

He Stood Her Up

Billie Seward

Jacki comfortably seated herself in the large blue armchair in the living room. I'll just read a bit before John comes, she thought. She had spent two hours that evening preparing for her "birthday date." Her neatly made-up face and her shining blond hair showed the care she had put into her preparation for the evening.

Beginning the third chapter of *War and Peace*, she glanced at the clock. It was eight o'clock! A half-hour late! How could he be late tonight, of all nights? Her clear gray eyes glared at the clock as she thought of all the things she would say to him when he came to pick her up.

She practiced aloud. "You're really excited about this date, aren't you, Mr. Cool? You think that just because you're a man, you can make a girl wait forever for you and act like nothing happened. Well, forget it, buddy." The more she thought about it, the angrier she became.

Opening the book to continue reading, she decided that she would wait and find out his excuse before she yelled at him. After all, she rationalized, his car probably broke down, and he hasn't got any way to call me. Convinced that this had happened, she began to concentrate once again on her book.

At 9:07 the doorbell rang. Jacki jumped out of her chair, turning her ankle on the chair's leg. Nevertheless, she quickly hobbled to the door, glancing in the hall mirror as she passed it. She paused before opening the door to catch her breath and finally opened it. Before her stood John's best friend, Rick, his clothes torn and his face bleeding from a large cut above his right eyebrow.

"Hi, Rick. What happened to you? You look a wreck!"

"May I please come in?" his voice quivered. "I want to talk to you for a minute." As he entered the house, tears began to stream down his face.

Jacki noticed the tears, but didn't want to interfere with Rick's private life. He and Candy had had a lot of trouble lately, and Jacki didn't want to make him talk about it, but she thought she ought to say something.

"I know I might be being nosey, but if you want to talk about it, I'll listen. Being a girl, I might be able to help."

Her innocence and sincerity were too much for Dick. He couldn't hold it back any longer.

"Jacki, let's go in the room and sit down. I don't know how to tell you any of this, but I have to do it."

Puzzled, she lowered herself into the same chair she had sat in only a few minutes before. Her pretty face was expressionless, not revealing the tension within her.

"Jacki, you and John have a date tonight. But I'm afraid John won't be able to make it. You see . . . John is . . . uh . . . Oh, Jacki, I don't know how to tell you this!"

"Tell me! What happened to him?" Her face was no longer expressionless; it held the look of terror.

"John is dead."

Jacki fell limp in the chair. I must have fallen asleep and have been dreaming all of this, she told herself. Wake up, Jacki! Rick reached over and touched her hand. I'm *not* dreaming! This is all real!

She tried to talk, but the words wouldn't come from her lips. Giving in to herself, she sat motionless until one tear after another began to escape from the corners of her eyes and roll down her cheeks.

He began to explain what had happened. "It was all a horrible mistake. John called me from a filling station and said his car had broken down. He asked me to come and pick him up because he didn't want to be late in picking you up. I went and got him, and we were driving along. All of a sudden my steering went out, and the car slid off the road. We hit a fence . . . the fence was on John's side. . ."

"You mean *you* were driving? It was *your* fault!" Jacki pictured over and over again in her mind John lying dead in the car and Rick walking away with a cut on his head.

"Get out, *murderer!* Get out!" she screamed and ran from the room, not knowing where to go or what to do.

Rick sadly walked from the house, leaving the door wide open and Jacki to her thoughts.

She found security in her own room. Throwing herself onto the bed, she tried to reason with herself. All this time I was mad at him for being late . . . so selfish . . . I was ready to tell him I didn't even want to see him . . . Oh, God, why did you punish me like this? What did I do to deserve this? . . . How can he be dead—on my *birthday!*

She was alone—no one to comfort her. The clock struck 10:00 but she never heard it; she was completely absorbed in her thoughts.

All the beautiful times . . . the prom . . . the picnic . . . and tonight . . . Oh, God, *please* don't let this be real. I *love* him! How can our love end up like this? . . .

She turned her head to the side and saw John's face smiling at her with a look of love and contentment. She reached over and took his picture from her dresser and held it to her chest. She could feel the warmth of the picture and pretended that the picture was really him, but she knew that it was warm only because it had been sitting under her lamp on the dresser.

When Jacki's parents came home late that night, they had not yet heard of John's death. Walking inside the open door and climbing the steps to Jacki's room, they found her lying on her bed, her arm hanging over the edge. And on the floor lay John's picture, the glass cracked from the impact it had made as it had hit the floor.

