

"So, how long have you been married, old timer?" I asked, tossing back another shot of Jack. The burn quit long ago, replaced with a hint of smoky nothingness as a few more brain cells went on holiday.

"Sixty-seven years, eight months, three weeks, four days and . . . seven hours," he answered, glancing at his watch.

"That long, eh? What's your secret? See, my wife and I, we've been married 'bout three years, and we wanna kill each other."

The old man chuckled. "Love each other that much, do you?"

I shot him a sidelong glance. He was right, of course, but I didn't realize it.

"Buy an old man a beer, and I'll tell you what I know."

'If nothing else, I'll have a drinking buddy for a while.' I thought, as I ordered up a cold one for him and another Jack for my brain cells.

"So, you want to know how to stay married?" he asked, taking a long pull from his bottle. "Think of a woman as a Rubik's Cube that resets itself, just when you figure you have it solved. Soon enough, you'll come to understand that it's not the solution you want, but the challenge of getting close."

I stared at him in disbelief. "You're joking. A Rubik's Cube that you can't finish? THAT'S your big secret??"

He gave me a wink. "No. It's rhetorical bullshit. GOOD rhetorical bullshit, but bullshit, all the same. I just always wanted to say that."

I shook my head and tossed back another shot.

"Son," he said, placing a weathered hand on my shoulder. "There's no big secret to a good marriage. Understand that she's not some mirror image of you. She has her own hopes, her own dreams, her own ambitions. Encourage those, even if you don't agree with them. Be there when she needs you. Learn how to be absent when she doesn't. We all need that time to ourselves. Don't deny that to her. When life shatters you . . . and it will, in time . . . let her help put you back together again. You'll both be stronger for it. Learn how to argue. We all have different ideas on things. When those differences rear their ugly heads, stay focused on them. Don't try to derail the discussion by tossing the past in her face. You won't like the result."

"So, it's fifty-fifty, right?" I asked, nodding as if I understood.

He looked down at the bar and shook his head. "No. That's the biggest relationship lie there is. You give fifty percent to your woman, you deserve to have it fail. Each of you has to give one hundred percent . . . sometimes more. If you're not willing to do that . . ." he trailed off, giving a shrug of his shoulders.

Somewhere, in my alcohol fog, that made sense. "What about the bedroom?" I asked, all inhibitions having gone on vacation with those brain cells. I hoped they were all having a wonderful time. "She says that I don't do it for her."

"Then find out what does," he answered. "Ask. Communicate. Most men your age think that all they have to do is drop their pants, and their lady will turn into a quivering puddle of goo, ready to do whatever they want. There is a thin line between being an arrogant prick and a confident lover. Women have a large array of erogenous zones, and every lady is different. But . . . they all have one in common, and it's not between their legs. It's between their ears. Seduce her mind, and her body will follow. Just

remember that the physical aspect of a marriage changes as time takes its toll on us. Heated passion never dies. It becomes something . . . different. Something eternal. Something . . ."

Again, he trailed off, and it was then that I saw him slowly turning the simple Gold band on the ring finger of his left hand. "So, what, you waiting for her to show up?" I asked, my slowly emptying head trying to make sense of the wisdom he'd imparted to me.

His eyes seemed to cloud over for a moment, and his smile faded. "Actually, she's waiting for me. Has been for the last Seven years, eight months, three weeks, four days and . . . eight hours." His smile returned as his eyes slowly opened. "I've never been on time for anything. Hope she'll forgive me . . . again."

As he rose, I understood his meaning. "I'm sorry," I said, reaching out to steady him.

"Why?" he asked, tossing a ten onto the bar. "I'm not. Not for one damn minute. Go home, son. Go work on your next sixty-odd years."

He shuffled out the door. I wanted to follow him, ask if I could take him home, but something told me that where he was going tonight, I wouldn't be able to get him to. Besides, I was far too drunk to drive. I pulled out my phone, took a deep breath, and hit speed dial one. If it didn't work, well, I'd know that I at least gave it one hundred percent. I could live with that.