

# The Jacket

*by Sandra Kent*

**D**ave puzzled over what he could wear to the surprise costume birthday party being thrown for Lucy, his great, great grandmother. Everyone was told to dress in some mode reflected in the 10 decades she had lived through. His parent's backyard already had people dressed as 20s era flappers, 40s era WWII vets and 60s era hippies mingling and enjoying the early summer evening. His dad had insisted he follow suit, suggesting an old cedar chest in the attic might have something he could use.

He walked up the creaky old steps and paused to survey the hushed room. A shelf with decades of photo albums hung on one wall. Thumbing through some of them, he found photos of Lucy as a child, a young woman, a bride, a mother raising her family. One photo in particular caught his attention. It showed one of her sons, James, wearing a bomber jacket as he stood beside a small fighter plane. A yellowed newspaper article touted the many dangerous missions he'd flown over France and Germany to stop fascists from taking over the world. One page heralded him a hero finally home safe after the war.

Competition for jobs was fierce back then with so many veterans returning home and he'd agreed to fly stunts over county fairs to thrill the crowds below. Sometimes he was the pilot; sometimes he was the daredevil waiting till the last moment to open his chute.

The next page showed bold headlines of an accident at the fair. PARACHUTE FAILS! DAREDEVIL DIES INSTANTLY. Dave slowly turned another page. Lucy's photo at the wake showed a woman numbed by pain, her vacant expression clearly turned inward searching for lost happy memories she could focus on to block out the cruelty of fate. Her husband stood behind her, his face bleak, lost in his own memories.

Dave set the albums on the tiny table near the window and reached into the cedar chest sitting at the end of a small bed. Inside, carefully wrapped in acid-free paper to preserve it, was the jacket, sleeves spread out carefully. Patches and insignia still in place, it looked pristine, the leather still soft. Someone had taken great care of it over these many decades.

With reverence, he tried it on, surprised at how good it felt. A separate smaller box held a military visor hat and sunglasses. He put both on and stared at his reflection in an antique mirror in the corner of the room. He turned to admire the flying eagle on the back and insignia on the sleeves. He had a sense of what the original wearer must have felt as he wore this jacket in a time of world upheaval. He noticed a striking resemblance to the man in the photo and gave a brief respectful salute to the man long gone.

Just then, his dad yelled up the stairs at him. "Dave! Hurry up! Lucy is here and heading out to the backyard. We want her to enjoy what everyone has done to celebrate her life."

"Coming!" Dave yelled, moving out to the yard to stand off to one side to observe.

Lucy sat in a special high-back chair while her family regaled her with their attempts to revive her past. She smiled, laughed and appeared to be enjoying herself. Her gaze took in the many generations of her family and the love they showed her. A life well lived. Love coming back to her from every decade. And then her gaze found Dave standing quietly off by himself like a ghost from the past.

Her expression froze. Her brow furrowed in momentary confusion. She gasped. Those around her fell silent, unsure what had happened.

“Jimmie?” she whispered. Her lips compressed and she reached out shaking arms to beckon him closer. She struggled to stand, her focus entirely on this miracle from the past. “Jimmie, come here!” she cried out.

Dave stepped forward quickly, afraid she would fall. He wrapped his arms around her, hugging her frail body closely as the soft leather jacket creaked in their embrace. He whispered what he knew she needed to hear. “I’m here, mom. It’s okay. I’m here.”

In her mind, she stepped back in time to hold her son once again, tears flowing at this gift.