

Walking Away

T. E. Killian

Chapter One

Kent Jackson was tired. He sure was glad it was Friday night. No. He looked at his watch. No, it was now Saturday morning. Had he actually been here for almost four hours now?

He looked around the noisy casino. It was one of the strangest places he'd ever been. There were many things about the place that he didn't like. It was too noisy, too many flashing lights and just too many people. They were crowding him every time he got off his stool in front of the slot machine he was playing.

Why did he come here so much? Yeah sure. As if he didn't know. He had started out at the beginning of the summer coming here just to have something to do on his weekends. He had always been too tired to do much more than eat supper and go to bed on weeknights. But after a while, that didn't seem to matter. He was in here most nights, tired or not.

Kent was getting ready to start his ninth year as a high school history teacher but he always worked for a local general contractor during his summers. That work sure was much more physical than teaching.

Well, he decided that it was about time to head back home. After all, Strawberry was anywhere from forty-five minutes to an hour from any of the Kansas City casinos.

When he headed for the exit, he saw his brother, Larry, heading toward him with a girl on each arm. Kent definitely did not need this right now. He just wanted to go home and go to bed, alone.

He quickly ducked into a restroom nearby and hoped Larry hadn't noticed him. But his luck with that was no better than his luck had been with the slots. Larry burst through the door before Kent could try to hide in one of the stalls.

"Hey big brother. You wouldn't be trying to hide from me now would you?"

Big brother, ha. Larry was thirty minutes younger than Kent and was always calling him big brother. Kent got tired of it sometimes. Even though they were twins, they didn't look much alike. Larry had blond hair and blue eyes while Kent had brown hair and eyes. He frowned. They didn't act much alike either.

He groaned when he noticed that Larry was weaving a little and his eyes were a little blurry. "Larry, you're not driving are you?"

Larry squinted at Kent and said, "No way man. I never drink when I'm driving . . . at least not this much. The girls picked me up and brought me here."

He seemed confused for a minute then he said, "Oh yeah. You almost made me forget why I came looking for you. Yeah, I knew I'd find you here tonight. You're always here on Friday nights aren't you?"

When Kent didn't answer, Larry said, "Well, I'll tell you what I'll do for you big brother. You see, I've got two girls and I thought you might like one, not that I can't handle both of them all by myself now. I was just trying to be a good brother and thought I'd share with you. Isn't that what good brothers are supposed to do?"

Kent began shaking his head immediately. He ignored Larry's question and said, "No thanks Larry. I'm so tired that all I want to do is go home and try to get some sleep."

At first, Larry looked like he was going to argue but Kent held up both hands between them and said, "I'm serious Larry. If I don't get some sleep, I'm going to crash right here."

After that, Larry turned around and left the restroom. Kent waited five minutes before leaving. He

wanted to make sure Larry wasn't out there waiting for him.

Soon, he was in his car headed for Strawberry. Home. Sure, he'd been like most kids growing up, barely able to wait to get out of that small town after high school. But, not only had Kent gone back to Strawberry after college, but he'd gone back to teach in that very high school. Go figure.

That made him begin to think of all that had happened in his life since he came back home. Wow. There sure was a lot of it.

The first thing and one of the worst things was that his longtime love, Grace Livingston had met someone in college and married him. That hurt. But as often happens, Kent married a local girl more or less on the rebound. And had that ever been a disaster.

Shelly had never been happy with her mother, Kent or even living in Strawberry. Shortly after their daughter, Michelle's first birthday, she had filed for divorce. Then a year later, Shelly had just disappeared with Michelle and Kent hadn't seen his daughter for five years now.

That hurt so bad that he always tried to push it out of his thoughts. He'd go into a funk for sure if he didn't.

He forced his thoughts back to Grace, as he passed the Strawberry city limits sign. She was a widow now and she had a seven-year-old daughter. Hey, that's exactly how old Michelle would be too.

But the best thing of all was that Grace was moving back to Strawberry. In fact, she had a job now teaching English at the high school. He would be able to see her every day. Would that be a joy or would it be torture?

Well, if it was going to be torture seeing her at school, it could be worse with her renting the house on the other side of Mrs. Anderson's house from his.

He was home now and he'd just have to think about all of that later. Yes, later when he'd had time to get some rest. Maybe then, he'd be able to think straight and figure out how he was going to act around Grace now that she was going to be so close all the time.

* * *

Grace Donaldson was happy. She knew that Brianna was happy too. She giggled softly to herself. No, happy wasn't quite the word to describe her seven-year-old daughter right now. Brianna had been wide-awake all the way on the drive from St. Louis today. It was probably the first time Brianna had ever stayed awake for the whole four-hour drive from one side of Missouri to the other.

They were moving back home. Grace couldn't get enough of that feeling either. Brianna had never lived in Strawberry, but she was super excited to be living near her grandparents and her Uncle Matt. Grace smiled to herself again when she realized that she now needed to include Matt's new wife Betty Sue. Brianna already loved her too as did the rest of the family.

That was another thing that made Grace happy lately. Her brother Matt had been into all kinds of bad stuff ever since he'd graduated from high school twelve years ago. But Betty Sue had come into his life and now not only was he away from all that but he had accepted the Lord and married Betty Sue. Added to all of the rest, he had just completed a training course on heating and cooling. She was so happy for them and so proud of her brother too.

Grace knew what would happen when she made the announcement she was about to make so she braced

herself for it.

“Brianna, there’s the Strawberry city limits sign.”

“Weeee!” Brianna squealed and said, “Oh boy Mommy. Are we going to Grandma’s house first?”

“No Sweetie. You know that Uncle Matt is behind us driving the truck with all our things in it, and we have to go to our new house to start unloading.”

There was silence in the backseat for a few seconds. “Okay Mommy.” Another pause then, “Can I get my room ready first of all?”

“You sure may. That’s why I had everything from your room put in the truck last so it would come off first.”

Almost as if he knew what they were saying, Brianna’s large yellow cat yelled out from his cage next to her.

“Oh Butterball. We’re almost there. Mommy, can I take Butterball into my room with me?”

“Yes, Honey, I think that would be a great place for him once we get all of your things in there. But please wait to release him until we do. Okay?”

Brianna giggled. “Sure Mommy. We wouldn’t want Butterball to run away. He wouldn’t know how to find his way back to our new house.”

Grace marveled at how mature her little girl could be at times. She knew that all the so-called experts say that most only children do mature faster. She did wish that Brianna had a younger brother or sister.

Maybe if she’d had a boy, he’d looked more like her brother and her dad. They both had light brown hair. Grace and Brianna both took after her mother, having the same shade of blond hair and dark blue eyes.

Oh, well, Brianna would probably never have a brother or sister now.

Soon, Grace turned onto their street and two blocks later, parked at the curb past their driveway so Matt could back the truck up to the garage. She hit the garage remote so it would be ready.

Once she and Brianna were out of the car and walking up the driveway, an older lady came out of the house next door and waved at them.

Grace smiled and let Brianna go on into the house through the garage. After all, there wasn’t anything in there that she could damage or get hurt on.

She turned to the woman coming at her across the lawns and thought that she looked somewhat familiar but she couldn’t quite place her. Oh well. She knew that would happen with a lot of people in this town. She hadn’t seen many of them for at least nine years.

The lady smiled at Grace and said, “I’ll bet you don’t remember me do you Grace?”

No, Grace didn’t . . . at first. But when she heard that voice and searched back in her memory she sure did.

“Oh Mrs. Anderson, is that you?” Then she shook her head. “How on earth did you remember me after all these years?”

Mrs. Anderson beamed a big smile back at her, “Oh Grace, how could I ever forget the best student that I ever had in first grade?”

Grace blushed. “I’ll bet you say that to all your former students.”

Mrs. Anderson shook her head, “Oh my no.” And with a sly smile said, “You’ll remember that I had your older brother too.”

They both laughed at that.

“So you’re the one moving in over here are you?”

“Yes we are. You saw my daughter Brianna as she ran into the house before. She’s so excited to be living near my parents and Matt.”

“I hear that boy straightened himself out and even got married too.”

“Yes ma’am, he sure did and Betty Sue is just simply the greatest. We all love her dearly,”

“Where’s your husband, Dear?”

Grace didn’t want to go into the whole story right then, so she just gave the short version. “He died in a car accident a year ago.”

Mrs. Anderson was looking at Grace’s face closely and she was sure the shrewd older lady noticed something in the way Grace said that. But she was relieved when Mrs. Anderson didn’t comment on it.

“I’m so sorry dear.”

Just then, Matt pulled the truck up on the street and began backing it into the driveway, thus breaking the tension of that awkward moment.

As they watched the truck back up, Mrs. Anderson turned to Grace and said, “I’ll bet you don’t know who lives on the other side of me. Do you?”

When Grace shook her head, Mrs. Anderson smiled a different kind of smile that Grace couldn’t quite identify. “Why, it’s Kent Jackson, that’s who.”

She said this as if it should be of the greatest importance to Grace. She was a little confused by that. But then Mrs. Anderson didn’t keep her in suspense long.

“Why, don’t you know that boy’s been sweet on you since you were in my class and he was in the second grade next door?”

Grace couldn’t believe it but she blushed. Sure, she and Kent had spent a lot of time together in high school, but never anything serious. Of course, she would have known if he’d been in love with her. Wouldn’t she?”

“I’m sure you’re mistaken Mrs. Anderson. Kent and I have always been friends but never what you could call close that way though.”

Mrs. Anderson cackled. “I’m sure the reason for that had to be that no good twin brother of his. You probably shied away from Kent because you didn’t want to be around Larry.”

Grace hadn’t thought about that in years but she had to admit that Mrs. Anderson was probably right. She did not like to be around Larry for even a few minutes.

Matt jumped out of the truck and waited for Betty Sue to come up from where she’d parked her car. Then they both began walking toward where Grace was talking with Mrs. Anderson.

“Hey Mrs. A it’s good to see you. I sure am glad Grace is moving in next to you, even if it is only until she can find a house to buy.”

Grace was surprised when Matt leaned over and kissed the frail woman on the cheek. Oh my! Her big brother sure was changing.

* * *

Kent sometimes wished that his brother lived far away. Larry was always causing him trouble or at the least embarrassing him in some way. Larry had a drinking problem and had ever since they were in high school.

Kent had been trying to cover for him ever since.

For probably the thousandth time he wondered how the two of them could even be brothers much less twins. They didn't look at all alike and they certainly didn't act alike, that was for sure. Larry did have blond hair like their sister Sheila and their mother. As luck would have it though, Kent had brown hair like their dad. It was just strange, that was all.

Larry had come over to Kent's house some time during the night, drunk as usual and probably passed out in one of Kent's spare bedrooms, where he was currently sleeping it off. Of course, that room was basically Larry's home away from home anyway.

As Kent sat at his kitchen table drinking a cup of coffee, his thoughts drifted to the fact that this was Saturday and school started on Monday. Wow. Where had the summer gone? He was finished working construction for this summer. He was kind of looking forward to the less physically strenuous duties of teaching.

In fact, Kent loved teaching. He only taught freshmen, even though he could have taught the older kids due to his eight years of seniority in the history department. But the principal, Dr. Payne, had it in for him for some reason and constantly passed him up for the upper grade classes.

Kent didn't mind that much since he really liked the younger kids. He enjoyed getting them while they were young and eager to learn so he could try to keep them that way.

A sound coming from the doorway behind him interrupted Kent's thoughts. He turned to see Larry leaning against the wall rubbing his eyes with both hands. He looked rough. His long blond hair looked disheveled and dirty and his clothes looked like he'd slept in them, which he had. Of course, Larry usually looked that way on Saturday and Sunday mornings.

Kent knew from experience not to even attempt to talk to Larry before he was able to wake up a little more. So he jumped up and poured a cup of coffee then set it on the table across from his brother who was still glaring at him.

Larry didn't say a word. He just collapsed into the chair and leaned over his cup, holding it with both hands. After a moment, he turned the cup up and drank it all down in several continuous swallows. Kent just shook his head. How in the world could Larry drink hot coffee that fast?

Larry still didn't say anything. He stood and only took the single step necessary to be able to reach the coffeemaker. After pouring another cup and shakily taking it back to the table, he looked up at Kent and said, "You sure missed out on a lot of fun last night."

When Kent remained silent, Larry who usually couldn't stand silence said, "What you got going today?"

Kent knew from experience that if he said he didn't have any plans then Larry would talk him into doing something with him that Kent rarely enjoyed. So he thought of something quickly.

"I noticed that someone is moving into the house on the other side of Mrs. Anderson. So I thought I'd go down and greet my new neighbors and help them move in."

He purposely didn't mention the fact that it was Grace moving into that house. He knew Larry would give him grief about it if he did.

Larry didn't react at first then he seemed to think about it for a moment. "Hey wait a minute. Didn't I hear that Grace Livingston was moving into that house?"

Larry surprised him but as Kent thought about it, Larry always seemed to know all the gossip going around town long before Kent ever heard anything.

“It’s Donaldson now and yes she and her little girl are renting that place until they can find a place to buy. It seems that they looked all summer and couldn’t find anything they liked.”

Larry was grinning now. Kent knew what was coming next and braced himself for it.

“That sure should be convenient for you, having Grace living so close to you. You always did have a thing for her and I know you really got all bummed out when she married that guy from St. Louis. But now, she’s single again. Go for it Bro.”

Kent chose not to comment on any of that. He knew that Larry would go on and on if he did. This way, he might stop soon.

Kent also knew that the only way to get Larry off an attack like this was to turn the tables on him and thereby get Larry mad at him.

“Larry, this is the third time in the past week that you’ve slept it off at my house.” Larry started to argue but Kent quickly continued. “You know I don’t mind you spending the night here once in a while. But Larry, you’re killing yourself with all the booze.”

Larry kept looking down at his now empty coffee cup for a long time before he silently stood and left the kitchen. Kent could have predicted exactly what would happen next and it did.

Kent went into the living room where he knew Larry would go next after he came out of the bedroom he’d slept in.

After some shuffling sounds came from the bedroom, Kent looked up and saw Larry coming down the hallway. He was going to go out the door without speaking to Kent, but Kent stepped in his path to stop him.

“Larry, you’re my brother and you know I love you, but man, I’m worried about you. I don’t want anything to happen to you.”

Larry stopped with his eyes on the door behind Kent. Finally, he looked at his brother. “I’m doing just fine. I don’t need you or Sheila or Mom and Dad or even my nosy apartment manager to tell me what to do with my life. Okay?”

With that, he reached for the door handle and Kent stepped out of his way. Larry was out the door and in his car quickly, then gone.

Kent closed the door and leaned his forehead against it for a long time. What could he do to help Larry? He’d tried everything he could think of over the years. Even Larry’s wife hadn’t been able to get him to stop drinking. She’d finally given up and divorced him and not too many people had really blamed her.

After Larry left, Kent went back to the kitchen to have one more cup of coffee before going back to his bedroom to get dressed.

He really did look forward to helping Grace move into her house. Larry was right. He had always had a thing for her and it really had hurt him when she’d met some guy in college, married him, and moved to St. Louis.

* * *

Grace stood at the curb next to the large rental van. She didn’t know what she would have done if Matt and Betty Sue hadn’t driven up to St. Louis and helped her pack. Then of course, Matt, the former truck driver, had driven the truck down to Strawberry for her. They had saved her lots of money. Now, they were helping to unload all of her and Brianna’s things into their new house.

My, it sure was good to be back home with her family, finally. She looked for her daughter and found her trying to help Betty Sue carry a big box. Grace had to laugh. Ever since Matt and Betty Sue had announced that she was pregnant, Brianna had hovered around Betty Sue like a little mother hen.

The funny part was that Betty Sue was six feet two inches tall and even at four months along she didn't need anyone's help for much of anything.

But Brianna seemed to be enjoying herself and that was the important thing to Grace. Of course, Betty Sue went along with Brianna just as if she'd always been around small children, which she never had.

Grace just knew that Brianna was going to love living in Strawberry. Brianna had never lived here before, but the little girl was sure looking forward to it for so many reasons. Grace was glad all over again that she'd finally made the decision to come back home and of course she was thankful that a teaching job had opened up here for her too.

An added benefit of Grace teaching at the high school was that Brianna's elementary school shared a large campus with the high school. Since Grace's mom was the high school secretary, Brianna could come over to the high school office after school to be with her grandma until Grace finished for the day. Both Grace's mom and Brianna were looking forward to having that time together.

Grace just smiled to herself. This move was exactly the right thing for both of them to be doing at that time. She, for one, had really needed the change from living near Randy's parents. They had been trying to tell her how to live her life a little too much, especially how to rear Brianna. Her own parents didn't even do that, at least they hadn't before.

Her big brother stopped next to her on his way back to the truck. She noticed that Brianna had gone into the house with Betty Sue.

He looked down at her and smiled. Grace was tall at five ten but her brother towered over her at six feet seven. Even her dad was six feet five. She and her mom, who was a couple of inches shorter than Grace, always had to look up a long way at both of them. Then Betty Sue had come into their lives last December and just made it even worse. But that was okay since Grace dearly loved her new sister-in-law.

"I sure hope you don't change your mind down the road and move back to St. Louis. Because I'm mighty glad you're back in town Gracie." Matt grinned down at her knowing that she didn't like that nickname at all and only tolerated it from a few special people but never in front of others. He flipped her long blond hair back over her shoulder playfully.

She grinned back up at him. "Matt, I have never been more positive about anything in my life." She swatted at his hand. "I just know that Brianna and I will love living here."

Matt ran his hand through his light brown hair and snorted. "Yeah. I'm sure she will. She'll have her grandparents as well as Betty Sue and me to spoil her all the time now. What kid wouldn't love that? On top of that, she'll love being next door to Mrs. Anderson too. She'll be like another grandma to Brianna."

Grace giggled at that and watched as her daughter came out of the house holding Betty Sue's hand. They stopped when they came up next to Grace and Matt.

"Mommy, can I go to my room and start putting my things away now?"

Grace reached down and hugged Brianna. They had made sure that everything of Brianna's went into her bedroom first and Matt had already put her bed together. "Sure you can Sweetheart. If you need help with anything just come get me okay."

Brianna squealed and took off for the house with her long blond hair streaming behind her.

Grace called out after her, "You can let Butterball out of his carrier now but make sure to keep your door shut so he'll stay in your room. Okay?"

"Okay Mommy." Brianna went on into the house.

Just then, a car pulled up at the curb and when Grace looked that way, she saw her parents coming up the driveway next to the truck. Well, her family was complete now. Everyone was there and it felt absolutely marvelous, in fact it couldn't be better.

Grace's parents both came up and hugged her, then her mom leaned back and looked into her eyes. "I would imagine that you could use some help getting your kitchen organized."

She waved her hand toward the others. "I'm sure they can get all the rest of the things out of the truck."

She grabbed Grace's hand and headed up the drive but Brianna coming out of the house just then stopped their progress.

"Grandma, Grandpa."

With that, the little girl flung herself up as high as she could into her grandpa's arms. That was sort of tradition for Brianna with both her uncle and her grandpa. They were so tall and broad that it had become a game for Brianna to see how high she could jump into their arms.

Soon, after Brianna went back into her room and Grace's dad began helping Matt and Betty Sue, Grace found herself sitting at the kitchen table with her mom.

Grace took a good look at her mother. Linda Livingston was still pretty at fifty-six. At least Grace thought so. Her mom still had mostly blond hair but there were some gray streaks starting to show now. She always thought of her mom as being so full of energy. She'd had to be when Grace and Matt had been growing up. With such a large older brother, Grace had quite naturally been a rather rambunctious tomboy. But being the high school secretary had certainly kept her mom on her toes over the years.

They were still sitting at the kitchen table when Grace heard a sound and looked up. She was shocked to see Kent Jackson standing there with a tentative smile on his face.

Wow, Kent Jackson. She didn't know what to say. She hadn't seen Kent much for quite a few years. She'd only talked to him on the phone a few times last December when she was trying to enlist his help in getting Matt to straighten out his life. Oh, and they'd both been at Matt's wedding in February but they had barely more than greeted each other then.

To say that it was a shock to see him standing there in her new kitchen was quite an understatement. Her first thought was that he looked good, really good. He hadn't changed much since high school. Sure, he was a little taller and had filled out a little but all that was to be expected with maturity. Oh yes, Kent had matured all right and he'd done it quite well too.

She didn't know what to say. Finally, her mom whose back was to the doorway, noticed that Grace had grown quiet and turned around to see why.

"Oh hello Kent, how are you today. Have you come to help? Everyone else is in the backyard setting up Brianna's swing set if you'd like to help them."

He didn't move and didn't speak either. He just stood there staring at Grace so hard that she began to blush, even though she fought it.

"Hi Kent. It's good to see you." Well that sounded lame. But what else could she say to him? She didn't really know him anymore.

Kent finally seemed to come out of his own daze. "You look nice Grace." Then he blushed too.

Grace's mom looked from one to the other and a knowing look came over her face. "I think I'd better go out there and make sure those men are getting that new swing set put together right."

With that, she was gone, leaving them alone, still staring at each other.

Finally, Grace mentally shook herself. "Kent, I guess you know that I'll be teaching at the high school this year."

He grinned. "Yes, I heard and I'm looking forward to it."

Now what could she say? She said the first thing that came to her mind. "Have you met my daughter Brianna yet?"

When he shook his head, she said, "Well, why don't we go out back so you can meet her."