

SERENITY

By

Sebastian Roberts

OTHER TITLES

Miss Match – 2015

Day 183 – 2015

Grace – 2015

Dragonfly – 2015

Serenity

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CHAPTER ONE

GOODBYE

Harold *Happy* Fitzpatrick walked slowly through Old Man Pritchard's pasture. His mind screamed at him, *Don't go!* He kept walking. His heart screamed in pain. *For God's sake! Stop me! Don't let me go!* He kept walking. His ears strained to hear her calling to him. He heard the cardinal singing in the nearby woods and the woosh of the swallows as they chased dragonflies in the field. He heard the buzz of the grasshoppers as they flew out of the grass in front of his feet. He never heard her call to him. She never did. Harold Fitzpatrick kept walking.

When he got to the road where he had parked his jeep, he stole a glance back into the pasture. Valerie Foreman sat there in the shade of the oak tree. Val had been his *not quite high school sweetheart* ever since he and she had enough hormones to know what the word *sweetheart* actually meant. Val's deep reddish brown hair framed an unforgettable face that was made all the more captivating by her strikingly blue eyes. She was only 17 but he and she had known each other since birth because their parents were best friends. This past year had been a good one. Val had led her softball team to the Missouri State Girls Fast-pitch softball championship. Harold had been at every game and often had been called upon to give her the post-game rubdown to keep her muscles from tightening up. At 5'7" and

125 pounds, her muscles were tight even when they were relaxed. Val lived in Sikeston and Harold lived in St. Francois, just north of Poplar Bluff. Due in large part to the distance between their homes, the mutual attraction that they had felt had never made the transition into the physical world. Last week, though, Harold had graduated high school and was free to go where he wanted and do what he wanted.

What he wanted was to be a Marine. But he also wanted to be with Val. In his own way, he had let Val decide. A few minutes earlier, sitting together under the oak tree, she had told him to do what he wanted to do. She said *Choose your future, Happy. Choose your life. Don't just let it happen.* She made it clear that she had another year of high school and that she didn't want to hold him back. He had then gotten up to leave, thinking, hoping, praying, that she would call him back.

Harold got in the Jeep, started the engine, and moved slowly down the dirt road. He never saw her stand and wave to him. He never saw her wipe away the tear.

Harold went straight home and packed his bag. He wouldn't need much. His dad had been in the Navy and had told him not to expect to need too many personal items during the first 16 weeks of service. The Marines would give him socks, a helmet, and everything in between. He could buy toothpaste when he got there. Harold looked at his bag. After twenty minutes he had packed one pair of jeans, one clean shirt, a ditty bag, a pen, a journal, and a picture of Valerie Foreman. It looked

pretty empty. It was too empty. His mom would have a fit. Harold quickly threw enough t-shirts into the small canvas bag to make it look full, and headed towards the staircase going downstairs to say his goodbyes.

As he rounded the corner of the upstairs hallway and faced the stairs, he found himself looking down at his Mom. Sarah Fitzpatrick waited for him on the landing at the bottom. She looked up at the 17 year old man coming down the stairs with a tear and a smile. He was quite intelligent, just like his parents.

At 5'10" and 170 pounds, he was fit and solid, yet still a bit thin. He had an equal mix of her black, almost obsidian, eyes and his father's dark brown ones. His eyes weren't quite black nor were they really brown. He did have his father's shortish, sandy hair. It was the kind of light brown that almost had no color at all. He wasn't handsome and he wasn't unattractive either. Sarah thought to herself, *He's plain*. She knew, though, that his best traits were the ones that he carried on the inside.

"I'm going now, Mom." Harold said as he came down, trying to look happy. He figured that she was doing the same thing. Sarah, smiled at her oldest son but there was a hint of an emotion in it that he couldn't quite place. It wasn't sadness, but it might have been a fear of a future sadness. Moms were generally proud of sons who went off to serve their country, but that didn't mean that they wouldn't worry about them. When he reached the landing, he gave her a big hug. "I'll be fine, Mom."

“I know.” Sarah said as she admired the man her son was becoming and the choices he had made. “Just remember to be happy.”

Harold wondered to himself if she meant that he should be happy or that he should be Happy. Only Val called him Happy, but his Mom knew it. As they walked outside to say goodbye to the rest of the family, he also wondered if she knew how much Val meant to him. He wondered if she could possibly know what it felt like to be in love as much as he was in love with Val. The slamming of the screen door behind him broke him away from these thoughts. The family in front of him gave him the answer. His Dad, Pete, holding his baby sister Susan, stood between his two younger brothers, Louis and Gordon. Victoria, his other sister, stood in front of them. *Yeah*, Harold thought. *Mom knew.*

“I gotta go.” Harold said.

In the style of repressed emotion known best in rural America, Harold shook hands with his brothers, hugged his sisters, and walked towards the road with his Dad. Words were few. There wasn't much of a need for them. Men like these could say *I love you* with a handshake a lot easier than with words. The girls, of course, did need a hug and Harold obliged with vigor. Sarah took her place among the other children and they watched Pete and Harold walk down the long dirt drive.

When they reached the end of it, down by the road, Pete took his eldest son by the shoulders and looked him right in the

eye. “It’s a long drive from Poplar Bluff to Ft. Leonard Wood. Did you pack anything to eat?”

“I’ll be fine, Dad.” Harold said. “If I get hungry, I’ll get something on the way. Tell mom I’ll call when I get there.”

“Call before you check in.” Pete said with a grin. “You never know how soon training might start.”

“I will.” Harold saw his ride coming down the dirt road that ran in front of his parents’ small ranch and waved. “Janice is almost here.”

Pete let go of his son’s shoulders and shook his hand again. “One more thing.” Pete said very seriously.

“What’s that?” Harold asked.

“With a wry grin, Pete squeezed Harold’s hand and said. “Don’t fuck up.”

Harold laughed as he remembered the stories his dad had told him about his own time in the service. This simple phrase had been how team members had reminded their buddies to make sure that they came back alive.

An hour later, Harold said goodbye to his best friend, Janice Edmonds, and boarded the bus that would take him to his future. Janice had been Harold’s best friend since that first day in kindergarten. Two years earlier, Janice’s family had moved to Poplar Bluff from Puerto Rico. Janice spoke a version of English that was delicately laced with a moderate accent.

During their first couple of years in grade school some of the other kids had teased her from time to time. Harold had always stood up for her, telling the others to leave her alone. By the time they all graduated, most of the boys in their class wished that they had been nicer to her when they were younger. Janice had matured into a remarkably attractive young woman and they were jealous of how close she and Harold had become. Most of them thought that she and Harold had been secretly dating. The impression was fine with Janice who, frankly, didn't want to be bothered. During the drive to the bus station, Janice didn't say much. The only question Harold remembered her asking was. "Did you tell her?" Harold winced and said. "No."

As the bus wound its way through the Ozarks, Harold found his journal and made his first entry. *June 15th, 1996. On the way to enlist in the Marines. I'm still not sure why I didn't need to wait 'till next month when I turn 18. Dad just said that he had friends.*

Harold reflected on his situation. His hopes and dreams swirled around his uncertainty – *What do I know about love anyway? I'm just a kid.* He thought about writing something about Val. He didn't.