

Saturday, May 5, 2068, 7:30 p.m., Cody, Wyoming

"I think I need this walk," Jeff said as he and Dianne walked slowly down the open area of the mall they were visiting. "That barbeque place was too filling."

"Oh, you've got that right," Dianne replied with a small groan. "I couldn't eat another bite."

"It was nice of your mother to take the boys off to find the arcade. It will make keeping track of Cherie and the girls a whole lot easier."

"Yes, and they'll think they're getting special treatment, too." She glanced around at the stores and the people who were walking by, pretty much ignoring them. "Nice not to be under the fisheye lens for a change. New York is always so... attuned to our comings and goings."

"Ned Cook isn't helping the situation there, either. I hear he's been pestering the public relations department for more 'updates'," Jeff said with disgust. "I hope he leaves us alone during our trip to New Hampshire."

"So do I," Dianne agreed fervently. She linked arms with him. "I wonder how long it will take for Cherie to spend that gift card you gave her?"

"Not long, I suppose," Jeff said with a shrug. "I just hope she buys some things for her friends as well as for herself."

"I don't think that's going to be a problem," Dianne replied, giving him a nudge. "Take a look."

The six girls were coming towards them, giggling and laughing together. They were all wearing new, matching jeans and shirts that, although differently colored, were similar in style. Each of the shirts had something different emblazoned across the chest. Erika's shirt was lavender, and read, "Cute, But Dangerous". Bonnie's was red, and said, "Spicy Hot!" Ellen had on a pink one that said, "Pretty Sassy". Maggie's was green and had the words, "Lucky Lady". Lorena's was yellow and said, "Sunshine Girl". And Cherie's was a royal blue with the word, "Princess", picked out in silvery lettering.

Jeff and Dianne looked at each other and chuckled together, then Dianne sighed. "Sometimes I wish we lived like normal, average people," she murmured. "It's hard on the kids to be so far from their friends."

"I know, love," her husband said quietly as he moved his arm to around her waist and drew her close. "But even if we didn't have the 'family business', we'd still have... the other family business, and it would affect how we lived." He kissed her on the head, his nose buried in her short waves. "We could still send her back to Greenville for school, you know."

Dianne sighed, leaning her head on his shoulder. "Yes, I know. But then... I'd miss her."

"And so would I. I've just barely begun to really get to know my daughter. I don't want to let her go so soon."

By this time the girls had gotten near. "Well?" Cherie asked, turning around with her arms held out. "What do you think?"

"I think you girls look great," Jeff said with a grin. "Especially you... Princess."

Cherie leaned in and gave him a kiss on the cheek. "Thanks, Dad! C'mon, girls. We've got more shopping to do!"

The couple watched as the girls sauntered off down the mall, still giggling and whispering, shopping bags hanging off their arms. The adults changed direction, strolling along in the wake of the gaggle of girls. They watched as the girls stopped to talk to Dom and Joshua. The nurse was grinning at them, and little Josh held up a stuffed horse for the girls to see.

"Y'know, love, I haven't bought you anything special and today is your birthday," Jeff said quietly.

Dianne gave him a long-suffering look. "You mean the time alone with you won't be special enough?"

"Well, yes, it will, but today is the actual day, and I think I should get you something to remember it by," Jeff said. "Let's take a look around in... here." He pulled her into a shop next to the music store the girls had disappeared into. "I bet the girls will end up in here later, but right now, it's just you and me."

"Oh, Jeff," Dianne said with a chuckle, shaking her head.

About twenty minutes later, the girls walked into the store, and spied Jeff and Dianne finishing up their purchase. "Dad! Mom!" Cherie called. "What are you doing in here?"

"Oh, I'm just buying your mother a special birthday gift," Jeff said with a grin.

"What is it?" "Can we see?" "Show it to us, please?" The girls crowded around Dianne. With a smile and a sigh, she opened the box and pulled out... a stuffed cat. But not just any stuffed cat. This was a custom-made white cat, wearing a formal dress of dark burgundy satin, and a stuffed golden crown on its head.

"Oooh!" "Oh, she's so cute!" "I want one like that!"

"Is she a princess?" Lorena asked, stroking the cat's soft, plush fur.

"No," Jeff said. "She's a queen... just like my wife."

From: TikatuSent: 8/31/2005

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