to be a divine match picked out for me. This little 'episode,' as she put it, has caused everyone a great deal of embarrassment. I've been fine without her my whole life, and I'll be fine without her now. Besides, we're going to have our own family."

James smiled at her and relaxed. He knew how badly she wanted that—her own family. "Okay, you've talked me back into it," he said, extending his elbow to her. "Shall we?" Just as they were about to enter the building Fiona came rushing up to greet them.

"Oh, good, I didn't miss it! I was nervous I'd messed things up for you. I had a devil of a time getting away from work." She kissed them both on the cheek and handed Jane a small bouquet of daisies.

Fiona was their witness. James's father had had a small stroke two months earlier and had been bedridden since. Jeff had exams

he couldn't miss, but he'd come down the weekend before and had brought James the shoes and tie he was wearing. While Jeff was home he had gotten a group of James's high school friends together for a very tame bachelor party. Parties were not Jeff's forte. James had noticed that Jeff's social skills, instead of improving at school, as had been James's hope, were actually getting worse.

"You're spending too much time in the lab," James admonished him at the bar of the local Elks Club, the site Jeff had chosen for his brother's last hurrah as a single man. Their father was a member. The club's mission statement, posted above the bar, represented the values the brothers had been raised with: *To inculcate the principles of Charity, Justice, Brotherly Love and Fidelity...to quicken the spirit of American patriotism...the Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks of the United States of America will serve the people and communities...*

"I'm on to something big, Jimmy—something real big. You'll see."

"I'm sure I will. But try to find some balance, okay? It's obvious from your color that you hardly ever see sunlight. I don't even understand why you have nice shoes and fancy ties—you never go out."

"I'm playing with the big boys now, Jim. I have to look the part in order to be taken seriously. I'm only twenty, after all."

"That's right, you're only twenty. It might do you some good to act like it every once in a while."

"You simply do not understand, Jim. I'm going to create something that will change life as we know it." There was a tinge of anger in Jeff's voice. He hated it when his brother was dismissive of his work. And James always got a little uncomfortable when Jeff talked about his experiments, not so much because he

didn't understand them, but because he believed Jeff's obsession bordered on being unhealthy.

"Let's just drop it, okay? I'm just trying to look out for you. I want to take *you* out for your bachelor party someday." James wanted to make peace before things got out of hand, as they sometimes did when his brother was involved.

"Well, actually, I am seeing this really sweet girl, Lucinda, pretty regularly," Jeff offered.

"Uh, Jeffrey, is Lucinda one of your lab rats?"

"Yup. And one of the prettiest ones you've ever seen." The brothers laughed. James was happy to see that although Jeff's joke wasn't terribly original, at least he still had a sense of humor about himself.

That visit with Jeff had been less than a week ago, but still, waiting for the clerk to call his name, moments away from marrying the love of his life, James missed his brother terribly. He didn't ask a friend to take Jeff's place. It didn't seem right to have anyone stand up for him except Jeff. James couldn't help but feel a little sad that his parents and his brother were absent from the most important day of his life. But by the time he and Jane got before the judge, all of his concerns had melted away. They would have their own family, just like Jane said.

As for Jane, as was her nature, she never experienced a moment of trepidation. She wasn't thinking about who wasn't there. She'd already started dreaming about the future with James, and the wonderful home she would make for him and the children they would have. She wanted two boys and two girls, in that order so the girls would always have their older brothers to protect them. And she would design and make their baby clothes and dresses for the girls' special occasions. She was so excited, so eagerly anticipating her version of a fairytale life with James.

So much was going through Jane's mind that she didn't remember responding to the judge's questions. She barely heard him pronounce her and James man and wife over the loud and rapid beating of her heart. James cupped her face in his hands and kissed her gently. There were tears in his eyes. Jane felt like she was in a trance.

Then Fiona clapped her hands loudly, startling everyone in the room. "And they lived happily ever after!" she cried.

But life is rarely so simple, or kind.