

## **FourEver Friends** **By Erica Miner**

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### **Chapter 2**

The Presidential race had been neck-in-neck throughout, but with Labor's support behind him in the Motor City, John Fitzgerald Kennedy had no problem attracting an enthusiastic turnout for his Labor Day speech in downtown Detroit.

Jessica came from a long line of opinionated family members well versed and savvy in politics. In her youthful perception, her parents held at least one soiree each weekend when aunts, uncles, cousins and friends were invited to partake of copious amounts of Olga's food and pastry and participate in heated political discussions. From a young age Jessica sat amongst her parents' company, listening to the escalating decibel levels of the arguments, watching with alarm as the veins on her father's temples bulged, and wondering why the subject of politics elicited such passionate emotions from the grownups.

*What is all the fuss about?*

Dave Rowe didn't tolerate Republicans in general, the present administration in particular. Olga held the same opinion. She thought Eisenhower a do-nothing President who spent most of his time and taxpayers' money playing golf. She did, however, feel Truman betrayed the

country and the world by dropping the bomb on Hiroshima. She had no qualms about expressing herself on that count.

“How could he do that to those poor people? I trusted him.”

In general the debates over Zionism took place much later in the evening, when Jessica was supposed to be in bed. But the subject fascinated so much she sat at the top of the stairs out of sight and listened, trying to make sense of the complex subject.

*But really, why begrudge Israelis the fervor of their convictions? They've suffered enough to get their little country, haven't they?*

Jessica felt people should be allowed to be as passionate as they wanted to be in arguing the case for an organized movement of world Jewry, as long as she herself didn't have to subscribe to it. Meanwhile, she had plenty of information to feed her natural curiosity about politics. By the time she became old enough to form her own opinions, she never hesitated about airing them, though she felt capable of presenting her own beliefs with a great deal more self-control than that of the older generation.

Jessica didn't trust Nixon. Not just because her family had liberal Democrat leanings, or because he was sinister and loathsome looking. When she looked at him she saw he was lying through his teeth. She had no qualms about declaring her opinion to her cousin Jane, who was six years older and almost of voting age.

“It's so obvious he's lying. Can't you see it?”

“I'm trying to be objective, Jessica. I'm going to watch all the debates and make a decision based on how the candidates perform and how convincing they are.”

Jane always represented the voice of reason of a benevolent and loving mentor and wished-for older sister Jessica never had. And who wouldn't wish for a sister, with a brother like Herb?

Mean-spirited, nasty, unsympathetic and arrogant, Herb had been her nemesis since day one, when at age three he had first seen his baby sister, just home from the hospital. He lost no time in stating his view to his mother.

"She's ugly. Take her back."

The more he hated his sister, however, the more she loved him, until she refused to bear his hatred anymore. Tired of being beaten up by him physically and verbally, Jessica just ignored him, which was easy to do, now that he was in the throes of adolescence and busy with his Young Socialist meetings.

But Jane always made herself available to Jessica. Warm and caring, without a mean cell in her body, Jane lavished Jessica with attention, *sans* the blistering jealousy Herb unloaded on his sister. Jane hand-sewed clothes for Jessica's dolls, spent endless hours playing with her and reading to her, and eventually taught her about sex.

For some unknown reason, Olga Rowe had been unwilling to explain the facts of life to her own daughter. Jessica then asked her father how babies were made. He just gasped and blushed and presented her with a childish book filled with tasteful drawings of fetuses growing in women's tummies. So when Jane found out Jessica had reached pre-puberty with no coping skills, she took it upon herself to instruct her cousin.

Sitting Jessica down at the dining room table, Jane pulled out pencil and paper and drew diagrams of eggs and sperm.

“Now, Jess, an egg is in the woman’s uterus. When an egg meets a sperm from a man’s penis, it forms a fetus. That’s how babies are made.”

Jessica understood the concept, though she had trouble imagining certain details.

“But how does a penis enter a vagina?”

Somehow she was unable to persuade Jane to draw a diagram of that, and had to content herself with whatever knowledge she took away from that table.

Now she had reached the age of fourteen and was much more equipped to handle the burden of being female. After spending an enchanting weekend visiting Jane at her dorm at Eastern Michigan University, Jessica felt almost like a woman of the world, qualified to make political judgments. And she decided Kennedy was the Great New Hope.

Labor Day morning was a pristine autumn day, mild and crisp, typical of Detroit at that season. Jessica bounded out of bed, excited, and hurried to get dressed for the event. Kennedy’s Labor Day speech in the Motor City was undoubtedly going to be attuned to the needs of Labor. She felt sure Kennedy was destined to become President. Seeing her idol in person constituted the memory of a lifetime, and she could barely contain her anticipation. But when she and her father spotted the intimidating crowd encroaching on the small podium in the middle of the square in front of the Hilton Hotel downtown, Jessica’s heart sank.

“There’s no way we’re going to even catch a glimpse of him, Dad.”

“Don’t worry, Babe.” (“Babe” was his pet name for her.) “I’ll think of something.”

Jessica and her Dad fought their way as close to the podium as possible. The fervor and charged energy of the throng filled her with enthusiasm.

*I would be content just to brush shoulders with those who can actually see JFK.*

Then a roar unlike anything she had ever heard swelled up from the crowd, as the young Presidential hopeful appeared on the podium. Crouching low and jumping high, Jessica struggled to see something, anything, of him. She became more and more frustrated.

All of a sudden she felt herself being lifted onto her Dad's shoulders. She only saw Kennedy's face in profile, but it was a view she would never forget.

*It's like seeing God.*

A divine quality emanated from JFK, in his features crafted to perfection and from the depths of his soul. Pure magic.

"Can you see now, Babe?"

She gasped, breathless with awe. "Oh! Oh yes, Dad."

Enraptured, she listened to the wondrous tones of the future President's voice, his charming Massachusetts inflections, and let herself be transported by his charisma.

How had her small-statured, handicapped father managed to hoist her upon his shoulders? She had no way of knowing, but her love for him deepened as surely as her love for that newfound leader of the Western world.

After watching each one of the debates and weighing with great care all of the pros and cons, Jane decided to choose Kennedy after all. Jessica, of course, considered it a no-brainer. The eighty million viewers who watched the pasty-faced Nixon square off against the well-tanned carefully made-up Kennedy thought so as well. Though radio listeners leaned towards Nixon, TV viewers outnumbered them. Jessica felt sure her hero would come out on top in the election.

Aside from politics, she had other important issues to discuss with her cousin Jane, issues grownups refused to talk about with Jessica because of her youth. Foremost among these was religion. Disillusioned, both with Judaism and with the whole idea of God, Jessica didn't understand why He made the decisions He did and caused the world to be such a screwed-up place. She decided to become an atheist.

Jane set her straight. "No, what you are is an agnostic. That's what I am. If you don't really know if there's a God, or if you just can't be sure, that's the best way to go."

Jessica considered this new information with great seriousness.

*A brilliant concept, of course! The perfect niche for me.*

She didn't know, she wasn't sure, and therefore she called herself an agnostic. If only she'd recognized this sooner!

*Now, if anyone asks me, I can answer with conviction.*

Until her father got wind of her decision and burst her bubble, she'd felt secure in knowing at long last what she wanted.

“You don’t know the first thing about it.” His assertive tone left no room for doubt. “Go to the library, get some books on the subject and study the philosophical background. Then maybe you can make an informed decision.”

Jessica berated herself for confiding in him and made a vow for the future.

*From now on, I’ll keep my newfound secrets to myself.*