

LIFE BEFORE ME

BY

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Disclaimer

Life Before Me is a complete work of fiction. Apart from the historical people, events, and locations that feature in the narrative, the stories about them are a product of the author's imagination or used fictitiously. Any resemblance to real people, events, and/or locales is entirely coincidental. Scenarios are not intended to reflect the complete accuracy of time periods, people, and/or locations described.

Sources and Acknowledgements

Although not intended to be a work of historical fiction, *Life Before Me* is the story of a USAF pilot serving during the Vietnam era. Some research was necessary in order to gain insight into an era and occupation previously unfamiliar to me.

I gleaned most of the historical facts from internet searches, specifically, Wikipedia.

However, since *Life Before Me* began as a way for me to “live out” my childhood dream to become a fighter pilot with the United States Air Force, I took great care to learn about the craft. The following are sources I found most helpful and referred to often:

No Guts No Glory! by Major General Frederick C. “Boots” Blesse.

Final Tour of Duty, North American's T-28 Trojans by Robert Genat.

The Air Force Academy Candidate Book by William L. Smallwood and Sue Ross.

Dogfights (TV series) from the History Channel.

The Specialized Undergraduate Pilot Training website:
<http://www.baseops.net/militarypilot/>

I would like to give special thanks to Michael “Moose” Moore for your guidance in helping me get into the mind of a pilot and for keeping the lingo as real as possible while still making sense to civilians like myself. Thank you for the great dog fighting stories. You are my hero and my friend.

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The story of Theodore Francis Bailey
is dedicated to all the military personnel
who did what I
could not.

Thank you.

Prologue
Daughter

Most of us share one common trait: We cannot fathom the existence of life before our own birth. We study history and read of the great figures of time long forgotten with nothing more than fanciful idealism.

In his novels, Jeff Shaara humanizes humble men transformed into the greatest figures of American military and political history—George Washington, Ulysses S. Grant, Robert E. Lee, Thomas “Stonewall” Jackson, and John J. Pershing—to name a few.

With the advent of television, viewers saw footage of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. telling the world his dream and losing his life, but not his voice, to a man unable to see past the color of his own skin. We watch with a sense of pride and sorrow as broadcasters replay footage of America’s own royal family, The Kennedys, our President and Prince, fallen prey to an assumed curse.

Hollywood memorializes legends in sports, music, and industry. Leonardo DiCaprio’s captivating performance of Howard Hughes allowed moviegoers to peep into the life of Mr. Hughes, experiencing the reckless abandon that made him thrive in the aviation and film industry.

We turn the pages with awestruck wonder and stare at the screen with childlike adoration, reducing their legacy to mere fictitious hearsay, forgetting the actuality of their heroism and dedication to an ideal now taken for granted. These images never mesh with our conscious reality. Our world view reduces all such stories into irrelevant myths. As far as we are concerned, life did not begin until we graced humanity with our first independent breath.

Case in point: My family gets together once every ten years or so to watch slides. For

those too young to remember slides, they are old transparent two-by-two photographs encased in a slide tray and displayed on a wall or screen using a projector, popular long before the age of digital imaging.

Even though I enjoy seeing slides of my mom and dad in their youth back in high school, at Laughlin Air Force Base in Texas during the early days of their marriage, and of Dad hanging out with long lost buddies while serving in Bien Hoa, I find myself wallowing in boredom while I wait for more familiar days.

I enjoy seeing my oldest brother as a baby. The first born child and grandchild grows accustomed to a flash bulb popping in his presence. My favorite picture of my other brother shows him sitting on Grandpa Jacob's lap trying to stick a lollipop the size of his head into his tiny mouth.

The stories that go along with each slide are true family treasures. I have one small problem with all those slides and all those stories—I am not a part of them. No one cares about me then because I did not yet exist. I want to see that adorable new baby, the one my dad called pumpkin-head because of the shape of my mother's stomach while pregnant with me, the one my older brother claimed as his own the moment of my birth, the one my daddy loved so much but never got to hold.

I want to see the picture of my mother with me inside her pumpkin-shaped belly, surrounded by friends and unwrapping presents at my baby shower. I want to see the one of me on my tummy holding myself up with feeble hands or the one of me with my brothers wearing our adorable Christmas pajamas. I want to see the photo of me on my tricycle leaning forward to kiss Uncle Robby.

I want to see the pictures characteristic of who I am still today—the one of me wearing a

cap, stuffing my face full of Valentine's chocolates—the one of me lying on the kitchen counter watching television with my cowboy boots kicking the air—the one of me wearing a proud smile, sitting on the patio with half a dozen puppies surrounding me—the one of me with Mom's makeup all over my face and gigantic alligator tears streaming down my cheeks—the one with baking flour covering my body from head to toe.

I want to hear the stories Mom loves to retell each time we look at those pictures together. *Your grandfather gave us chocolate every year on Valentine's Day, and you had to have your own box. You refused to share and ate every piece.—You loved wearing Cowboy hats and boots. No matter where we went, your daily wardrobe included a hat, boots, and jeans. —I came looking for you to see if you finished your chores and found dirty dishes in the sink and you on the countertop watching television.—Do you remember your dog Chow Chow? All her puppies became your best buddies. It broke your heart when we gave them away.—You asked permission to do something after you already did it because you knew I would say no. You were always getting into trouble.*

Life never really began until I became a part of it. We all want to be included in the family lore and the tales of yesteryear. They become real to us only after our entrance onto the scene. The truth remains, though, no matter how inconceivable. Life existed before my birth. My parents, my grandparents, my entire family lived a life before me.

Chapter One
Theodore Francis Bailey
(Teddy)

I remember my father talking about the attack on Pearl Harbor, “a humiliating defeat through enemy air power,” as he described it. “Son,” he said, “Americans have more resources than any other country on earth—more raw materials, more intelligent people, more industrial efficiency—yet we’ve been outwitted in the air. Use your potential, Boy. Don’t allow yourself to trail behind inferiority. You make others imitate you.”

I never questioned the accuracy of his fervent acclaim for our beloved country. Taking his energetic words as absolute truth, my passion for aviation took root. Not once did I question my destiny to fly. I coveted the notion of engaging in America’s booming air technology and taking my father’s mission to war, using our country’s military superiority in battle in my own way, saving face for the humiliation and anger my dad felt at the hands of the Japanese fighters on December 7, 1941.

My daddy, Jacob Isaiah Bailey, grew up on a farm in Saybrook, Illinois, shucking corn and plowing fields since he was knee high to a cob. He knew nothing but farming and intended for nothing else except to continue the trade handed down from his father’s father’s father. Then, when news reached his small community that the war from across the ocean struck a harbor within the impenetrable US of A, the impossible became possible. The unbelievable became reality. America had been found vulnerable.

A surge of anger swept through my daddy’s pious veins. An unquenchable desire for retribution swelled his pride. In a blind instant, the rural peace of plowed fields suffocated this stoic young man. Leaving a new bride and two small children in care of family, he enlisted in the

Marines and followed all the other brave youth as America entered the Second World War.

When he returned home to the farm, he never spoke about his experiences. Momma told us kids that the war changed him, but she never explained why or how. Since I was only four when he left, I never quite understood her meaning. She simply said, ‘Now mind that you don’t fret him with your questions. Leave him be. He’s got enough to worry about, takin’ care of the farm and all. Don’t aggravate him with no war talk.’ We never did.

As I grew older, my interest in what happened in that foreign world intensified. The forbidden topic became a fascination for me. Even though the details remained his secret, I could still sense his pride in the United States—country and military—and the honor he felt at having fought alongside other worthy Marines.

“We’ve come a long way, my boy, but we’ve got a long way to go. We need strong men, proud men, men who aren’t afraid, men willing to take a stand. Without that, without these men, there *will* be another Pearl Harbor, mark my word. Only next time, those bastards won’t attack so far away . . . away . . . from . . . from *here*,” he said, pounding his fist against his chest. “Next time they’ll go after our bread and butter; they’ll try to destroy our means of survival . . . and . . . and they won’t stop.” My father bent forward in his chair and looked me straight in the eye as he said those words.

“They won’t stop. And if you think you can just turn a blind eye to it,” he trailed off. The anger in his voice betrayed his sentiment.

Daddy believed ignorance and indifference could one day kill our great nation. My Bible-toting, Bible-quoting father understood the occasional necessity for military action and trusted that Jesus Christ Himself sanctioned war if the only means to stop traitors of human dignity and Christian ideals and to protect the greater good of those unable to defend themselves involved

hostile action.

“Peaceful entreaties won’t silence the beast of tyranny,” my father would say. “Enemies of peace will not listen to the idle chatter of negotiation. They only know one way, that of cruelty and devastation. The enemy of peace can be destroyed only with force. He can be destroyed only using his own ways against him. And don’t nobody go waving a Bible in my face. I know what Jesus preached, and, lord, it would be wonderful if we could really live like that. But I also know what’s out there. If a man does not have Christ in him, there is nothing to make him act according to Christ’s word. As long as there’s sin in this world, the doctrines of the Bible . . . well . . . there’s just no way . . . there’s just . . .”

Daddy had some strong opinions about war and the Bible. The more he tried to talk about those opinions, though, the more his racing thoughts choked his words. As his ideas raged quicker than his lips, his frustration silenced his tirade. He always ended his sermons with this final thought: “We must out think and out plan, or we’ll have a secondary position among airpower nations. The future of everything is in the air.”

My father never flew in peacetime nor in war and even preferred keeping both feet planted on the ground. This, however, never squelched his faith in our country’s salvation through aviation. “With airplanes, we are no longer isolated. The shores can no longer protect us. The Indians were isolated until ships landed here. Look what happened to them. If our nation can’t defend our borders from air and sea, we, as a nation, will find ourselves cast in the same lot as the natives. Someone else will be ruling over us.

“We’ve come a long way since we first used planes in World War One, but it’s not enough. We must not let ourselves become vulnerable. No matter what people say, we must

stand up for freedom and never allow our country to become victims of mass chaos. What was once oceans apart is now just hours apart.”

Even though America saw loss, stalemate, and narrow victories in war before the controversial Korean and Vietnam conflicts of my era—such as the War of 1812 against the British and the Seminole Wars against the Native Americans—the two world wars most current in the memory of my father’s generation convinced him that the potential vulnerability he spoke of could never actually happen. With people at home fighting right alongside the men overseas, uniting as one for the glory of our great nation, he, along with the rest of the country, still believed in our unconquerable strength.

Ever since the early days of American history, media communications sabotaged war efforts, caring more about getting the story than the greater good. In a conversation with his first cousin, Cassius Lee, Robert E. Lee criticized the newspaper men who followed his exploits, arguing that their lack of patriotism—demonstrated by carelessly publishing the movements of his army—disrupted his plans. Lee spoke of sending Longstreet to the Western Army and the efforts made to keep this movement a secret. The mission failed when the papers published the plan for both friend and foe to read.

Even though American military leaders have had to deal with the nuisance of the media since the early days of her history, she has not always had to succumb to the lack of support from her people and rule from a wayward government perched in the comfort of civilization far removed from the theater of war.

Aware of his own limitations, Abraham Lincoln trusted Ulysses S. Grant to fight as his training and front line experience dictated. Our country won and lost wars based on the decisions

of those in the midst of the action with acute knowledge of the real threat they faced, not by politicians swayed by political agenda—as witnessed in Vietnam. Before governed fear caught up with military exploits, Americans stood as one. We sang with genuine patriotism:

America! America!

God shed His grace on thee

Till selfish gain no longer stain

The banner of the free!

My father spoke his caution, believing America incapable of ever surrendering to the whims of individuality. Although he refused to say it out loud, I sensed he had absolute confidence that the military and political leaders of the future would take calculated measures to protect our nation, placing the welfare of the people above self-promoting propaganda.

My dad's insistence on remaining impervious hardened him. But his resolve about the importance of aero warfare as the dominating force in his war and all future wars ignited in me a desire to be part of that endeavor—to be an active member of American preservation.

My dad's dueling sides—high spirited pride of American military might blended with his flat denial to discuss his own involvement in war—triggered my curiosity. I wanted to experience this secret for myself.

And though my war was of a different kind and time, his secret became my own.

Chapter Two Daughter

My father, as he looks in this picture, stood at about average height. His thin body preserved a well-built physique without indulging in muscular excess. His tanned skin betrayed his days of working under the cornfield sun. His straight light brown hair glistened in youthful exuberance and his bangs brushed against his forehead as if a gust of wind surged across his face.

Assuming the military practice of depilation existed to erase the identity of a soldier, I once asked my mother why they allowed my father to fashion his individuality with hair that fell below the tips of his ears. She laughed and told me the life of a pilot differed from the life of a foot soldier. Her exact meaning escaped my understanding, but, as the legend of my father grew, I began to understand how personality ultimately promotes the pilot's abilities while flying.

To hear others who once knew him and served with him in Vietnam, he was a man of great emotion and enthusiasm. Untouched by the cruelties of life, his naiveté served as both a blessing and a curse. He wore his fatigues with pride, but one always sensed a bit of rustic country boy in the way he carried himself. He walked with an erect back, chest thrust out, and shoulders hunched forward as if running late for an important engagement.

From the first day of his military training, the other recruits liked him and his superiors respected him. They saw the makings of a great future leader without any of the cocky egotism. They also feared for him. They knew what awaited him out there and were concerned his potential would never be reached if he could not gain control of his emotions. They wanted to toughen him up in hopes of keeping his humble mind intact.

Since his father first captured his child-like wonder with high-spirited declarations of

heroic aero defense, my father longed to fly for the United States Air Force (USAF), established in 1947. He dreamed of becoming a proud and capable ace, earning the respect of everyone from the ordinary citizen to the President and becoming infamous worldwide like his heroes Pappy Boyington and Chuck Yeager. He wanted to see battle and to know for himself the secrets his own father never shared. Right out of high school, he joined the USAF and soon became one of the top cadets at the Air Force Academy.

In 1961, President Kennedy sent my father's battalion to Vietnam a few years prior to President Johnson's public declaration of war. Refusing to participate in open warfare until the Gulf of Tonkin incident in 1964, America deployed a small percentage of US military personnel to "aid in training." He celebrated with the rest of the crew, toasting grand adventures and majestic heroism. He knew the government's official stance guarded the exact intent of their mission and my father thrived on the possibility of seeing his own action.

In Vietnam, he flew his T-37 and F-4 daily, training South Vietnamese Air Force pilots. Even during lazy downtime hours, he still soared on top of the world. My father fulfilled his destiny, living out his dream while serving his country.

This picture, the one I described earlier, is my favorite depiction of my father. His profile betrays a smirk of boyish excitement. His F-4 sits in the background like a faithful companion, his pride in his bird and his mission evident in the gleam in his eyes. If one looks closely, one can see a faint dot in the uppermost edge of the picture. I used to think a stain dirtied the pose and tried without hope to remove it. After studying this picture, I realized how the blemish memorializes the day that sentiment killed my father's innocence.

Chapter Three
Theodore Francis Bailey
(Teddy)

Finding our return to the routine of academia after a long summer of leisure difficult, Bobby and I heeded the rumbling in our stomachs and planned to follow the sweet aroma of maple syrup to Aunt Martha's Country Kitchen. Just as we were about to make our final dash out the door and to his car, we stopped dead in our tracks, our minds instantly forgetting the path we intended moments ago.

Alone, holding a single notebook close to her bosom, she walked toward the front office. Hiding a bashful smile, she retreated from our stares. Bobby boldly strutted in behind her.

“Good morning, Mrs. Saunders. Ted and I were late this morning. Overslept. We need passes to get to class.” Bobby forgot his appetite for pancakes.

“Didn’t I see you both earlier this morning before school?” Mrs. Saunders teased. She, like everyone else, loved Bobby and forgave his infrequent quirks of behavior.

Leaning on the counter, he made peace with Mrs. Saunders by posing a bashful grin and firing a persuasive wink. Turning his attention to his new obsession, he remarked, “Haven’t seen you here before. New, I take it?”

“Yes,” she said.

“Where’d you go to school before descending upon Saybrook High?”

“Central Catholic in Bloomington.”

“Not too far, but far enough. Your family move?”

“No.”

Enchanted by her shy demeanor, Bobby elected to impress her by recreating her history. “Okay. There are closer Catholic schools than Central. Must mean that you had some sort of tie

to Bloomington.” He paused, rubbing his chin for effect. “I’ve got it! Your dad is the priest there, and that’s why you went to school so far away.”

His attempt at filling in the blanks of her former existence calmed her nervous disposition. She laughed, “Priests don’t have children. They can’t get married. At least, not in the Catholic Church.”

“Well, that’s too bad. Let me try again. Catholic school girls have a reputation for being wild. I bet your parents intended good by sending you, but, once you got there, you turned into an unruly child. So, they figured if they removed you from that environment, you’d calm down a bit.”

She laughed again, lured by his magnetism. “I’m not that interesting,” she confessed. “My parents liked the school. I was a boarder. That simple. My dad lost his job, and my parents can no longer afford to send me to private school. That suits me just fine. I would much rather go to school here.”

“Good ole’ public high school. I’d say you can find just as much trouble here as anywhere. My name’s Bobby Clayton. This here is Theodore Bailey. He’s gonna fly someday.”

She extended her delicate hand to greet me. “Good to meet you, Theodore Bailey.”

“Call me Teddy,” I corrected with nervous intimidation.

“Hallelujah! He speaks!” Bobby bellowed, throwing his arms in the air as if tossing a balloon to the moon. “He is a little shy with the ladies, especially the pretty ones.” He nodded toward her as he spoke, making it very clear that both of us considered her to be one of those pretty ones.

“Uh humm,” interrupted Mrs. Saunders. “Hate to disturb you all, but it’s about time you boys got to class.” She handed us our tardy slips.

“Madam, I would be much obliged if I could show this young woman around the campus.” Turning toward the young woman, he said, “And I don’t even know your name.”

“Abigail Sullivan.” Turning to me she said, “You may call me Abbey.”

“So, what do you say, Mrs. Saunders?” Bobby pleaded.

“We can take care of her just fine, Romeo. You go on now. You can’t play if you can’t even make it to class. I’m sure you will run into her again soon.”

“You can count on that!”

As we headed back to homeroom, Bobby pretended to be weak in the knees, feigning as if her essence drained the life out of him. “Doesn’t she just take your breath away? I’ve earned about twenty extra laps for this. It would’ve been better for me to skip altogether, but it was well worth it.”

Bobby was your typical All-American beloved jock. His family moved to our little town from the great state of Texas, searching for hidden dreams buried in the fields of Illinois. After the first day of summer training camp, rumors of illegal recruiting circulated around town. No freshman in the history of Saybrook ever started his high school football career as a starter on varsity. With his speed and remarkable hand-eye coordination, our new wide receiver transformed our team from a group of clumsy misfits to adolescent football icons. The team with the most interceptions and fumbles in the league won every regular season game the first year Bobby stepped onto the field. He never acknowledged the rumors, preferring the aura of mystery such gossip wrapped around him.

Every girl swooned for him, flirting with shameless constancy. Every boy pretended not to notice him while longing for the skill he possessed on the field and with the ladies. Our elders

in the community acted as if in the presence of Dante “Glue Fingers” Lavelli from the Cleveland Browns, Bobby’s idol. Preserving his southern charm and grace—attributes absent from most teenage boys with his looks and talent—made his public love him that much more. Everyone predicted NFL greatness for our hometown hero.

How a simple farm boy and an athletic powerhouse became best friends is as bewildering as our characters contrasting. Robert Clayton stood behind me, Theodore Bailey, during school registration the summer before our freshman year.

“You play football?” a booming voice behind me asked. I pretended not to hear. At five foot nothing, weighing 100 and nothing, no one had ever mistaken me for a football player.

“You play ball?” he asked again, this time tapping me on the shoulder as he spoke.

I turned around and looked at him. Although not much taller than I, his lean frame showed the strength of a mule. “No,” I answered, questioning his inquiry.

“Good. I’ll be seeing enough of those goons. Be good to hang out with someone else and be able to talk about something other than football. There’s more to life, you know?”

I paused before responding. Who was this person? A grown man repeating the ninth grade for the twelfth time or a freak of nature? Either way, I had never met anyone quite like him and doubted I ever would again.

He stared at me with mouth gaping, waiting for an answer. “Sure, I guess,” I finally said.

He chose to be my friend because I offered an escape from the sport that consumed his life. This anecdote sums up his character and explains why he distanced himself from his adoring female fans. Bobby craved an outlet from the pressures of maintaining a winning streak. By age sixteen, he fantasized about living a more humble existence. He dreamed of dating girls interested in something other than their own public image.

“They don’t know anything about me except that I’m a good ball player. Hell, most of them know that only because someone else told them. I bet half of them don’t even know the difference between a forward pass and a bootleg.”

“I don’t even know the difference,” I confessed.

“Yea, but you’re not trying to hang with me to make yourself look good. You know me and like me despite my flaws.”

“You have flaws?” I taunted.

Bobby punched me rather hard in the arm. “You know what I’m getting at. So what if I can catch a football? I could be a real asshole. Why would any girl want to date me if I were an asshole?”

“But you’re not,” I argued.

“They don’t know that.”

So, when Abigail Louise Sullivan ambled into his life, he fell in love. Her demeanor, from day one, contrasted dramatically with the other girls at school, even after she learned of Bobby’s reign in Saybrook.

She visited local hangouts because she wanted to, and, if she crossed paths with Bobby, she treated him no different from anyone else. She attended football games because she enjoyed the sport and because most of the town shut down on game nights. She never waited around after a game or stayed behind one of his classes hoping to catch him on his way out. Her indifference intrigued Bobby.

“Abigail,” he would say. “The name of an angel, don’t you think?”

“Pretty name,” I agreed.

“I’ve got to get to know her. Think she’d go out with me? She doesn’t seem all that

interested.”

“Only one way to find out.”

Embracing shyness for what I imagined to be the first time in his life, he swallowed his fear and asked out an angel. To no one’s surprise, she said yes and became the envy and enemy of every other girl in school.

“You know why they hate you, don’t you?” I once asked Abbey.

“Yes, but why should anyone hate me just because of that? They know nothing about me.”

“You and Bobby are something else,” I mused. “Old souls in teenage bodies. You do realize that neither one of you think like you’re supposed to?”

“Oh, so I’m supposed to be caught up in boys and gossip, and Bobby is supposed to be the cocky jock that dates all the girls instead of having just one steady girlfriend?”

“Pretty much.”

“And what about you, Teddy Bailey? So set on your future. I don’t see you dating any of these ordinary teenagers. If Bobby and I are different, then so are you.”

Although I did go out with a girl a time or two, I never had a serious girlfriend. Abbey thought I spent endless hours plotting and planning my route to the Air Force, leaving little time for dating. Contrary to what she believed, I never pursued a relationship because Bobby held the one I wanted. No one compared to her. I, too, was in love with Abigail Sullivan, the girl with the name of an angel—the girl with the voice of an angel—the girl—the angel.

Bobby’s talent and popularity never made me jealous. I never boasted that a jock like him chose to hang out with a simpleton like me. I never even considered our differences until he introduced her into my world. Jealousy took root after Abbey came along. He had her, and I

could never compete with him. She would never be mine.

Chapter Four
Abigail Louise Sullivan
(Abbey)

My mother cried tears of sorrow the day her doctor predicted that I, the new life growing inside her, rather than a virus, caused her nausea. “Stephen and Jesse are older now. They can work and help keep the farm from going under,” my mother reasoned with my father. “This one will be ten years younger than the boys. We can’t take care of another baby!”

Even though most farm families birthed multiple children spanning two generations, my parents decided long before my arrival to give me away. My aunt and uncle took me in and raised me as their own.

My family concealed nothing about my origins. My birth parents visited us, and we visited them on numerous occasions. They sent presents for my birthday and Christmas every year. They even sent my aunt and uncle money from time to time. But, I adored the two who loved me beyond words more than the couple who simply gave me life before giving me away.

I never questioned their reasons for abandoning me until after I returned “home.” If concern for my wellbeing—whether the farm allotted enough food for my belly or enough income to clothe me—dominated the decision, then sending me to my poor relatives made little sense. If incapable of loving me, why did they make such a great effort to remain a part of my life? I harbored resentment for many years.

My Aunt Rosie and Uncle Walter lived in a modest one bedroom home in a small farming community on the outskirts of Bloomington, Illinois. Uncle Walter fashioned a makeshift bedroom for me just off the kitchen by throwing up walls in one corner of the room. My bedroom stowed little more than a small twin bed, a chest of drawers, and a washing

machine. Aunt Rosie washed the clothes in the machine and hung them outside to dry.

The dilapidated barn sheltered a few pigs, chickens, and my uncle's beat up 1937 Ford pickup—nick-named ole' faithful. Rust covered her faded blue body, but, after a few cranks, she always started and got us where we needed to go. Uncle Walter taught me to drive her as soon as my legs reached the pedals.

They owned several acres of land and grew corn. My uncle worked from sunup until sundown six days a week. He ate, drank, and smoked more than any man I knew, but worked off his bad habits under the sun in the fields. He sold most of the fruits of his labor at the local farmer's market. Aunt Rosie kept a garden in the back yard. We lived off the land, eating the vegetables she grew and the chickens we raised.

“She'll never make it as a farmer's wife,” my uncle teased. “Names all the animals and refuses to eat her 'friends,' she says.”

I remember the first time I saw him kill a chicken. I watched Mary run in circles after Uncle Walter cut off her head. Aunt Rosie brought the carcass inside to bleed and de-feather her. Mom, Dad, Stephen, and Jesse came over that night for Sunday dinner. They assured me her breast tasted as delectable as morsels from heaven. I refused to eat, electing to cry myself to sleep instead.

“It defies all reason how that child can eat anything you put on her plate, without shame, but squalls like an infant if she sees the very thing on that very same plate killed,” my uncle grumbled.

My aunt tried to explain my neuroses. “It's all in her head. As long as it doesn't look like a living, breathing thing, she can enjoy it. If she pictures it as something with emotions, she mourns for it.”

“Them blasted chickens don’t have no feelings!”

“To her, all living creatures have a soul and feel the same as she does. She has compassion.”

“The girl thinks too much is all.”

Uncle Walter loved me enough to surrender to my quirkiness. From thence forward, my aunt and uncle performed the mortifying task required to feed the family out of my presence.

Every day after school, I performed more mundane chores such as collecting eggs and feeding the pigs. From time to time, stray kittens sought shelter in the barn. Aunt Rosie set out a bowl in the yard, and I filled it with milk once a day, careful to protect the kittens from Uncle Walter’s wrath.

“Befriend the cats, if you like, but don’t you ever bring them into the house,” Aunt Rosie warned. “Your uncle hates cats.”

“But why? They’re so adorable,” I said, snuggling with one while standing in the doorway.

“Those little creatures make him down right miserable. They’d be the death of him—or of us—if we’re not careful.”

I misinterpreted her warning and smuggled my playmate inside. After a long day in the fields, he returned home for a nice, quiet evening. Instead of peaceful rest, his eyes watered and itched and his constant sneezing constricted his breathing.

“Abigail, I better not find any of them damned cats in here,” he warned before searching my room.

“They’re not in here,” I lied.

He searched under the bed, under the sheets and in my dresser drawer. Nothing. I almost got away with it, but the little kitten, claustrophobic in her hiding place, scratched and meowed in fear. He opened the door to the washing machine and out jumped Spots, clawing Uncle Walter as she scrambled toward safety.

My uncle took me over his knee and beat my bottom until I cried for mercy. "Maybe next time you will remember to do as I say. I will not tolerate lying in this house." I never lied to him again.

Because our farm produced few dollars, I lacked some of the finer things others use to measure true happiness. I never realized all the material goods absent from my life. In fact, my uncle's philosophy enriched my thinking. "Two pairs of shoes? Who needs two pairs of shoes?"

"One pair is for school and another pair is for church," I explained.

He looked down at his own feet in worn leather boots. "One pair seems to do me just fine." He smiled and patted my head. "I suppose a pretty girl needs pretty shoes to go with her pretty Sunday dress." He bent down and whispered, "You know you're special when you've got two pairs of shoes." He kissed my cheek, making me feel like the wealthiest girl in the world.

In a community where people lived off the land, went to church on Sunday, and ate three square meals a day as a family, I never understood the term poverty. I appreciated the fact that I attended a private school paid for by patrons other than my relatives. My uncle vowed to take any means necessary to provide the best education for me. Since he attended public school in an era when many young men dropped out after learning the very basics of reading, writing, and arithmetic, he promised a more solid future for me. "There's always work at home to be done, but as long as I'm alive and my bones are willing, you tend to your studies first and to the farm

after."

Even though we all wore the same uniform to school, I still noticed the differences between me and my fellow classmates. Everything about them—their demeanor, their attitude, their extra-curricular activities and looks—clashed with me. They fashioned their individuality with fancy bracelets, watches, necklaces, and rings. They even sported hairdos with accessories such as barrettes and bows.

Regardless of evident discrepancies between us, I felt blessed because of the delicious food on the table, the warm bed in *my* room, and *my* two pairs of shoes. The love and care from my aunt and uncle left me wanting for nothing until the day my uncle died.

My Aunt Rosie sat on the porch swing awaiting my return home from school. As I walked up the narrow dirt driveway to the house, I sensed an air of change. By this late in the afternoon, sweat should have been building at her temples as she prepared supper. The closer each step brought me to her, the more evident it became that bad news awaited me. A hauntingly white complexion replaced the pink hue of her plump rosy cheeks, and her constant smirk gave way to a cheerless frown. I stood at the bottom step, pleading with wordless desperation for an explanation.

“You just missed them,” she told me, breaking the spell-binding silence.

“Missed who?”

“They took him away.” She spoke with monotonous syllables, hiding her true meaning behind choppy words.

“Took who away? Took Uncle Walter? Where? Is Uncle Walter in some sort of trouble?”

Aunt Rosie rocked on the swing, her eyes staring right at me, but looking past me. Her

chin began to quiver and one solitary tear escaped. "What am I going to do?" With those words, she dropped her head into her hands and sobbed. Weeping moans grew louder with each breathless convulsion. I dropped my books and ran up the steps, slumped to my knees in front of her and threw the weight of my body into hers.

"Where's Uncle Walter?" I pleaded.

She fought to catch her breath, wanting to respond, but unable to find the strength. We held each other until the burden became too much and weary limbs dried her tears and steadied her breathing. The sky grew dark and the moon showed its full brightness before either of us spoke another word. We remained rooted in our place, indifferent to grumbling tummies or aching extremities.

"You better get on to bed," she said at last. "Gotta go to school in the morning."

"Not until you tell me what happened," I protested.

"Go on. Mind your auntie, now. If you're hungry, lunch is still sitting on the table. Eat something, then go on to bed."

"But . . ." I whined.

"Now go!" She demanded with a bit more force. I dared not argue.

That night, I lay in bed imagining all the possibilities. Did he commit a crime we knew nothing about? Did he owe a bad debt? I never knew my uncle to carouse in town or to gamble or drink too much or flirt with the wrong type of woman. He worked hard all day and relaxed with the family at night.

Did he get into an accident? Ole' faithful still sat in the driveway. No new dents damaged her body. He was as healthy as a horse and as strong as a mule. I refused to think the most logical, pushing every thought of death out of my head. Instead, I willed myself into a restless

sleep and waited for the first hint of sunlight.

When I opened my bedroom door the next morning, silence greeted me. No eggs frying on the griddle. No talk of the work to be done today. No one calling my name, warning me to hurry before breakfast got cold and I arrived late for school. I walked through the house, looking for any signs of normal activity. I found myself all alone.

“I’m out here, Baby,” my aunt called from the front porch. She wore the same clothes and sat in the same place and wore the same ghostly expression as the night before.

“What are you doing out here, Aunt Rosie? You ever go to bed?”

“No,” she answered in a matter-of-fact tone.

I went back inside to fetch the blanket from my bed. Although mid-spring, a slight chill hung in the air. I wrapped the blanket around her and hefted her to her feet. “Come on inside. Let me make you some coffee, warm you up a bit.”

She followed with the obedience of an infant, sipped her coffee and nibbled on a piece of bacon. “Aunt Rosie? I’m not going to school today, okay?”

She looked at me with a quizzical gaze. “You feeling okay, Honey?”

“No, Aunt Rosie. I’m not feeling good at all.”

“Hope you’re not coming down with something.”

“I’m not getting sick. I’m . . . sad, you know? Like you. I miss Uncle Walter.”

“Fine man, your uncle. Hard working, too. But, what’s to miss? You got home awfully late last night. Got you a new beau? That why you don’t want to go to school? Too tired? Well, I’ll let it slide this once.”

“No, ma’am. I haven’t met anybody. Worried about Uncle Walter is all.”

“He’s up early this morning. Had to get to workin’, he said. You’ll see him when you get

home from school. Just don't stay out so late again. Go on to school and be sure to be home in time to do your chores before supper." She erased the memory of whatever happened the day before, electing to go on as if nothing had happened.

I hated to leave her alone, but I needed to find out what happened to my uncle. I got dressed, grabbed my books, and kissed my aunt goodbye, promising to be home in time for supper. Instead of heading for school, however, I headed for our nearest neighbor.

"Johnny! Amy! Anybody home?" I banged on the front door.

"Well hello, Abbey. Surprised to see you," Amy, Johnny's wife, said. "We're so sorry about your uncle."

"That's actually why I'm here."

"Come in. What can we do for you?"

Johnny and Amy's two young boys sat at the breakfast table staring at me as if looking at an apparition, eager to run, but more afraid to move lest I steal their souls. Johnny and Amy pursed their lips and tilted their heads, an obvious sign of sympathy in their eyes. I knew they knew my aunt's buried secret.

"Have a seat," Johnny stood and offered me his warmed chair.

"I came home yesterday and . . ." I started.

"We know," Amy finished. "We called for the ambulance. It's such a shock to us all."

My eyes bulged with the mention of an ambulance. The smell of eggs and bacon crawled through my nostrils and numbed my starved body. "That's just it," I said, fighting to control the nausea swirling in my head. "I think she's in shock or something. My aunt never told me what happened. Then, this morning, she's acting strange. She thinks Uncle Walter's out working in the fields. She doesn't even remember my coming home yesterday. I didn't want to leave her at

home alone, but I don't know what else to do. I needed to find out what happened."

Amy rushed to the door and ran toward our house. As she fled, she asked Johnny to speak with me while she went to look after my aunt. Johnny saw the boys off to school before rejoining me at the table.

"So, you don't know anything?"

"No." I lowered my head. "But I have a feeling . . ."

Johnny took my hands in his. "Abbey, I really hate to be the one to tell you this, but your Uncle Walter passed away yesterday."

I began to cry.

"Your uncle had an accident. You know that new tractor of his? Them tractors have what's called a pto, you see? A power take off."

"He told me to keep away from it. Yelled at me any time I got too close. Told me I'd get myself hurt."

"Well, it spins pretty fast. Doesn't matter how careful you are. It's dangerous. He tried to hook that old hay mower to the back, but something went terribly wrong. Had trouble with the latch and his sleeve got caught in the blade. Tore off his whole arm. He bled to death out there in the field."

"Who found him?"

"From what I understand, your aunt called him in for lunch. When he never came, she intended to drag him in by the collar. That's when . . ."

"Oh . . ."

"As it happened, the boys got it in their head to skip school yesterday. They were playing by the creek that separates ya'll's place from ours. They mistook your aunt's wailing for the cries

of a witch," Johnny chuckled in spite of himself. "They come charging up to the house fast as lightning to confess their sins and vow to never skip school again. Amy sent the boys to their room as punishment and came to fetch me.

"We headed for the spot where the boys encountered the witch, expecting to find one of the heifers in labor or something. The second we heard the noise, we knew something terrible happened over there. Amy ran back to the house to call for help. I ran toward the screams.

"She sat on the ground, cradling him in her lap. Blood soaked both their bodies and the ground around them. I tried to get to him, but she refused to let him go. I took one look at him and knew. I wanted to help, Abbey, I swear I did. But, by the time I got there . . . I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

Johnny cried with me. I felt the burden he carried. "It's not your fault. At least you were there. Did she know . . . you know . . . when they took him away?"

"Yes. The paramedics came out to where we were mighty quick. It took three men and soothing words from Amy to pry your uncle out of your aunt's arms. But, yes. She knew. Amy stayed with her most of the day. Offered to stay until you got home, but your aunt said she'd be okay. Wanted to tell you herself. Guess we should have known better."

I thanked Johnny and returned home. When I arrived, a doctor and our priest tended to Aunt Rosie. A daily vigil of family and friends nurtured us, never leaving us out of their sight or allowing a silent moment to drag us into further despair. Aunt Rosie never recovered, though. Uncle Walter and Aunt Rosie met in grade school, becoming instant friends and life partners. Without him, her life was no longer worth living.

Through the support of the community, I managed to complete the school year before returning to live with my mother and father in Saybrook. They placed my aunt Rosie in a home

nearby. Nurses resorted to feeding her through an IV since she refused to feed herself. She spent her time between staring at a wall in utter silence to chatting with anyone willing to listen about her dear husband slaving in the field.

“He sure’s been working hard,” she sometimes swore. “Feel like I ain’t seen him in ages. When he comes in tonight, I’m going to give him a piece of my mind. Not even time for the harvest and he’s workin’ like a slave, forgettin’ the family. Gonna kill his’self if he don’t watch it.”

“Her behavior mimics that of one of our Alzheimer’s patients at times,” the doctor warned us. “She’s very healthy, though. We just can’t seem to break past her grief.”

“What accounts for the way she talks?” my dad asked. “I mean, at least when we were around, she spoke proper, you know?” He turned to me. “Right, Abbey?”

I nodded my head. “She always made me speak proper English and corrected me any time I used conjunctions or ‘bad words’ as she called them, words like ‘ain’t’ or ‘yea’ or ‘uh hu’.”

“Now, that I don’t know about. Maybe she doesn’t feel a need to use correct grammar since you aren’t around. Maybe she’s reverting to some former time. Maybe that’s how she spoke with her husband.”

“Will she be okay?” my mother asked.

“Only time will tell. If we can’t get her to accept the present and move on, well, then there’s not a whole lot we can do except make her as comfortable as possible.”

Within a few short months of losing my uncle Walter and moving into a nursing facility closer to my parents, my aunt Rosie died of a broken heart. The summer ended with a funeral. We buried her next to Uncle Walter. Mom and Dad sold their farm, eager to separate me and

those haunting recollections. Even though moving back “home” severed my ties with my former community, distance never erased the good or the bad memories of my childhood with Aunt Rosie and Uncle Walter.

Chapter Five
Theodore Francis Bailey
(Teddy)

A couple buddies and I got together each Tuesday evening at Pete's Place, a local dive on the outskirts of town where lonely drunks came to unwind. The rest of the men in the band, who surpassed me in age by more than twenty years, played for booze and gasoline. Our audience expected nothing more than for us to keep a beat and allow them to sing off key right along with us.

Abbey and her best friend, Lauren, walked in and sat at a table near the door. Neither the dense smoke permeating the small room nor the smell of stale grease encouraged them to leave. They watched our entire set as if listening to Big Joe Turner or Bill Haley and the Comets.

Filled with false confidence, I joined them during our first break and inquired how two innocent young women ended up in such a seedy bar. They blamed boredom and curiosity.

Their tale lacked conviction, but my inhibition prevented me from pushing the issue. Instead, I grasped for more mundane topics to fill the awkward silence.

"So," I began, checking the tremor in my tone, "how's Bobby? Why didn't you bring him here tonight?"

Abbey stared at a sticky stain on the table, scrutinizing its origin. With a weak smirk, her companion looked from Abbey to me, back to Abbey, then down and away. "They . . ." she started to say.

Abbey finally met my gaze. "We broke up."

I tried to hide my astonished excitement. "Broke up? When? Why? We hung out for a while after school today and he didn't say a thing!"

"Well, it just sort of happened. I mean, we'd been talking about it for a while, but we

finally made it official a little while ago.”

“I’m sorry. What happened, if you don’t mind me asking?”

“Don’t be sorry. It was mutual. Did he tell you he got a scholarship to play ball at UCLA?” I nodded my head yes. “We decided to break up since he would be moving clear across the country and since I intended to stay right here at home.”

“Why should that stop you? There’s always holidays and summers. You two could make it work.”

“Yes, I suppose, if we loved each other.” Her eyes met mine, searching for a reaction. I pulled my gaze away and stared at my calloused finger tips. “The truth is, I don’t think either one of us ever really loved each other. I held no unrealistic expectations of his moving to California and remaining faithful.”

“But, he’s not like that. He . . .”

She cut me off. “I know, but . . . we weren’t meant to be.” She shrugged her shoulders as she spoke. “Our relationship simply ran its course.”

“You think you’ll always stay in Saybrook?” Still trying to piece her confession and possible hidden intentions together, I wracked my brain trying to come up with a way to take advantage of an unexpected turn of events.

“I guess, realistically, I’ll move on as well. All I know is Bobby and I intended to break up at the end of the summer anyway. This way, we can enjoy the rest of the school year and graduation without the inevitable looming over our heads.”

“I have to say I’m shocked. I really expected you two to go the distance. Are you sure you’re okay?”

“I’m sure. Like I said, it was mutual. Don’t get me wrong, he’s a great guy, but I’m not in

love with him.”

Paul, the band leader, tapped me on the shoulder. “Round two. Ready to go?”

I got back on stage for another set, thankful for the tone deaf ears of our inebriated crowd. My mind tumbled trying to make sense of her words. The captain of the football team and the Homecoming queen broke up. Perfection destroyed. For the first time that night, I allowed myself to scrutinize her alibi.

It stood to reason why Abbey needed a night out after a devastating split with her longtime boyfriend. Breakups and beer complement one another. Yet, she sat at her table sipping an alcohol free cola, watching intently as the band dissected another top forty hit. An inner voice scoffed when I allowed myself to wonder if she came to see me.

“This next number is a brand new song by the Penguins. Dedicated to the lovely young ladies in the corner.” Paul winked at my humiliation and chuckled as he watched Abbey and Lauren squirm in their seats. “Benny,” he said to the bartender. “Get these two Earth Angels a drink on me.”

Paul threw his arm around me and smiled in Abbey’s direction as he sang:

I fell for you and I knew
The vision of your love-loveliness
I hoped and I pray that someday
I'll be the vision of your hap-happiness

He timed our next break to coincide with the conclusion of a mortifying confession. His brass tactics shined a spotlight on a topic I intended to keep secret. “Thanks a lot, Paul!” I said before leaving the stage. “What’d you do that for?”

“I saw the way you’ve been looking at her ever since she walked in. I also witnessed your

crash and burn earlier. She's given you an opening. I merely gave you a push." He shoved me as he spoke.

Conscious of eyes in the distance watching my every move, I asked Abbey's permission to drive her home after our next set.

"Sorry, but I'm not allowed to go out on school nights. My parents believe I'm working late on a class project at Lauren's house. I'm spending the night with her."

As if scheming with the old man on stage, Lauren interjected, "We can work something out. If you two want to talk for a while, we could plan to meet outside my house at, say, two o'clock? That enough time? Can't be too loud, though, for obvious reasons."

The three of us made plans for Abbey and me to spend some time together after last call. I walked back on stage with head held high and chest thrust out. A twinge of guilt scratched at my newfound confidence, desperate to remind me of the cost of victory.

"So, tell me the truth," I said, leading her to the dark space adjacent to the band stand posing as the backstage slash dressing room area. With walls made of thick woolen drapes rung through shower curtain-like rods hanging from wall to floor, no natural or artificial light penetrated our makeshift cave. Decorated with nothing other than one couch smelling of mildew, cigarettes, and sex, this area served multiple needs. Looking around the room to stress my point, I continued, "Why did you really come here?"

Taking in the drab odor, she wrinkled her nose in a discrete attempt to mask her disgust. "First time in a place like this. Can't tell much from the outside."

"You can tell enough to know it's not your kind of place."

"And how do you know what's my kind of place?"

I raised an eyebrow, playfully scolding her for telling such lies. "You didn't answer my question." My words feigned confidence, but my insides quivered as the smell of her fragrant perfume mingling with other stenches of ill repute teased my nostrils.

"Fine. I knew you'd be here. Is that what you want to hear?"

My throat constricted as her confession reached my ears. "Is that the truth?"

She reached for my hand. "That's the truth."

My best friend's girlfriend, the woman I fell in love with more than one year ago, sat next to me on a foul smelling sofa in a hole-in-the-wall bar holding my hand at one o'clock in the morning on a Tuesday night. I needed time to digest everything. How could this woman be interested in a no-consequence farm boy like me?

"So," she broke my reverie, leaning her shoulder into mine. "So?"

"Do you know how long I've wanted to kiss you?"

"Then why don't you?" I fantasized about this moment, about the softness of her lips, the way they would pucker with mouth slightly parted to meet mine. Her light brown eyes close with subtle yearning as she tilts her head and leans her body into my embrace. Now, she waited for me just as I imagined. Conscious of my every breath, I touched her lips to mine.

"I never thought you'd kiss me like that," I confessed.

"Why not?"

"Well, I'm no Bobby." Oh my goodness! Bobby! Lost in my own selfish desires, I forgot about my best friend. An unspoken pact existed between brothers. I broke our pact. The more I thought about the kiss, though, the quicker Bobby's memory vanished from my mind. No matter the consequence, I kissed her again.

She pulled away, readdressing the issue of her former boyfriend. "What do you mean,

you're not Bobby? I'm well aware of that."

"Well," I stammered, trying to figure out what to say. "He's Bobby. He's most likely going to become a big time ball player. He'll make lots of money, live in a huge house, drive fancy cars . . . He's Bobby!"

"Maybe I'm looking for more than all that. Maybe I don't want a big fancy house and a big fancy car."

"Everybody does, though."

"You don't really believe that, do you? Besides, maybe I don't want to be the girlfriend or wife of someone who's going to be in the public eye so much. You ever think about that?"

"To be quite honest, no. I assumed . . ."

She cut me off. "A lot of people assume a lot of things. Truth is, I got a small taste of his future life. Everywhere we go, it's all about Bobby. We can't go to the movies without people wanting to talk to the local hero. Girls come up to him all the time. They don't care one bit if he's standing right there holding my hand. They flirt with him as if I didn't exist."

"And, it doesn't bother me in the sense that I'm jealous or anything. I know he pays them no mind, and I know he never cheated on me. I know he's a great football player and everyone wants a little piece of his time, but what about our time? I'd like to be able to go out to a nice dinner without my food get cold because of the endless chatter. He's such a nice guy, and I don't want him to be one of those obnoxious celebrities too good for his fans, but it's not for me. I want a quiet life. If it's like this now, can you imagine what it will be like if he does make it?"

"Wow! I had no idea."

"Does that seem crazy to you?"

"Not at all. I guess I see your point." After a few moments of silence, I said, "I have

another confession to make.” She laughed as she waited for me to continue. “I’m not really bad in science. You teased me about having unsteady hands. Being that close to you in lab made me nervous is all.”

“I have a confession to make, too. I called your house, and your mother told me where to find you. I dragged Lauren here to disguise my true intentions. She’s the only one who knew I liked you.”

“Really?” My voice cracked, betraying my shock.

“To be honest, she knew before I did. She confronted me about it a while back. She said she noticed the way we acted when together.”

My cheeks grew red. Thank God for the honesty of friends.

Lauren sat in the dark on the front porch of her house. I pulled up to the curb, reluctant to let Abbey go. Before we said goodnight, she leaned against the hood, and we stood there hand in hand. I kissed her one more time, savoring the moment before reality woke me from my dream.

She finally pulled away from me. “I better go. I don’t want to get Lauren into trouble.”

“Can I see you tomorrow?”

“I’m not supposed to go out on weeknights, remember?”

“I could come over after school, and we could do our homework together.”

She sighed. *Here it comes, I thought to myself, the explanation for tonight. She spiked her cola with hard liquor and lied about the breakup. She used me to get back at Bobby after a devastating fight.*

“I like you, Teddy. I really do. But maybe we shouldn’t be doing this. At least, not right now.”

“It’s Bobby, isn’t it?”

“He is your best friend. Maybe you should talk to him first. I know I started this and all, but . . .” she struggled with the words. “I don’t want to be the one to blame for breaking up the two of you. Talk to him first. Then . . .”

“After I talk to Bobby, then can I see you?”

She smiled a sad and nervous smile. “Talk to Bobby.”

I feared the message behind those eyes, but dreaded the consequence of giving up even more.

The very next day, I hung out after school to watch Bobby’s baseball practice, his second sport of choice. Rick, another friend, and I sat on the hood of Bobby’s car and drank some beers as the team scrimmaged. After practice, Bobby joined us.

“I’m holding you personally responsible for any damage done to her,” Bobby warned as he opened a beer.

“Our ass prints add personality to this piece of shit car of yours,” Rick shot back.

Bobby drove a 1941 Chrysler Windsor Sedan. It had the potential to be a gorgeous cruiser, but it looked more like a box on wheels abandoned on the bottom of a lake.

In fact, Bobby and his father found the vehicle sitting in a field with trees and grass grown up around the body. Rust and dirt cemented a few years of vegetation and pollution to its exterior. All kinds of wild and domesticated animals made shelter of the interior. They located the owner and bargained their way to afternoons and weekends of back breaking and love making labor. Father and son got the engine running and the inside clean enough, but it still needed a lot of attention. Bobby loved this machine, though. He prided himself in the work they

did together and continued to do to turn a neglected and unwanted piece of metal into the art in which the original creators intended.

We sat enjoying our beers, watching as the school's ground crew emerged to get the field ready for the next day's game. Although we were still under the legal drinking age, being a part of Bobby's entourage meant doing whatever we wanted wherever we wanted without getting into too much trouble. The coach and everyone else pretended not to notice as long as we remained somewhat quiet and discreet.

Our local police officers, although compelled to say something because of the responsibilities associated with the badge, also turned a blind eye. "Boys," an officer would say, "it's all part of being a kid, but be careful. I don't want to get a call saying you've wrapped your car around a tree. Then we'd all have some explaining to do." With that said, we knew we needed to move along.

But on this day, no one else loitered around the field except the grounds crew. "Hey," I said, feeling my way toward the topic most pressing on my mind. "Heard you and Abbey broke up. When were you planning on telling us?"

"No big deal. Just happened." He shrugged it off as if it meant nothing to him. "No big deal?" Rick chimed in. "You got the hottest girl in school, not to mention the hippest, and just like that you break up? Bull shit. What happened?"

"Just moving on. That's all."

"Who dumped who? Bet she dumped you," Rick pestered.

"Believe it or not, it was mutual. We'd been talking about it for a while. You know, with graduation coming up and all. She ain't gonna follow me all the way to California. Don't blame her."

“But what about the dance and graduation?” I asked. “Wouldn’t it be easier to have a date for all this end of the year bullshit and breakup after grad, maybe after the summer?”

“Naw. Neither of us care about that stuff anyway. Waste money on fancy clothes and fancy food. It’s less of a hassle this way. Clean break. She can move on, and I can move on.”

Rick chuckled. “I get it. Get you some before shipping out. Let all the locals know what they’ll be missing. Then, no ties so you can hit all them blonds on the beach.”

Bobby said nothing in response. I knew better than to believe Rick’s lewd suggestions held any truth for Bobby. However, his tepid explanation about the breakup pleased me.

I wanted to continue with my mission, but, even if they parted on the best of terms, I still had several scenarios to consider. First, most couples reunite after the initial breakup. They could get back together by day’s end and wind up getting married. Second, should the split be for good, the first guy a girl dates after a long relationship ends is usually the rebound guy, kicked to the curb once she sorts out her feelings. Did I want to risk whatever might happen between me and Bobby for one of those possibilities?

Then again, their stories matched as if reading the same script, suggesting neither intended to reconcile. And, something deeper than retribution ignited when we kissed.

I also worried about Bobby’s reaction to my claim of devotion for Abbey. If he asked me to back off, I must yield to his wishes. But I had no desire to let her go.

“Do you love her?” I asked, treading in shallow water before plunging in.

He sighed. “No. I thought I did. I mean, she’s something special, but when we started talking about the future, we both wanted different things. When we started to talk about possibly breaking up, it seemed like the right thing to do.”

“Now that she’s free, can I take a crack at her?” Rick asked. I felt myself stop breathing.

He showed no interest in her before now.

“You goon!” Bobby laughed out loud and punched Rick hard on the shoulder. “She’s too good for you. She’d never date a perverted lowlife like you.”

“What about Teddy?” Rick asked. “He’s a good guy. Besides, I think he likes her.”

My eyes widened to the size of baseballs, and my cheeks turned as red as the cap on Bobby’s head. They both howled at catching me off guard, kicking their legs and flailing their arms. Beer splattered everywhere.

“Teddy’s a good one. I’d trust him,” Bobby answered with affectionate humor.

When their laughter subsided and I regained control of myself, I asked, “Do you mean it?”

“Mean what?” Bobby questioned.

“What would you say if I wanted to ask her out?”

“I told you that somabitch liked her!” Rick declared.

Bobby sobered and took in my words. He looked me dead in the eye. “Do you like her?”

I nodded my head yes.

“I always knew you did. I may be a jock, but I’m not stupid. You didn’t make an obvious show of it, for that I thank you, but I could tell.” He paused for a minute or two. “Who wouldn’t like her, though?”

“I thought you said you didn’t,” I asked with trepidation.

“You’re right. I don’t . . . love her that is. Of course, I like her.” Bobby paused again to consider my choice of wording. “Why? Do you? Are you in love with Abbey?”

Looking down at the warming bottle of beer in my lap, I again nodded. Bobby and Rick shook their heads in unison, dumbfounded by my confession.

“But I never acted on it. Besides, who knew I’d have a chance with someone like her until . . .” I trailed off, remembering he had no idea about last night.

“Until what?” Bobby asked.

“Until what?” Rick echoed.

“Wait. How did you know we broke up? I didn’t tell you, and the only other person who knew was Abbey. What happened last night?”

I took a deep breath before answering. “Abbey and Lauren showed up at the bar where my band played last night. First time I’d seen them there.”

Rick interrupted me. “Bar where your band played? What the . . .”

Bobby punched him in the shoulder again. “Shut up, asshole, let him finish.”

“I hung out with them during the breaks. I asked where you were, and she told me.”

I intended to say as little as possible, but Bobby saw right through me. “What else? You’re leaving something out. You said you never thought you had a chance until last night. Why? What happened?”

“I’m not sure how it all happened, but I kissed her, and she let me.”

“With Lauren right there?”

“Well, she kind of left.”

“What do you mean ‘she kind of left’?”

“I asked if I could take Abbey home. Lauren left, and I took Abbey back to Lauren’s a little later.”

“Is that all? Did you do anything else?”

“NO! I swear! We kissed, but that’s it!”

“Did you ask her out already? I mean, I’d consider last night a date whether you planned

it or not, even if you didn't have sex."

"Yes, but she said no. She said I needed to talk to you first. Neither one of us wants to pursue this if you're not okay with it."

My head started spinning as if drunk, ready to pass out at any moment. We all stared at the ground without talking for what seemed like an eternity until Rick began snorting.

I looked up and saw Bobby smile. "Well, better a brother than a prick like Rick. But you knew I'd be off to college soon. Why not wait until then?"

"Why didn't you?"

"Touché!"

"Hey!" Rick protested. "You made this way too easy on the guy!"

"Hmmm . . . What's good payment in exchange for my girlfriend?" Bobby asked.

"Ex-girlfriend!" I exclaimed, feeling the tension begin to subside.

"I've got it! I get to beat the crap out of you. Consider it an initiation before basics."

Bobby lifted his fist in the air. With gaping mouth and wild, teasing eyes, he aimed right for my chest. I jumped off the hood.

"Run, you jackass!" Rick screamed. "Run for your life!"

"I'll give you a five second head start," Bobby promised.

I looked bewildered, wondering if he meant what he said. I stood ready to take a beating. At least by threatening me, he gave his blessing in his own Bobby-like way.

"Go, you moron. Go ask out my girlfriend before I change my mind." Bobby and Rick cackled like drunken old women. "Go, I said." Bobby threw his empty beer bottle just to the left of my head. I turned and trotted to my car.

"Hey!" Bobby shouted, stopping me in my tracks. "It's okay, really. Thanks for asking.

Tell her thanks for making you ask. And, Teddy, there's no one I'd rather see her with, but I tell you now, hurt her and I'll be back here quick to beat the crap out of you for real."

"I know. I won't."

"I know you won't."

With nothing more to say, I left to claim my prize.

Chapter Six
Abigail Louise Sullivan
(Abbey)

“Do you know what time it is, young lady? Almost three minutes after two!” Lauren scolded as I walked up the porch steps after Teddy drove away. “I called it! Moving faster than I expected, I called it.”

“What did I do? Why didn’t you stop me?”

“What’re you talking about? You two make the perfect couple, and it’s obvious he adores you.”

“But what about Bobby?”

“What about him?”

“He deserved better. I mean, we break up and the next thing you know, I start going out with his best friend? What if he thinks we hooked up before we broke up?”

Lauren sighed her frustration. “Look, Bobby’s a good guy, and Teddy’s a good guy. It’ll all work out, you’ll see.”

A few days after Teddy and I first kissed, I stood at the window to my bedroom, staring at the full moon, its light glaring back at me, beckoning me to come closer. I moved to the porch swing. It swayed back and forth as if an apparition sat in it. I felt a sense of peace, imagining Aunt Rosie swinging with me. The stars winked and the enormity of the cloudless sky carried away my concerns.

It looks as big and round as the sun and shines almost as brightly, I thought. It makes everything here seem so silly. Who cares what everyone might think. So what if they whisper behind my back and think Bobby broke up with me. So what if they think I cheated on him. Who

cares what any of them thinks. None of this high school drama will matter in a few months anyway. At least Bobby knows the truth. At least he made peace with all of this, and at least he and Teddy remain friends.

I remembered old stories of how Aunt Rosie and Uncle Walter met, playing in the school yard, so young and carefree.

“Do you love the boy?” she would have asked me.

“Yes,” I would have told her.

“Then nothing else matters. When your uncle dropped out of school to help out the family, he feared losing me to someone else. He asked me right then to marry him. Imagine, an eight-year old boy getting down on his knees and asking me to marry him. What a sweet and serious little man. I said yes.

“I ran right home and told my momma, and she laughed at me. All the grown-ups got a good laugh out of my romantic moment. But he promised to sneak away and walk me home from school every day. And he did. He kept good on all his promises.

“I say this to you because only you know what your heart is telling you. How it appears to everyone else is of no consequence. If you love him and he loves you, nothing else matters.”

As these thoughts escaped my conscience, the headlights of an old rusted Chrysler pulled into the drive.

“Hey, Abbey.” With both hands deep in his pocket, he walked toward me, his chin tucked into his chest as if hiding from his own shadow.

“Bobby! Surprised to see you.”

“I know. I’m not disturbing you, am I? Just thought we could talk.” He looked around as if expecting someone to sprint from out of the darkness.

“Sure. Is everything okay?” I had never seen Bobby look so disheveled or unsure of his next move.

“I don’t . . . I mean . . . well . . . you see . . . the . . . we . . .”

“What is it, Bobby?” I laughed at his flailing tongue.

He sat on the top step of the porch, turning to face me. “Okay, here goes. I want us to get back together.”

“What?” I shot back, completely taken by surprise by his proposal.

“We made a mistake when we broke up. Let’s get back together. If you want to stay here, I’ll go to a state school. I can always transfer later . . . or not. Whatever you want.”

“Bobby, we’ve been over this. You don’t want to throw your future away on me. You need to go to California.”

“But I want to be with you. If going to California means we can’t be together, then I won’t go.”

“Bobby, listen to yourself. You know full well how many other factors influenced our decision.”

“I’m not so sure I believe that anymore.”

“But you said yourself you’re not in love with me.”

“I took you for granted, Abbey. I don’t know what I was thinking. I love you, Abbey. I swear on my life, I love you.”

“Bobby, what brought this on?” His pleading dumbfounded me. Bobby’s groveling epitomized everything he categorized as repulsive male behavior.

“Teddy came to me right after we broke up. He told me he loved you, Abbey. Can you believe it? Our quiet little Teddy in love with my angel. It shocked me . . . but . . . but . . . oh . . .

I don't know. I kinda felt nothing at the time.

"Then, I went home and started thinking about it. I wondered why you sought him out the same day we broke up and what guts it took for him to kiss you. I mean, the nerve of both of you!"

"I know, Bobby, I'm . . ."

"But I wasn't mad at you. Not really. I wasn't even mad at Teddy. I mean, I know how you felt about the way people treated me and how they treated you because of me. Teddy's a good guy. He's a nice, quiet, safe guy. I get it."

"And, as for Teddy, who could blame him for wanting to kiss you. I get it. Really, I do."

"Bobby . . ."

"Then, to see you two together. It drove me crazy. I should be with you, not Teddy."

"Bobby . . ."

"Abbey. I'll give you the kind of life you want. I can be the guy you need."

"You're a football player, Bobby, a good football player."

"There's more to me than football."

"I know."

"I love you, Abbey. I'll be anything, anybody you want me to be."

"You don't mean that."

"I do."

"Bobby, if no one else showed interest in dating me, would you still be here hoping to get back together?"

"I admit it took me some time without you to figure out how I felt, but, yes, absolutely!"

The wind rustling through the trees spoke for us as my thoughts took root. "*Stay strong,*"

I heard Aunt Rosie say.

“I’m in love with Teddy,” I said.

“Oh,” Bobby moaned.

“I’m sorry.”

“No.” Bobby waved away my apology as he stood to go. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have come here.”

I stood as well, stopping him before he descended the last step. “Don’t go. Not like this. We’re still friends, aren’t we? Come inside. Let’s talk.”

We sat across from each other at the kitchen table sipping cold drinks. “You’re right. I know you are.” He huffed. “I guess I’m just scared about going clear across the country by myself. Stupid?”

“Of course not. It’s scary to imagine starting over in a strange place all by yourself. But people gravitate toward you. You’ll manage just fine.”

“So, what do you see in him anyway?”

“What do you mean ‘what do I see in him?’ He’s your best friend!” I tapped his hand in mock annoyance.

“I know, but humor me.”

“I don’t know. I never gave it much thought.”

“Did you think about him when we were together?”

“Some, I suppose. I mean, he’s such a humble and unassuming guy. And he’s as passionate about flying as you are about football. Something very sexy about that. But the most attractive thing about him is how oblivious he is about his own good looks. I mean, if he just put himself out there, girls would fall all over themselves to get to him.”

“What d’ya mean?”

“Girls look at Teddy, and they think he’s unavailable, not because they believe he has a girlfriend, but because they assume he’s not interested. I don’t know how to explain it. If he only knew his own appeal and flirted back a little, they’d want him almost as much as they want you.”

“Really?” Bobby asked, genuinely surprised.

“Pay attention next time you’re with him. The fact that he doesn’t see it either makes him all the more appealing.”

“Well, you sure helped him get over his shyness in a hurry.”

“I know,” I said with a hint of satisfaction and lust in my voice. “Sorry,” I blushed, remembering what brought him to my house. “I never expected such a reaction from him.”

“Then why did you go?”

“Lauren.” One name explained it all. She often acted as my conscience, directing the scenes of my life as she saw fit, adding color to an otherwise dull, reclusive character. “You know, she first noticed our chemistry. I ignored her until . . . until she convinced me to go see him . . . but even then . . .”

“But?” Bobby questioned after I trailed off without finishing my thoughts.

“But then he said he wanted to kiss me and I let him. It felt right, as if it was meant to be. I felt this connection with him like . . . like . . . How can I explain it?”

“I get it.”

Bobby and I said our final goodbye as the last star faded with the morning. Ashamed by what he called his lapse in judgment, I promised to keep his visit a secret, especially from Teddy. Bobby acted like the same carefree pal as always, showing no visible signs of heartache. After graduation, Bobby took his scholarship to UCLA. Though we drifted apart as life caught up with

each of us, he always remained a faithful friend, supporting us both at the best and worst of times.

Chapter Seven
Theodore Francis Bailey
(Teddy)

On May 8, 1955, a few weeks shy of high school graduation, I celebrated my eighteenth birthday. My father predicted great glory for my life. "On May 8, 1945," he reminded me each year, "on V-E Day, our World War Two Allies formally accepted the surrender of all Nazi Germany armed forces. May eighth—the year you turned eight—marked the end of Adolf Hitler and his Third Reich. Only men of unyielding courage can lay claim to this day. Live up to the standards set by the men who fought for this victory."

Each year, I vowed to accomplish all he hoped and dreamed for me. I promised myself life changing growth in my eighteenth year—leave the shy and insecure farm boy behind and make my future my own. With Abbey by my side, I foresaw nothing short of glory. I stood tall, at the pinnacle of my young adult life, confident that the coming days and weeks would bring unfathomable changes, creating an unrecognizable man in place of this little boy. If I had only been prepared for the way fate chose to transform me.

In the early morning hours of May tenth, two days past my passage into manhood, my mother gently tapped my covered shoulder, caressing my hair and softly calling my name. "Teddy. Teddy Sweetheart. Wake up," her voice calm and soothing. "Wake up, Honey."

I looked at the clock. It ticked the early morning minutes away in sleepy monotones. The light of the moon and stars cowered behind the evil veil of darkness. On an otherwise calm spring morning, my mother's summons confused my slumbering mind. The echo of her voice met the creatures in my dream, blurring truth and fantasy.

"Teddy?"

I rolled over to face her. Wiping sleep from my eyes, I yawned, "What is it, Momma? Is

everything okay?"

She took my hands in hers, and I rose to sit on the edge of my bed. Sorrow clouded her eyes, and her bottom lip quivered.

"My daddy died," she said, sounding like a child abandoned without warning at the grocery store, suddenly fearful of every eye and every object in sight, frightfully aware for the first time of her tiny form and vulnerable spirit. She pulled me to her and hugged me as if the rise and fall of my chest made the truth of this moment less real. "My daddy died," she heaved. Her tears soaked my shoulder. I held on to her, trying with all my might to cry, feeling guilty for feeling nothing.

My father took the week off to fish with his buddies. His absence forced me into the reluctant role of protector and consoler. Although angry with him for unwittingly hurling his responsibilities on to me, I knew the task, as her eldest son, belonged to no one else.

Memories of stolen moments flooded my conscience. All the times I chased him, begging him to wait for me, thinking the man could do no wrong. When his health began to deteriorate, the unmovable force I once knew became a crumbling wall right before my eyes. Instead of embracing him in his last moments, I ignored the inevitable facts of age. Instead of allowing myself to accept the defeat of my hero, I pretended he still reigned as king.

I saw him for the last time on Thanksgiving Day. Every time our eyes met, I looked away in shame. He lost too much weight. His skeletal form gave way to his increasing weakness. He spoke little. Emotionless lips replaced his laughter and smiles that told old stories of hunting and fishing and the shared tales of family lore. An emptiness fogged the gleam in his eyes. Instead of staring at me, he stared past me.

I sat across from him in my aunt's living room. The men watched football, and I watched one man. The voice that once voraciously cursed the opposing team now sat silent with hands cupped in his lap, staring at some unseen spot on the wall behind me.

The gnawing in the pit of my stomach warned me this might be the last time I saw him alive. Instead of embracing this thought and getting up to sit by him, hold his hand, and tell him how much I loved him, instead of being with him for as long as possible, I stood up and joined the women in the kitchen, eager to engage in their idle chatter rather than take one more look at his fragile form.

Later that evening, my aunt and uncle brought my grandparents to our home. Grandpa stayed outside smoking cigars with my uncle before joining the rest of the family inside. My grandpa sat in a chair and stared through the radio. Holding on to my own uncomfortable feelings, I ignored him, certain no one cared what I did or did not say and what I did or did not do.

In a rare state of lucidity, he looked me in the eye, leaned forward, and in his matter-of-fact way, said, "Hi!" His voice hinted at hurt feelings. "Didn't you see me sitting here?"

I smiled an awkward smile, as if getting caught swiping cash from his wallet. "I saw you, Grandpa. You listening to the radio?"

He glanced from me to the radio, his expression telling all. No. He longed for something greater than the company of the voices of strangers locked away in a box. He stared because no one paid him any mind. The boy he questioned, the one who used to call him best friend, now patronizingly tried to sidestep any real communication or connection. I felt his disappointment, but chose to ignore his plea to say goodbye.

He climbed in the passenger seat of my uncle's car. I sighed, anxious to escape my

shame. Before my uncle drove away, Grandpa poked his head out of the car and said, “I love you.” He said to me and me alone. I told him I loved him, too, but my words choked back in my throat. He never heard them.

The man I would soon become first needed to cry like a child. My granddaddy, the indestructible, larger-than-life figure of my youth, no longer existed in my tangible world. One tear fell as the memories of my wasted last moments with my grandpa resurfaced. Another tear fell as the guilt at not embracing him and making my final words loud enough for him to hear washed over me. One forced tear trickled down my neck as my remorse for failing to let him know how much I still looked up to him and loved him pierced my heart.

I cried for me, in all my selfishness. The last time I sat down to talk with him, he confided his desires to me. “I’m ready to go, Teddy,” he said as we sat side by side, just the two of us, before his physical form grew to match his inner decay. “All my friends are gone. I can’t drive anymore. I can’t do anything anymore. I’m tired. I’m ready to die.”

Because of our conversation, I expected to greet his death with grace. But the more frail he became, the more lucid and detached he appeared, the more I denied his mortality and believed in his in-destructiveness. The news of his death actually shocked me.

I cried because I would miss him. I would miss all the times we had together and all the times we could have had. I would miss the man who made me feel invincible just because he stood beside me. I would miss the man I knew loved me without question.

But I did not cry the way I wanted to cry. I did not cry like I thought I should cry. The pain of his loss oozed through my entire being, but I still questioned the reality of the situation. I wanted to abandon all control, but for whatever reason, the flood of tears refused to fall.

“Just now?” I asked my mom.

“At about one o’clock this morning. I didn’t want to wake you.” My mom gained enough control to tell me what she knew. “Your Aunt Esther and Grandmother sat up with him all night. They were . . .”

I cut her off. “What do you mean they were sitting with him? How did they know?”

“They took him to the doctor. His heart quit working as it should. The doctor gave him six weeks.”

“What do you mean? Why didn’t anyone tell me?” Panic tried to convince me of my innocence. I wanted to blame someone else for my past neglect.

“He just went Monday. We all thought we had more time. They sat up with him trying to make him comfortable. He had a difficult time breathing.” She paused. She gave me a look of apology as if taking the blame for my conscience. “They said he looked so peaceful. He kept caressing their hands and telling them he loved them. He began staring at the ceiling with a puzzled look on his face and called his sister’s name, Angela, the one who died a few years ago. He asked what she wanted. Then he got agitated with Mom and Esther, as if blaming them for interfering in his conversation with his sister.

“Esther helped Mom into bed in another room, hoping to calm Dad with a few moments of peace and quiet. When she returned less than ten minutes later, he had died.” She paused again, a look of serene calm on her face. “I think he waited until they left. I think that’s why he grew agitated with them.”

“I’m sorry, Mom.” All other words failed me.

Catholic funeral services draw out the devastation felt with the loss of a loved one,

encouraging family and friends to participate in the viewing, rosary, and actual funeral service.

The process for dedicating the soul to heaven accents feelings of suffocation and mourning.

I managed to make it eighteen years without ever having to suffer through this tradition.

Eighteen years of childhood vanished in one moment. As my mom, dad, brothers, and I drove to the funeral home for the viewing and rosary, I braced myself for anything. With nothing to compare this new experience with, I had no idea what to expect. All I knew was that nothing would ever be the same for me ever again. As I labored to keep my breath from faltering, I willed myself to be a man and maintain control of my emotions at all costs.

Each footstep that brought me closer and closer to the threshold of the funeral home challenged my self-restraint. One step, one breath. Another step, another breath. I wanted to turn around and flee, to deny what waited in front of me.

There he lay in his coffin—lifeless—like a replication in a wax museum. Mementoes, including a framed picture I drew for him almost ten years before, decorated the inside corners. “He’s going to take his most beloved treasures with him,” Grandma explained. She hugged me and cried mercilessly on my shoulder. Her abandon unleashed the tears I begged to come days before. My will surrendered to my changing reality.

As I stood holding on to Grandma, Mom and Dad knelt by the coffin. My line of vision rested right on them. I opened my eyes and watched as my parents grieved. My mother wiped away tears with one hand. With the other, she caressed her father’s cheek, face, and hands. She touched his collar and straightened his tie. A note appeared in her hand. She folded the sheet and put it in his coat pocket. She whispered her goodbyes and leaned in to kiss him.

Dad rubbed my mom’s back to console her. I heard low sobs and saw his shoulders heave. My father, the hardened Marine, wept like an infant. His reaction surprised me. I

wondered why. Did he mourn for my mother, or did he feel his own loss? I would have given anything to know his thoughts, but, more than that, watching him gave fuller force to my own remorse.

Grandma let me go just as Mom and Dad stood. I exchanged places with my parents. I knelt before him, trying to recognize the man I once knew. Where had the smile gone? True, it had been quite some time since any of us had seen his characteristic smile, but seeing him without it seemed so unnatural.

I thought I heard him laughing. I thought I saw him smirk. I thought I felt him beside me. He looked happy. "Enjoying this, Grandpa?" I said loud enough for our ears only. "All these people here to say goodbye. They all miss you so much. You're loving this turnout, aren't you?"

I wanted to laugh and to cry all at the same time. His presence, whether real or imagined, comforted me. I believed he now lived in peace in his new home. I also believed he forgave me for my past behavior. He still loved me and knew I never stopped loving him.

I mimicked the behaviors of both my parents, caressing him and sobbing out loud. I pulled my own paper from my pocket, unaware of my mom's same intention.

I unfolded the sheet and showed it to him. "I still can't draw, but here's a picture for you. If you look here, it's you and me flying a plane together. That's you, the taller stick figure at the controls. I'm here by your side."

I folded up the picture and placed it between his shirt and jacket before standing to go. I leaned in and kissed him on the forehead and forced myself to walk away. Other people waited for their turn to grieve.

"He looks like Daddy from back here," my mom explained when she caught me questioning her queer behavior as she bobbed her head up and down. "Up close, he doesn't look

real. From back here, if you look just so,” she sunk down into the seat until only her eyes peeked above the pew in front of her, “he looks like Daddy. It even looks like he’s smiling.” I joined in her diversionary play.

“What the heck you two doing?” a cousin asked. Faces turned to see who dared break the silence. Mom shared her experiment and soon, several heads bobbed at different angles, making the gathering crowd look like an arcade bobble head game. This act brought confirmation to my mom’s hypothesis as well as some much-needed somber chuckles.

“The kids are back with the tack board, Mom,” an aunt said. “We can start hanging up the pictures.” As we organized the pictures to hang on the board, the family gathered around to take a look at the photos chosen for the display. They all had one thing in common. He smiled in each picture.

“See.” Facing Grandpa, my mom took a picture and held it up in front of her. “From here, he looks just the same, thinner, but the same.” Everyone agreed.

“Look at this one,” another aunt said, taking a picture of Grandpa standing by a grill with a beer in one hand, a spatula in the other, and a cigar poking out of his tooth-filled grin. “This says it all, doesn’t it?”

“Remember all those fish fries we had?”

“He used to love to catch the fish himself.”

“He always had that beer in his hand when he cooked.”

“And he loved to cook.”

“Remember those big French fries he’d make?”

“Somehow, he made them taste good and salty on the inside, too.”

“We always had a fish fry after he got the urge to go fishing.”

“Which was all the time!” Everyone said in unison.

“Can you picture him? Up in heaven with all his buddies? Standing waist high in water wearing his rubber pants?”

“With a big smile on his face.”

The family fell silent in their reverie as each one reflected on this image. Laughter and tears meshed.

My dad broke the silence. “That’s how I grew to love him. My own father and I weren’t very close. When Dorothy first brought me to meet him, I could feel his scrutinizing stare burning a hole through me. First words out of his mouth, ‘You like to fish?’ When I told him I’d never been fishing before, he said, ‘Saturday, first thing, you and me’ll go fishing. Don’t be late.’ He didn’t ask whether or not I wanted to go or if my schedule allowed me the time to go. He made it very clear by the way he looked at me that, if I had any intention of marrying his daughter, I would be there and I would be on time.

“I had the best time of my life.” He paused to wipe away the flow of tears. Choking the words, he said, “He called me ‘Son’ that day.”

I learned so much about my grandfather as the family reminisced. Their memories made me miss him even more. I knew virtually nothing about this man during his lifetime. After his death, I saw how he played the role of superhero to every life he touched.

He taught my family the value of love, family, education, money, and hard work. The man my parents cherished instilled in them the lessons they tried to instill in me.

My brothers and I waited in the lobby while our folks said their goodbyes. I turned around to look at Grandpa one final time. Grandma pulled Grandpa’s head to her bosom. Her

children crowded around her, sharing in her grief. The chorus of their baritone convulsions suffocated my own breathing. Seeking solace in the quiet night air, I escaped the image, but their cries echoed in my ears like howling Halloween goblins.

As we headed to the car after seeing Grandma off with another family member, my dad slung his arm around my shoulder. "Your grandfather was a good man, Son. He meant a lot to a lot of people."

"I know, Dad." I could barely speak the words above a whisper.

Dad put his other arm around my mother who held on to the hands of my brothers. Squeezing all of us into him, he said, "I love you all. You know that, right?" My mom buried her face in his chest and began to sob. My brothers and I nodded our heads, unable to utter one more syllable.

I always assumed the events my father witnessed during the war, the death of so many men, including his close friends and comrades, made him immune to hardship of any kind. Seeing his reaction in the days leading up to Grandpa's funeral combated my old notion. I watched as the hardened shell of a United States Marine melted.

At the church the next day, five priests from three different parishes presided over the service. Some people crowded in the pews while others filled the side aisles and poured all the way out the back doors. One priest later confessed that he had never been to a funeral with so many mourners in attendance. As they parted to make room for Grandpa's casket and for the family to walk down the middle aisle to the front of the church, I stared at all the unfamiliar faces wiping their eyes as we passed.

"This turnout is a true testament to the character of Ramon Christopher Clemons and the

kind of life he led,” the Father began. “I will remember his smile best. He looked as if he stole candy and didn’t know if you knew it or not.” I looked at my cousins as he said these words. We all knew the truth behind the Father’s remark.

“After spending time with the family after Ramon’s passing,” the Father continued, “and hearing all the wonderful stories, it became clear to me that the theme of his life was simple. He was there.”

The rest of his words faded into undecipherable whispers. I knew my turn to speak crept upon me soon. I started to panic. I could feel my heart beating out of my chest.

“Claudia has asked her eldest grandson, Theodore, to say a few words as a testament to the man loved by so many. Theodore.” The Father bowed his head to me and gestured with his hand for me to take my place at the podium. Summoning all my strength and vowing to never look up from my notes, I made my way to the center of attention.

“The Father made mention of Grandpa’s smile. That made me laugh for two reasons. One, we all remember that smile, and, two, he really did hide candy in his pockets.”

This story brought giggles. I took a deep breath, now confident that I could go on.

“Uncle Ramon, the baby of the family, loved to hear Grandpa tell him about his birth. Because of complications, the doctors urged them to abort the pregnancy. If allowed to come full term, they feared he might develop severe handicaps. My grandparents refused to terminate the pregnancy and refused the option of abandoning the baby to a special needs’ home.

“As Grandpa said, ‘If God intends for us to have this baby, who are we to say otherwise?’

“Grandma gave birth to Uncle Ramon several months premature, and he weighed only three pounds. Hours passed before they got to see him and weeks before they were allowed to hold him.

“Uncle Ramon gives thanks every day for his father’s adamant refusal to take the easy way out. ‘No one could have asked for better parents,’ he says. ‘I was lucky I got to keep my daddy.’”

I shared many other stories, and each one brought tears mingled with laughter. My eyes watered, but I managed to keep my cool. I knew my conclusion would not be as easy, though. Grandma trusted me with this time, and I wanted to use it to make amends. I apologized numerous times since finding out about Grandpa’s death, but I needed to say it out loud, for everyone to hear.

“These memories are all we’ve been talking about for days. Looking at all of you here today makes me appreciate what kind of man he was and what kind of man I want to become.” The tear stained faces hanging on to my every word frightened me. I looked back down.

“What I have shared so far is a collection of memories none of us will ever forget. I’m sure we all have stories we could spend hours talking about, things he did for us, things he did for others. We could talk about his work in the church or his time in the service, but that would take days. I hope we will all take these stories and learn from them. I know I will.”

One more deep breath. “This first part has been from the family to all of you. I hope you don’t mind, but this last part is from me to my grandpa.”

I turned my head to face the casket. Although it remained closed, his pictures hung on a bulletin board next to him. Looking at those photos, I began to lose control. Fighting for air, I choked out my final words.

“Grandpa, when Mom told me you died, I remembered the picture of an airplane I drew for you and gave to you on Father’s Day all those years ago. You put it in a frame and hung it on the wall. Any time I visited you, you’d remind me about that picture. You told everyone about

that picture and bragged about your future pilot grandson.

“I remember the look in your eyes when you talked about it. I could tell I made you proud. I never understood why. Just a silly little drawing, but you loved it. Then it hit me. My childish gift reminded you of the bond we once shared. You put me on your shoulders and flew me around the room making airplane noises. We were buddies, and our bond needed no explanation. Even so, I told you I loved you all the time. Then, I got older, and we grew apart.

“That’s what’s so important about the picture. It’s a reminder of the last time I told you I loved you. How could I have let that happen? Please forgive me.”

The noise reverberating in the pews was reminiscent to the sounds I heard before turning my back on the scene in the funeral home. The entire congregation shared one emotion.

My grandma and I locked eyes. In a tone only loud enough for her and those around her to hear, I said, “I’m sorry.”

“Grandpa,” I continued. “I won’t make this mistake again. I’ll do better, I promise.” The noises continued to grow in intensity, as if everyone made the same apology and vowed to make the same changes.

“Grandpa, I never doubted your love for me, and I take comfort in knowing that you never doubted my love for you. The emotions that encouraged me to draw a picture for you all those years ago are still as real today as they were back then. I want to tell you right now, for everyone to hear, I love you, Grandpa.”

With those final four words squeaking out of my mouth, I wiped my eyes the best I could with the back of my hand and returned to my seat. After the service, many grown men, including my own father, stood in line to shake my hand. With bloodshot eyes, they admitted losing their cool after I made my public apology.

This was no place and no occasion for men to be men. We all needed to grieve, and my humble need to boldly let go gave others the courage—whether willed or not—to let go themselves.

Chapter Eight
Theodore Francis Bailey
(Teddy)

Abbey and I made no plans for after graduation. As much as I loved her, we never discussed our feelings or intentions. Under the guidance and supervision of my father, I groomed myself from a very early age for a life as a military pilot. I considered no other option and intended seeing my dream through to the end.

Prior to World War II, land-based pilots served in the Army Air Corps, an auxiliary branch of the army created to support ground troops. In 1941, in response to the increasing needs of the air arm, the Air Corp became the United States Army Air Force (USAAF). In the aftermath of war, President Harry S. Truman signed the National Security Act of 1947, which, in part, made the United States Air Force (USAF) a separate branch of the military.

In April of 1954, when President Dwight D. Eisenhower signed into law a bill creating the Air Force Academy scheduled to open the summer after high school graduation in 1955, my efforts quadrupled. Knowing only a small fraction of those who want to fly actually fill pilot vacancies, I did everything in my power to make myself stand out in all the ways important to any branch of the military. Although a simple small town farm boy by birth, I allowed nothing to stop me from becoming one of the first to enter an academy as prestigious as the Army's West Point or the Navy's Annapolis.

While in high school, I demonstrated my physical ability by competing on the cross country team. I established my moral credibility by volunteering as a fire fighter and emergency care team member in our community. I proved my academic ability by graduating at the top five percent of my class.

After a positive interview with the admissions committee and coveting a great letter of

recommendation from Illinois State House of Representatives member Robert McLoskey, I gained admittance to the brand new Air Force Academy in Colorado and made plans to leave for Lowry Air Force base, the school's temporary home in Denver, by mid-July.

Bobby and Abbey both claimed his move to California and her desire to remain close to home spurred their decision to break up. Even though I envisioned Abbey right there with me wherever the Air Force called me, I assumed her ties to Illinois would eventually uproot our relationship. After Grandpa's death, though, the thought of living a life without her became unbearable. I needed her and aimed to do whatever it took to keep her.

“What’re your plans after graduation?” I asked.

“Don’t know,” she said, wryly smiling at me from across the table where we sat in the school cafeteria. “I imagine you’ll go off to the Air Force and off to war, and I’ll be left here all by my lonesome.”

“What makes you think I’m going off to war?”

“Haven’t changed your mind about joining the service, have you? Look what’s going on in the Soviet Union. They signed the Warsaw Pact with Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Albania, East Germany, Poland, Romania, and Bulgaria. This means if we go to war against the Soviets, we’ll have to fight all of them since they pledged to defend any member who’s attacked.”

“What makes you think America wants to go to war with Russia?”

“It’s not a matter of our wanting to. We may have no other choice. They’re a Communist country with nuclear weapons! The Secretary of State says America has to confront the Soviet challenge by going to the brink. What else could ‘going to the brink’ mean other than nuclear war?”

Although I entertained similar thoughts, Abbey’s intuition shocked me. My thoughts

resulted from my dad's own war experience and impressions of rumored conflicts. Abbey's instincts were uniquely her own, or so I imagined. "What makes you think that?" I asked, eager to understand where she gained her insights.

"Eisenhower just signed his national security policy called the New Look, which emphasizes deterring potential threats whether conventional or nuclear. And guess who he intends to use to carry out his plan? Not the Army or the Navy. He says the Air Force will play the principal role. He says the Air Force will provide 'more bang for his buck.' "

I nodded my head in agreement. "Okay, now that is not the talk of an eighteen year old girl. Where's this coming from?"

Abbey bowed her head to hide her flushed cheeks. She chuckled. "Whenever I hear people discussing America's potential involvement in world conflicts, I listen. I hear most of it from my dad and uncles. They're certain we'll see war before the end of the year, in which case, it'll most likely be over before you got shipped out. If it does come to nuclear war, we may all be dead soon, but I think about it just the same."

Her thoughts pleased me. She must love me if she fretted over the possibility of my going off to war.

"Anyway," she continued, "the tenants of communism work great in theory—equal goods for all. That's the way Jesus envisioned things. That's how the church fathers ran the original church. But, when fallible, greedy, Godless individuals get involved, communism fails. Unless every single human being living together in a communist society believes in the exact same teachings of the exact same God, it cannot work."

"With sin in the world, there's bound to be a few people eager for power and domination, and they don't want to share anything with anybody. That's what real communism is all about—

control—domination. You've got a handful of extremely wealthy people running the country with force. The rest of the country is poor and starving—no freedom and no independence.

“It goes against everything democracy stands for. You have a handful of people in total control of all the wealth and other assets and military strength. They become dangerous not only to their own people, but also to democratic nations like America. Our government will not tolerate that kind of threat.”

“Some claim the same is true in our nation, greedy big government controlling the people under the guise of democracy,” I teased. “But, seriously, do you really think it will come to all that?”

“I hope not, but I guarantee you, if we can't gain control of the Sino-Soviet bloc soon, mark my word, our government will engage Russia, and you, my sweet boy, just might be part of the action.”

Abbey and I never discussed any political or newsworthy event beyond the borders of our small town. She seemed disinterested in world affairs. How she came to build so much theory on the gossip of a group of drunk, rowdy men baffled me. On the other hand, I thought very little about my military career beyond enlisting, training, and stepping aboard an aircraft for my first solo flight as an Air Force fighter jock.

I felt like an active part in our conversation, as if linked to events unfolding in the U.S.S.R. It ignited in me a new hunger to serve my country in war and join the ranks of extraordinary men such as Raoul Lufbery of the Lafayette Escadrille and Von Richthofen, the “Red Baron” from World War I Germany.

Without trying to shield the brunt of our topic, other nonchalant ears strained to listen. We carried on as if oblivious to our captive audience. “Assuming everything you said is true, do

you agree with our government's stance?"

Abbey shrugged. "Contrary to all I just said, I really don't know all that much about Communist governments. All I know is if you say the word out loud, people get scared.

"What I do know is that people, no matter where they live, have the right to live without fear. We Americans take all our rights for granted. Could you imagine being afraid of walking out your front door because there's open warfare on your streets? Your fellow country-men trying to kill you because you think differently from what they do? Could you imagine most of the country starving and naked on the streets because only the rich government can afford food? Not being able to go to school? Feeding your family by digging in dumpsters? Living in dumps? Wondering if your mom or dad will be alive when you wake up or if disease will take them away from you?"

Thinking about my grandpa and Abbey's uncle having to work hard after their fathers died, I cut her off. "That's not necessarily a communist problem. People struggle everywhere. People . . ."

She cut me off, "But it's not the same. Our poorest people are rich compared to most of the world. My point is that anyone who rules by driving fear into the people must be stopped. It's our Christian responsibility to help oppressed nations. The last time I checked, we're still a Christian nation. Are we not?"

"Yes," I agreed.

"Then we have a responsibility to help those who cannot help themselves."

"What if they don't want our help?" I asked, playing devil's advocate.

She reminded me of my father—the way his passion for the topic inhibited his ability to speak his mind clearly. "Do you wait for an infant to ask before you give him a bottle? Do you

wait for an injured person to ask for help before you administer first aid? I'm not saying everyone in non-democratic countries is helpless or needs our help. Every country has a right to defend itself. If they can't and they want our help, or if it is obvious they need our help but cannot ask for it, we should."

She paused, contemplating the impact of her voiced thoughts. "The bottom line is I trust our government. No matter what people say about our politicians and their 'agenda,' I have to believe that, when it comes right down to it, they, too, want only what's best for our country. I have to believe they wouldn't needlessly put Americans in harm's way."

She paused again, losing interest in speculation. "We can talk all we want about communist countries," she concluded, "what's really going on over there, and what may or may not happen, but, the truth is, all I know is what I hear others talk about. My ideas aren't my own. I don't want to be quoted when I don't have all the facts. I'm just making conversation."

With that, the deft listeners turned away and our conversation ceased. She gave a lot of thought to a topic most people were too afraid to mention out loud. I listened for deeper meaning as we talked, hoping to know where I stood in her life, whether potential political conflict threatened or protected her feelings and intentions. Losing my nerve for the time being, I let go my ambitious plan to define our future as a couple.

It did not take long for me to regain my courage. Sitting in our regular booth at Aunt Martha's Country Kitchen only days after our lunchroom chat, Abbey and I lingered over cooling French fries and half eaten cheeseburgers, watching as the ice in our glasses melted with each forgotten sip. We made no other plans for the evening and I fought to commence my purpose.

“Are you all right?” Abbey questioned, reading the concern on my stained face.

“What are your plans for after graduation?”

“You already asked me that. Couldn’t tell you . . . Is everything okay? Are you breaking up with me?”

I reached across the booth and took both her hands in mine. “I never answered you when you asked me the same question.”

“I don’t think I actually asked you. As I remember it, I told you. I didn’t ask you.”

“You’re right, but we’ve never really talked about the details. As a matter of fact, the other day is the first time we talked about anything seriously.” I took a second to determine how to proceed. “I’ve never told you my plans beyond wanting to be an Air Force pilot.”

“So, what are your plans?”

“After graduation, I’m off to the Air Force Academy.”

Abbey grew silent. In a few short weeks, with diploma in hand, my future belonged to the will of the United States military. “So, you are breaking up with me.”

The look of concern and sadness that filled her eyes encouraged me to press on. “Abbey, when you kissed me for the first time, I couldn’t believe how lucky I was. Every day since then, I believed we were too good to be true. Until a few days ago, I thought I could leave and have no regrets.”

My disbelieving words pierced her, and she bowed her head. “But the truth is,” I continued, eager to clarify my meaning, “I was already in love with you. I’ve loved you long before you first kissed me. I’m still in love with you. I’ll always be in love with you.” Her head picked back up. My soliloquy piqued her curiosity. “You’ve always compared me to my father. That comparison makes me proud, for the most part, but he, like I do, has a hard time expressing

how he feels.

"I don't know why I've never been able to tell you . . . Yes, I do. If I told you I loved you and you didn't feel the same, I'd be crushed. But then my grandpa died. I don't want to mess things up with you the way I did with him.

"I love you, and I don't want graduation to be the end of us. I want you to come with me. I mean, I know you can't go to the Academy with me, but after that. Wherever the Air Force takes me, I want you to be right there with me."

Her tears of hurt-filled anger transformed into tears of joy. "I know you and Bobby broke up because you didn't want to go to California. I know it's selfish of me to ask you to leave your family to be with me, but . . ."

"I broke up with Bobby because I didn't love him," she corrected. Her smile communicated what no words could.

"So?" I pestered.

"I'll go wherever you go."

After taking a few moments to digest the moment, I proceeded with my real purpose.

I pulled a ring out of my pocket, a cheap imitation of her worth, and held it for her to see. "Abbey, I've always known I wanted to spend the rest of my life with you. Will you marry me?"

"What?" she screamed, causing the clamor of other patrons to quiet for second. Once they saw there was nothing to see except two teenagers—I hid the ring under my palm after her reaction—they picked up their various conversations where they left off. "What?" she asked again.

"If we got married, we'd have a much easier time being together. After I graduate from the Academy, we'd live in married housing wherever they shipped me."

“Is that any reason to get married now? Besides, what if you get shipped to the Soviet Union? What if some of the rumors are right, and this thing does turn in to war?”

“Then, you’d be taken care of back here. And, yes, this is a reason to get married right now, but I’m not talking about getting married now. This is a promise ring, not an engagement ring.

“On the other hand, I guess that’s what I’m promising, so . . . I guess you can call it an engagement ring . . . a long engagement. What’s the difference if it’s right now or four years from now?”

“I’ve told you I don’t want to get married . . . to anybody. You know how I feel about marriage.”

“We’re not your parents. We’re not even my parents. Not all marriages are bad. Think about your aunt and uncle. Besides, I’m not asking you to marry me today. I simply want you to know that I love you and intend to spend the rest of my life with you. Whether we get married now or ten years from now, it really doesn’t matter. Just . . . some day. Will you marry me some day?”

She took a few minutes to take it all in. “Okay,” she finally said. “Let’s do it. One day, we’ll get married.”

Chapter Nine
Theodore Francis Bailey
(Teddy)

Having decided my path many years before, I benefitted from the anecdotes of local survivors of basic training. Acquaintances from the Navy and Army teased of brutal Drill Sergeants and warned that no matter how hard I tried, nothing would ever be good enough. No one escaped their wrath.

Those from other branches reminisced about weapons and combat training, cautioning me never, ever, under any circumstance, to drop my weapon, recommending I name her in an effort to control nervous fingers.

Airmen from the new USAF and former USAAF listened to such tales and found no evidence in their own experience to support their claims. “I liked my Drill Sergeant. I don’t remember his giving us a hard time.”

“I remember marching a lot and having to have my uniform perfect. Everything had to be pressed, polished, and sparkling all the time.”

“We went to the range a few times, but they never issued a gun. I do remember the obstacle courses. Those were fun.”

The discrepancy made me wonder if I chose the right branch. Basic Training for my Airmen friends seemed to be more like camp than the war preparedness training of my friends from other branches. My father, the former Marine, endured the most physically and mentally demanding training. I, his son, selected the least demanding route.

When I questioned my father, he put my mind at ease. “Son,” he lectured. “It’s not about proving yourself as a man by doing what seems to be the hardest. It’s not about taking the easy way out just because you hear one way is easier than another. It’s about pride and serving your

country in a way that best suits you.

“Yes, you can be a pilot in any of the other branches, but, first, think about your goals, not my goals for you or anyone else’s. Be proud of your choice. I will be proud no matter what you decide.”

As a side note he added, “Besides, just because one man had a nice Drill Sergeant doesn’t mean you will. And anyway, it’s been twenty-some-odd years since most of those men have even been to basics. They may have forgotten an awful lot. I bet if they sat down and thought about it, they’d remember plenty. The purpose of all basics is to train a civilian to be a war-ready soldier. The military can’t afford to be nice. I’m sure you will get plenty of thorough training at the Academy just like you would if you were going to West Point or Annapolis.”

Neither their lore nor my time at the Reception Center nor the ride to our receiving site prepared me for the road that lay ahead. At the makeshift Reception Center in the Denver International Airport, they loaded all the new cadets into a cattle truck. During the ride, the Air Training Officers complained about absolutely everything imaginable. The sun’s too damn bright. The truck smelled like cow manure. The dust from the road kicked up in their eyes. Rather than mumbling their grievances, they leaned over and yelled into the ears of the unfortunate recruit standing beside them.

God forbid one of us sneezed as the dust fondled our noses or tripped when a bump in the road knocked us off kilter. “Goddamnit. Which one of you pansies stepped on my shoe? I want it polished and shining brighter than that sun. NOW!” Of course, we all stumbled, and no one knew who stepped on whom. Even if we knew, one hundred cadets packed in a space intended for a few head of cattle lacked the extra room to crouch down.

“Sneeze one more time, I’ll give you somthin’ to sneeze at.” For the remainder of the ride, we steadied ourselves the best we could and held back every urge to cough or sneeze as the thin summer air of Colorado blew dry dust straight up our nostrils and down our parched throats.

“You’ve got thirty seconds to get outta that trailer,” the Air Training Officer barked, an impossible task. Once out, they lined us up and ordered us to hold our packs above our heads. One recruit made the mistake of looking at a muddy field to his left.

The Air Training Officer stood in front of him, the brim of his hat touching the recruit’s forehead. “See something interesting over there?”

“Nnnoo Sir!” the recruit stammered. “Just wondering where that mud came from, Sir. Everything else being so dry and all, like it hasn’t rained for a while.”

Sergeant Leonard Graham stepped back and laughed. The other Sergeants shared an amusement lost on the rest of us. “Well, Rainbow, why don’t we find out now, shall we?”

Marching with bags over heads, we sank into ankle deep mud pits and were ordered to do unheard of exercises such as planks and donkey kicks. No one knew how to perform these movements. They rewarded our failure with more exercise. If a recruit dropped his pack before given permission to hold it at another angle or to put it down, they ordered us to repeat the process over and over again until every single one of us performed as one.

Their demands for perfection on impossible tasks broke a handful of fragile men. They dropped their sacks and hitchhiked back home. Those of us too proud or too scared to leave gritted our teeth and fought through the fatigue.

“Anyone else ready to quit?” one officer asked. No one made a sound.

“Don’t worry, ya’ll be dropping like flies as the year progresses,” another officer promised.

“Welcome to the Academy, boys. Welcome to year one. Welcome to hell on earth.”

With mud caking our bodies and the stench of cattle waste and sweat oozing from our pores, we loaded a bus and headed to Lowry Air Force Base, the temporary home of the Academy while the permanent site near Colorado Springs underwent construction. On July 11, 1955, we, the first class of 306 cadets, took the Oath of Allegiance into the United States Air Force.

As we made our hasty exit and lined up beside the bus, I watched as men in starched uniforms with neatly groomed hair marched in perfect unison. I could just imagine what I looked like to them, with shaggy hair and crumpled civilian clothes, looking like I just emerged from a romp in a marshy lakebed. Their flawless demeanor both shamed me and made me proud. Although I came looking like a disheveled embarrassment, I would leave as part of an elite fighting force, the best in the world.

“Why did you join the military, Rainbow?” The ATO asked the cadets one by one. “I joined because I want to fly for my country, Sir!” I yelled in response. The sporadic doubts about my choice vanished with the flash of approval I caught in his eye.

Our official initiation into the Academy demanded that all of us new recruits make it through two eighteen-day periods of the most grueling introduction into military life. The Beast, as we nicknamed the ordeal, clearly defined our place on the bottom of the pecking order. The Beast evaporated all my inhibitions about joining a “soft” service.

During the first eighteen-day period, we awoke every morning at 0530 with ATOs pounding on the doors and shouting for us to move faster. Before breakfast, we endured morning

calisthenics followed by a twenty minute break to shower, change, and clean our rooms.

At a pace too quick for our inexperienced bodies and minds, ATOs taught us the basics of Air Force custom from marching, discipline, and military courtesy. During the first “Beast,” each cadet took placement tests, learned how to shoot and clean our rifles, practiced continuous drills, and received instruction on honor and ethics. Our physical training included strenuous exercises, endless miles of running, and competitive sports.

No cadet candidate was allowed to withdraw during Basic Cadet Training (BCT) unless given a doctor’s excuse for a serious medical condition. We learned six permissible phrases, the two main phrases being “yes, Sir” and “no, Sir.” During our time of training, no cadet candidate uttered any other words unless otherwise instructed. Even the slightest slip of the tongue or use of a contraction ended in severe punishment for the entire group. This practice, while daunting, taught us a quick and valuable lesson in teamwork and team responsibility.

Early on, before the pressure of BCT set in and before we questioned our choices, ATOs told us to repeat to ourselves, “If I can take it, I can make it. I know I can take it; therefore, I can make it” any time we felt overwhelmed or inadequate.

At the end of the first eighteen-day period, we marched five miles to Jack’s Valley, home of the “Second Beast” where we learned about overcoming fears and relying on one another. Organized similar to a combat wing, we worked through assault and confidence courses and learned field skills, hand-to-hand combat techniques, and first aid. The “Second Beast” pushed us beyond the limits of our physical ability.

One course, designed to build confidence and teamwork, grouped ten cadets together. The ATO in charge presented each group with a problem and gave us fifteen minutes to find a solution. The task: take two boards, a rope, and six sandbag “bombs”; go over a fence topped

with barbed wire; and pass the six bombs to the other side without touching the fence.

Forced to sing the National Anthem and forgo all forms of verbal communication, my group tried in vain to devise a workable plan. Idea after idea failed. With 30 seconds to spare, one cadet took charge. Tying the two boards together to form the base, he signaled for the rest of us to form a human pyramid. Climbing over our huddled bodies, he managed to drop the bombs without touching the fence. Unfortunately for us, we failed to drop all six bombs in the time allotted. Our punishment: a nighttime run followed by calisthenics before and after dinner.

The last part of the training consisted of a march back to the main Academy area where those of us who endured received our shoulder boards signifying our official acceptance into the cadet wing. The honor of this upcoming moment motivated me and every other survivor to make it through BCT.

Each summer for the next four years focused on basic military, officer, and flight training. During the school year, our work centered on academics, even though we continued daily physical training exercises. Most of the lessons I learned about survival in the military came during my first year at the Academy as a fourth-class cadet.

The coarse brutality of those first 36 days in BCT slackened little during the entire first year, even as we learned how to perform tasks immediately after being ordered. “In war, you don’t have time to think,” ATOs barked when we messed up. “Thinking will get you killed. You have less than a second to decide what to do.” The ATO angled his nose centimeters from the cadet who made a mistake. “NOW WHAT ARE YOU GOING TO DO?”

Sharing in seemingly impossible and pointless tasks instilled a camaraderie that pales in comparison to any relationship I had ever known or would ever know again. Everything we did, whether keeping a clean bunk and spit polished shoes or striving to master an obstacle course

under the guidance of demanding ATOs, instilled in us the value of teamwork.

I had always heard the saying, “You’re only as strong as your weakest link.” Basic training at the Academy made this real for me. If I failed at something, we all failed. If one man could not perform a task, we were all punished until the task could be properly completed. If a cadet’s uniform did not pass inspection, we all suffered the consequences. “Leave no man behind” was the lesson learned.

“Integrity first, Service before self, and Excellence in all we do”: Our ATOs did a first-rate job of instilling the force’s core values into our way of thinking and living. We were to practice these values ourselves and expect no less from those we serve.

“Discipline, pride, self-respect, motivation—they all tie together. Hard work. Teamwork. DO NOT let your comrade down. You screw up, you fail to pull more than your own weight, not only do you let him down, you let everyone down.”

“Cadets,” ATOs preached, “Look to your right and to your left. These boys are your family. Here, right now, we’re building on a proud tradition. I don’t give a damn if you call yourself a Republican or a Democrat. No one cares about political lines here. Don’t care whether you’ve got a tan or are whiter than mayonnaise. Doesn’t matter if you worship God or worship this rock,” An ATO kicked pebbles to prove the point. “What matters to me and what must matter to you is a belief in this country and the freedoms we have and the preservation of those freedoms. But, boys, preservation doesn’t come without hard work, and sometimes even bloodshed, and death.

“This is the responsibility that, if you boys decide to become men, you face. You not only have the weight of the nation on your shoulders, but also the weight of the United States Military and, in particular, the United States Air Force. Some out there will throw stones, never able to

understand what we do and why we do it. Are you man enough to look them in the eye and say, ‘My nation is worth fighting for. It’s worth dying for.’? If not, we don’t want you here. We can’t afford to have you here.

“Those of you man enough, you have a great deal of responsibility on your shoulders. You are a part of a proud heritage. Make proud the Airmen of the past and the present. Look to your left.” We followed orders. “Now look to your right.” We did as told. “The men on the right and the left are the future. Make them proud.”

His speech proved a powerful motivator. Few in our group quit after our first year. Most hungered for the day when we would receive our wings and become men, members of a great lineage. During our days of training, we learned to be a part of something larger than ourselves. And the day we received our wings, most of us cried, sharing in the knowledge that the torch had been passed to us.

Not all of my memories of my time at the Academy are of unity and pride. I spent many lonely moments longing to be with Abbey, missing the sound of her voice and the simplicity of the civilian world. When not kept busy, I began to feel sorry for myself, having to work so hard at futile tasks and enduring the demeaning tone of the ATO, forgetting the goal of it all. I reminisced about my favorite television shows or the aromas at Aunt Martha’s Country Kitchen. I missed my old friends, hanging out doing absolutely nothing. Even though my best friends had moved on as well, I could not help but wonder why I came here, thinking for a minute that life back home was better than his present hell.

But when kept busy, time went by so quickly and the pride in our endeavor took control. The doubts about our decision vanished and the importance of our experiences reemerged. When

our motivation lagged, the ATO encouraged us to write letters home. "Get it out then move on. Look, no one's forcing you to be here. Not yet. But as long as you are, why not get the most out of it and make it fun? Make this a positive experience." They managed to motivate us without coming across as soft or less intimidating.

I wrote letters to Abbey and my family every night. Mail call became the highlight of every cadet's day.

Abbey,

They call us "doolies" here. That's their slang term for fourth-class cadets and means someone insignificant. Man, they sure do a great job making us feel trivial. Our ATOs can stop us at any time and ask us anything. They ask impossible questions ranging from military history to what's on the lunch menu for the entire week. We rarely know the answer, which means extra drilling and calisthenics.

Trying to eat is a pain. We only get 25 minutes, and most of that time is spent bowing to the whims of our trainers. This afternoon, an ATO sat right next to me. He made me count aloud how many times I chewed each bite of food. I had to chew each bite exactly ten times. If I didn't, he made me chew the next bite more or less to make up the difference. He threw me off by asking another absurd question. I had to try to answer while chewing and counting. My buddy reminded me that everything's a lesson here. They're just trying to teach us to pay attention to detail. It helps to have someone to talk to. We're all in this together, but it doesn't

make it any easier. We have to account for every minute of our day. That leaves little time just to sit around and bullshit with the guys. If an ATO hears us complaining, they make fun of us and then lead us outside for extra drills. We're damned no matter what we do.

Sometimes, when Air Training Officer Graham is in my face, it takes all I've got not to sock him. I know it's not personal, but it's hard not to take it personally sometimes. I bite down on my jaw as tight as I can and use all my concentration not to blink, but to look him dead in the eye. My jaw hurts an awful lot lately.

Enough of my whining now. I don't mean to complain so much. I'll be fine. They say it gets easier each year. I've just got to make it through this year. Well, it's about time for lights out.

Love,

Teddy

Teddy,

I hope all is well with you. Abbey told me that your ATO is giving you a hard time. Just remember, Son, that's his job. He's there to make a soldier out of you. Keep on gritting your teeth. Having a sore jaw is better than a broken one.

Dad

Abbey,

A cold or flu virus seems to be making the rounds. One of the cadets said he was warned this always happens. Working so hard all the time and sleeping so little makes a body susceptible to getting sick. It stinks going through drills when you've got a hundred temperature and a runny nose. We can only drink when told and my throat has been so parched.

I'd finally figured out how to eat the most in the time allotted. You see, we only get three minutes to eat these days. We have to race through line, eat what we can, and throw the rest away when ordered. It's hard to eat much that way. We don't even bother sitting down. That's another way to get sick—lack of proper nutrition and then going back to drills right after eating. Anyway, I found that if I make one big sandwich out of everything, I can eat pretty much anything on my tray in about a minute. Food here is not for tasting anyway. Now, being sick, I can't stomach the food they serve. It's like being back in week one when I couldn't manage to eat much in time and what I did eat I would throw up at drills afterwards.

Teddy

Teddy,

I miss you so much. I look at the ring you gave me and wonder if we

really had that conversation. Do you really love me? If only you knew just how much I love and miss you. I hope you are feeling better. What I wouldn't give to have you here with me. But I know you are living out your dream, and, for that, I am proud and thankful.

All my love,

Abbey

Dad,

Did you have a Battle Buddy when you were going through basics? I don't remember anyone mentioning them. We've got them here. We're assigned to someone as different from ourselves as they can find and make you responsible for one another. If his uniform is not properly worn, if his locker or bunk don't pass inspection, or if he fails in any other way, the buddy also suffers the consequences. It's supposed to rid us of any prejudices we may have and teach us that we are a family, no matter the race, religion, whatever. It's also supposed to teach us about the importance of teamwork and depending on each other.

I thought I would hate having a battle buddy since I don't like having to depend on anyone, but I've grown to love Caleb, my battle buddy, like a brother. He's a black man from Detroit, Michigan. We have a lot to talk about with him being

from such a big city and me being from a small town. He's also a lot taller and stronger than I am. I wouldn't hesitate putting my life in his hands at all.

Everything about him is different: his family life, his religion, some political views. At the same time, we have a lot in common: a love for baseball, girlfriends back home, and a childhood dream that's about to come true. We actually get to attend flight school together. This battle buddy idea turned out to be a good thing in more ways than one. We're even going to put in for the same assignment after all our training. I think we have a good shot at getting what we want.

There are rumors going around about something big that may be in our very near future. I don't think I'm at liberty to talk about it even though they are only rumors, and I'm sure those same rumors are floating around everywhere. Let's just say that I have conflicting emotions. On the one hand, I want to be the best pilot for my country, wherever they send me. On the other, I'm anxious to marry Abbey and be the best husband I can be. I know Abbey will support me no matter what. If anyone would understand, you would.

Teddy

Teddy,

I went home to visit the folks. Ran into Abbey while I was there. She's looking as beautiful as ever. You lucky SOB. She says you get lonely out there and that I should write.

You poor thing!!! Don't get too lonely, though!!!

Things are pretty good on this end. California's just as wonderful as you could imagine, the beach and the warm skies. Not that I get to see too much of it. It's tough going from the big dog to just one of the pack. I wouldn't trade it for the world, though. As I'm sure you yourself are finding out, dreaming big is hard work. Well, in the end, I guess dreams aren't worth going after if you're not willing to work hard. Am I right, Amigo?

Keep reaching for the stars.

Your pal,

Bobby

Mom,

I found a way to make some extra money. Our uniforms have to be neatly pressed with no wrinkles whatsoever. Our shoes have to be polished until they shine. If even one of us does not have a perfect uniform upon inspection, we catch all hell. Most of the guys can't stand doing that stuff. They think it has nothing to do with why we are here, and a lot of them think that's women's work.

I think I get it. I don't think it's so much about a perfect uniform as uniformity and following orders. I think it's like what Air Training Officer Graham said about teamwork. We have to act and react as one in order to be successful in combat. They use every opportunity to teach us this lesson.

Anyway, I made an offer a lot of the cadets could not pass up. I'll press their uniforms and shine their shoes for a price. Most of the guys have no other expenses, so this is a great investment for them and a great way to make a little extra for me. I'll send some home once the guys cash in and give me my pay.

Love,

Teddy

Teddy,

I hope this letter finds you well. You have only been gone for such a short time, but it feels like an eternity. You are my baby, and now my baby boy has become a man. This is a sad time for your mother. As your mother, I am allowed to feel sorry for myself. Also, as your mother, I want you to know how proud I am of you. Keep yourself safe.

Love,

Mom

Abbey,

I can't believe you can even question how I feel for you. If only you knew how much I love you.

I was having trouble sleeping. Being in a room with 100 snoring guys makes sleep tough. I found out that if I volunteered for latrine duty, I could share a room with five or six other guys. I signed up in a hurry. Between latrine duty at the

end of the day and pressing and polishing for the other recruits, I get to sleep a little bit later than I would like, but it's a much more restful sleep.

It seemed like I would never get to feeling better, but I'm slowly getting there. I'm making some great friends here. I guess going through this hell together really bonds people. Don't worry about what I just said; it's tough and frustrating at times, but I wouldn't change a thing.

I miss you more and more every day.

Teddy

Son,

We serve our country to protect the values of our country. We also serve to protect those who cannot protect themselves, no matter who or where they are. As military men, we have a responsibility to trust our commanders and to go where called. Remember why you are doing what you are doing. I trust that you will always make the right decisions. We all support you and pray for you.

Dad

Abbey,

Just got back from our 48 hours of hell. It reminded me of basic cadet training last summer. They worked us so hard that our bodies completely shut

down. I mean it, I couldn't move. Every muscle in my body ached. But, somehow, I kept going. We all kept going. We had to talk ourselves and each other into pressing on. Our reward lay straight ahead. With the completion of the weekend, we would no longer be doolies; we'd be third-class cadets, a huge leap forward for all of us.

The purpose of all this was to reinforce our behavior of acting composed, calm, and rational in any situation, even the most demanding and stressful. They did a damn fine job of instilling that lesson all year.

The last event of the weekend was what we call the "run to the rock." We run $3 \frac{1}{2}$ miles to a place called Cathedral Rock. Talk about a rewarding experience. By this point, we really had nothing left. Guys were literally holding each other up as they ran. You could hear others around you panting and their shoes scuffing the ground because we couldn't bring our feet up any higher than absolutely necessary. Once we reached our destination and the ATO called for us to halt, not one cadet fell. We stood, out of breath with legs shaking, waiting for the words we knew were coming. We made it. Our year of trial is over.

When I returned to my room, the ATOs surprised us by cleaning our rooms for us and pressing our clothes. All that's left is the ceremony tonight. I might even be home before you receive this letter, but I had to share this with you. I

love you.

See you soon.

Teddy

That night, the night after our last forty-eight hours of year one, the Academy held a ceremony honoring all fourth-class doolies by pinning us with our prop and wings insignias. After the ceremony, we ate our first meal at rest.

Chapter Ten
Theodore Francis Bailey
(Teddy)

After high school, I saw Abbey only a few times each year when I visited home for holidays and brief summer vacations. Living in an environment dominated by men, I grew lonely at times and longed for female companionship. I never intended to cheat. I loved Abbey very much, but I succumbed to the pressures of the Academy.

Back in high school, Bobby reigned as king. The big state of California dethroned him, subjecting him to a life as a mere nobleman. I, on the other hand, thrived as a cadet. The Academy transformed a former football star sidekick into an invincible narcissist.

Upperclassman taught new recruits about the sexual attraction associated with a uniform. Even without medals and stripes, our cadet uniforms brought newfound attention from local girls. On free nights, several men caroused in town and joined in harmless flirting. Bringing girls back to our dorms resulted in heavy discipline or immediate expulsion if discovered. However, no one ever snitched on a classmate.

During year one, I ignored the lore of secret Academy rendezvous, focusing instead on survival and proving my worth. By the end of year two, when my ego caught up with my growing physique, remaining chaste became harder and harder. For the first time in my life, girls wanted me for no other reason than the uniform I wore and the reputation of the new Academy.

The flirtations escalated from looks and a smile to winks and a nod. Sandra was her name, I think. I saw her several times at our favorite hangout. She brought us drinks on the house. We tipped her well. She had long, straight blond hair and bright blue eyes. She wore a short, tight shirt that accented her petite breasts. Her snug jeans held her pear-shaped rear end.

She wore faded red lipstick, and her eyes sparkled when she talked. Every time her eyes met mine, I forgot about everybody else in the room.

On the night of Abbey's surprise visit, I drank one too many beers. I rarely drank. As a matter of fact, this was the first night I had drunk any sort of alcoholic beverage since my grandfather's funeral. I already regretted the last few, knowing the next day's workout would most likely make me feel like coughing up my intestines.

I made my rounds to say goodbye and headed for the door when she summoned me. "I get off in thirty minutes," she said. I knew her intentions. I had watched as others played this game before. I had even observed her in action a time or two.

My buddies laughed and nudged my side. "We won't wait up," they joked.

"I'll bunk with Gabe tonight," Mick promised. "Just be sure to get her out of there by sunup. If I can't see it, it didn't happen."

They all left without me. My intoxicated brain knew better than to stay. It begged me to go home and sleep it off. My body refused to listen. I wanted her. I wanted somebody. I wanted Abbey, but her image drifted in and out of consciousness. I forgot to consider the consequences, how my actions would hurt Abbey and ruin the best and most important part of my life. I thought of nothing except the woman standing in front of me. I wanted nothing more than to see her naked in my bed.

Her amazing body spoke volumes about her experience with men. Afterwards, with my head pounding and my body numb, I stared at the perfect shape of her legs, thighs, waist, and breasts.

Someone tapped on my dorm room door. I lay in my bed covered in a thin sheet. My guest turned the knob.

“Go away, Mick,” I shouted. My visitor remained hidden just inside the door. The person on the other side kept eerily silent. Mick, my roommate, the suspected intruder, said nothing.

Sandra opened the door wide enough to poke her head through. “May I help you?” she asked.

I saw the long flow of Abbey’s auburn hair in the small gap between the frame and my companion’s head. The one eye I saw staring at me conveyed her disbelief and shouted her silent curses. Grabbing my pants from the floor and springing into them in one leap, I sprinted for the door as she turned to leave.

She walked away from me down the hall toward the descending stairs. “Abbey,” I yelled after her. “Abbey, please stop. I’m sorry. Talk to me, Abbey! Please!”

She walked on in absolute silence, not even pausing to consider my plea. As she reached the stairwell, she turned to face me, mouth still clamped shut. I stopped dead in my tracks. My heart sank to my stomach. Without saying a word, she dropped her engagement ring into the palm of my hand. I read her unspoken words in the crease of her lips and the disappointment in her eyes. I lost her.

The very second I saw Abbey’s half face in the doorway I knew the girl in my bed was not worth it. Abbey knew me, inside and out. She loved me for me and wanted to be with me because she loved me, not because of a stupid uniform or assumed rank. My time at the Academy made me feel like a rock star. The women attracted to uniforms even treated me like one. None of that mattered now. I wanted only one woman, and I lost her because I gave in to the fantasy and lost my self-control.

I made no excuses for hurting the woman I loved. Although my first act of indiscretion,

my behavior warranted no forgiveness. But it happened. And the moment I looked into Abbey's eyes, I understood the cost of believing my own hype. No matter how popular I became at the Academy or with the girls, no matter how much my body changed from the school's grueling physical demands or how much knowledge I gained about engineering and flying, I was still that same small town boy from Saybrook, Illinois. No matter how hard I tried, nothing could change the real me.

Abbey once teased me about how much women loved a man in uniform and warned me to remember the people who mattered in life. She heard all the stories of men going off to war and leaving loved ones behind for years at a time. She suspected most of the men strayed with random one-night-stands and most of the women sought affairs. She understood their needs and loneliness, but she still expected more from me. Truth be told, I expected more from me as well.

Later that year in 1956, the Academy adopted a formal honor code: We will not lie, steal, or cheat, nor tolerate among us anyone who does. If written and enforced prior to my lapse in judgment, the code might have stayed my hand. Character counts. I failed. Had I been caught by someone other than Abbey, my career in the Air Force could have been terminated. Had my buddies adhered to these tenants, they would have stopped me or at least advised against my planned course. Had I adhered to these tenants, my honor might have risen above my ego. But I cannot blame the lack of a formal honor code. These ideals were manifest in all facets of training every day before then.

Chapter Eleven
Abigail Louise Sullivan
(Abbey)

“I miss him so much,” I confided. My brothers and their families joined us for supper after the Easter Sunday worship service. “Even though they get a week off from classes for spring break, his flight training schedule will keep him from coming home again this year.”

“Summer’s not that far away. He’ll be home some for the summer, won’t he?” my dad asked.

“Well, yes, but that’s still a few months away.”

“If he’s too busy to come home for break, what makes you think he’ll have time to spend with you if you go to Colorado?” my mom reasoned.

“Besides,” my oldest brother, Stephen, protested, “Where would you be staying?”

Turning his attention to my father, he added, “Surely you’re not going to let your daughter sleep in the same room, possibly even in the same bed with this boy when they aren’t even married?”

“But we’re engaged!”

“Your brother is right,” my father answered. “Being engaged is not the same as being married. I will not have my daughter going off to . . . to . . . sin like that!”

I hid a smile, knowing Teddy and I had already “sinned.”

“Does he even know what you’re planning?” my other brother, Jesse, asked.

“No. I want to surprise him.”

“Again, how do you know it would be a welcomed surprise? Maybe you’d be getting him into trouble. Maybe, like mom said, he’d be too busy to spend time with you. You don’t want to put him in that position needlessly, do you? And what about the expense? Who is going to pay for this little adventure of yours?”

I wanted nothing more than to surprise the man I loved, to spend even one hour with him. I thought I lost the battle before my sisters-in-law came to my rescue.

“Jesse, can’t you see how in love with this boy she is? How hard it must be to have to spend so much time away from him. If you and I were separated, wouldn’t you be happy to see me if I surprised you?” my brother’s wife, Julie, argued.

“Well, of course.” He altered his course. “I just think she should work it out with him first. Give him some kind of notice so he can make plans to spend time with her.”

“Oh, but how romantic,” Stephen’s wife, Veronica intoned. “Just like in the movies. He’s an adult, and she’s an adult. Let her make her own decisions.”

We collectively looked toward my mother and father, those who held my fate in their hands.

My mom said, “Well, she is an adult. Perfectly capable of making her own decisions. And, she has a job. Has her own money.” She turned toward my father. “She’s also very responsible. We can trust her. If she wants to go, I don’t think we can stop her.”

My dad grumbled before standing up to leave the table. Before he walked away he said, “I may not be able to stop her, but I want to go on record as saying that I don’t think this is appropriate or a good idea at all.”

The following morning, my mother drove me to the bus station. “He just doesn’t want you to get hurt, you know?”

“I know,” I answered. “But he’s got to let me grow up. I’m not a baby anymore.” *It’s not like he cared when I really was a baby*, I mumbled to myself.

“What did you say?” my mother asked.

“Nothing. Everything’s going to be okay. I’ve never been to Colorado. Even if I only get to see Teddy for a little while, it’ll all be worth it. I’ll try skiing or simply curl up by a fire and read. I packed a couple books. Maybe I’ll go hiking, maybe make a trip up Pike’s Peak. It’ll be fun.”

“But all by yourself? I mean, if Teddy’s studies won’t allow him to spend time with you, you’ll be doing all those things alone.”

“I’m not afraid of being alone, Mom. I’m a big girl. I can take care of myself.”

“Well, then, are you sure you have enough money?”

“I don’t spend my money on anything. All I do is work and save. I’ll be fine.”

She pulled up to the curb. A baggage handler offered his assistance as we said our final goodbyes. “Here,” she said, stuffing some bills into my hand. “Your father wanted to make sure you had enough.”

“Thanks.” I took the money without arguing.

My mom hugged me tight. When she released her grip, her hands caressed my shoulders, and she looked at me with such grief in her eyes, as if letting me go meant the loss of something. I did not understand the look then, but I remembered that look later, after I saw him. It seemed as if she knew without knowing, as if she wanted to tell me, but knew not what to say.

“Be careful,” she pleaded. “Call us if you need anything.”

“I’ll be fine, Mom,” I sighed, misjudging her concern for mere parental nonsense.

From my seat on the bus, I watched her watching me until we vanished from each other’s sight.

After over fifteen hours on a bus, my joints creaked and my neck throbbed. Instead of heading to my hotel to rest and freshen up, though, I decided to try my luck with Teddy. If I

hoped to see him, I knew my chances fared better at three o'clock in the morning before his day began. As tired as I felt, my body ached for Teddy even more.

"Where to, Ma'am?" the cab driver asked.

"Lowry Air Force Base."

I saw his reflection in the rearview mirror. His eyebrow arched in curious wonder. "Don't look like you have any business at a place like that this time of night."

Catching his meaning, I corrected his false assumption with a lie. "My brother is stationed there. My dad's really sick, and he needs to come home."

I could tell he doubted me. "Why not write him a letter or given him a call? Both options faster and cheaper. Didn't need to get on a bus to come fetch him."

"Our dad is dying. He shouldn't travel alone after hearing such news."

"Yet you traveled alone to fetch him?" He smirked, peering at me in the mirror. "None of my business what you do there. A fare's a fare. Do your parents know what you're up to? How old are you?"

"Of course they know," I argued, angry at his condescending disbelief yet unwilling to back out of my lie. "They're the ones who sent me to bring my brother home." I sat back in the seat. "Besides, thought you said you didn't care."

He turned his eyes toward the road and drove, saying not another word until we arrived at Lowry.

"Here we are. Know where you're going?"

"Not exactly," I admitted, my soft tone betraying my nervousness. "My boyfriend is a cadet in the Academy."

"You mean your brother?"

“Uh . . . yea . . .” I murmured as my cheeks reddened.

He pointed to a building detached from the cloister of other structures. “The boys are in the building over there. They have curfews, you know? You may not be able to get to him for a few hours yet. You want me to wait?”

“No,” I said, more eager to get rid of this man than confident about my success.

“No bother. Tell you what. I’ll wait for 30 minutes, won’t keep the meter running or anything. If you’re not back by then, I’ll assume you found your brother and be on my way.”

“Oh . . . okay,” I stammered. I hated his patronizing tone, but feared the truth of his prediction. After arriving at my destination, I felt anxious and wondered at my own wisdom. Maybe I should have gone to the hotel first. Maybe I should have called first. Maybe I should have stayed home.

I took a deep breath and exited the cab. The cool mountain air filled my lungs and sent a chill down my spine. As I headed toward the cadet dorms, I thought about Teddy sleeping yards away. So close. I wondered if he dreamed of home, of me. I dug my hands into the pockets of my jacket to feign off the cold and imagined myself curled up next to him, warming my body next to his. All my doubts faded as I thought of his kissing me and caressing my body.

I pulled on the door, but it was locked. I knocked softly, unsure who lurked on the other side and too self-conscious to arouse too much suspicion. “May I help you?” a man not much older than Teddy asked as he opened the door.

“Um . . . yes . . . well . . . I . . .” With downcast eyes, I stumbled over the words to say. My lie failed with the cab driver. Would it fail here, too? Would he let me in if I told the truth?

“Are you okay, Ma’am?” he asked, peering behind me. The cab hidden from where we stood.

I smiled, laughing at myself. Had I come all this way for nothing? I met his gaze and asked, "Are you a cadet here?"

"Yes, Ma'am," he answered, obvious wonder in his voice.

"How long have you been here?"

"I'm a firstly . . . I mean first-class cadet . . . senior."

"What's your name?"

"Jonathan Tucker, Ma'am."

"And where's home, Jonathan Tucker?"

"Alabama, Ma'am. Mobile."

"Well, Jonathan, is there a girl back in Mobile waiting for you?"

He looked at me, confused by my questions. For a brief moment, I saw the same question in his eye as I first saw in the cab drivers. I swallowed my pride and continued. "Well?"

"As a matter of fact, Ma'am, I do. We're getting married this summer after graduation."

He paused. "Ma'am, it's late. Our day begins at 5:00am. May I help you with something?"

"Do you miss her? I mean, are there times you would give anything just to see her, if only for a moment?"

"Ma'am, if you have no business here, I'm going to have to ask you to go on your way."

"Just answer this one question." I flashed my brightest, warmest smile and pleaded with my eyes. "Please."

He sighed. "Yes. I miss her all the time."

"Thank you, Jonathan, for your honesty. Now, please entertain me one more time. If she were to walk up to this door right now and ask to see you, wouldn't you want to see her? Wouldn't you hope whoever answered the knock would show some compassion and let her in

just so you could hold her for one brief moment?"

"I'm in charge here, Ma'am. If she were to come, I'd be the one to open the door to her, just as I did for you." A spark of understanding crossed his face as he said these words. He smiled. "Who are you here to see, Ma'am?"

"You may call me Abbey, Jonathan. I've traveled almost one thousand miles, all the way from Illinois, to see my fiancé, Theodore Bailey, Teddy. He's a third-class cadet."

"Abbey, as much as I understand, rules are rules. I just can't . . ."

I reached to stroke his arm. "Imagine your girl . . ."

"Rebecca."

"Imagine Rebecca standing in my place."

Jonathan stepped aside and let me pass. "Third floor. Second to last door on the right."

I walked down the hall, imagining the surprise on his sleepy face when he opened the door to find me standing in front of him. We wrote countless letters to each other and talked on the phone every Sunday evening. But several months past since we last saw each other face to face. Long, lonely months since we last kissed. As each step drew me closer to his door, my body tingled at the memory of his last embrace, his body pressed against mine. My throat constricted as I prayed to find him alone so we might greet each other with the pleasure denied us by nine hundred and eighty-seven miles.

I knocked on the door. "Go away, Mick," I heard Teddy yell. He said these words just as the door opened, exposing the naked silhouette of a blonde female.

"May I help you?" she asked. I saw Teddy lying in bed. No shirt and a thin sheet covering his midsection. We locked eyes, but my voice found no words to vent my disbelief. My Teddy, my sweet, innocent, honest, perfection. The Walter to my Aunt Rose.

He jumped out of bed, calling my name as he put on his pants to chase after me. I turned and walked away, unable and unwilling to look at him any longer. His pleading for me to stop awakened his neighbors. Doors opened and prying eyes spied on the commotion disturbing their last peaceful hours of sleep before their grueling regimen began again.

As I walked the short distance from the door of his room to the stairwell, I lost faith in love. My Aunt Rosie and Uncle Walter enjoyed a unique bond, a fairy-tale romance reserved for a few lucky lovers. My own parents, although married for over thirty years, mirrored what I saw in the lives of most other couples their age—resignation and acceptance—the loss of the lust once disguised as love. Before this moment, I allowed myself to believe Teddy and I shared what my Aunt Rosie and Uncle Walter shared. Seeing her image in his doorway helped me recognize my error.

Before descending the stairs, I turned to face Teddy. The look of concern on my mother's face came back to mind. Without knowing why or how, she somehow foresaw what I saw now—a casualty of love.

The ring slid off my finger as easily as if pulling it off a decomposing corpse. I gave it back to him before running down the stairs and out the door. The cab waited for me and whether out of compassion or unconcern, the driver drove me back to the bus station without saying a word.

When I returned home the following evening, my father greeted me with dumbstruck wonder. "What are you doing here?" he asked.

I did not cry when I came face to face with Teddy. I did not cry in the cab on the way back to the bus station. I never even cried during the wretched hours waiting in the terminal or along the slow road home. But when my father looked at me, I could not speak. I fell in his arms

and mourned like an infant.

“What happened?” He asked. His voice overcome with concern. My mother looked on. “I told you this wasn’t a good idea,” he said to her.

They led me to the sofa in the living room. Sitting on either side of me, they held me and let me cry, asking nothing more of me.

“He cheated on me,” I finally said. “Teddy, of all people. How could he do that? I thought he loved me. I really thought . . .”

My dad stroked my hair. “I’m sure he does love you, Sweetheart. But these long distance relationships are hard.”

“He can’t love me. How could he do that to me and then say he loves me?”

“How do you know he was cheating on you?” my mom asked. “Did he tell you?”

“I saw them, Mom.”

“Maybe she was just a friend. Maybe you misunderstood?”

“Misunderstood?” I said, angry with Teddy but taking it out on my poor mother. “She was . . . he . . . I SAW them!”

I continued to cry, comforted by my dad’s love. He never said he told me so, never scolded me for going against his better judgment. He simply offered a shoulder for me to cry on.

I never fully recovered from Teddy’s betrayal. Every once in a while, he called or came by the house. I never talked to him. My parents ran him off any time he stopped by. Whenever he wrote letters, I threw them away without reading one sentence.

Since we lived in a small town, I made sure to avoid him when he returned home for holidays and vacations. If he ran into a friend of mine, he asked about me and made it known

how much he still loved me. Friends and family alike urged me to talk to him, convinced the only way to rid myself of him for good would be to speak to him face to face and demand he leave me alone. Since I moved on, he needed to move on as well.

But in all honesty, I had not moved on. I began dating a man as different from Teddy as a man could be. I wanted nothing to do with romance and voiced my opposition to commitment on every first date. For some reason, stating my detached intentions caused men to dream of meeting me at the altar. Charles proved to be no different from others I dated. After dating for only a few short weeks, he mapped out our future—from where we would live, how many kids we would have, to how we would make our living. I told him time and again that I wanted a husband about as much as I wanted a limb ripped from my body. His determination to win me over kept him coming to my door time and time again.

My dad loved Charles and hoped to see my resistance fade away with time. Charles offered stability and financial peace of mind. He drove a fancy car and grew irritated any time I insisted on opening my own doors. He called my father “Sir” and my mother “Ma’am” and took them to dinner with us a time or two. He kept his hair neatly groomed, shaved his face every day, and never wore jeans or an un-tucked shirt. Charles even agreed with my father—at least while conversing together—that a single woman’s chastity heightened her worth as a potential partner in marriage. He knew exactly what to say and how to act in certain company.

Charles offered very little romance and absolutely no excitement. He served his purpose well, however, by taking me out and keeping me from thinking about Teddy. After two years, I assumed enough time elapsed to fill the void inside me—until the day I saw him again—face to face—after all those years. All I ever felt for him came flooding back to the surface the moment I saw him. No matter how hard I denied it, I knew I still loved him the way Aunt Rosie loved

Uncle Walter.

Chapter Twelve
Theodore Francis Bailey
(Teddy)

For the next two years, I continued to excel at the Academy and engaged in shallow, loveless relationships. I called Abbey every once in a while. She never took my calls. Her mother concocted clever excuses for her daughter and her father cursed me before hanging up.

When home for the holidays, I went to her house and knocked on the door. "Leave her alone," her father scolded each time I tried. "After what you put her through, how dare you keep bothering her. It's time for you to move on and to let her move on."

I could only imagine how much he hated me. What did he think after she came home from Colorado days earlier than planned? Did she tell them everything that happened? Did she cry? What goes through a father's mind when he witnesses his only daughter's heartbreak? How much self-restraint did it take to keep from killing me when I came calling?

Her mother treated me with undeserved respect. I guess she pitied the hurt on my face. "She's seeing someone else," her mother told me. "He's a really smart and handsome man. He treats her well. Separation is too hard. I'm sure there are a lot of girls you could date in Colorado."

She refused to speak to me for more than two years. Instead of discouraging me, her distance gave me hope. Her persistent silence scolded me for wounding her, but it also whispered how much she still cared. I vowed to keep trying until the day she met my gaze with cold, uncaring eyes and insisted she no longer loved me.

The Air Force granted Academy graduates three months leave before returning to advanced pilot training. During my first few days back home, I tried knocking on the door again.

Pleading with her mother for sympathy, I poured out my heart to her. If I gained her mother's sympathy, she might be able to convince Abbey to talk to me.

Offering my most pitiful expression, I said, "I know I screwed up. I've regretted it every day since then. I wasn't prepared for how hard it would be out there on my own, but I get it now. I get that nothing is worth losing her over. She's all I need. She's all I want. I know she doesn't trust me and she shouldn't, but I can prove myself worthy of her if she'd just talk to me."

"I told you she's seeing someone else. I can't help you."

"Does she love him?"

"I don't know, Teddy. Besides, you have another girlfriend. I think it's best if you leave it alone."

"How does she know I have a girlfriend?"

"It's a small town, Teddy. We all know how wonderfully you've done for yourself. Look," she sighed. I knew she felt sorry for me. "I can see you still love her very much, and I'm sure, if you had it to do again, you'd do things differently, but you have to understand how badly you hurt her."

"I know." I bowed my head in defeat. "She's so . . ." I struggled to find the words, "different. She's always been so different from everybody else. I know I messed up bad and I can't fix it, but . . ." I clutched at my heart, "this pain won't go away. I love her too much."

I choked back tears, conscious that my performance, although genuine, created an ally in Abbey's mother. "If she'd just talk to me," I continued. "I need to hear it from her, face to face, that it's over. If she can look me in the eye and tell me she doesn't love me anymore, I'll leave her alone."

"It's been two years, Teddy."

“I haven’t stopped loving her in two years, and I won’t ever stop loving her. I have to believe she still loves me, too. If she does, I can make everything else right again.”

“Give her time . . . more time . . . time to miss you. If you two are meant to be together, you will be together.”

“Does she still love me? Has she ever said anything to you to make you think she still loves me?”

Abbey’s mother took a deep breath and exhaled with compassion. “I’ll talk to her, get her to talk to you. I think you need to ask her these questions.”

Almost a full week passed without a word from Abbey or her mother. Unwilling to stand by the phone and hope for the best, I took matters into my own hands. When I knocked on the door, Abbey’s father greeted me with a victorious smirk. “How unfortunate you did not arrive a mere five minutes earlier, my son,” he said. “She just left with Charles. He is her boyfriend, you know?”

“Yes, Sir. I know.”

“Such a gentleman, that boy. Dotes on my Abbey. Too bad you missed him.”

“Yea, too bad.”

I parked by the curb near their house and waited for her to return.

A brand new sky blue Austin Healey pulled into the driveway. A man as polished as the car sat in the driver’s seat with Abbey right beside him. A fit of anger and jealousy overtook me as I watched the two of them. He walked around his precious British sports car and opened her door for her. I saw him staring at me out of the corner of his eye.

My heart melted as soon as she stepped out onto the sidewalk. She looked as beautiful as

ever. I got out of the car and ran to her side, oblivious to the man walking hand in hand beside her.

“Abbey,” I stammered, overcome by loss, as if finding a hidden treasure you could not keep. She looked at me, unsurprised by my appearance in front of her. I kept pace with her as she continued walking toward the house. “Abbey, give me five minutes of your time. Please.”

She turned to look at her escort and then at me. “Teddy, this is Charles, my boyfriend. Charles, this is an old acquaintance from high school, Teddy.”

She took a few steps back with Charles in tow. “Go on home. I’ll be okay.” Charles glared at me over Abbey’s shoulder. He knew more about me than just my name, and he wanted me to know that he knew.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” he asked.

“I’m sure,” she said, clasping his hand in both of hers. “I’ll call you later.”

Charles gave Abbey a deliberate kiss on the lips before walking away. He turned the ignition and revved the engine, trying his best to intimidate me by showing off his wealth and stature. Since his flamboyant display distracted Abbey, I responded by flashing my most confident, toothy grin.

Abbey led me to the porch, and we sat down on the steps. “So, that’s good ole’ Charlie, huh?” I said, jealousy obvious in my tone.

“His name is Charles. He doesn’t like to be called Charlie or Chuck or Chip or anything else. It’s Charles.”

“Charles,” I repeated, faking my best stuffy British accent. “I bet he insists on calling you Abigail? Couldn’t have chosen anyone more different from me, could you?” I asked, again unable to conceal my jealousy.

“That was the point.” She paused. “You have five minutes. Are you sure you want to waste them talking about my boyfriend?”

I spent the past two years having imaginary conversations with her, but, in this moment, I sat speechless, unsure how to communicate my most sincere regrets and deepest desires. “Why are you with him, Abbey? You don’t love him.”

“I trust him. He treats me like a queen.”

“But he’s not right for you. He’s so uptight and boring.”

“What do you know about him?”

“I know that anybody who gets angry if someone calls him something other than Charles must be a real blast to be around.”

“And I guess it’s more fun to be with a guy who wants to have fun no matter who he hurts? Someone who will lie and say he loves you, but then cheats on the person he is supposed to love? Sounds like a lot of fun. Oh, wait! It’s not!”

By dating someone like Charles, Abbey made a calculated decision to be with a man based on qualities other than emotion. Her deliberate efforts to distance herself from me gave me renewed courage.

“What do you want, Teddy?”

“I still love you. I want you back. I want us back.”

“Does your girlfriend know you’re here? I bet she’d really appreciate what you’re doing.”

“We’re not that serious. She sees other people, I’m sure. Besides, she knows all about you.”

“So that makes this right?”

“You want me to break up with her? Take me back, and I’ll break up with her right now.”

“Teddy, we can’t . . .”

“Why not? You can’t tell me you don’t still love me. Give me one more chance, Abbey. I know I messed up. Not a day goes by I don’t see that look on your face. I can’t take it back, but I can promise you I’ll never do anything that stupid ever again.”

“How can you be so sure? You’re leaving again at the end of the summer. I’ll still be here. Who knows how long we’ll be apart next time. What if you get shipped off to war? I know all about how men, married men, have affairs with foreign women. No matter what you do or where you go, there will always be other women. There will always be temptation.”

“But I’ll have you. I won’t need them.”

“You had me before.”

“Abbey, I never expected people to treat me with so much respect because of the uniform, filling me up with so much unearned praise. I fell for it, believing in my own invincibility. All I ever wanted out of life was to fly. I never dreamed I’d be treated like some sort of hero before even earning my wings.”

“Isn’t that one of the things we both loved about Bobby? He was our very own town hero, but he never bought into his own hype.”

“You’re right. I should’ve taken a lesson from him, but I didn’t. Abbey, you’ve got to believe me: When you looked at me before walking away, I knew none of it mattered. I lost you because I listened to the lies told by people who know nothing about me. You do. If you take me back, I won’t ever forget that look or what that look taught me. Give me a chance. I’ll prove it to you. It’s not worth it, none of it. There’s nothing in this world worth losing you.”

“How? How can you prove to me it won’t ever happen again? We’ll still be apart.”

“We don’t have to be. Come with me. You can go with me wherever I go. I don’t have to

live on barracks. We can get us a place of our own. We can make this work

“You’re more important to me than anything. I can’t imagine not flying. I’ve got a taste, and it’s incredible. Besides, I’m not good at anything else. But I’ve made up my mind. If you won’t go with me, I’m not going. I’ll stay in Saybrook, and we can build a life together right here. I do have an engineering degree. I’m sure someone would love to hire an Academy brat. Or I can always go back to farming. Get us our own little place.” In a self-condescending and comical tone, I added, “I mean, I do owe the Air Force so much time for paying the bill for my training and education, and I’m not sure what they do to people who’re AWOL. Probably some sort of prison sentence.”

She smiled at me for the first time. “You’re pretty sure of yourself, aren’t you?”

“Look me in the eye and tell me you don’t love me. If you can do that, I’ll get in my car and drive away, and I’ll never bother you again.”

She looked at her feet. “Let’s not forget about your girlfriend.” Abbey forgot to mention Chuck, and I neglected to remind her. She tried to meet my gaze, but looked away every time our eyes met. She attempted to say those dreaded words, but hesitated every time.

She stood to leave, and I jumped to my feet. I grabbed her hands and held them against my chest. When she looked me in the eye, her posture softened. I leaned in and kissed her. She bowed her head so that her forehead touched my chest; she reminded me again, “You have a girlfriend.”

With the tips of my fingers, I lifted her chin. One tear struggled to break free from the corner of her eye. “I’ll take care of that. After it’s done, can I come back?”

As the tear fell, she nodded her uncertain approval. I watched as she turned around and walked inside. Staring at the closed door, I breathed in the lingering aroma of her perfume and

stood in awe of my good fortune. Fate chose to give me a second chance.

Like the day I ran to gain Bobby's approval, I wasted no time breaking up with the girl who stood in my way of happiness.

"So she took you back?" my ex-girlfriend asked. "Good for you. I have to say, I'm surprised, but good for you."

Chapter Thirteen
Theodore Francis Bailey
(Teddy)

Each passing hour of separation gave her mind more time to outwit her heart. Hoping to outrun reason, I drove to Abbey's house early the next morning, eager to reclaim my girl.

"You broke up with her over the phone? You couldn't even wait to break up with her face to face? Didn't she deserve better from you?"

"I told you we weren't serious. She knew all about you. I told her you were the love of my life, the one I let slip away. She knew I wanted you back."

"Why would any woman in her right mind be with a guy who admitted he loved someone else?"

I shrugged my shoulders. Even though she chastised me for my crude breakup tactics, she seemed pleased all the same. I wrapped my arms around her waist and pulled her to me. "So," I whispered. "You forgive me?"

"Forgive . . . I'm not sure. Forget . . . definitely not."

"Will you at least give me another chance?"

"You better not break my heart again, or I'll kill you." Just then, good ole' Chuck pulled into the driveway. "Better yet, break my heart, and I'll send my dad and Charles after you." She freed herself from my embrace.

"Teddy." With outstretched arm, Charlie greeted me, saying my name as if greeting his Negro servant. He searched Abbey's face while shaking my hand.

"Charles," I returned the handshake, squeezing his knuckles in my grip.

His sudden arrival brought out the bully in me. I stood at attention with my chest thrust out and my muscles flexed. I wanted him to know that even though he earned more money, I

stood a better chance of winning a fight. Even though her demeanor toward me last night and this morning left no doubt in my mind about her feelings for me, his presence threatened our reconciliation.

She left me standing by the bottom porch step and walked him back to his car. *Look here, Chuckie Boy, she's mine. Always has been and always will be. Run along now. Nothing for you here*, I thought to myself as I watched Abbey's lips mouth undecipherable words which caused his face and ears to turn blood red. He pivoted his head and stared in my direction. The rage on his face betrayed his desire to beat the tar out of me.

I smiled in response, daring him to act on his raw emotions. If he came running after me, I intended to stand my ground and fight back. Even if he proved too tough for me, he would have the satisfaction of bleeding me a bit, but I would have the satisfaction of having Abbey by my side to doctor me up while he drove off alone.

Instead of retaliating, he crawled into his car and drove away. "Bye, bye, Chuckie Boy." I said under my breath. "Good riddance."

With Charlie gone, another battle had been won, but the war for Abbey was still well under way. "My daddy saw you waiting for me in your car last night. He kept peeking at us. My mom told him not to, but he did. He saw you kiss me."

Uh-oh. My chest felt tight. He never liked me very much. I took her away from her All-American boyfriend and then stole her back from Mr. Wall Street, both young men her father preferred over the shaggy headed, sloppy dressing flyboy. Even after sporting a new military look, he still resented me for taking his youngest child and only daughter away from what he deemed a more proper future.

“He’s not happy,” Abbey explained. “He doesn’t want me to get back together with you. Mom tried to convince him to let me make my own decision. He refused to hear any of it. He says if you cheated on me once, you’ll do it again.”

“What do you think?”

She struggled to answer me. “Part of me agrees with my dad. I must be out of my mind for doing this, but . . . but I can’t help how I feel. I never stopped loving you. I don’t ever want you to hurt me like that again, but . . . something tells me this is right. This is where I’m supposed to be.”

I held on to her for dear life. She said the words. She still loved me and never stopped loving me.

“When we first met,” she continued, “I felt like I’d known you my entire life. When I saw you with that girl, I felt like I lost a part of me, like somehow a part of me died.”

Her confession shamed me. “I’m so sorry,” I wept as I held her. “I felt the same way. That’s how I know I won’t ever do that to you again.”

She let me go, and we wiped away each other’s tears. “So, you ready?”

“Ready for what?” I asked.

“He wants to talk to you. He said if you had any intentions of going out with me again, he wanted to have a few words with you first.” I gulped down my fear, grabbed her hand, and followed her into the house.

He waited for me in his study as if he knew when to expect me. When he heard the door close, he said, “Teddy, will you join me, please?”

Abbey’s father had a demanding presence, and he spoke with authority. He scared me

more than any instructor I ever encountered at the Academy.

“Teddy, I wanted to take this opportunity to talk to you, man to man,” he began. I stood before him, sweat seeping out of every pore on my body. He motioned for me to sit on an adjoining seat. I sat on the edge, unable to make myself comfortable in his presence and afraid of what he might say or think of me if I actually had been able to sit back on his plush sofa and relax.

“Teddy, do you know what it does to a father when he sees his baby girl cry?”

“Umm . . .” I mumbled. “No, sir. Not . . . not exactly . . . but . . .”

“Let me tell you. It rips your heart out. You want to do everything in you power to make her happy again.”

“Yes, Sir.”

He leaned forward in his chair and looked me directly in the eye. We sat inches away from each other. I could hear his breathing, and I knew he smelled my fear.

“I didn’t approve of her little trip. Tried to put a stop to it. In hindsight, I’m glad she saw for herself what kind of man you really are.”

He paused to take in my reaction. All I could do was sit in silence and try with all my might to match his stare. His intimidating tactics forced me to lower my line of vision to his chin.

“She came home visibly upset,” he continued. “Now, my daughter has never made a habit of confiding in me. So, when she broke down and told me what happened, you can imagine how I felt.”

“Yes, Sir,” I said, bowing my head to the floor, too ashamed to face him.

“Personally, I have no idea what she sees in you. She’s so stubborn. God knows why, but she thinks she loves you and wants to be with you.”

My face twitched as I tried not to smile. To hear him or anyone else admit she loved me made this whole ordeal bearable. Abbey's father, on the other hand, disapproved of my reaction and grunted to recapture my attention and trepidation.

"You like that, do you? Think you have her in the palm of your hand? Treat her however you like?"

"No, Sir!" I bucked up at his accusation. "I love Abbey very much. I'd never try to control her or mistreat her."

"Sure fooled me."

"I know I messed up, but if she's willing to forgive me and take me back, that's all that matters. I'm sorry if you don't like me, Sir, but at the end of the day, I really don't care. Abbey loves me, and I love her. That's all I care about."

"Until the next time you find yourself separated from her and feeling a little lonely?"

I could sense his anger intensifying. "Look, I understand why you'd be so upset. She's your only daughter, but I'm going to marry her someday. Your daughter wouldn't be with me if she didn't trust me."

"Trust you? After what you put her through? Why should she trust you now?"

"I told her I'd earn her trust back, and I will. Like you said, Abbey's a stubborn girl. I know full well that if I ever screw up again and break her trust, that's it for me. I've only got one shot, and I sure don't plan on blowing it."

"So what kind of husband do you think you'll make? What kind of life can you give her?"

"I love her. That's enough. I'll take care of her just fine."

"Do you ever hear from your old pal, Bobby? I hear he's going pro."

“So I guess you think he can provide a better life for Abbey? Good ole Bobby will be rich and famous. Is that what Abbey needs to make her happy? What about . . .” I bit my lip, trying to control my anger before cursing in front of him. “What about Charles? I suppose he’d be an even better match for her? Mr. Suit and Tie?”

“As a matter of fact!” His voice rose, and his face radiated a bright red hue. He stood and towered above me, fists clenched and chest heaving. I could not believe my nerve, talking to him like that, but my pride got the better of me.

Abbey’s mom poked her head into the room. “Everything okay in here?” she asked.

“Just fine,” Abbey’s dad answered, relaxing his fingers and retaking his seat.

She looked to me. “We’re fine,” I echoed.

“Look,” I said, humbling myself and reclaiming my fear. “Bobby and Charles can both offer Abbey more fiscal stability. Lord knows I won’t make a lot of money in the Air Force, but the military takes good care of their own. Besides, Bobby wasn’t in love with Abbey. I doubt Charles loves Abbey, but I do. And she loves me, too. That’s enough, isn’t it?”

“Let’s get one thing straight. I can’t forbid Abbey from seeing you. As much as I’d like to, I can’t. For some reason, she does love you. And you are right. If you ever mess up again, she can and will take care of herself. But she will always be my little girl, and I will not sit by and watch you hurt her again. You will answer to me next time.”

I managed to look him in the eye as he made this threat. I knew he meant what he said.

“And another thing,” he continued, “love is not always enough. You kids are young yet. You have no idea how hard life can be. Will love be enough when times are tough and you’re struggling to put food on the table? Will love be enough if you’re sent off to war and Abbey’s left home alone? Will love be enough if you, God forbid, ever got killed and left Abbey alone, or

worse, left Abbey alone with your children? Will love be enough then?"

What could I say? I realized just how much Abbey's father despised me. He hated me for reasons other than cheating on his daughter and breaking her heart. When she broke up with me, he breathed a sigh of relief, believing she saved herself from a worse fate. Recovering from infidelity would be easier than recovering from death.

"You play poker, Son?" he asked.

"I have, but . . ."

"Know what a bad beat means?"

"A strong hand you expect to win, but end up losing." I hung my head in shame. "I get it," I said. "But what do you want from me? Should I break up with her because of something that might happen? Sir, the past two years have been the worst years of my life. I know I'm young, and I have no idea what's going to happen in the future, but neither do you."

"All I know, right now, is that I can't go another two years or twenty years without Abbey. When I lost her, I lost everything. I'll spend the rest of my life making it up to her if that's what it takes. I promise you, I'll do right by her."

"Daddy?" Abbey said from the other side of the door, breaking the uncomfortable silence.

"Come on in, Sweetheart," he answered, giving me a sideways smile and a saddened wink. "We're done in here."

"Mom wanted me to let you know dinner's almost ready. Can Teddy stay?" she asked with a nervous tremor in her voice.

"If he likes." Abbey's father took my hand in his and squeezed it without shaking it. He

gave me a look that said, I'm still not comfortable with this situation, but if she loves you what can I do? He put his other hand on my shoulder and led me out of the room.

Chapter Fourteen
Theodore Francis Bailey
(Teddy)

During the summer of 1959, before shipping out to Undergraduate Pilot Training, Abbey and I spent almost every waking moment together. We acted like a brand new couple falling in love for the very first time. Living with our parents dampened our lustful and selfish longing for intimacy. Even if we managed to find a quiet corner in our respective homes, some prying eye or curious ear lurked in the shadows.

On the Fourth of July, Abbey and I and a bunch of our old buddies from high school, several of whom stayed in Saybrook, electing to join the ranks of other farmers rather than venture out into the great unknown of life beyond the county lines, gathered in the fields to drink, talk, and watch the fireworks light up the late night sky.

With a buzz in our heads and a jovial lightness in our step, Abbey and I left the gathered celebration to engage in our own revelry. Our clumsy feet managed to silence the creaking stairs and carry us past her sleeping parents to her bedroom.

Throwing off our clothes in hurried ecstasy, we crawled under the covers of her bed and made love. Although taking more and more risks, we needed to be together and the backseat of my car cramped our passionate desires. With alcohol desensitizing our cares, we thought nothing about the consequences of our actions.

Awakened by a bewildering noise, Abbey's father searched for its source. Sneaking his way to the threshold of her bedroom, he opened the door. "WHAT THE?" he screeched in horrified shock.

At the sound of his voice, I flew off the bed and landed with a hard thud on the floor. Abbey grabbed at the blankets to cover herself. I covered myself with my hands and stared up at

him, terrified of his next move.

Eying our clothes scattered on the ground, making a path from the door to the bed, Abbey's dad shifted his gaze to a spot high above our heads. A stern and hard voice demanded, "You better go." He turned and left, closing the door behind him.

I looked at Abbey, saying nothing but communicating my sorrow and apology all the same. Dressing as quickly as I could, I kissed her goodbye and made a hasty retreat. To my utter relief, Abbey's dad retreated back into his room instead of waiting to deal me a bad beat. He never said another word about this incident to either one of us, but, all the same, we never tried our luck in her house ever again.

Instead, we spent more time at my house. Our basement acted as a laundry room, storage area, and entertainment area. One partition contained an old weather-worn sofa, a television, and a closet filled with long forgotten toys. The drab atmosphere of the room ensured almost complete seclusion from the rest of the household. My mother, understanding our need for privacy, seldom barged into our space, and, when chores required her to descend the stairs, she approached with loud footsteps, forced coughs, and a "knock, knock" before entering.

My youngest brother, not yet eight years old, understood nothing about our grownup needs. With her skirt pulled above her waist and my pants falling just below mine, we half sat and half laid on the sofa. Unaware of his intrusion, our unusual behavior created a rather confusing sight for young Robby. His innocent compulsion to tell his Mommy alerted us to his presence.

As soon as Abbey left, my mother called me into the kitchen. I leaned on the counter nibbling on the vegetables she prepared for our dinner. "He saw you," she said as a simple matter of fact. No anger or bitterness disguised in her voice.

“Who saw what?”

“Your brother. He went downstairs and saw you and Abbey.”

I quit chewing, and my face turned white. My mother smiled and laughed at my embarrassment. “He saw you moving on top of her and heard her making a noise. He said your clothes were all messed up. He saw her leg ‘high up’ and saw your,” she pointed to her backside the way Robby pointed to his when describing the scene. “He thought you were hurting her,” she laughed again, this time at the simplicity of her youngest child’s innocence.

“Why’d you let him go down there?”

“I’m sorry, Honey. I thought he was playing in his room.” My bond with my mother surpassed typical mother-son relationships. Nothing shocked her. I often wondered if living in a house filled with boys diminished her sense of shame or if her natural temperament prepared her for the ruckus antics and obscene behavior of her three sons. Only once in my life did I ever catch her off guard by something I said or did.

“Don’t be mad at him,” she continued. “He just wants to spend time with his big brother. He looks up to you, you know?”

“I know,” I sighed. “I’m not mad, but . . .”

“But you can’t be alone here any easier than you can at Abbey’s house.”

“Yea. Something’s gotta give. I’ve got to get out of here.”

“Patience, my dear. You’re leaving in another month. Isn’t that soon enough for you?”

“I don’t mean here, as in leave town. I mean, Abbey and I need to be together, some place of our own, where fathers and little brothers won’t bother us.”

“You know, Son, some people actually wait until they’re married to have sex. Those couples wouldn’t be bothered by fathers and little brothers. Do you blame her father or Robby

for your troubles?"

"No. Of course not, but it just seems to be getting too cramped around here."

"Well, I hope you don't plan on moving in together without getting married. I'll have no son of mine living in sin."

"I know."

"And sex is no reason to get married."

"I didn't say anything about getting married!" I protested.

My mom resumed meal preparations, and I sat watching her and thinking of a way for Abbey and me to escape our present predicament.

The more I thought about it, the more I contemplated marriage. After all, she said yes to the proposal once before. Although we made no mention of it since we got back together, I knew I still wanted to marry her someday. Now seemed as perfect a time as any.

Although motivated by reasons other than sex, our recent blusters compelled my frustrated obsession to find a more permanent way out. Both her parents and mine threatened to disown us if we chose to cohabit before exchanging rings. However, convinced the legal obligation of marriage doomed a sound relationship, Abbey preferred the notion of living together. But without a signed certificate proving our attachment, pilot training regulations required me to live on base with other single men. This option solved nothing.

Because I loved her and intended to spend the rest of my life with her and because of the military policy, I made up my mind to propose once again. This time, I tried my best to give her a better memory than greasy burgers and an inquisitive dinner crowd.

"Abbey," I said over the phone. "I'll be by at four to pick you up. Be ready."

“Ready for what?” she asked.

“I found a way for us to escape the watchful eyes of fathers and brothers.”

“Oooh,” she said in a deep, sensual whisper. I could almost feel her breath on my ear, arousing my imagination and almost making me forget my true purpose.

Our first destination—Saybrook High.

Summer staff opened the doors to us, giving us free reign of the nearly deserted building. We walked in, hand in hand, past the front office where we first met, down each hall, into the cafeteria and gymnasium.

“You found us a place at the school?” she questioned. “Doesn’t seem right. I mean, there’s still people working.”

“You think nobody’s ever done it in a school?” I teased. “Ask around. You’d be surprised. But, no. We’re not here to have sex, unless you want to. It’s just that I’m leaving soon and thought it’d be fun to come check out our old stomping ground.”

“It’s not like you’ll never see this place again. I mean, your family’s here . . . and I’m here.”

I smiled, but kept silent, purposefully leading her to one room in particular. When we arrived, I said, “Physical Science. The only class we ever took together.” I sat in my old seat. “Do you know I sat here just so I could smell your hair?”

“You did not!” She sat backwards in the desk in front of me, put her hands flat against my desk, and rested her chin on her hands. She looked up at me with the sweetest eyes. She took my breath away the same as she did back in high school.

“Eureka!” She exclaimed. “I remember when Mr. Meade told the story of the scientist

sitting in his bathtub thinking about something. When the answer came to him, he jumped up and yelled ‘Eureka!’ ”

“Eureka!” I laughed.

“I’ll never forget the meaning of that word for as long as I live. I heard you and James snickering behind me, ‘He found it!’ ”

“What was it he actually found?”

“I don’t remember,” Abbey confessed.

“Mr. Meade would be proud.”

After a moment, I shifted the conversation. “You made me so nervous. I wanted more than anything to run my fingers through your hair.” I ran my fingers through her long, dark hair. “I thought I’d never get any closer to you than this. Thought there’d be no way you’d go out with a guy like me when you already had a guy like Bobby.” She said nothing. She simply looked at me, her eyes filled with love. Still, after all this time and all we went through together, I could not believe my good fortune. All our past doubts and present emotions echoed in the stillness of the room. Our bond to one another linked each scene of bygone days and future dreams.

Taking her hand in mine, I stood, and I led her out the door. We sat on the front curb by the main entrance of the school building, still reeling from our shared moment. “Do you know what Bobby and I were doing when you first came here?” She responded by nudging my side. “We were actually about to skip class and get some breakfast. Then you walked in.”

“I remember how scared I was that day. I didn’t want to be the new girl. I’d spent my entire life in one place, and now I’d have to start over. I would have given anything if my dad had said ‘just kidding’ and kept on driving.”

“You were so shy and quiet.”

“Me? Look who’s talking. You couldn’t even look me in the eye!”

“Of course I couldn’t. Who can look an angel in the eye?”

“Oh, stop it.”

“I’m serious. And that’s exactly what Bobby called you, an angel. Actually, I think he said you had the name of an angel. You were the first girl ever to take his breath away.”

Destination two—The Watering Hole.

“You really are on a reminiscent trip, aren’t you?” Abbey asked as we pulled up to the bar.

“Just thought we’d stop for a drink on our way to . . .”

“To?”

“To somewhere else. Let’s go.”

We sat at the same table where I first learned of the breakup of my best friend and the object of my infatuation. Sipping our beers, Abbey laughed as she watched the band play. “You guys were so awful,” she teased. “Even if I had been drinking, you guys would have been just as terrible.”

“Thanks a lot.”

“The men you played with made me cringe more than the off key singing. A bunch of middle-aged men acting like teenagers! What a sad sight!”

“Yea, but what fun! They came here to relive their glory days. No harm in that. I enjoyed playing with them, something so freeing about being up there. No pressure. I miss those guys. It surprised me to see you walk through those doors.”

“What did you think when you saw us?”

“I first thought another woman simply looked like you. After I realized it was you, I entertained the idea you might possibly be there to see me. The whole night, I kept telling myself to enjoy it because in the morning, I’d wake up and realize I dreamt the whole thing.”

She grabbed my hands before quickly releasing them. “Ewe. I forgot how gross these tables are . . . I can’t believe you went to Bobby the very next day.”

“I had to before you changed your mind.”

“Weren’t you afraid he’d hit you?”

“Hell, yea, but I figured a beating was worth it if I got you in the end. I thought the same about Charlie. He looked like he wanted to kill me. What did you say to him anyway?”

“The truth. No matter how much we tried to deny it, we both knew how I felt about him and how I felt about you. I thought the world of him, but I loved you.”

“I wonder what ole’ Chuckie boy is up to these days?”

“Oh, shut up,” she said with a smile.

Destination Three—Bamboo Forest Park.

I parked in my car on the south end of the baseball field by home plate.

“I know why we’re here.” She scooted closer to me and nuzzled up against my side. A bamboo forest used to grow on the north end of the baseball diamond. Several lucky kids hit homerun balls into those woods. Even luckier kids made grand slams over there.

“I can’t believe he’s cutting it down. It’s such a beautiful place.”

“Must’ve got tired of running everyone off his property,” I said.

“Oh, foo. He never moved a muscle. He’d sic that dog on ‘em. Remember the time we heard him start barking. We all took off running as fast as we could.”

“I think about it every time I look at that little scar on my leg. It still baffles me how I hung from one little barbed wire sticking in my calf muscle. I didn’t even feel it at first. I thought it just ripped my jeans. You all made it across, and I hung there.”

“But you made it. Never did see that dog, though. Remember the time you and your buddies snuck to my house?”

“Of course. You were having a sleepover, and we all picked out our girl before we got there.”

“Too bad we never heard you knocking. You should have knocked louder.”

“Yea, but bigger rocks might have busted your window; then your dad would’ve been after us. I’d rather face that old dog. But I had the perfect spot picked out for us.”

“It was better that we didn’t hear you. Nothing romantic about having sex with your boyfriend for the first time with other couples nearby. Don’t think I would’ve gone for that.”

“I never planned on having sex with you that night. I just thought we’d make out a bit. Our first time turned out to be perfect.”

My friends and I hung out in the forbidden bamboo forest long before discovering its other hidden treasures. The uniqueness of the trees ignited our boyish imaginations. As we got older, we all dreamed of bringing a girl to this spot and becoming one with a legion of other boys in our town.

When Bobby and I met Abbey, she joined our circle of adventurers, building fires, making S’mores, and acting like immature high school kids. Every great childhood memory for almost every kid in the neighborhood began and ended at the Bamboo Forest Park.

The night Abbey and I made love for the first time we started the night sitting on the

bleachers, the only spectators to an impromptu game of mismatched teams of boys and girls almost too young to hold a bat.

As the light of the moon replaced the brightness of the sun and the little ones hurried home before darkness awoke their fears, Abbey and I stayed behind, comforted by the star's solitary company.

She wore long pants to shield her from the cooling night breeze. She shivered. I rubbed my hands up and down her arms to warm her. She laughed and told me my touch gave her a chill, not the cold. We kissed. I wrapped my arms around her and massaged the bare part of her back between her shirt tail and pants line. She pulled away.

“Have you ever?” she questioned. I looked at her, trying to understand her meaning. “Have you ever been with a girl alone over there?” She pointed with her head in the direction of the forest.

“No,” I answered honestly.

“Have you ever anywhere?”

“Have you?”

She nodded her head yes. “With Bobby, but he was my first. He’s the only one. And you?”

I sighed. “Yes.” I did not tell her more, and she did not ask.

She took my hand and led me toward the forest. I followed, unable to breathe, nervous as never before, and more excited than I had ever been. I helped her over the fence and followed right behind. She stood motionless on the other side. I thought she changed her mind.

She gave me a look that told me to take the lead. I took us to the place I picked out long before, never imagining this day would actually come. A bed of plush green grass lay flat as if

making a bed in expectation of our arrival. Bamboo shoots sprung up all around, lean and tall and tightly spaced as if creating a wall of protection for two lovers.

We both took off our jackets and laid them on the ground as a makeshift blanket. We sat side by side and kissed. My hand reached under her blouse and I caressed every inch of her body. Her breasts heaved in my palm. I paced myself, conscious of every moment. I wanted to take it all in, every touch, every sigh, every movement of our bodies.

Our clothes came off, one layer at a time. She lay on her back, nervous eyes staring up at me. I had never seen her naked before. I took a moment to look at her and to caress her. She reached her hand up to the back of my neck and pulled me to her.

Abbey and I wandered to the area we presumed to hold the memories of our first lovemaking. With a blanket in tow this time, we laid it out and sat, staring at the memory of those two young lovers.

“Abbey, being with you that night changed my life. I knew I loved you the first day I met you. I knew I wanted to spend the rest of my life with you the moment we made love. I love you, Abbey.”

“I love you, too.”

I pulled the ring out of my pocket, the same ring I gave her four years before and the same ring she gave back to me at the Academy. “I made a half-hearted promise to your four years ago. But I was scared about going away to school and depressed about my grandfather’s death and afraid of losing you. Even though I loved you very much, I proposed for all the wrong reasons.

“I’ve made mistakes, and, praise God, you took me back. I’m a different man from the

boy who left here four years ago. We're both different. Even my love for you is different. It's a stronger love, a more mature love. An honest love. Never doubt that." I held the ring out to her. "If I earned more money, I'd buy you a better ring, but I hope this will do." I got on one knee and slipped the ring on her finger. "It still fits. I mean it this time. There's no ulterior motive, nothing behind my proposal other than the fact that I love you and I want you to be my wife. Will you marry me?"

Her eyes crinkled, staring at me as if I spoke a foreign language.

"I admit that it will be rough at first. I mean, I still have a year of training left, and I'm pretty sure I'll be working twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, but at least we can . . ."

She got up on her knees and wrapped her arms around my neck, causing me to choke back the rest of my plea. "Yes," she said as her tears wet my already sweaty shirt.

Without telling a soul, Abbey and I took our fee and headed straight to the Justice of the Peace Office the day before leaving for Laughlin Air Force Base in Texas for my Undergraduate Pilot Training (UPT). I reported for duty with papers in hand proving my status as a married man.

Chapter Fifteen
Abigail Louise Bailey
(Abbey)

With little more than two small suitcases and a few mementoes from home, Teddy and I spent our first night as husband and wife on a bus bound for our new life in Del Rio, Texas, just north of the Mexican border. A crowd of well-wishers gathered in the Bailey home to celebrate the accomplishments and future of their home-town hero, ignorant as to the reasoning behind their guest of honor's absence. Our preoccupied planning and spontaneous departure closed our eyes to all backdoor whispers and surprise party preparations. We knew nothing of their foiled plans until the following evening.

After checking in at the base and making all the necessary arrangements for married living, Teddy carried me over the threshold of our bridal suite at a nearby cheap motel. After consummating our vows, we remembered our families and thought it best to share our happiness before paranoid mothers took police by the hand to search every area hospital and morgue.

“Hey, Robby, what are you doing up so late?” Teddy asked when his baby brother answered the telephone. “Can I talk to Momma?” He asked without waiting for Robby’s response.

“Teddy, thank the Lord! Where are you? Where have you been? We’ve been worried sick!” The uh-oh look on Teddy’s face let me know the Bailey clan had already begun their search and rescue parade on the streets of our home town.

“I’m fine, Mom. I’m actually down in Texas already.”

“You’re where?”

“Abbey and I decided to come on down and . . .”

“You and Abbey?”

“Yes, me and Abbey. That’s actually why I’m calling, Mom. I wanted to know if you would like to talk to your daughter-in-law . . . Mom?”

Teddy repeated the word several more times before removing the phone from his ear and turning to me. “I think she hung up on me.”

Grabbing the phone from his hand, I listened and heard nothing. “I don’t hear a dial tone.” Speaking into the phone I said, “Mrs. Bailey? Are you there? Hello?”

In a monotonous tone, she answered, “I’m here, Honey. Let me talk to Teddy, will you?” “Mom? Are you okay?” Teddy asked.

“I thought we talked about this, Son. Just because you want to have sex doesn’t mean you need to run off and get married. You’re too young for this.”

“Mom, don’t be ridiculous,” Teddy smirked. “I’m older than you and Dad were when you two got married. You already had kids by the time you were my age.”

“But that was different. We did things right. We didn’t run away. He asked my father for my hand, and we got married in the church by a priest with all our family and friends there to witness. Did you get married in a church? Did a priest perform the ceremony? Was I the only one not invited?”

“We got married at the courthouse. No priest. No one knew, Mom. We just did it.”

“That’s what I thought,” she said with an air of motherly scolding. “Well, then, Teddy, you do realize, don’t you, that you and Abbey are living in sin?”

“No we’re not,” Teddy protested. “We’ve got our papers right here. I’ve already talked to the Air Force. They’ve approved our marriage, and we’ll be living in our own place off base.”

Teddy’s dad, who had been listening silently until now, spoke. “Son, it doesn’t matter what the military thinks. What matters is what God thinks. According to the church, you’re not

married. They will not recognize that piece of paper. Your mother is right. If you continue with this charade, you will be living in sin. I think it best you send her home. We'll make all the arrangements for a proper wedding right here. When you get a break, you can come back and marry her proper."

I could see the anger burning on Teddy's face. "Do you really think God cares about all that?"

"How dare you?" His mother yelled loud enough for me to hear from my seat on the corner of the bed.

"I mean no disrespect to you, Dad, or God, Mom, but tell me. Where in the Bible does it say I have to get married in the Catholic Church by a Catholic priest in order for my marriage to be legitimate?"

"Don't you talk to me like that, young man. I know my Bible!"

"So do I, Mom. That's why I'm asking. 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife and the two shall become one flesh.' God spoke these words in the beginning, and Jesus confirmed them in all the Gospels. Do you know how a man and woman became man and wife back then? 'Then Isaac brought her into his mother Sarah's tent, and he took Rebekah, and she became his wife, and he loved her.' That's from Genesis. No mention of Catholic priests being present or Sarah's bed being in a church. Would you rather I bring Abbey home and take her in your bed?"

"That's enough!" Teddy's father demanded. Even though I felt Teddy's rising anger, I cringed at his argument. I could see his sorrow and regret immediately after those words left his tongue.

"I'm sorry," Teddy sighed. "I just thought you'd be happy for us. I love her. You know

this. I just thought . . . hopefully . . . someday, you'll be able to see that's enough. It's enough for us."

Teddy hung up on his parents, thinking he might never speak to them again. We held each other. No words. No tears. The shock of their reaction dumbfounded us.

"They're wrong, you know?" He said to me. "Jesus doesn't care about all that. So what if the Vatican doesn't have our names on file? God does. Besides, it doesn't matter what they think or what the church thinks. All I care about is what you think."

I looked at him, the tears beginning to form. "I love you," I cried.

"I love you, too."

We held each other well into the early morning dawn. Exhaustion filled our bodies, but recaps of the night kept us awake and lost in our silent thoughts. As the sun peeked through closed curtains, Teddy bounced out of bed as if the warm rays fed new life into him.

"We've got two days until I have to report back at Laughlin. That means two days for a honeymoon."

Rejuvenated by his energy, I sat upright and smiled at him. "What do you have in mind, Mr. Bailey?"

"Well, Mrs. Bailey. We're very close to the Mexican border. I hear there's a lot of fun to be had down there. When I went to the base yesterday, some of the guys told me about a place called Boys Town just outside of Ciudad Acuña. Said I had to check it out. So what do you say, my beautiful bride. You up for a little romantic getaway?"

"Absolutely, but I think I oughta call my folks first. I can just imagine how they'll take it since your folks . . . but at least we'll expect it this time."

My fingers shook as they dialed the number. I cared less for how my parents would

respond than I did for how Teddy's mother responded. I felt closer to her and loved her more than I did my own mother. Hearing her rejection cut deeper than any words my mother could profess.

"Hello, Abbey," my dad answered. His voice betrayed foreknowledge of my call.
"What's going on with you?"

"Dad, I'm sorry I didn't come home or call last night. Things got a little crazy, but I wanted to let you know Teddy and I got married. I'm with him now in Del Rio, Texas."

"I know," he said. "Teddy's mom called last night. I can't believe the nerve of that man, forcing you into a marriage and taking you to that God-forsaken part of the country. Too damn close to too many Mexicans. Who does he think he is?"

My dad's angered response made it sound as if Teddy kidnapped me. "Dad, it's not as if he took me against my will," I corrected. "I wanted to marry him. I wanted to come here with him. It was my choice and my choice alone."

"Give me the phone. Let me talk some sense into her," I heard my mom say in the background. "Hey, Honey, Dear. Are you okay?"

"I'm fine, Mom. As I told Dad, I married Teddy and came here of my own free will."

"He didn't have to force your hand. I mean . . ."

"Again, he didn't force me into anything."

"And his poor mother," she continued, deaf to my words. "She's so upset."

"I understand, but we didn't get married with them in mind."

"Obviously."

"That's not exactly what I meant. What I mean is, marriage isn't about them or you for that matter. It's about the couple getting married. It's about me and Teddy. And we wanted to get

married so we could be together here.”

“But, Abbey, think with your head for a minute, not with your heart. I’m not worried so much about the right or wrong of things the same as Dorothy, but what about what you want? It’s every girl’s dream to get married. Every little girl dreams about her wedding day, her dress, the cake, the food. How could you let him talk you into giving up on your dream?”

“My dream? When did I ever talk about having a big wedding? Spend all that time and money for what? So people can stare at me and judge me based on the outcome of the day? So I can spend my time fretting over every little detail instead of focusing on why I’m getting married? That has never been my dream. You’d know this if you’d . . . Aunt Rosie would know this about me.”

“What do you mean you never wanted a big wedding? It’s every girl’s dream!”

“Not mine. All that matters is how much we love each other and want to be together. A piece of paper simply makes doing so easier.”

“Okay, okay. Supposing you are the only girl in the world who never dreamed of her own wedding day, what about your father? He was looking forward to the day he could walk you down the aisle.”

“Ha! The only way he’d walk me down the aisle willingly is if he were going to give me away to someone HE chose, someone other than Teddy.”

I heard my mother sigh. She accused me of being blinded by love and assured me when the doldrums of marriage set in, I would miss what could have been. “When you’re just another married woman with kids to raise and a house to keep, you’ll think back to this time and begin to resent Teddy for not giving you your fairytale wedding. You’ll remember what you wanted and regret the choices you made now.”

“Mother,” I chided, “I did not call to ask your opinion or to receive your blessing. I never expected it. I called as a courtesy so you wouldn’t worry needlessly. I can see now it wasn’t necessary since Mrs. Bailey informed you. I’m going to hang up now and pray one day you’ll see the insensitivity of your argument and that we can be civil once again.”

I hung up, not surprised, but angered all the same. Teddy’s parents disapproved of our union because of deeply held religious sentiment. My parents objected for far more worldly reasons. They all came around in time, though. We both kept in contact with our parents, maintaining a purely superficial relationship until the day we announced my pregnancy. With the conception and birth of our first child, our son’s grandparents thawed about our union and warmed to their new role.

Later that morning, after making all necessary announcements and enduring misguided wrath, we put the burden of family behind us and crossed the border to enjoy our first days as husband and wife.

We understood the meaning of the name Boy’s Town as soon as we entered the district so popular with single young pilots. Bars and brothels lined the streets. Even in the early afternoon, loud boisterous flyboys caroused with flamboyant women. My presence tamed no one. Teddy stayed close to my side to ward off eager men, and street walkers shouted two for one offers in broken English.

“Girlfriend like, si? Pretty chica. Please both? Dos para uno?”

One woman took the liberty to grope my breast with one hand while the other hand felt the fabric of my dress from my back, around my waist and bottom, before reaching around toward my midsection. Teddy grabbed her hand before it felt its way between my legs, and he

shoved her to the ground.

“We better get out of here,” he said as we stepped over the smirking prostitute.

“Adios amantes,” she waved in farewell.

Back in Acuña, we walked Calle Hidalgo, the main street of the city. We found peace in this small factory town. Making our way to the main plaza, we visited shops filled with wrought iron ornaments, jewelry, woven goods, leather crafts, pottery, and all other sorts of keepsakes. Street vendors offered tasty treats and other trinkets and souvenirs for a discounted price.

Everything in sight cost considerably less than what it would have cost back in the states. No vendor or store owner permitted a potential customer to walk away without bartering to the best of his or her ability. I loaded Teddy’s arms with mementoes to decorate our first home.

With tacos and tortas purchased from a street vendor, we walked toward the Santa Maria de Guadalupe Church, rebuilt the year before in 1958. The cubist architectural design and heavy wooden doors mocked my image of typical church structure. From my vantage point from Victoria Street, I would not have known the significance of this building without the implied Trinity. A massive granite cross crowned the structure like the crest of a mountain peeking through dense clouds and three majestic angels marked the center and two outermost edges. These images blocked our view of the original and more orthodox tower to the south.

We arrived at the church just as the sun began its ascent over the horizon. The rays illuminated the cross, making it look as if the light emanated from the cross itself.

“I am the way and the truth and the life,” Jesus said. “All who are weary, come to me and I will give you rest.”

Teddy and I had been awake for over twenty-four hours. I began to feel exhausted and

ready to enter into God's rest. As the weight of weariness swallowed my body, my focus shifted from the cross to the angels.

Their slender bodies arched forward at full attention, like proud soldiers awaiting their King. Their wings pointed straight to heaven. Each angel held trumpets erect, one pointing east, the other south-east, and another north-east, sounding the call of the coming of Christ.

"We give thanks to you, Lord God Almighty, the One who is and who was, because you have taken your great power and have begun to reign."

"My God!" Teddy shouted as we stood across the street staring up at these sculptures. "Truly breathtaking, isn't it? I mean, churches back home sure don't look this exquisite!"

"I thought the steeple of St. Luke's was impressive, how it seems to reach clear to heaven, but that's nothing compared to this!" I interjected.

Teddy wrapped his arm around me, and we stood gawking in awe at the symbols of heaven's glory. "Do you think she's right?" Teddy asked.

"Do I think who's right about what?"

"Your mom. Think you'll look back one day and wish we'd done things differently?"

He pointed toward the church as he spoke. I buried my head against his shoulder, reached across my body and swatted his outstretched hand. "As beautiful as this building may be, or any other building, I will never regret marrying you or the way we did it. I must say, though, I think your mom would love this place."

"Maybe, someday soon, she'll come visit. If and when that day comes, we'll bring her here."

Taken in by the beauty of the church and consumed with fatigue and grief once again, we discussed making plans to renew our vows at Santa Maria de Guadalupe. "We could get married

right on those steps, witnessed by angels. We could do it on my next day off if our parents can get here that quickly. I bet we could even get the chaplain at base to perform the ceremony.”

Even though such a jester would surely please our parents, we fought the temptation of nostalgia and sided with reason.

“We’d be doing nothing more than giving in to what they want over what we want,” I said.

“Besides,” Teddy added, “it still wouldn’t please them. We’d be getting married at a church, but not in it.”

“And, not by a Catholic priest! If it wasn’t for the Air Force’s requirements, I’d just as soon have skipped all of it. What a mess!”

“Do you think God cares? Do you think it really matters to Him how or by whom we got married?” Teddy asked rhetorically. “Never read where Jesus said it must be a Catholic ceremony. Just what God brings together no man should separate.”

Teddy and I turned to face each other. I pulled him to me. “Then, it’s settled. No renewing our vows for fifty years.”

“Agreed.”

“Besides, renewing our vows would only complicate matters. We’d have two anniversary dates to celebrate. Which one would count?”

Chapter Sixteen
Abigail Louise Bailey
(Abbey)

After our brief honeymoon, Teddy reported to training, and I went about the business of making our house a home and getting acquainted with my new life. The reactions of our families to the announcement of our union reawakened a yearning to know the Jesus Christ of happier days when I lived with my aunt and uncle.

“I knew Him once, Aunt Rosie. You introduced me to Him. He ate at our table and took walks with me out in the pasture. Where did He go?” I knew Jesus as intimately as I knew any person of flesh. When my aunt and uncle died, my relationship with Him died with them.

I missed Aunt Rosie and the life I once lived. I knew without a doubt she would have embraced Teddy and welcomed our marriage as a blessed event. She could have explained why she, a life-time Catholic herself, seemed so different from our parents.

“He’s right beside you, Dear. All you have to do is look. He never left your side.”

My family attended church at 8:00 every Sunday morning with the faithfulness of a sunrise. Neither late nights nor sick tummies excused our absence. They knew the rules of the Church and lived lives devoted to tradition. But they worshipped the law and fell short of the glory of God. My mother’s prayer life began and ended within the sanctuary walls. My father caroused with other men of ill repute Monday through Saturday. My parents example robbed me of the foundation for a Christ-centered life laid by my aunt and uncle.

Even though Teddy’s parents demonstrated the love of Christ, they also confined worship to Sunday mornings. I never saw a Bible in their home, never heard mentioned the Word of God nor witnessed a call to Christ other than before meals. Teddy’s knowledge of the Bible came from the Catholic Christian Doctrine (CCD) classes all devout children attended in preparation

for their confirmation into the Church. His parents never questioned what he learned during these sessions or discussed their faith outside the confines of organized religion.

“You talked about ‘your Savior’ all the time. I knew what you believed without asking, but we still talked and shared our faith. Life was so different with you. Why?” I asked Aunt Rosie.

“Don’t judge them based on what you saw in me. People are different. Doesn’t necessarily make them wrong.”

“But I don’t get it. They seem to worship the Church and not Jesus Christ. They pray to saints instead of to God. Why?”

“Why don’t you ask the One who has all the answers?”

“But I don’t see Him!”

“All you have to do is look. You don’t need me anymore, Baby. You have all the comfort you need before you.”

“But where do I look?”

“Look inside. He’s right there. He’s always been there, patiently waiting for you to return to Him. Let me go, and you go seek Him.”

“But I don’t want to let you go!”

“You have to, my Love. I will always be with you, but it’s time you found comfort in your heavenly Father. He’s waiting.”

I got down on my knees in the front pew of Sacred Heart, the only church in this small humid border town. Catholicism reigned supreme in Texas and among the resident Hispanic

population.

“God, this used to be so easy for me. When I lived with Aunt Rosie and Uncle Walter, you were my best friend. We played together. I saw you as clearly as I see Teddy. We talked and I heard your voice as clearly as I hear my own.”

I opened my eyes and stared up at the cross. “Why is this so difficult?” I sighed.

I tried again. “I know you’re here. Just let me feel you,” I pleaded. “Remember when we used to go down to the creek? You held my hand as I skipped along. You smiled at me, and, in that smile, I felt so loved and so safe. We’d sit by the creek for hours, tossing rocks, sharing a picnic, staring at our reflections, or listening as the water washed downstream.

“Remember when I told you how much I loved the sound of the water? It made me feel so peaceful. Whenever I got into trouble or had a bad day, we’d come to the creek. You told me your love for me was like our little stream. It washed away all the bad and let me be happy again. Somewhere along the way, I lost you.

“But, I’m here now, and I’m desperate for Your love again. I haven’t felt it since I lost my aunt and uncle. Don’t get me wrong, I love my new life, and I dearly love Teddy, but something’s missing. I know now what that something is.

“I need you, God. I’m so bitter and angry with your church. I blame it for the way our parents reacted. It doesn’t seem right. But, God, I don’t want to be angry anymore. I just want to get on with my life. Most of all, I want You back in my life. I know nothing else would matter if You walked with me again. Please, God. Please.”

I kept my head bowed and my eyes closed. Dredging up the past brought Him into my present. In that moment, I felt His arms wrapped around me, loving me back to life in Him. “I love you,” Jesus whispered in my ear. “I am the living water. If you are thirsty, come and drink.

Believe in me and the stream of living water will flow from within you.”

“Just as Aunt Rosie promised?”

“Just as I promised.”

I sat back in the pew, wearied by my encounter with Christ. “Good morning,” a voice greeted. “I am not disturbing you, am I?” I looked as a man in clerical garb approached the communion table.

Looking around the church, I realized we were the only two present. “No. I hope I’m not bothering you,” I said with a hint of embarrassment in my voice.

“Not at all. I am merely setting up for our daily mass service. Are you here to join us?”

“Ummmm, no, Sir. I was unaware of any service today.”

He turned to face me. Smiling, he said, “We hold a service every weekday morning at 7:00 a.m. If not here for the service, you are here very early to meet with Our LORD.”

“I decided to come after sending my husband off to work. Do all Catholic churches have weekday services?”

“Many, but the times may vary.”

“Is the weekday service the same as it is on Sundays?” I inquired.

“That, too, may depend on the church. We pray the rosary and offer communion here.

Only lasts about half an hour. Would you like to join us today?”

My sigh must have signaled my inhibitions. His kind eyes displayed understanding and lacked judgment. “I haven’t seen you here before. Are you and your husband Catholic?”

“Y . . . yes,” I stammered. “I mean, we were both raised Catholic, but we haven’t attended church, at least, not since we moved here.”

“New to town? What brought you to Del Rio?”

“My husband and I, we just got married. We’re from Illinois. After we got married, we moved here. My husband’s attending training at Laughlin.” My unease in speaking with a representative of the Church I hated caused me to stumble over my words.

“Should have guessed. Well, welcome. I hope to see you two some Sunday morning.”

Again, I could not control my emotions. He witnessed my critical guffaw.

“Disapprove?” He asked as a matter of fact, his tone still without judgment.

My lips formed soundless words. My insides churned in alarm over my complete lack of respect.

“It’s okay. We’re in the House of the LORD. You can be honest in here. No one will throw stones.”

“Well, it’s just that I . . . you see . . .” He sat on the edge of the pew railing in front of me, giving me his undivided attention. “There’s just some things I don’t understand.”

“Would you like to talk about it?”

“With you?” I sounded too shocked.

“Yes, with me.”

“I don’t know. I . . .”

“No need to worry. You can trust me. We don’t even have to talk at the church if you’d feel more comfortable somewhere else. I can even leave the collar behind.”

“Can you do that?”

He laughed a hearty laugh. “Yes, I can do that. So?”

“I’m not sure.”

“Tell you what? I have to get ready for the service.” I now noticed a small crowd of older

men and women gathering around us. “The invitation is open. You can call me or stop by any time to talk about anything. Okay?”

“Okay,” I answered, still unsure how to interpret his gesture. Afraid to leave as others gathered, I remained in my seat for the duration of the weekday service. After the priest walked down the aisle at the conclusion of mass, I made a hasty exit, anxious to avoid running into him once again.

The following day, after the morning worship, I returned to the church and found the priest in his office, reading his Bible.

“Welcome!” he greeted. “I prayed you would come back to see me!”

“Uhhh, hi, Father. To be honest, a priest is the last person I want to talk to, but something pulled me here.”

He looked at me over the rim of his glasses. “God wanted us to talk, no?” He motioned with his hand for me to take the seat in front of him. “I’m Father Clarence. I apologize for not introducing myself yesterday.”

“I’m Abbey, Abigail Sulli . . . I mean, Abigail Bailey.”

“Tough getting used to a new name, isn’t it? Pleased to meet you, Abigail Bailey,” he snickered.

“Please, call me Abbey. Actually, I think this is the first time I’ve had the opportunity to introduce myself using my new name, Father.”

“You can call me Clarence if it makes you feel more comfortable. You don’t have to call me Father.”

“My Uncle Jack is a priest. Well, he’s studying to become a priest, anyway. I don’t mind

calling you Father. I just don't know if a priest is the right one to talk to," I confessed.

"Have you never spoken with your uncle?"

"It's different with him. He's not just a priest to me. You know?"

"I get it. Will you excuse me for a few minutes?"

"Yes, Father."

His abrupt departure puzzled me. I worried myself as I waited, convinced that he saw through me and planned to condemn me as a heretic when he returned. I envisioned his coming back into the room with a tub of holy water, aiming to dunk me and rid me of the demons who possessed my body and spirit. Instead, he came back wearing jeans, a faded button down short sleeve plaid shirt, and a crumpled and dusty cowboy hat. His grey hair poked out of the hat, jutting over his long ears. He looked more like my Uncle Walter than he did a priest.

"How about we take a walk? The San Felipe Springs are nearby. I enjoy walking along the creek from time to time. There's something very soothing about the sound of the water."

I stared up at him, dumbfounded by his suggestion. "*Did you really send a priest to me, God? Of all people?*"

"What?" he asked, taken aback by my silence. "Does my appearance surprise you?"

"No, it's not that," I paused, staring at this strange man in front of me, eager, yet afraid, to follow God's push. "I would love to go for a walk," I finally said.

"Good. From here on out, I am not 'Father' to you. I am 'friend.'"

We stopped near the creek, close enough to hear the water flowing over rocks and sand. "I love that sound," Father Clarence admitted as he took a deep breath. "And, the fresh air. This is the place I like to come when I want to get out of the church and be alone with my thoughts

and with God. That's sometimes hard to do in my office."

"Really? It's hard for you to pray in church?" I asked, baffled by the paradox of his statement.

"Absolutely! I have an open door policy. Anyone may come see me any time they feel the need. I never want to turn anyone away. But in order to tend to my flock, I must first tend to myself. When I'm out here, where no one bothers to look for me, I can work on my own relationship with God." He winked at me as he said, "I've never brought anyone here with me before. This is our little secret. Okay?"

This man of God surpassed all my preconceived notions about priests. "You're nothing like what I expected," I admitted.

"What did you expect?"

I followed his lead and sat at the edge of the creek. We took off our shoes and allowed the flow of water to tickle our feet. "I never knew a priest personally, but to watch them in church, they seem so boring. They say the same words over and over again in such a monotonous tone. Even their homilies are dull."

"I see," he answered, more amused by my statement than offended. "You find the service uninteresting?"

"Well, no offense, but, yes. I mean, I can recite the prayers and the Nicene Creed in my sleep. I get more out of watching people than I do out of paying attention to the service. I mean, where is the real prayer? Why aren't we taught from the Bible?"

"Have you ever read the Bible or have you ever questioned where the first and second readings or the Gospel reading comes from?" Although his tone remained friendly, his words sounded defensive.

I kicked my feet, splashing as if pretending to walk on water. “I mean, I know the Lord’s Prayer comes directly from the Bible. And, I know the readings come from the Bible, but why aren’t we taught to pray using our own words? Why aren’t we ever encouraged to bring our own Bibles to read along and to study on our own?”

“Do you not read your Bible outside of church or pray your own prayers?”

“I do, but I wasn’t taught this by the Church. My aunt taught me. She raised me.”

“Is she Catholic?”

“Was. She died a few years back.”

Father Clarence laid back on the grass, his feet still dangling in the creek. One hand cradled the back of his head and the other shielded his eyes from the sun. “Abbey, when you were in school, did you ever have any homework? Did you ever have to study for a test?”

“Of course,” I answered, confused by what this had to do with the topic of prayer or the Bible.

“You mean, you had to work outside of the classroom? Why?”

“There wasn’t enough time to do all we had to do in class, I suppose.”

“What subject required the most time for you?”

“Mathematics. We had to do so many problems. They were all basically the same just with different numbers.”

“Did your teacher do your homework for you? Or study for a test for you?”

“Of course not!”

“But, why? They were your teachers, after all. Isn’t that their job?”

“No. They were there to show us how to do it and then we had to do it ourselves.”

“Now, I’m confused. What’s the point of doing it yourself? Why do the same math

problem over and over again?"

"That's how we learn. If the teacher did it all for us, we'd never be able to do it for ourselves. By repetition, it becomes second nature. I never realized how much I learned until I got a job and started balancing a checkbook."

He looked at me, one eye closed to fight the sun. He wore a smile larger than Texas. I returned his stare, mouth hanging open and eyes scrunched to prove my incomprehension.

"I am your teacher. I am here to show you the way, but I can't walk the walk for you."

"I still don't understand," I admitted.

"Imagine church is a classroom, your math class."

"I didn't like math either."

He laughed. "But how did you learn to manage money? Can you tell me what two plus two equals? Or, how about what four times four equals? Can you tell me what the square route of sixteen equals?"

"Sure!"

"And why is that?"

"Because," I said, finally grasping his meaning. "I had to do it over and over again."

"Precisely! Abbey, I understand that some people find our tradition crude and, as you say, boring, but there is a purpose. I cannot make you accept Christ. All I can do is lead you to Him. It's only one way. This is the path some folks need. Tradition works for the people who need it."

"Okay. I get that, but let's talk about the saints. And Mary! My Bible tells me I can pray to Jesus. He is the only way to the Father. And, the Bible makes it very clear that worshipping any icon, idol, or image is a sin. Explain, then, why Catholics pray to dead human beings and

worship statues. No matter how good a person any saint may have been, they were still only human, which means they still had sin. Why would I want a fallible human being, such as myself, praying for me if I can go straight to the source?"

Father Clarence sat up and rubbed his back. "My bones are too old to act like a boy for too long. What do you say we walk some?" We put our shoes back on and walked the path along the creek. He kept silent for so long, I thought he either forgot my question or wished to ignore it. His Uncle Walter appearance made me drop my guard and view him as a confidant and friend. Maybe my growing ease crossed a line.

"Have you ever asked anyone to pray for you?"

"Sure. I guess so."

"Was that person praying to you or for you?"

"For me."

"Why didn't you go straight to God and cut out the middle man if that's what the Bible says?" He asked, answering my question once again in a roundabout way.

"Well, I remember one time in particular. No matter how hard I tried, prayer failed me."

"So, the other person prayed for you, to the same God, on your behalf?"

"Okay," I conceded, "but what about confession? Again, why do I have to go through you when I can go straight to Jesus?"

"Confession, or Penance, is one of the seven sacraments. The purpose of confession is to reconcile man to God. When we sin, we deprive ourselves of God's grace, making it even easier to sin again. The only way out of this cycle is to acknowledge our sins, repent, and ask God's forgiveness. Then, grace can be restored to our souls, and we can once again resist sin."

"Yeah, I get what confession is. But I don't remember anything in the New Testament

saying I must have an intermediary to hear my confession.”

“Catholics believe Jesus Christ Himself instituted all sacraments. Christ gave the Sacrament of Confession on Easter Sunday when He first appeared to the apostles after His Resurrection. Breathing on them, He said: ‘Receive the Holy Spirit. For those whose sins you forgive, they are forgiven; for those whose sins you retain, they are retained.’ ”

“That doesn’t answer my question.”

“Peter is the rock, the father of the Church, the first Pope, if you will. The apostles acted as the first priests. If they forgive sins, those sins are forgiven.”

“That’s a pretty loose interpretation of scripture!” I remonstrated.

“Sure, sure. Your point has been argued before. But look at it another way. Some people confess to a priest for the same reason they pray to a saint or to Mary. And,” he said, wagging his finger for emphasis, “think of it as a matter of accountability. If someone else knows your deepest, darkest sins, you are more likely to repent and turn from them instead of making excuses.”

“Makes sense, I guess,” I understood his reasoning, but it still seemed pointless to me. “No offense to you, but I’ll stick with praying directly to God.”

We stopped in front of a large live oak tree and stood under its shade. “See the branches up there?” With hands deep in his pockets, he lifted his chin toward the tallest limb. “The trunk alone offers no shade whatsoever. Couldn’t stand very tall if it didn’t have deep roots underground.”

I stared at the different parts of the tree trying to catch the meaning of this little parable. “See how leaves grow from every branch?” he asked.

“I see.”

“They are all an equal part of the tree. Are they not?”

“I suppose.”

He turned from the tree to face me. With arms folded across his chest, he leaned against the trunk and said, “Jesus Christ, our LORD and Savior, is our root. Whether Catholic, Protestant, Evangelical, or whatever, we all believe in the same basic fundamentals.

“We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and in Jesus Christ, His only Son, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary, crucified under Pontius Pilate, suffered, died, and was buried. He descended into hell and on the third day He rose again. He ascended into heaven and sits at the right hand of the Father. He will come again to judge the living and the dead.”

“And,” I concluded the Father’s summarization of the Nicene Creed, “We believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and life everlasting. Amen.”

Chuckling, he asked, “We may repeat the Nicene Creed every Sunday, but do you understand what we just said? Other denominations may replace the last part, about believing in ‘the holy catholic church’ with ‘the universal church,’ but we all believe Jesus is exactly who He said He was.”

“What’s the difference between the Nicene Creed and the Apostles’ Creed?” I asked.

“Well, let’s not worry about a history lesson right now. Basically, we summarized the Apostle’s Creed. It’s simply a condensed version of the Nicene Creed, but the premise is the same.”

“So are you saying I won’t go to hell if I never set foot in Catholic Church again? Or if I

don't agree with all its practices? Or if my husband and I aren't technically married, according to the Church? Why is that, by the way?"

"Why doesn't the Church recognize your marriage? I take it you did not get married in a Catholic church by a priest?"

I nodded my assent.

"The Vatican doesn't have you on record," Clarence explained.

"You mean there's no profound spiritual reason?"

"Oh, sure. According to the Catholic faith, marriage is another blessed sacrament.

Marriage is more than a custom or a piece of legal documentation. During the ceremony, the couple petitions God's blessing, guidance, and help in all their future life together. The bride and groom must prepare themselves spiritually for this great sacrament. They must meet with their priest. A legal ceremony neglects the spiritual importance of the marriage."

"I never thought about that. But we do believe He brought us together. Does God, then, not recognize our union?"

"Oh, I believe He recognizes it the same as He recognizes any other. You two must decide for yourselves what you believe. The Church, on the other hand, does not recognize it, meaning you cannot receive Holy Communion."

"You know, my priest back home would call you a heretic for all you've said. My parents would want to burn you at the stake for telling me this!" I laughed.

"I know my views are unconventional. But I happen to agree with you on some other points as well. Can I tell you a secret?" He pivoted his head, indicating it was time to start walking back toward the church.

"Of course!" I said, keeping pace with my teacher.

“My mother has a picture of Mary hanging on her wall in her bedroom. She lights candles in front of it and prays to her devoutly. Now, don’t get me wrong. I do understand that she is not praying to Mary. She is praying for Mary to intercede with her Son on her behalf, but it looks like she’s praying to Mary. I, like you, prefer going straight to the source. My mother, and so many others like her, however, don’t feel worthy of a direct line of communication.”

“But that’s the beauty of it. The Bible says none of us are worthy. It’s by His mercy and grace that we are able to be in His presence.”

“You know that and I know that, but the other thing to consider is tradition. They were raised this way, especially the Hispanic community. This is what they know. They are no less spiritual than you or I because they do things differently.”

“I suppose not, but . . . Can I ask you a personal question?”

“As if offending my faith is not personal enough?” he teased. “Ask away.”

“Why are you a Catholic priest? I thought my Aunt Rosie was a different sort of Catholic, but even she would cringe if she heard some of the things you’ve been telling me.”

“Fair question,” he answered. “I guess the answer would be tradition. I, too, was born into and raised by a Catholic family.”

“But you don’t agree with everything the Church teaches.”

“Don’t I? Again, just because I may practice my faith a little differently doesn’t mean I am right and they are wrong. I do get it and see no sin in the way they practice their faith.

“The Apostle Paul writes in the Letter to the Romans, ‘One man’s faith allows him to eat everything, but another man, whose faith is weak, eats only vegetables. The man who eats everything must not look down on him who does not, and the man who does not eat everything must not condemn the man who does, for God has accepted him. Who are you to judge someone

else's servant? To his own master he stands or falls. And he will stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand.'

"Again he says, 'One man considers one day more sacred than another; another man considers every day alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind. He who regards one day as special, does so to the Lord. He who eats meat, eats to the Lord, for he gives thanks to God; and he who abstains, does so to the Lord and gives thanks to God.'

" 'As one who is in the Lord Jesus, I am fully convinced that no food is unclean in itself. But if anyone regards something as unclean, then for him it is unclean. If your brother is distressed because of what you eat, you are no longer acting in love.'

" 'So whatever you believe about these things keep between yourself and God. Blessed is the man who does not condemn himself by what he approves. But the man who has doubts is condemned if he eats, because his eating is not from faith; and everything that does not come from faith is sin.' Does this make sense?"

"Yes," I said, keeping my stride straight so as to avoid making eye contact with Father Clarence. "We have been wrong in condemning our families. I am such a horrible person. I have sinned."

Father Clarence stopped in his tracks. He took hold of my arms and pivoted me to face him. He looked in my eyes with such tenderness as if he were a father gazing upon his beloved daughter. I felt caught between the gaze of Christ and the face of Uncle Walter.

"He loves you," Father Clarence declared, his voice anxious for me to believe. "Jesus Christ loves all His children. That's the point. That's what you need to take away with you. He loves you. It doesn't matter if you feel closest to Him when walking along this creek or when kneeling before a picture of Mary. It doesn't matter if you pray directly to Him or ask for

intercession. He loves you. All He asks in return is for you to act according to the call of the Holy Spirit living inside you. Act on faith because He loves you.” His voice cracked as his tone changed from pleading to compassion. “He loves you. Do you believe that?”

I felt his hands holding me in place. My knees grew weak and tears streamed down my face. Yes, I believed, but I could not say the words. I nodded my head up and down and up and down. Father Clarence pulled me to him and hugged me as if he had loved me all my life.

Chapter Seventeen
Theodore Francis Bailey
(Teddy)

On September 8, 1959, I reported to the Operations Support Squadron to begin Phase I of my pilot training. Standing at role call, I heard a familiar voice behind me answer “present.”

“This is the Air Force for the United States of friggin’ America. The best military in the world, for Chrissakes! You think they’d leave the damn racism shit to the civvies,” Caleb Jenkins, my battle buddy from the Academy, greeted me.

“Young ones givin’ ya hell?”

“All my life, don’t you know? Heard you went off and got yourself married, you son-of-a-gun. Got me bunkin’ with the freakin’ Klan.”

I laughed. “Can’t be that bad.”

“Oh no? Looks at me like I’m his friggin’ slave. I looked’m square in the eye, got so close, his eyes got so big, bastard probably thought I was gonna kiss him. I looked him square in the eye and told him I was not his nigger and he had two choices, lose the attitude or find him another bunk mate.”

“What’d he do?”

“Went to OSS, complained I threatened him, and asked to be switched to another room. They just laughed him off, though. Told him part of our training is to learn to work together as a team. What better place to start than with your roomie?”

“Sorry, man. If things get too rough, I’m sure Abbey wouldn’t mind if you crashed at our place.”

“Doubt that Pard. Newlyweds at training? When you’re not working or sleeping, you’re gonna want some lovin’. Won’t want me around then.”

“Gotta meet her at least. Come over for dinner.”

“That I can do.”

“Well, show that bastard up in training. That ought to quiet him a bit.”

“Hell, I’m not the only colored man here. He’s probably some hillbilly from some hick school who’s never seen a negro before. No offense to you, of course.”

“Of course.”

“He’ll figure it out.”

“Or, he’ll get his ass blown out of the sky.”

“Hell, yeah!”

Even though complete desegregation stalled in courthouses around the country, the government and average citizens alike fought to change the law and social norms. In 1948, President Harry Truman desegregated the military. In 1954, Brown vs. Board of Education desegregated the schools. In 1956, the defiance of citizens such as Irene Morgan, Sarah Louise Keys, and Rosa Parks led to a federal ruling declaring the segregation of public transportation to be unconstitutional.

Despite growing political efforts, increasing racial tensions reached dangerous heights. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X become famous in the fight for equality. Although their enemies successfully silenced both men, they failed to quiet the cause of civil justice.

Because of our prior training, those of us from the Academy learned to see past the color of our brother’s skin and to love him as a member of our own family, someone with whom we would defend with our lives. We naively expected racial lines to blur in the military. Caleb’s first day echoed the alarming truth: Racism lived even among those signed on to serve and protect their fellow men—all of them.

“So,” I said, “thought you might not make it out here.”

“I thought so, too. My girl’s havin’ a hellava time back home. You think this bullshit don’t happen up north? A willing free state before the Civil War? Think again! We fought those slave lovin’, cotton pickin’, rich bastards and won! But it’s all over the damn place. What’s worse, our young ones are going about this civil rights thing the wrong way. Kids younger than my baby brother got guns!”

“Think it makes ‘em tough, carryin’ them around. There’s these groups talkin’ about how the King’s wrong, that the only way to get heard is with violence. That’s some messed up shit. Gave my baby brother a lecture about it. Told him if I ever found out he was carryin’, causin’ harm, I’d beat the black out of him.”

I laughed. “Teaching him to stay away from violence by threatening him with violence?”

“He knows what I mean. I told him to listen to the King. If we don’t do it right, it’ll make things worse. Respect. We’ve got a tough fight ahead. We win nothing without respect. Anyway, remember before grad when I showed you the letter my girl sent?”

“Yeah, robberies in the neighborhood, lots of problems. Your girl’s family owns a store. That got hit, right?”

“Those damn kids following those god forsakin’ war Nazis. And they’re hitting their own neighborhoods! That’s what I don’t get. Taught my girl how to use a gun for protection. She’s feisty, but I still worry. I thought about marrying her and bringing her out here like you did, but she didn’t want to leave the family, not now. I made up my mind, though. If she wasn’t coming with me, I’d stay with her.”

“What changed your mind?”

“She said she’d marry me when I got back. Wouldn’t marry me if I didn’t leave.”

“She knows what’s best for you.”

“Yeah. Said this was our best shot at getting out of there. She’s right, I know she’s right, but it’s hard leaving her. Besides, this crap is everywhere. How we gonna get out of it?”

“It’ll happen. My hometown’s not like that.”

“Teddy, you’re white. I’m black. Everywhere I go, I’ll still be black.”

That shut me up. What did I know about his experiences?

“I’ll put in to be stationed in another city, though, or another country. Maybe these assholes will get it together and things can be different for us. Maybe wearing a uniform will at least give my family some peace.”

After our first six weeks of classroom training, the fun for most of us young pilots began. The discrimination Caleb endured during the first days of orientation still chased him.

Although most new aircraft of the time were pressurized, a pilot needed to recognize the signs of hypoxia on his body in order to be able to counterattack the effects of the lack of oxygen and maintain control of his machine.

In the altitude chamber, each student was hooked up to an oxygen mask. The pressure changed to simulate any altitude, from sea level to heights well above cloud cover. At a simulated 25,000 feet, the instructor, monitoring our progress from outside the chamber, instructed us to remove our masks. Most students experiencing the normal signs of hypoxia—tingly feeling in the body, dizziness, and disorientation—maintained a healthy semblance of blood flow.

Caleb, however, showed early signs of danger. Sitting across from my friend, we locked eyes the second our masks came off. He offered a weak smile of encouragement tinged with fear.

Almost immediately, his eyes grew wider, communicating with me his escalating panic. I saw the veins in his neck bulging and sweat beading on his forehead.

I looked at the man sitting to his left and motioned with my gaze for him to take notice. He looked at Caleb with an empty, careless expression before returning to his forward stare. I tried to arouse the attention of the man sitting on Caleb's right side, but his eyes stayed shut. Others in the chamber must have seen what I saw, but no one moved.

I looked back at Caleb. With closed eyes and head leaning back, I saw vomit collecting in his mouth. I unstrapped myself at the same instant that the instructor burst through the door. We removed his safety harness and laid him on his side. The instructor scooped Caleb's mouth clean and checked his vital signs. Assured that my friend was alive and breathing, I jumped over his body and rushed toward the still stoic piece of garbage still sitting strapped into his seat.

"You son-of-a-bitch!" I screamed as I jumped on top of him and wrapped my hands around his neck. "He could have died!"

Other recruits came to his rescue and pulled me off him. Caleb sat up and watched my tirade, oblivious to the reason for my conduct. Two men held me down while my target unbuckled himself and rubbed his red neck.

"If anything'd happened to him, I'd've freakin' killed you, you . . ."

He stared at me, a look of satisfaction smeared on his smug white face. Sergeant Reed ordered him to leave. With him gone, I calmed down long enough to check on my friend.

After explaining my behavior to my superiors, I received a reprimand with the understanding that, although acting with noble intent, my actions warranted discipline.

Our superiors gave the racist idiot a stern warning about taking care of and supporting everyone in our squadron, regardless of race or religion or any other differentiating factors.

Failure to erase his biased upbringing would result in his dismissal from training and from the Air Force. He never made it past Phase I.

Caleb's roommate, on the other hand, the KKK hillbilly, who happened to be from Shreveport, Louisiana, and not from some Podunk hick town, discovered the error of his ways and became, if not blind to all races, at least more tolerant toward those he got to know. Tracy Mullins, the mild mannered skinny kid from the bayou, made peace with his adversary after discovering their many similarities.

"What right you got to be racist with a name like Tracy. You got tits instead of a pecker?" Caleb instigated.

"Better white tits than a black ass," Tracy shot back.

Caleb extended his arms and opened his palms, fingers gyrating as he ambled toward Tracy. "Let me touch those sweet thangs."

Tracy, falling prey to Caleb's taunting, backed away, taking his shirt off as he did so. "Look like I got tits to you, you friggin' monkey?"

Instead of finding insult in his words, Caleb broke down laughing. "Damn, boy. Put your shirt back on. They not feed you back home? I wouldn't mess with a girl that skinny."

Still intent on proving his manhood, Tracy unzipped his pants and pulled out his penis. "What d'ya think about that? Some bitch gonna have this?"

"Now it all makes perfect sense," Caleb said, putting his arms down and pretending to squint. "You're one of them . . ." He waved his hand trying to come up with the word. ". . . homo . . . hermo . . . himmo . . . one of them boy-girls. Guess your momma couldn't tell you had a willy."

Tracy took a shot at Caleb, getting him square across the chin.

Again, instead of retaliating, Caleb said, “Feel better? Now, put that thing of yours back in your pants.”

Tracy ran as fast as he could into Caleb, knocking him to the ground. The two brawled with unrelenting hunger until the echoes of their collective punching reached the ears of those nearby.

As punishment for their behavior, the two were sentenced to latrine duty until they could either learn to get along or one of them quit. The fighting between the two intensified before matters improved.

“This shit’s as black as you and as smelly as you, too,” Tracy teased.

“Think so?” Caleb asked as he grabbed the back of Tracy’s neck and slammed his head into the unflushed toilet. Holding him down, he said, “How about a taste of what it’s really like to be black?”

When Caleb finally released him, Tracy sprinted to the nearest sink. “Washing that shit out of your mouth? Pretty appropriate, don’t you think?” Caleb asked. “You want to know what it’s really like to be black? Have a seat.”

Feeling completely humiliated and under the reluctant control of his aggressor, he leaned up against the wall, face dripping with water, and gave Caleb his almost full attention.

“You from Louisiana, aren’t you?” Tracy nodded his head yes. Caleb continued, “Aren’t there a lot of blacks in Louisiana? I mean, seems mighty strange for a man surrounded by blacks to be so damned racist. I’d expect that more from a farm boy like Teddy than someone like you. All he’s got to go on is what people tell him about us. Not so many Negroes in the corn fields, unless they’re hired hands, I imagine. So what is it about us that you find so repulsive?”

Tracy said nothing. He stared straight ahead, the smell of shit still in his nostrils. The taste of shit still on his tongue.

“Okay. We’ll come back to that one. Let me tell you about me. I’m from Michigan. I have three sisters and three bothers. There’s seven of us. Can you imagine? My mom stayed home so she could take care of all us kids, keep us in line. I still have two sisters and one brother at home. She’d whip us good if we didn’t do our chores or our homework. Couldn’t do a thing until we finished. Even on Fridays.

“Looking back, though, she did right by us. She was strict, but she kept us from hanging with the wrong crowd. We were poor, as you can imagine. My dad worked real hard so Momma could stay home and raise us right. You know how hard a poor man’s got to work to feed nine people?

“We didn’t have a whole lot, but we always had what we needed. Things weren’t always easy though, not by a mile. You walk down the road—some white woman is nearby. She nonchalantly walks to the other side of the road to avoid you, thinks I’m gonna rob her or rape her or something. Just because I’m black. Women don’t cross the street to get away from a white man.

“And the cops. We’d just be standing there, minding our own business. We didn’t do anything wrong, but they’d look at us like we were about to break into the nearest car. You know how that makes me feel?”

“You just answered your own question,” Tracy growled.

“What’s that?” Caleb asked, startled that Tracy said anything.

“I said you answered your own freaking question.”

“How’s that?”

“Women don’t cross the street to get away from white men because white men aren’t the ones they’ve got to worry about. The cops stop to look at you because it’s your kind breaking into those cars.”

Surprising himself by remaining calm, Caleb asked, “What makes you think that?”

“You think seven kids is a lot? I’m one of nine. Would’ve been ten. Ten damned kids, can you imagine?”

Caleb saw the anger brewing in Tracy’s eyes. The blood in his cheeks spoke volumes about an old, unforgotten memory. “What happened to number ten, Tracy?” Caleb asked, almost seeing the answer play out before the words were ever uttered.

“They got her, with me standing right there.” Tracy’s gaze looked past any object in the room. “I stood right there, watched it all, and I did nothing.”

“What happened, Tracy?” Caleb asked again.

“Those black bastards. Why’d they come after her? We didn’t have anything they wanted. You could tell just by the way we looked we didn’t have any money. Do I know how hard a man has to work to feed nine people? How about eleven and a half? Damn straight I know. Do you know how hard it is for a man to work to feed ten people and raise nine kids?” Tracy’s anger pierced the walls around him as the memories flooded his mind.

“What happened, Tracy?” Caleb asked again.

“We had nothing. We were on our way home from the store, had nothing more than a loaf of bread and some milk. I insisted on going with her that day. I don’t know why. I never wanted to go to the store, always made me feel so low, you know? Some days she’d hide things in her clothes just so we could eat.

“It was just me and her that day. Those two men, they came up from behind, knocked the

bag with the bread and milk right out of Momma's hands. They started saying things to her. I can't hear the words, but I can see the look on their faces. They were so smug . . . laughing at us. They started touching her.

"Momma took my hand and told me not to look at them and keep walking. I did just that, but then Momma's hand left mine. I looked at her to see what happened, and there she was, face down on the ground. One of the men got behind her and pulled up her skirt. He started . . . I didn't really understand then what he was doing to her, but I could see his cock, and I heard her crying.

"The other one, he kneeled down in front of her, pulled her head back by her hair. He had his dick out, too. Told Momma to give it a kiss. She kept shaking her head no. He said something to her that made her kiss it. He grabbed her hand and wrapped it around his . . ." He motioned with his hands what her attacker made her do. The thought of it forced enraged tears to stream down his cheeks. His voice cracked as he finished the story. "And he told her to keep kissing. Next thing I know it's in her mouth."

Tracy paused to catch his breath. "She did what he told her to do and begged them to leave her babies alone. She yelled at me to run away, but I couldn't. I couldn't do anything. All I could do was stare. I couldn't help her. I should have helped her."

"How old were you, Tracy?"

"I dunno. Four, maybe five?"

"There was nothing you could do for her, Tracy. You were so young. There was nothing you could do." Caleb, gaining a better understanding of hate's origin, tried his best to alleviate some of his bunk mate's guilt.

"Then they just left. No reasons for what they did. Didn't take the groceries or anything.

They just left.”

“There are no reasons for things like that.”

“Momma, she just laid there. She wouldn’t move, wouldn’t say anything. I ran home so fast. Got Daddy. He came and took her home. When they threw her on the ground and raped her, she lost the baby. Between the rape and losing her child, she never recovered. A few weeks later, she killed herself. Took Daddy’s gun and shot herself dead. Daddy found her in their bed. He blamed himself, but I always knew it was my fault. I shoulda killed those niggers.”

“It was no one’s fault, Tracy, not yours or your father’s. Those assholes who hurt your mother, they’re the ones to blame. But believe me, Tracy, we’re not all malicious like that.”

Tracy slumped to the floor and sobbed as if he were that four or five year old boy weeping at his mother’s side. Caleb went to him and embraced him. The two of them sat for hours, sometimes in silence, sometimes talking about other stereotypes against races and even against those living in poverty, and sometimes talking about similarities other than their large, poor families. Before the end of the day, Caleb and Tracy buried their differences and became unlikely allies.

“By the way,” Caleb asked once tears were dried and laughter found voice, “where’d the name Tracy come from anyway?”

“It’s a family name. Couple good men on down the lines named Tracy.”

“It’s a fine name,” Caleb conceded. “It’s a fine name.”

Chapter Eighteen
Theodore Francis Bailey
(Teddy)

Caleb came to my rescue during an exercise intended to teach recruits how to recognize the onset of spatial disorientation symptoms. Without a visible horizon—while flying at night or in the soup—the inner ear takes over and upsets the pilot's equilibrium.

Strapped into the spin chair, I shut my eyes and bowed my head as ordered, anticipating nothing more than an intense ride similar to a roller coaster. After twenty seconds of tumultuous movement, I no longer noticed the spinning. When the machine stopped, the instructor ordered me to open my eyes and sit up straight with my arms above my head. I lost all sense of direction. Even with the seatbelt securing me in place, I felt as if my body tumbled forward.

After unbuckling me, Caleb caught me as I fell out of the chair. I vomited all over the front of his flight suit. "Your ass would be dead right now if you'da been in a damn plane," he joked. "At least when I got sick, I had the good sense to keep it to myself."

We survived many more days of simulator training, which tested our skills and challenged us to react to malfunctioning systems and in-flight emergencies. These lessons also tested our ability to hold down our lunch, which was tough to do when you added a few late night beers to the mix. The classroom instruction, while not as exciting as physical training, offered a welcome reprieve for recuperation. All the hard work paid off when the surviving students moved up to Phase II—the flight line.

Phase II consisted of twelve hour days spent on the flight line. Starting at precisely 0500 hours, we learned the routines crucial to becoming an Air Force Pilot. Each day began with a formal brief conducted by the students. Quizzed on everything from the previous night's

homework to emergency procedures for any given scenario, any student unable to answer properly may get “sat down,” meaning he lost his flying privileges for the day. Instead of real-time experience, he hit the books in preparation for the next day’s briefing question.

Marshall Johnson, our student flight leader, called us to attention when the flight commander entered: “Sir, Eagle Flight all present and accounted for.”

“Turn and greet your Instructor Pilots,” the flight commander responded. We saluted and took our seats with feet flat on the floor and heels together.

“You pull the trigger in your A-37 to fire a rocket. The pod does not extend. The rocket misfires right through the nose of the plane. The fire-warning lights illuminate as the engine begins to vibrate violently.” Instructor Pilot Reed looked at me. “You have the aircraft.”

I stood at attention and barked the prerequisite response: “I will maintain aircraft control, analyze the situation, take appropriate action, and land as soon as conditions permit.”

Grabbing my in-flight guides and emergency procedures books, I took my time to come up with the best answer I knew how, fearing the chanced “sit-down” or worse, the “bone.” Students failing to answer any question correctly during the formal brief were ordered to carry a big plastic bone with them wherever they went for one week. The bone reminded everyone of the cadet’s failures. With every ounce of my being, I wanted to be the best, not the bone.

“Sir, what is the weather like?” I asked.

“It is a typical Texas summer day. Hot, dry, and humid. Clear skies.”

“Sir, what is the airport environment?”

“Airport is busy as usual for a summer afternoon. Many tourists flying in and out.”

“Sir, any anomalies in the engine-start checklist?”

“No anomalies.”

The answers told me that although a typical day, the air pressure and humidity increased the temperature of the aircraft's engine, escalating the risk of fire if fire did not already exist. Seeking an emergency landing at the main city airport proved too dangerous and potentially fatal because of the high volume of "puddle jumpers" and other runway activity. Besides, gliding that far if I lost all propulsive power would be too risky. No other irregularities noted during pre-flight meant the problem was not expected and could not be managed easily.

"Sir, my first course of action would be to alert the tower of my situation. Once notified, I would check the panel and the area around me for visible signs of damage or fire. Should both engine fire lights illuminate, I would shut off both engines and look for an emergency landing site. I would then tighten down my straps and stow any loose items and brace myself for a hard landing.

"Since I know the airport is not a viable option for an emergency landing and the private field near the border has too many trees around it, not to mention the power lines, the best option for a safe landing would be to steer the aircraft toward the dry lakebed just south of town. Besides the sparse population, the dirt would create a softer site to make up for the harder landing due to the loss of power."

"The fire reached the cockpit before the engine could be shut down. The lakebed is too far. You will burn up before reaching your target destination," IP Reed's scenario went from bad to worse.

"Sir, landing with a plane on fire is not recommended since it could burn through my control cables. My only option at this point would be to point the aircraft as far away from the city as feasible, bailout, and hope I didn't break my neck once I cleared the cockpit."

Although I knew fire near the cockpit justified bailing out, I still feared failure. I expected

to watch in despair as my friends headed for the flight line while I headed for the books in preparation for another assault.

IP Reed made no comment about my answer, but neither did he ground me.

Even though those of us from the Academy knew the basics of flying, the purpose of the Instructor Pilot rides were to take us to the next level—jet flying and aerobatic maneuvers to prepare for dog fighting. The momentum ramped up pretty quickly at Undergraduate Pilot Training even though it was a fifty-two week course. Those unprepared to deal with the fast pace found it harder and harder to keep up. The August Texas sun reflected off everything, from the body of the aircraft to the cement landing strip, causing pilots to get sick even before stepping into the cockpit. No one ate anything with color. We all drank nothing but water and carried gum with us to avoid the humiliation of repeating simulator sickness.

“Gonna have to change your diet, boys,” senior pilots warned. “If you know you’re going up, stay away from all the things you love. If your food or drink of choice has any kind of color or flavor, stay away. If your urine is not as clear as water, you’re not drinking enough of it, water, that is.” Converting our diet challenged those addicted to the finer things in life such as beer, tequila, and the full flavor of the local Tex-Mex cuisine. But if a student could not gain control of his body, he knew the flight surgeon would eventually ground him. No amount of adult beverages or refried beans was worth losing those coveted wings.

On the day of my first actual flight with my IP, I spent the morning in simulator training, a welcomed outlet for my nervous energy. Trying to catch my breath after sucking air through a three foot hose and sweating profusely from trying to do all the maneuvers required, I spent my few minutes of down time between the sim and my flight eating a bland breakfast of crackers

and water.

Scheduled to fly at 1500 hours, I met my instructor for the pre-flight check. While walking around the plane and sitting in the cockpit, I noticed my anxiety-level rising once again. As we taxied for takeoff, I struggled with the controls. The Tweet (T-37) required a light touch, but my nerves caused me to force too much muscle on the stick. When I realized my error, I eased back only to have the aircraft jerk in the opposite direction the same way an automatic car jerks when stalled.

When I eventually got the bird to line up correctly, I released the brakes and began to pick up speed. As we skipped across the runway, I expected a command to abort, but my IP remained silent. With shaking hands and sweat soaking through my flight suit, I pulled the jet into the sky. After a clumsy takeoff, the peace I felt in the air helped me gain my bearings and calm my nerves.

I stumbled over ground calls and tower calls. My instructor allowed these blunders, knowing the humiliation served to prompt further practice until I mastered what I needed to know.

We headed into a military operations airspace (MOA) to practice maneuvers such as loops and aileron rolls—rolling the airplane over quickly—to get the feel for the plane and test the 1200 pounds of thrust. I failed each attempt, causing my IP to take the stick. He showed me the correct technique and let me retake the controls, demanding I practice until I perfected every move.

Considering all the blunders during my first IP ride, area orientation challenged my ability more than anything else. After an aileron roll, I could not tell up from down, left from right. My gut quivered, reminding me of my first experience with the spatial disorientation

simulation. I thanked God for the light breakfast.

Although I messed up my gear down calls, we landed safely. During my debriefing, my IP critiqued my every move from the pre-flight walk around through the point where my feet touched the earth after landing. Even with so many flaws, I never performed an unsafe or dangerous operation, ending my IP ride with a status of “GOOD.”

I left the debriefing covered in sweat and queasy, but grinning from ear to ear. Successful completion of this Instructor Pilot Phase meant a promotion to full pilot status. Next step—flying solo. After passing this phase, I rewarded myself with chicken fried steak with gravy, a loaded baked potato, and several cold brews.

Once the solo flight portion of training began, IPs started keeping score and evaluating us on every specific action—or inaction—on every flight. They graded our understanding and skill in knowing our destination, route, necessary speed, and our ability to land the airplane on centerline without doing multiple bounces. Our IPs no longer sat in the backseat, talking us through procedures or maneuvers. We capped off our twelve-hour days with three hours of study before catching a few hours of precious sleep.

During solos, we learned how to trust our crosscheck and seat-of-the-pants flying when performing almost every aerobatic maneuver in the book, from loops and barrel rolls, to the Split S used in dogfights to engage the enemy’s six o’clock position.

The escalating intensity caused men without the stamina to chase after their dreams to drop out of the fighter pilot race, electing for a less demanding Air Force position. Those of us who survived the first six months of these twelve-hour days and who managed to memorize the thousands of aircraft specifications and performance charts were funneled into our advanced

training tracks.

Because the Air Force made selections based on student qualification determined by class ranking as measured by both classroom work and flight capability, I made sure my name showed up on the top of the list. I had no desire to serve in the Air Force if I could not be a fighter pilot. I understood the importance and unique danger of airlifts and tankers, turboprops and helicopters, but I knew I was destined to fight. My IPs agreed, graduating me to my first choice track.

Abbey and I moved to Tyndall Air Force Base in Florida for follow-up training in my specialty for mission qualification before I received an operational assignment. It took approximately three years from the time I left my UPT to the time I achieved full combat qualified status.

During my years of academics and pilot training, Abbey and I spent very little time together. She never begrudged my efforts and never regretted her decision to marry me. I intended to give her the time and attention she deserved once training concluded and we moved yet again for my first operational assignment as a full-fledged pilot, but the escalation in Vietnam was, by this time, about to involve US forces.

Although our military entered South Vietnam in 1961 to “aid in training,” we all saw the writing on the wall. By 1964, America officially entered the war. My new bride and my young son would have to wait even longer before I could be the type of husband and father they deserved.

Chapter Nineteen
Abigail Louise Bailey
(Abbey)

Teddy reported for training at 5:00 a.m. six days a week. Most nights, he returned home hours after I fell asleep. He tried not to wake me as he climbed into bed, but I always sensed his presence. Without opening my eyes, I asked him about his day. Exhausted by this time, he usually said no more than “fine” before discarding his clothes at the foot of the bed, crawling under the covers, and pulling me to him. He often fell asleep within seconds.

We made up for lost time on Sundays. I kept as quiet as possible in the mornings, reading or going for walks, allowing him to sleep as long as he needed without disturbance. When he awoke, we held our own church service, reading the Bible in bed while drinking coffee. Teddy’s friend, Caleb, often joined us for dinner. He left shortly after the meal, conscious of our need to spend time alone together. During the late evening hours after I retired, Teddy studied, preparing himself for the coming week. His fear of receiving orders to perform any task with the Air Force other than flying drove him to perfection. I never begrudged his schedule, knowing how much it meant to him.

In order to keep myself busy, I took a job as a cashier at a local grocery store. Even though I worked only a few hours a week, the job kept me from getting too bored at home alone and kept me from missing Teddy too much.

When not working, I often checked out books from the library and got lost in a good novel while listening to the rushing water near the creek. Not wanting to disturb his alone time with God, I avoided disrupting Father Clarence too often. We, did, however, become great friends. I had always been somewhat of a loner. Father Clarence became one of the few people, other than Teddy’s friends, with whom I enjoyed spending time.

Even though he helped me understand Catholic tradition better, I still shied away from church attendance, intent on finding a more personal God than the God presented to me during Catholic worship services. My frustrations with the church did not keep me from conversing with the Father. His insight and intellect sparked a curiosity in me to know more. We spent a few afternoons each week, either in his office, over lunch at a local diner, or outside in the fresh air, discussing topics from other confusing Catholic traditions, spirituality and the Bible in general, or life issues. He even joined us for Sunday dinners on several occasions.

“I should go,” Caleb protested after learning that a white priest from a Hispanic church planned to join us for dinner. “I mean, maybe if he was Mexican, but white?”

“He’s a great man,” Teddy offered. “He doesn’t consider things like that!”

“How do you know? Have you ever asked him? Have you ever seen him around my kind before?”

“We eat at the diner regularly,” I said. “Our waitress is a black woman. He’s always very nice to her.”

“Of course he is! She was waiting on him, not sitting down sharing his biscuits!” Caleb argued. “Teddy, the only place we’ve shared a meal off base is right here, in the privacy of your home! You don’t know what it’s like out there. People take them Jim Crow laws very seriously!”

“He’s different,” I assured. “You should hear him talk about religion. He’d make the Pope turn in his grave!”

They both laughed. “The Pope isn’t dead, Honey,” Teddy corrected.

“Well, maybe not Pope John the twenty-third, but Popes before him are!” I turned my attention back to Caleb. “Please stay. If things get uncomfortable in any way, excuse yourself. I

will understand, but please give him a chance.”

Caleb had no choice. His hand gripped the doorknob as Father Clarence knocked. Caleb turned the knob, staring at us as he did so.

“Oh,” Father Clarence said, looking into the black face of our friend. “I’m . . . I’m sorry . . . I’m looking for . . .” I pulled the door all the way open so he could see me and Teddy standing nearby. Looking at us he laughed, “Thought I had the wrong house for a second!”

I noticed Caleb staring at the floor, avoiding eye contact with the rest of us. “Father, this is my friend, Caleb. He’s a pilot in training with me over at Laughlin. We’ve known each other for years, though. We were battle buddies back at the Academy,” Teddy introduced.

“Good to meet you, Sir,” Caleb stammered, nodding his head, but never looking up to meet our eyes. He was no longer the strong, opinionated man I knew only moments before.

Father Clarence bent his head, trying to catch the newcomer’s attention. He held out his hand for Caleb to shake. “Pleasure to meet you, Caleb. I hope you’ll be joining us this evening?”

Caleb lifted his head inch by inch, unsure of the priest’s intent. Did he expect Caleb to serve or to join them at the table? He never stood straight and withheld his hand.

“Well, shall we proceed?” Father Clarence suggested as he turned his gaze toward me and Teddy. “Smells mighty good and I’m mighty hungry!”

I led the way. Teddy closed the door behind the Father and nudged Caleb in the ribs. “What’s up with you?” He jibed. “Stand at attention, Soldier!” Caleb followed behind, acting like a lowly servant instead of a fighter.

Father Clarence took a seat first. “Caleb, my man. Why don’t you sit next to me? I bet you have some stories to tell!”

Caleb finally looked up and met Father Clarence’s stare. His face divulged his level of

surprise and discomfort. "Me?" he asked, afraid he somehow misunderstood.

"Unless I got your name wrong? Oh, I'm so sorry. I guess I'm starting to show my age.

What did you say your name was, young man?"

"Oh . . . uhuh . . . you're . . . right. My . . . name . . . is . . . Caleb, . . . Sir. I just . . ."

The Father gave Caleb that same all-knowing and all-loving smile he gave me the first time we met. "Like I said, I bet you have some stories to tell. Nothing worse than a man being treated so harshly just because of the color of his skin. No?"

With this statement, Caleb relaxed and started to look and act like his old self.

"My goodness, how I love coming here for dinner. Teddy, you sure did find yourself a good woman. Beautiful, smart, AND a great cook. My doctor's been on me about my diet, but good eatin' is surely one of my strongest weaknesses! You come for dinner often, Caleb?"

"Sure do, Father, any time Abbey lets me."

"Now, let's get one thing straight here, Son. I'll tell you like I told those two. You call me Clarence, you hear? We're all friends here. No need being so formal."

"Yes, Father. I mean, sure thing, Clarence!"

"That's better. Now, tell me about yourself. Where are you from? What made you decide to become a pilot in the Air Force?"

Caleb told Clarence the basics of his life story while we ate. He ended with the debacle between him and his bunkmate, Tracy, a fable gaining epic popularity on base.

"Mmmm . . ." Clarence muttered, blowing into his after-dinner coffee. "The misguided truth of our great society."

We all sat in silence, the sound of forks clanking against empty dessert plates the only noise breaking the gloomy stillness. "I come from a small town myself, Inistioge, a small village

in Ireland, in the Nore River Valley. Never so much as seen anyone different from myself until I moved to America!"

"Why'd you move to a place like this?" Caleb inquired.

"We are not so different, you and I," Clarence explained. "When you get your wings, you will go wherever Uncle Sam tells you. I am much the same. Once I graduated from seminary and took my vows, I came where the church called me."

"To Del Rio, Texas?" Teddy asked.

"No. Not at first. I started in Mexico, believe it or not. In a town much poorer than my home, with people much different from myself. But I gladly accepted the call and have never been sorry for it."

"Then, I suppose you speak Spanish?" I asked.

"Of course, my dear. But, more importantly, that is where I learned about the tree."

It was obvious neither Teddy nor Caleb knew what Father Clarence meant when he spoke of the tree. Having spent countless afternoons with him, I knew exactly what he meant. Sensing their confusion, he said, "Abbey, why don't you explain the tree to our two bewildered pilots?"

I first explained the foundation of the roots and how diverse Christian sects can branch out and produce life without withering the roots. "The roots are in all of us. God is the root," I shared. "The trunk is built on our foundation. Our foundation is our faith which tells us that since 'God so loved the world, He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever shall believe in Him shall not perish but have eternal life.' "

"John three, sixteen!" Caleb pronounced.

"Exactly," I continued. "The trunk is the life, death, and resurrection, the truth on which all Christianity is based—Jesus Christ. Each limb that sprouts from the trunk represents all the

different forms of Christian faith—whether Catholic, Baptist, Protestant—all part of the same trunk and the same roots, just a little different. Makes them no less a part of the whole tree.

“Each leaf branches off the larger branches. The leaves embody us, the individual believers. We all have our slight idiosyncrasies even within our select group. We can be swayed by the wind, but we are still connected, can still find our strength from the cross, from the blood of Jesus Christ, from our roots.”

“Excellent, Abbey!” Clarence stood over me, his hands resting on my shoulders. Teddy and Caleb sat opposite us, staring like entranced pupils, eager for their teacher to continue the tale. “But what can the tree tell us about man? Can we learn more about ourselves from the leaves?”

I turned to face him, unsure how to continue the story with the new twist he introduced. “Caleb? What can you tell us about the leaves?”

Caleb stared at his shoes. His face showed understanding. “I heard once,” Caleb began, his voice muffled by the harsh reality of what he was about to share. “that each leaf is like our fingerprint. No one exactly alike. They may look similar, but look closely. They have what look like veins.”

“But that’s not the only thing that makes them different, is it?” Father Clarence asked Caleb.

“No, Sir. Some have holes in them from where bugs and other insects have eaten them. Some have edges broken off where people come and rip them apart. Others are burned by fires or dry because they aren’t getting fed. Then their colors change, one slightly darker than another, and they fall and die, to decompose and restock the soil.

“Father Clarence, why, if we are all connected to the same root, do some of us get eaten,

or torn apart, or killed?" Caleb asked.

Caleb asked the age-old question: Why does God allow bad things to happen to good people? More specifically, why would God allow a man to be beaten and hung to die for no other reason than the color of his skin?

"I live it every day," Caleb resumed. "I've lived it all my life! If I look at a white man the wrong way, he at least calls me 'nigger' and at most spits in my face or threatens to hang me on one of your proverbial trees."

The mood grew eerily calm. Caleb became the teacher, giving us a glimpse into the life he fought to forget. "I live in fear every moment of every day." He looked up toward the ceiling. "And for what? Why do they want to hurt me? What did I ever do to them?"

"I know why Tracy hated me so much. I could justify hating him, or any of you for that matter, just the same."

"And you would indeed be justified in doing so," Teddy admitted.

"But, I don't. I judge you based on you. Not because you're white and other whites have beat me near to death or because other whites made sport of . . ." He looked each one of us, one by one, dead in the eye. "Did you know that I lost my two oldest brothers on the same day?"

The three of us sat in stunned silence, eager to hear the rest of the story even though we all feared the details. "We went fishing when I was a young boy, not much older than when Tracy lost his momma. We always went fishing. I was so proud that they let me tag along. There we were, minding our own business, enjoying the summer sun and each other's company. We planned to fry up our catch for dinner, just the three of us right there by the lake.

"But the sun burned hot that day. Felt like I sweated blood instead of water. We put our poles in the ground, took off our clothes, and took a dip. I was the only one who knew how to

swim, though. No one taught me. I taught myself. I loved being in the water.

“I swam to a grove of trees on the other side of the lake, thought I’d catch me a frog or two. My brothers stayed near the shore. Said they needed to stay close in case our lines caught anything, but I knew better. They’d never admit I knew how to do something they didn’t.

“I played for a while, and, when I remembered to check on my brothers and our fish, I saw a group of white boys nearby.”

“Have you ever heard this before?” I whispered to Teddy. He shushed me with his eyes, giving me my answer.

“I couldn’t hear what they said, but they looked mean. And my brothers just stayed rooted right where they stood in the water. Those boys grabbed our clothes and noticed three pairs of britches and only two niggers in the water.

“ ‘Where’s the other coon?’ I heard them demand from my brothers. ‘They ain’t no one else hear but us twos,’ they answered. We learned mighty young how to talk to white folks, especially the mean ones. One big ‘ole boy grabbed both of them by the top of the head and pulled them out of the water. Then, the other boys moved in real close. I could barely make out my brother’s bodies, but I heard them pleading for my life. ‘Theys no one else nowheres abouts but uses!’

“ ‘If you coons is telling the truth, then you stole these clothes, didn’t ya?’

“ ‘Yessir, yessir,’ my brothers lied. The water made my fingers wrinkle, but I was too afraid to move one muscle, afraid if I even made waves in the water, they’d come after me, too. But, my brothers did their best to keep me safe.

“ ‘You know what we do with lyin’, thievin’ niggers? Do ya?’ I heard the big one scream. I knew what he meant, but I couldn’t move. I knew if they caught me, I’d suffer the

same fate as my brothers.

“The big one kicked the first kick. I heard Joe squeal in pain. The others quickly joined in, kicking, using each other for leverage and balance. They kept kicking and kicking until my brothers quit making noises and quit moving.

“Those white boys finally backed off. ‘Let’s toss their bodies in the river,’ I heard one of them suggest. ‘We gotta get out of here!’ He sounded scared. He may have wanted to kill them, but he now feared the consequences of his actions.

“Then I saw both Joe and Michael start to move. I hoped the others wouldn’t see. I thought if they threw them in the water and left them for dead, I could save them.

“But, the others saw them move, too. The big one ran to his truck. He came back with some rope. The big one tied the knots while the others hefted up Michael and Joe. They hanged both of them. Afterwards, they just stood there, watching my brothers’ dead, naked bodies dangling from the tree. Blood from the beating still dripped from the tips of their fingers and the tips of their toes.

“Before they left, they set the whole tree on fire, my brothers and all. There was nothing I could do to save them. Again, I ask ‘why?’ They didn’t do anything to those white boys. Not a thing. We weren’t so much as trespassing on their land. If we all have the same root, why are some of the leaves cut and bruised and burned and killed?”

No one, not even Father Clarence, could keep from weeping at his tale. This man had every right to grow up hating every white man he saw. He had the right to question the God he loved. Instead, he chose to live a different sort of life. He chose to act and to react the way the gang of white boys should have acted with his brothers. He chose to live the example of Christ.

“The root didn’t kill your brothers. Man did. Misguided men,” Teddy answered his

friend. He got up and embraced Caleb in a brotherly hug, sharing his anguish and grief.

“Teddy’s right,” Father Clarence offered. “The root, the trunk, is our foundation. Notice, too, how the limbs thin the closer they get to the individual leaves. We can be as strong in Christ as we want to be, but we must work at it. It can be too easy to fall victim to the outside forces in our society. We have a responsibility to one another to uplift each other. When we fail, we grow weak.”

“But, I thought your parable of the tree was a good thing? I thought the small differences didn’t matter as long as we shared the same root?” I questioned. “Now you’re suggesting our differences make us weak?”

“Don’t misunderstand me,” Father Clarence corrected. “It’s a good thing if we remain fixed to the other leaves, larger branches, trunk and roots—the way God intended. Bugs, wind, fire, and drought are good metaphors for the sin in the world. Sin can touch us and sway us, but, like leaves that hang on in spite of getting bruised and broken, as long as we hold on to Christ, we may stumble, but we will not fall. Some people, though, who are not grounded in Christ, allow sin to destroy them. They are like the autumn leaves which die and fall from the tree.

“When Jesus came to walk among us, He gave us the example by which we are all to live. He was tempted, but never sinned. The tree is a parable of life. You, Caleb, are an example of how to live life.”

Chapter Twenty
Abigail Louise Bailey
(Abbey)

When August greets south Texas, the grass shrivels into dust and the birds flee from parched trees. The flow of the springs wrestles with a thirsty earth, trudging downstream like a prisoner in shackles. The early afternoon sun chases lethargic children indoors, triggering an eerie stillness in the streets.

I spent many Texas summer days indoors, replacing the spiritual pleasures of nature with a cold glass of water and a good book. The unfamiliar heat suffocated my breathing and nauseated my stomach. A light-headed swirl greeted me each morning as the stifling humidity invaded even the sunless dawn hours.

Because of my growing fatigue and weakness, Father Clarence visited me more often during these oppressive days, allowing me to rest indoors instead of venturing out into the stout summer sun.

During one such visit, I excused myself more than once to release the food my stomach could not digest.

“I’m not used to heat quite like this, Father,” I confessed. “Will I ever grow accustomed to it?”

Father Clarence eyed me with suspicion. “Texas in the summer does tend to drive people indoors. The humid air makes breathing more difficult than normal. But, I must admit, I have never seen this sort of reaction to the heat before.”

“Never?”

“I have seen the effects of heat stroke, symptoms very common to what I see in you and what you have described to me. But, you say you spend your days almost completely indoors?

Drink plenty of fluids?"

"I don't mean to be vulgar, Father, but I drink so much water lately that I'm constantly going to the restroom."

The suspicious look changed into a knowing smile. "Of course. Just as I suspected."

"Is this normal? Should I see a doctor?" I asked, afraid of what illness I contracted from this southern heat.

"Yes, it is normal for someone in your condition. And, yes, it would be a very good idea to see a doctor." He laughed at the expression of terror etched on my face. "Abbey, I believe you are pregnant."

"Pregnant? But . . . we . . . Really?"

"I believe so. Is this not good news?"

"Well . . . no . . . I mean . . . yes . . . I guess it's good news. Teddy and I never discussed children. I mean, we discussed having children someday, but we weren't exactly planning to have any right now!"

"Do you think he'll be pleased?"

"I don't know," I said, anxious to talk with my husband and to hear his reaction. "I mean, he's still in training. He's so busy. I just don't know."

Father Clarence offered to stay with me until Teddy returned home. I declined, preferring to hear his honest reaction and afraid the Father's presence would cloud his true feelings. Before he left that day, Father Clarence promised to return with some women from the church to talk me through what to expect during the next nine months and to lend a hand whenever and wherever needed.

The hours between learning the possible truth of my condition and Teddy's return home intensified the queasiness I felt inside. My clammy hands shook with nervous anticipation. I lay on the living room sofa with a cold rag over my face when he came home. As soon as he turned the knob, I sat up and stared at the door. He knew immediately that something was wrong.

Without even closing the door behind him, Teddy ran to my side. "Are you okay? Are you feeling worse? Do we need to go to the hospital?"

I grabbed his hand and tried my best to give him a reassuring smile. "I'm fine. At least, I'm not sick like we thought."

"Then, what is it?" He looked so concerned at that moment. I knew right then how much he loved me. All my doubts and fears vanished.

"Father Clarence came by today. I've been feeling sicker and sicker lately. Teddy, he thinks I'm pregnant."

Teddy fell back against the sofa, breathing a deep sigh of relief. He took a few moments to digest my words before responding. "Pregnant? That would explain a lot, huh?"

I nodded my head, tears forming in my eyes. Teddy took my face in both his hands and kissed me as passionately as the first time we kissed. He began to share my tears.

"We're going to have a baby?" he asked, his voice calm and sweet. "I'm gonna be a daddy?"

I nodded my head again, unable to speak. "And you're going to be a mommy? We need to see the doctor immediately!"

Teddy acted as if he wanted to go that very minute. "We can't go now," I reasoned. "And you've got training early like always. Father Clarence promised to take care of all that for us. He's going to have some ladies from the church come help me."

“Abbey, Honey. Nothing matters more to me right now than this. I can be late one day.”

“Teddy, don’t do anything foolish. You’ve come so far. Don’t blow your chances now!

Father Clarence and the other women will help out. There’s nothing for you to do at the doctor’s office anyway,” I assured him.

“Oh no. No way am I missing this! I’ve never been late or out sick or anything. Not even back at the Academy. If I lose my standing now because of this, the hell with them. I’m taking you to see the staff doctor first thing in the morning and that’s that.”

First thing the following morning, Teddy took me to the doctor as promised. The doctor confirmed the Father’s suspicion. After seeing me home, Teddy returned to duty. His supervisors excused his absence, and his standing at the head of his training squadron remained secure.

Even though I was not an active member of the church—I never even attended a single Sunday morning service—a few faithful women knocked on my door mere hours after learning of my impending gift.

“Oh, what a blessing. What a blessing!” Margaret boomed as the five of us sat around our modest kitchen table over afternoon tea.

“There is so much to do. Only nine months—or less!” Barbara exclaimed hinting at the urgency of preparation. She stood to refill our glasses. “How far along did the doctor say you are, Sweety?”

“About six weeks,” I said.

“Oh, dear,” Barbara worried. “So much to do!”

Angela and Edith sat in silence, contemplating the plethora of chores awaiting us. “We should make a list!” Angela and Edith proclaimed almost in unison.

The chatter lasted for hours, discussing things I should expect and the joys of children in the home, making arrangements for doctor visits, planning the baby shower, and scheduling an around-the-clock vigil as the date for delivery neared.

“We certainly can’t rely on your husband for this,” Barbara admonished.

Sensing the resentment welling up inside of me, Margaret intervened, “We all have husbands at Laughlin. That’s why Father Clarence sent us to you. We understand the life of a military man. They are all good men. Brave men. But their jobs require so much from them. Sometimes, they simply cannot be at home during such important moments.”

“But Teddy would never miss the birth of his child,” I reprimanded the women.

“Not intentionally, but in his line of work, neither he, nor you, will ever know what tomorrow brings.”

Edith tried to console me: “We all know that he will be there for the birth of your first child, God willing. We simply want to be there for you if he can’t be. Like right now while he’s working. We wives of soldiers must stick together.”

“Besides,” Angela added, “all that happens during the first pregnancy can be pretty scary. Your body goes through all sorts of changes. One moment you’ll be laughing and thinking all is right with the world. The next moment you may be crying, thinking your world is over. You need someone who understands, who can be there for you in a way no man can. No matter how loving and supportive your husband may be, he simply cannot and will not ever know what you are going through.”

“You’ll need us,” Barbara promised. “No woman should have to go through this on her own. You’ll see. With each passing day, you’ll come to understand just how much you really do need us.”

I listened to all their chatter, eager for the busy ramblings of mouths and bodies to subside so I could rest. I was not used to the constant attention of so many female personalities and the ringing their voices left in my ear made me yearn for past days of solitude by the creek.

Angela lovingly squeezed my arm as she crossed the threshold of the door, heading back with the other women to their own homes and their own lives. "Think of this as baby training. Once the baby is born, life as you know it will cease to exist," she whispered. "I know all their cackling can be a bit much. They can come across as being too pushy or tawdry, but Barbara's right. You will come to appreciate them being around. They do have a lot to offer."

I found a friend in Angela, someone who provided a lifeboat amidst the storms of meddling mother hens. I quickly learned the truth of her parting words. As the baby inside of me grew, my mind and body rebelled against my natural disposition. The wisdom of these mother sages helped me process my new reality and helped Teddy and me recognize genuine needs from his support during my temperamental pregnant-induced-moods to dietary considerations for the health of me and the child inside of me.

"Don't get me wrong," Teddy confessed. "I sincerely appreciate all they're doing for you, but, I have to admit, it makes me feel bad. I mean, I should be the one to take you to all your appointments. I should be the one taking care of you."

By now, my belly had swelled to the size of a plump round watermelon fresh for picking. Every night, when Teddy came to bed, he rubbed my belly until he fell asleep. At first, he cuddled up to us and stared at us like a child staring at the kitchen oven, smelling the sweet aroma of baking chocolate chip cookies, anxious to taste the freshest, hottest one. As time went on and my stomach grew, I heard him sighing with worry and guilt.

“Teddy, you’re working hard. I understand. I really do. Trust me, I’m okay.”

“I know, Abbey, but how can I be a good father if I can’t even be a good husband to you?”

“But you are. And you will be. You’re working hard, not just for your own future, but for ours. It won’t last forever. When your training’s over, you’ll have more time with us. It’s okay. I promise you, it’s all going to work out just the way it’s supposed to.”

His guttural sigh expressed his reluctant acceptance of my words. “I know you’re right, but I just hate the thought of missing so much.”

I could not help but laugh. “You mean, you don’t want to miss me throwing up at all hours of the day, watching the absurdity of me trying to do simple things like using the restroom or getting up from a chair? You want to watch my feet swell and my body get fatter and fatter every day?”

“Of course! I want to be the one to hold your hair for you when you get sick. I want to be there to help you take a shower, use the toilet, or get out of bed. I love watching your stomach grow and,” he bent down to grab my feet. I leaned back against the headboard pillows and allowed him to pull my feet into his lap. “I could massage your swollen feet. I want to be here for you.”

The extra weight warmed me through the mild Texas winter. By early spring, I grew anxious to shed the extra load. As my due date neared, one of my four newfound caretakers stood watch over me during the hours while Teddy worked.

“Um, I think my water just broke,” I announced from my position in the restroom. “Either that or I completely lost control of my bladder!” Angela rushed to my side and confirmed

my suspicions. Before helping me from my seat, she hurried to enlist the help of the others and to call Father Clarence.

“Barbara is on her way,” Angela assured me. “Father Clarence is going to notify Teddy and get him to the hospital as soon as possible.”

“I can’t have this baby without Teddy!” I pleaded.

“I understand that, Honey. But your baby’s coming in spite of what you may want. First things first. Let’s get you ready so when Barbara gets here with the car, we can be on our way.”

Moments after helping me out of the restroom, Barbara arrived and hefted me into her awaiting vehicle. “How are you feeling, Honey? Have the contractions started?”

“I’m fine right now,” I said, my voice quivering. “But I’m scared. How is a baby supposed to come out of such a small place?” I asked, pointing toward the area between my legs.

Barbara laughed. She looked at me through the rearview mirror. “Abbey, women have been doing this since creation. God built your body for this moment. Trust me. Things will happen as they should.”

“But, it’s still going to hurt!”

“Probably,” Barbara answered as a matter of fact.

“As soon as you hold your child in your arms, none of the pain will matter. You’ll forget all about it,” Angela promised. She gave my hand a squeeze.

Before we reached the nearby hospital, the first of many contractions set in. The pain was unlike anything I ever felt before. I prayed Father Clarence found Teddy and the both of them would be waiting for me when I arrived.

Barbara pulled up to the emergency room entrance. No one stood at the doors to await me. A nurse helped me into a wheelchair and took me to a room. Father Clarence arrived while

we waited for the doctor.

“Where’s Teddy?” I asked, stunned to see the Father without my husband.

“He was in flight when I called the base. They assured me they would radio him and get him down immediately,” Father Clarence answered.

“Why didn’t you wait for him? How is he supposed to get to me or know where to find me once he lands?”

Clarence wiped the sweat from my forehead and stroked my hair. “Abbey, I assure you, he will be here shortly. If I didn’t believe that, I would not have come without him. One of his commanding officers promised to deliver Teddy personally right here to this very room.

“Abbey, Teddy came by to see me a few weeks ago. He was so very concerned about you and about missing this moment. He wanted nothing more than to ensure your wellbeing and to come up with a plan to make sure I notified him as soon as possible.

“He gave me the name of one of his superiors, Marcus Reed. Teddy instructed me to call him if you went into labor during his training. He also arranged for Marcus to find him and get him to you in time to see your first child come into the world. Teddy wanted to make sure once I contacted the base, I came to you immediately. So here I am.”

Hearing of the effort Teddy went through to make sure he could be there for me and our baby clouded the pains of impending child birth. I still feared he would somehow not make it in time. “But, how will they know where . . .” Before I finished the rest of the sentence, the door to my room opened. My heart leapt into my throat, expecting Teddy to be standing at the threshold. Instead, the doctor entered.

“Well, how’s the patient doing?” he asked.

“I think she’d be doing a lot better if her husband was here,” Father Clarence offered.

The doctor met his eyes and gave him a wink. "Let's see what we've got," he said as he sat down before me to check on my progress. "I think we're ready to have this baby," he told me.

I looked up at Father Clarence, pleading for him to stop time somehow until Teddy arrived.

"Don't worry, Dear," the doctor said as he rose from his seat and patted my knee. "There is someone very special outside waiting to meet you in the delivery room. Father, ladies." The doctor excused himself as the nurses prepared to cart me off to another location of the hospital for delivery.

"I told you he'd be here!" Angela congratulated.

"Good luck, Doll," Barbara remarked.

"You'll do just fine," Father Clarence promised. He kissed my forehead as a father would kiss his daughter goodnight.

Teddy held my hand and never left my side during the many arduous hours of labor. "Congratulations," the doctor said. "You have a healthy baby boy." Clarence Walter Bailey was born just before midnight on Wednesday, April 13, 1960.

Chapter Twenty-One
Theodore Francis Bailey
(Teddy)

“Hello?” I had not heard her voice since our obligatory greeting five months before on Christmas day. My voice croaked like a young boy plagued by the onset of puberty. “Mom?” “Teddy? Is that you, Son? Is everything all right?”

I cleared my throat. “Mom. I’m calling because . . . I wanted to tell you . . . well . . . I wanted you to know . . . me and Abbey . . . have a son.” I heard her breathing. “Mom? Can you hear me?”

“I heard you, Son,” her voice muffled by tears.

“Mom?”

“Abbey was pregnant?”

“Yeah, Mom. She gave birth today. We named him Clarence Walter, after her uncle and a dear friend.”

“She was pregnant, and I wasn’t there for either of you,” she said as a matter of fact more to herself than to me. “She was pregnant during the holidays? Of course. But I didn’t know. And why should I? What right did I have to know that my son was to become a father?”

“Mom?” Her self-reprimand frightened me.

“Yes, Teddy?”

Up until this moment, I never intended to introduce my joy to her, calling only as a fulfillment of childhood duty. “I’m so busy with training and all, and I can’t get away right now. I was wondering . . . I mean . . . if it’s not too much to ask . . . if you would like to come visit, meet your grandson, maybe stay for a while and help out Abbey until she gets back on her feet.”

“My grandson,” she mused. “I would be honored, if Abbey could ever forgive an old

crow like myself.”

“Clarence Walter Bailey,” my mother cooed as she held her first grandchild in her arms. Rocking him to sleep, she reminisced of bygone days holding her own son in her arms as he rested in peaceful slumber. “He looks just like you, Teddy.”

“Abbey says the same thing. I don’t see it. I don’t see any resemblance of anyone in his face. He just looks like a baby to me.”

“He has your eyes,” Abbey said.

“But they’re so dark! Can’t even see his pupils! No one in my family has eyes that dark.”

“It’s not the color, Honey,” my mom chided. “It’s the shape and the light in his eyes. The way he looks up at me. There is no doubt he’s your son. Besides, his eyes will lighten in time.”

My chest constricted with those words. I may not have been able to tell him apart from any other newborn child, but every time I held him, every time someone referred to him as my son, the fulfillment of this common miracle humbled me.

Clarence awoke from his peaceful slumber. His face turned blood red, and his fists shook as he bawled at the ceiling. Abbey caught my guffaw. “What’s so funny?” she asked as she took him to her breast.

“That expression! Took me back to high school. The first time I saw Bobby play, he dropped a pass. It should have been an easy catch, but the ball just slipped right through his hands. The coach called him out of the game and started screaming at Bobby before he even made it to the sidelines. He stuck his neck out, and his face turned bright red, and the veins on the side of his neck looked like they were going to burst. He clenched his fists so tight, and, when he shook them, his whole body shook.

“We felt so bad for Bobby. Playing his first game, the only freshman on the varsity team. We thought he’d crumble and quit. But he looked Coach Baskin square in the eye, shrugged his shoulders, and sat down on the bench. Everyone heard what the coach said, but no one heard Bobby’s response.

“After the game, I asked him what he said. He said, ‘Well, what’s done is done, Coach. Try my best not to let it happen again.’ Calm as could be.”

My mom and I shared stories of childhood friends then and now. She noticed Abbey engrossed in feeding her son and stroking his head and cheeks and arms and fingers. “Abbey, Dear. Why do you look so sad?” she asked.

“Hmm?” Abbey mumbled, oblivious to anyone and anything outside of her reverie. “Oh, sorry. What did you say?”

“Is there something bothering you, Sweetie?”

“Oh, no. I was just thinking about my mother.”

“I enjoyed seeing her. I’m glad your folks came to visit their grandson.”

“Hmph . . .” Abbey snorted.

“What’s wrong, Abbey?” my mom asked again.

Abbey struggled with voicing her own emotions, pausing before putting her thoughts into words. “Holding him, looking at him, I can’t understand how a mother could let go of her child. I love him so much. I don’t get it.”

I scooted closer to her and wrapped my arm around her. She looked up at me and smiled, her anguish visible in her eyes. “How can any mother give up her child?”

My mother scooted her chair close to Abbey. With knees touching, she placed one hand on Abbey’s thigh and the other on Clarence’s head. “Tell me about it, Sweetie.”

“There’s nothing to tell. She didn’t want me. You think she would have welcomed a daughter, someone to help out around the house. Why wouldn’t she want me? How could she hold me, then let me go?”

As if sensing his momma’s rage, Clarence opened his eyes and gazed into Abbey’s. He reached for her finger and held on with all his might. Finding comfort in her embrace, he closed his eyes once again and continued to suckle at her breast.

“I had a sister, you know?” She kept her gaze on her son as she admitted her shame.

My mother and I looked at each other, bewildered by her confession. “I never knew you had a sister,” my inflection begged for details.

“She died days after her birth. I’m not sure what killed her, but my brothers say it destroyed my mother.” Caressing Clarence once again, she added, “My birth, unplanned and unwanted already, gave her no comfort from whatever damage my sister’s death caused. She refused to hold me. My dad fed me. He changed my diapers. He got up in the middle of the night to take care of me.

“He couldn’t handle taking care of the farm, my mother, and me. That’s why he gave me to my aunt and uncle. My head gets it, but my heart has never been able to forgive them.”

We sat in silence, digesting her revelation. We listened to the whirring of the ceiling fan and the gurgling of Clarence. I thought of nothing to say to comfort my wife.

“What was her name?” my mother asked.

“Sandra,” Abbey said.

“Why didn’t you ever tell me before?” My hurt feelings too obvious.

“I don’t know. I never really thought about it much. I mean, I never gave much thought to Sandra. I never knew her. And when I did think about her, I hated her. I blamed her as much as I

blamed my parents for giving me up and not loving me like they should. I guess the other part of me felt guilty for hating an innocent baby.

“Did you know in Hebrew, Abigail means ‘a father’s joy’? My aunt told me this. The contradiction disgusted me. My name doesn’t quite fit.”

My mother continued to caress Abbey’s knees in an effort to comfort her. “Just because he thought it best for your aunt and uncle to raise you doesn’t mean he didn’t love you,” she offered. “He gave you away because he loved you.”

“I know, I know. I don’t want to be mad at them. I mean, I love that my aunt and uncle raised me. I think I’m better for it, especially knowing about my mother’s mental state. I’ve prayed for years to be able to forgive them. I’ve tried. I really have. But sitting here, holding Clarence, I can’t help but feel angry.”

“Does Father Clarence know about this?” I asked, trying harder to disguise my own self pity.

“Yes,” Abbey replied, her voice and manner meek, conscious that her confession wounded me.

“I’m glad,” I sighed, shocked by the comfort I took in knowing she trusted Father Clarence with her secret burdens, even though she turned to him before coming to me.

Using the introduction of a new character into the story, my mom took this opportunity to change the subject. “So, I know about your uncle Walter, Abbey. Now tell me about Clarence’s other namesake, this priest I’ve heard so little about.”

Abbey told the story of how they met and the peace he brought into her life, sharing intimate details of their time together to fully illustrate their bond.

“He doesn’t sound like any Catholic priest I have ever met,” my mom said. “But he does

sound wonderful.”

“He even goes to Acuña with us on occasion. They have a dance at the plaza every Thursday night. When Abbey told him about our trips, he reminisced about younger days when he travelled through Mexico, enjoying the Mexican culture. Abbey invited him to join us, but he declined several times. We’re so close to the border, though. So she started teasing him about being an old man. Now he joins us whenever he can.

“You’d like it there, Mom. There’s a church right next to the plaza—a Catholic church—you’d love it. There’s these . . .”

Abbey cut me off, overwhelmed with excitement. “You should take her, Teddy! She would absolutely love it. You said you wanted to take her some time. Why not now?”

“Sounds like fun,” my mom said. “We can all make a day of it!”

“Oh, not me,” Abbey protested. “I’m not quite up to getting out and about with the baby yet.”

“We can find a babysitter for him for a few hours, can’t we? If you think it would be too much for him. Come on, it will be fun!”

One look at Abbey told us she was not yet willing to go anywhere for any length of time without her first born son. No amount of cajoling convinced her to make a trip across the border with us.

“Well, then,” my mom suggested, “How about you invite that priest of yours? I can get to know him, find out what makes him so special?”

“I’ll give him a call.”

Father Clarence delighted at the idea of meeting my mother. This trip offered the

opportunity to impart his impressions of Iglesia de Guadalupe and the fine art of Mexican courtship. The very next Thursday, the three of us packed into his old nineteen-thirty-something Chevy truck.

Catching the scrutiny of my mother's stare, he said, "Every Texan has gotta have a truck!" He winked and smiled, somewhat thawing her ill-conceived scorn.

"The church provide this vehicle for you?" she asked, attempting to calm her nerves by engaging in any sort of conversation. She had never spent time with a priest outside the church walls on a Sunday morning. Relating to him proved more difficult than she imagined. She was unsure whether to bow her head in homage or to treat him as a common man. Seeing him out of clerical garb all but shocked her into speechlessness.

"Nah," he said, sounding and acting more like an ordinary human being than a holy witness for Christ. "She's my baby, all mine! We've taken many trips out fishing together. Her bed has been my place of refuge on many sleepy afternoons." He stroked the truck's dash. "We've been through a lot together. She may be getting up there in years, but I can't bear to part with her." He turned to face my mom who sat in between me and the Father. "I'd hate to think we'd be put out to pasture just because we're getting old." He winked and smiled at her again. "Not when we still have some miles left in us." With that, he cranked the engine. She puttered to life and carried us to Acuña.

By the time we reached the plaza, the two conversed as if they had known each other for years. My mother no longer worried about the state of her soul or about acting righteous in front of a pious man.

Father Clarence offered her his hand as she stepped from the truck. "Dorothy, this, my

dear, is our very lovely Ciudad de Acuña.”

She took in everything around her, from the distinctive rhythm of the Mexican band playing in the plaza’s gazebo to the sound of unfamiliar tongues. She breathed in the smell of foreign delicacies and watched as lovers swayed in time with the drummer’s beat. Mothers and fathers strolled the lane, deep in conversation with one eye always on their sons and daughters, a constant reminder to the young couples to set boundaries with their musical love-makings. Little ones played chase with ice cream dripping down their cheeks, oblivious to the concerns of their elders.

A bell tolled the hour. She turned to face the familiar sound of the Lord’s music. “On the other side of those trees, Mom, is the church I told you about.”

“How magnificent! Look at that angel reaching up to heaven!”

“You can’t see them for the trees, but just below the cross are two more angels with trumpets pointed toward heaven. They’re unbelievable! Abbey and I came here for the first time just after we moved to Del Rio, our impromptu honeymoon. We even considered getting remarried . . .” I caught myself a little late. Mom and I never discussed our past quarrels or resolved our conflicting opinions.

My mom squeezed my hand in a gesture of pure love and acceptance as she took my hand and led me to holy ground. After gazing at the statues for a time, Father Clarence suggested we take a look inside.

A mourner on her knees begged the statue of a saint for intercession. Another sat in a pew in silent prayer. Father Clarence walked ahead of us, stopping to converse with the woman in the pew. He met up with us at the altar.

“Did you know that woman?” my mom asked.

“No, just thought I’d say hello.” He offered no more about the secret conversation, and we pressed no further.

A picture of Jesus calming a storm graced the entire midsection of the wall behind the altar. The painting took up the entire midsection of the front wall of the church.

“A furious squall came up, and the waves broke over the boat so that it was nearly swamped. Jesus was in the stern, sleeping on a cushion. The disciples woke him and said to him, ‘Teacher, don’t you care if we drown?’ He got up, rebuked the wind, and said to the waves, ‘Quiet! Be still!’ Then the wind died down, and it was completely calm. He said to his disciples, ‘Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?’ They were terrified and asked each other, ‘Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him!’ Mark chapter four, verses thirty-seven through forty-one,” Father quoted.

“Clarence, Abbey told us about Sandra,” I said. Something about that verse reminded me of Abbey’s internal storm. Father Clarence acknowledged my statement with a look, but said nothing.

We turned our attention to the paintings to the right and to the left of the storm.

“Six days before the Passover, Jesus arrived at Bethany, where Lazarus lived, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. Here a dinner was given in Jesus’ honor. Martha served while Lazarus was among those reclining at the table with him. Then Mary took about a pint of pure nard, an expensive perfume; she poured it on Jesus’ feet and wiped them with her hair. And the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.

“But one of his disciples, Judas Iscariot, who was later to betray him, objected: ‘Why wasn’t this perfume sold and the money given to the poor? It was worth a year’s wages.’ He did not say this because he cared about the poor but because he was a thief; as keeper of the money

bag, he used to help himself to what was put into it.

“ ‘Leave her alone,’ Jesus replied. ‘It was intended that she should save this perfume for the day of my burial. You will always have the poor among you, but you will not always have me.’ John, twelve, verses one through eight.”

“I always liked the story of Mary and Martha, how different they acted,” my mom replied. “Their story made me realize the relevancy of the Bible in my life.”

I listened to her words, shocked to discover she read and studied the Bible outside of church. She kept her spiritual journey a secret.

She continued, “I always thought Jesus meant for us to be more like Mary. She hung on His every word and sought Him out whenever He came near. I suppose she bonded with Him on an emotional level after Jesus saved her from stoning. But I always related more to Martha. I cared more about the details, making sure I met the needs of everyone and took care of everything. For the longest time, I condemned myself for not being more needy. I know that’s not the right word, but you understand my meaning?

“Anyway, I put down my Bible one day and stared at the wall. No matter how hard I tried to pray, I felt disconnected for some reason. I sat feeling nothing, no anger or bitterness. Not even joy or happiness. Then, I heard God speak to my heart. He told me He needed me, too. He uses people like me for His kingdom purpose the same as He uses people like Mary.

“They needed Martha. She prepared the meal Jesus shared with His disciples. She filled their cups before they ran dry. She kept her home clean for them and provided fresh water for washing.

“Marthas and Marys coexist in this world. We bring each other balance. We take care of and nurture one another.”

“The Old Testament isn’t just a history of God’s chosen people. The New Testament isn’t just the life and times of Jesus. It’s about us,” Father Clarence explained. “It’s about our relationship with our Lord. That’s why the Bible remains relevant today. That’s why, almost two thousand years later, it’s still the most sought after and the most read book in the world. The Bible has been translated into more languages than any other piece of literature in history.

“Any passage, any verse can be translated for us, for our lives and circumstances. Like your finding peace with who you are and what you have to offer through the story of Mary and Martha.”

After a few moments’ pause, the three of us turned our attention to the final painting. A group of men, whom I assumed to be His disciples, gathered around Jesus. One man knelt before Him. Jesus was handing him a key.

“I don’t get it,” my mom pondered aloud. “Oh, wait! That’s Peter, and Jesus is handing him the keys to the kingdom!”

“When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, ‘Who do people say the Son of Man is?’ They replied, ‘Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets.’

“But what about you?” he asked. ‘Who do you say I am?’

“Simon Peter answered, ‘You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.’

“Jesus replied, ‘Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in Heaven. And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. I will give you the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven; whatever you bind on Earth will be bound in Heaven, and whatever you loose on

Earth will be loosed in Heaven.' Then he warned his disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Christ. Matthew, chapter sixteen, verses thirteen through twenty."

"That is quite amazing!" Father Clarence fascinated my mother with his knowledge of scripture. "How do you know the Bible so well?"

"It's my job, Dorothy!" Father Clarence teased, pretending to be shocked and hurt by her surprise. "Honestly, I do know most of the Gospel of John by heart. I took an advanced Greek course in seminary. Our professor gave us one assignment for the entire semester—no other tests or graded work. He told us to read a Greek translation of the Bible and translate it into English. This class intended to give us a deeper appreciation and understanding of the Bible. Through this project, I memorized much of the text.

"As far as the scripture verses corresponding to the paintings, when I first saw this church, I fell in love with the art work. I went home and studied all the scripture verses relating to these pictures. The story of Jesus calming the storm and handing Peter the keys to Heaven are not found in the Gospel of John. God also blessed me with a mind like a sponge."

Father Clarence lost my mother's attention shortly after he began his explanation. Her curiosity centered on his days in seminary. "You translated the entire Gospel?" she asked in absolute astonishment. "But why?"

"He told you, Mom. To gain a better appreciation for the Gospel and the message he intended to preach as an ordained priest."

"I get that. But if you wanted to be a preacher, you should have been well versed in the Bible already, right? What's the purpose in doing the work someone else has already done? I mean, you can go to any bookstore and buy all kinds of different translations."

"Yes!" My mother ignited a fire in the man. Dressed in his Texas best, he stood a little

more erect as if behind the pulpit, his voice rising to the pitch of a tent revival preacher, an odd sight in this Catholic church in Acuña, Mexico.

“Dorothy, do you know what you read? Do you really understand all that is behind one little word?”

“What are you talking about?” she took a step back. His exuberance caught her off guard.

“Take one simple word, a word so basic and ordinary, a word that needs very little clarification in English. Fish.”

“Fish?” she exclaimed. I laughed as her nose scrunched as if he had placed a stinky fish right under it.

“That’s right. Needs no explanation, does it? I say fish and you know exactly what I’m talking about.” He gave her a quizzical sneer. “Or do you?” He watched my mom squirm. “Remember the story of Jesus feeding five thousand?”

“Of course.”

“When Jesus looked up and saw a great crowd coming toward him, he said to Philip, ‘Where shall we buy bread for these people to eat?’ He asked this only to test him, for he already had in mind what he was going to do.

“Philip answered him, ‘Eight months’ wages would not buy enough bread for each one to have a bite!’

“Another of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother, spoke up: ‘Here is a boy with five small barley loaves and two small fish, but how far will they go among so many?’

“Now, in your Bible, it says ‘small fish.’ What does that mean to you?”

“I don’t know. Little fish. So?”

“If you’re like I am, you would simply have an image of a regular ole’ fish, just like what

you might catch at the lake or eat in a restaurant. Right? But the Greek term actually refers to a tiny thing,” Father Clarence brought two fingers very close together. “Sardine tiny. This boy had a poor man’s lunch. Jesus fed five thousand with two sardines! Really changes your image of the miracle if you think of the insignificance of the original gift.

“Now, consider the last chapter of John after the crucifixion and burial of Jesus. Simon Peter and other disciples decide to go out fishing. They’re gone all night and catch nothing. In the early morning, as they return to shore, they see a man standing at the water’s edge. The man tells them to throw their net to the right of the boat. They do. And when they pull the net back in, ‘it was full of large fish, one hundred and fifty three, but even with so many the net was not torn.’

“Even though many English translations differentiate the fish by saying small or large, again, most readers cannot or do not conceive the difference. Most glance past ‘one hundred and fifty three, but even with so many the net was not torn.’ We think ‘so what? Why does this matter?’

“I’ll tell you why it matters. John is trying to prove a point. Even though Jesus told them to bring Him some of the fish they caught, *they* didn’t catch anything. Jesus did the catching. The disciples were merely the means by which Jesus worked.

“So much meaning is lost in translation, especially the English translation, a language with very limited vocabulary.”

My mother’s eyes grew wider and her mouth parted as he spoke. Captivated by his knowledge, she begged for more. Father Clarence took the bait and taught on.

“You remember the end of the Gospel of John, when Jesus questioned Peter three times? The first time Jesus asks Peter if he loves Him, He asks, ‘Simon, bar Jonah, do you agape me?’

Peter answers, ‘Phileo se.’ He changes it. Jesus asks “agape me?” and Peter answers ‘phileo se.’

“Jesus asks again, ‘Simon, bar Jonah’—bar simply means son of—do you agape me?”

Peter answers ‘Lord, you know everything. Phileo se.’

“The third time Jesus asks, ‘Simon, bar Jonah, phileos me?’

“Here’s what’s happening, and I don’t know of one English Bible that says this. Jesus is asking Peter, ‘Peter, do you, with all your heart, love me?’ Peter answers back, ‘Lord, you know I *like* you.’

“ ‘Peter, do you agape me? Do you completely love me?’

“ ‘Lord, you know I *like* you.’ The word phileo is where we get Philadelphia, the city of brotherly love—like or kindness.

“Now, is brotherly love different from other types of love? The love you have for your children? Your spouse? I sure hope so. The problem is that we only have one word for love. This morning, I told you I loved my truck. When I get home tonight, I’ll pat my dog on the head and say I love you. Sunday, I’ll hug one of my parishioners and tell him I love him. Later, I’ll be in prayer and tell Jesus I love Him. How can I love all these with the same type of love? It’s impossible! But we have no other words to describe it in English. We use the same English word to describe many different emotions. The ancient language differentiated its meanings.

“When we read our English translation, we wonder why it grieved Peter’s heart when Jesus asked him the third time if he loved Him. Our conclusion takes us back to the only other time in which the text mentions a charcoal fire—when Peter denies Jesus three times. We believe it grieves Peter’s heart to remember his betrayal and assume Jesus is now restoring him after the resurrection, forgiving him for his sins. Maybe this is Jesus’ exact intent.

“On the other hand, reading it in the original text, Jesus says to Peter, ‘Peter, do you

really like me?’ The third time grieves him because Jesus is now challenging Peter’s own words. Jesus, knowing Peter’s limitations, brings His level of love down to meet Peter’s. He now uses the same word for love Peter used the first two times. This devastates Peter because he understands what Jesus is doing—He is meeting us in our weaknesses, loving us in spite of our sin and inability to ‘agape se.’

“Now, let’s go back and examine what Jesus tells Peter to do between the questions of love. The first time, Jesus tells him to feed His lambs. The Greek translation says nurture or feed my babies—take care of the little ones, the new believers.

“The second time, Jesus tells Peter to shepherd His sheep. The Greek translation says to guide the old ones—don’t neglect the spiritual needs of the more mature believers.

“The third time Jesus says feed His sheep. The Greek translation says nurture the old ones. Nurture the old ones, too. We come full circle. Jesus combines the first and second commands.

“So, here’s what’s happening. Dorothy, do you love the Lord?”

“Yes, Sir.”

“Then take care of His flock. How can we love the Lord? How do we show Him we love Him? We can’t offer to cut his grass for Him. We can’t give Him a hug or comfort Him when He’s sick. I can’t lend Him my truck or offer to help Him move. What, then? How do we show Him we love Him? Simple. We take care of His people.”

“Oh my God,” my mom gasped, as if she forgot to breathe while Father Clarence gave his impromptu sermon. “I thought I understood the whole concept of the living Bible, but this . . . such deeper . . . the Bible . . . so profound. It’s historical, literal, metaphorical, and personal, all at the same time. It’s amazing how one book can be all these things in one!”

Father Clarence beamed with satisfaction. Even though I heard the story before, I listened as if enjoying it for the first time. His enthusiasm brought the Bible to life. He had an obvious love for both learning and the Lord. When he united his two passions, he moved the spirit of every listener.

My mind and my eyes drifted as their conversation continued, and they spoke about pros and cons of various Biblical translations and his other experiences as a student and priest. I noticed men setting up as if preparing for a church service. More people trickled into the sanctuary.

“I don’t remember them having mass on Thursday evenings,” I whispered to Father Clarence. He looked around, and we noticed a hearse pulling up in front of the church. The three of us simultaneously shut our mouths and ducked out through the side entrance.

Before we reached the bottom step, a man stood in front of my mother, close enough to touch her lips with his. He spoke to her in soft Spanish. She could not understand him. Father Clarence rebuked him in the man’s own language. “What does he want?” she asked.

“He wants money,” I said, still snickering at Father Clarence’s reprimand.

“What did he tell that man?” she questioned, ignoring the figure who still stood inches in front of her with his upright palm stuck out.

“He asked the man if he was drunk,” I answered.

My mom looked at the two of us with obvious scorn in her eyes. Unaccustomed to such bold behavior from strangers, she scolded us for our uncaring hearts. She reached into her pocket and handed the man all the change she carried. “This is all I have,” she told him. “I’m sorry.”

“Gracias. Thank you.” He bowed his head to her several times as he backed away.

“Dorothy, you really must watch what you do around here. There are eyes everywhere.”

“The man needed money, and I gave him some. How dare you, a good Catholic priest, rebuke him the way you did!”

“The man was drunk. Couldn’t you smell it?”

“He was no such thing!” she retorted.

“He was so,” I laughed as I wrapped my arm around my naïve mother and led her back toward the plaza.

As we walked around, Father Clarence shared some of the finer points of Acuña’s history and culture. “Ah, you should really come back during the diez y seis and cinco de mayo festivals. You think the plaza is crowded tonight. Women and men come dressed in their finest. Food and drink and music. It is quite a joyous time. Oh, and we must go to Crosby’s. It is the most famous restaurant in these parts and the food is to die for! But watch out for the rain. The river floods every year and water washes down the lanes, getting up to here!” He pointed to his chest.

“You exaggerate!” My mother criticized.

“I am a priest. Would I lie?”

I found myself tuning them out and turning my attention to a woman dressed in rags with dirt on her face, standing beside us as if making a fourth out of our threesome. No one, not even my mother, looked her in the eye. Father Clarence and I knew what she wanted, and my mother now heeded our warning.

“Can she understand me?” my mom asked me out of the corner of her mouth, not wanting to draw attention to the fact that she noticed the woman.

“I doubt it. Most of the folks here know the basics—hello, goodbye, thank you, please, help—but they do not know conversational English.”

“There are so many poor people here,” my mom observed. “She’s standing so close.”

Questioning Father Clarence, she asked, “I see now why you didn’t want me to give that man at the church money. I couldn’t possibly help everyone.”

“I didn’t want you to give him money because I know him. He is a drunk and a beggar. He will do nothing to help himself. I and others have tried too many times to help him. I can do many things, but Jesus needs to work on him a little while longer. Until then . . .

“Now, about the rest of them. The border towns between Mexico and the United States tend to be poor, at least, according to American standards,” Father Clarence explained. “But the one thing you need to realize is there is a difference between the poor and the beggars. Look around at all the street vendors. They are earning an honest living. Look at all the people dancing and enjoying each other’s company. They may not have much, but many of them take care of one another. They’re family, and that’s the way of their culture. Unfortunately, many, like the man back at the church, want something for nothing.

“Don’t get me wrong—there are a lot of people in need who would do right with your money, but you can’t always tell which is which. You give to one, and, the next thing you know, they are swarming all over you. Some even distract you so another can rob you. They look for Americans, especially female Americans. You must take precautions to protect yourself. There are other ways to help without giving them money. If they are hungry, feed them. If they are thirsty, give them something to drink. If they are cold, give them your coat. ”

“It’s a shame it has to be this way, that I can’t simply give them money, I mean.”

“Yes. Yes, it is.”

“There’s gotta be a Biblical lesson in there somewhere,” I joked, appreciative for Father Clarence’s knowledge, but blessed with enough insight for one night.

He took my mother by the elbow and escorted her away from the woman and into the throng of merriment in the middle of the plaza. "May I have this dance?" he asked.

They looked like old lovers and talked and laughed like old friends. I saw a side of my mother I had never seen before. I glimpsed a spiritual side I never knew existed. The walls between tradition and faith collapsed, and I thanked God for it.

Chapter Twenty-Two Daughter

When Communist Russia announced the detonation of their first atomic bomb after blockading Berlin and pushing their way into Poland and Eastern Europe in the late summer of 1949, paralyzing fear took over school houses all over the United States. Air raid sirens warned children to take cover underneath their desks in a futile effort to cover up from the effects of a nuclear blast.

Later that same year, Chinese Communist leader, Mao Zedong, announced the creation of the People's Republic of China, ending the Civil War between the Chinese Communist Party and the Chinese Nationalist Party.

On Saturday June 24, 1950, US Secretary of State, Dean Acheson, told President Harry S. Truman, "Mr. President, I have very serious news. The [Communist] North Koreans have invaded South Korea."

President Truman supported an American police action stating that "if South Korea was allowed to fall, Communist leaders would be emboldened to override nations closer to our own shores. If the Communists were permitted to force their way into the Republic of Korea without opposition from the free world, no small nation would have the courage to resist threat and aggression by stronger Communist neighbors."

My mother and father grew up during the worst of the Second Red Scare following World War II. The strengthening Communist forces terrorized both American citizens and the United States government. Intent on halting another Communist threat, the US began to take secret action against the growing problem in Southeast Asia. Even during the days of my father's Air Force Training and initial service in Bien Hoa, my parents knew nothing about the theater of

war staged by our government.

In 1946, the French entered a war against the Communist Vietminh over control of Vietnam. By early 1950, the new People's Republic of China gave bases and weapons to the Vietminh. As they began to advance upon French occupied areas, the United States, fearing another Communist threat, authorized fifteen million dollars in military aid to the French, financing eighty percent of their war effort.

A secret memorandum issued during the 1950 United States National Security Council discussed what they termed the Domino Theory—if one country fell to Communism, the rest would follow. In order to stop the spread of Communism, they must keep the first domino—country—from falling.

In June 1952, another secret memo added to these fears, using a chain of US military bases along the coast of China, Philippines, Taiwan, Japan, and South Korea as possible examples of what might happen under Communist control.

This memorandum claimed that “Communist control of all of Southeast Asia would render the US position in the Pacific offshore island chain precarious and would seriously jeopardize fundamental US security interests in the Far East.” The Council claimed the United States had a responsibility to aid in the French efforts since Southeast Asia—particularly Malaya and Indonesia—provided the principal world source of natural rubber and tin and produced petroleum and other strategically important commodities.

By 1953, the Vietnamese started to rally behind Communist leader Ho Chi Minh, forcing the French to consider options for pulling out of the war effort. In response to this alarming turn of events, a Congressional study stated, “If the French actually decided to withdraw, the United States would have to consider most seriously whether to take over this area.”

The following year, the French agreed to withdraw temporarily into the southern part of Vietnam and allow the Vietminh to remain in the north. Both sides agreed to hold an election in 1956 in a unified Vietnam, enabling the Vietnamese people to choose their own government.

Refusing to sit back and watch as a Communist government won an election to unite and control North and South Vietnam, the US appointed former Vietnamese official, Ngo Dinh Diem, to head up the government in Saigon. The US encouraged Diem to postpone the scheduled elections for unification. He succeeded. With American money and arms, his government became more firmly established. By controlling the actions of Diem, the United States government essentially created South Vietnam.

However, by 1958, Ngo Dinh Diem grew increasingly unpopular and guerrilla activities, encouraged and aided by the Communist regime in Hanoi, began against the Diem regime.

When John F. Kennedy took office in 1961, he approved a secret plan for various military actions in Vietnam and Laos, including the “dispatch of agents to North Vietnam” to engage in “sabotage and light harassment.”

The 1954 Geneva Accords permitted the US to send 685 military advisors to southern Vietnam. Eisenhower secretly sent several thousand. Under Kennedy, the figure rose to 16,000, some of whom began taking part in combat operations under the guise of “training” for the South Vietnamese Air Force. My father took part in this “training” beginning in November of 1961.

As Diem became more of an embarrassment and was considered an obstacle to effective control over Vietnam, the US planned a coup. On November 1, 1963, generals attacked the presidential palace. Diem fled, but was soon captured and executed. Even with Diem out of the way, the generals who replaced him failed to suppress the National Liberation Front. The popularity of this group baffled American leaders who were determined to stop them.

In 1964, President Johnson exploited a murky set of events in the Gulf of Tonkin to launch a full-scale war on Vietnam. Secretary of Defense, Robert McNamara, reported to the American people that North Vietnamese torpedo boats launched an unprovoked attack on the American US Destroyer Maddox.

The Tonkin “attack” brought a congressional resolution, passed unanimously in the House—with only two dissenting votes in the Senate—giving Johnson the power to take military action as he saw fit. This Tonkin Resolution awarded the President the power to initiate hostilities without a Congressional declaration of war required by the Constitution. The Supreme Court, expected to be the watchdog of the Constitution, was asked again and again during the course of the war to declare it unconstitutional. The court refused to consider the issue. Immediately after the Tonkin affair, American warplanes began bombarding North Vietnam.

Although my father’s squadron heard about the escalating tensions in Southeast Asia and suspected they may be shipped to aid in training in Vietnam, the facts behind America’s mounting involvement did not become public knowledge until many years later.

In 1971, Daniel Ellsberg managed to procure, photocopy, and return a large number of classified papers regarding the conduct of the Vietnam War. These Pentagon Papers, leaked to the *New York Times* on June 13, 1971, embarrassed the Kennedy and Johnson administrations and initiated a chain of events leading to the impeachment of Richard Nixon.

In 2005, an internal National Security Agency history study declassified information regarding the Gulf of Tonkin. The study concluded that the USS Maddox engaged the North Vietnamese Navy on August 2 but not on August 4, the date which served as Johnson's legal

justification for deploying US forces and declaring open warfare against North Vietnam. The report stated that it “is not simply that there is a different story as to what happened; it is that no attack happened that night . . . In truth, Hanoi's navy was engaged in nothing that night but the salvage of two of the boats damaged on August 2.”

My mother blames the United States government for leading her husband into what she believed to be an unjustified war, producing a division between her love and commitment to her husband and her secret support for the growing anti-war tensions back home. She condemns American leadership for needlessly sharing the secrets of the father with the son.

“If our President felt the need to sacrifice thousands upon thousands of American soldiers, they should have done more to ensure our victory . . . or at least burned these papers before the truth leaked out,” she admonished.

Chapter Twenty-Three
Theodore Francis Bailey
(Teddy)

By 1961, shortly after graduating from UPT and earning my wings, Caleb and I were both stationed at Tyndall Air Force Base in Florida. Tactical Air Command Officials requested volunteers for Project Jungle Jim, a mission to train indigenous air forces in counterinsurgency.

The base commander summoned potential volunteers to discuss our willingness to participate in this top secret mission. I stepped into his office and saluted.

“At ease, Lieutenant Bailey. First, I must inform you that everything said in this office is strictly confidential. You are not to repeat anything to anyone. Is that understood?”

“Yes, Colonel, Sir.”

“I will ask you a series of questions. Answer either in the affirmative or the negative. You are not to ask for clarification. None will be given. Is that understood?”

“Yes, Colonel, Sir.”

“Would you be willing to fly and fight in support of a friendly foreign nation in situations where you could not wear the US uniform?”

“Yes, Colonel, Sir.”

“Affirmative or negative, please.”

“Affirmative.”

“Would you be willing to fly and fight on behalf of the US government and to agree to do so knowing your government might choose to deny you are a member of the US military, or even associated with this nation, and thus might not be able to provide you with the protection normally given to a US citizen?”

“Affirmative.”

His vague line of questioning piqued my curiosity. With rumors of accelerated hostilities in Communist countries, I suspected my assignment involved crushing the latest threat to North American democracy. I trained for this very moment. Although still green by military standards—I had not yet finished my post-undergraduate pilot training—my record and the military's need pushed me to the front of the line.

On April 14, 1961, the US government activated the 4400th Combat Crew Training Squadron. Both Caleb and I received orders for immediate training at Hurlburt Field in the panhandle of Florida, roughly eighty miles from Tyndall.

Colonel Benjamin H. King greeted the new unit by saying, “All I can promise you are long hours and hard work in preparation for what lies ahead. You will become a special operations forces unit, and you will be called ‘air commandos.’”

Training for our secret mission—still a secret to those of the 4400th—began with psychological evaluations designed to identify unstable personalities unable to handle the rigors of the assignment.

“I heard talk they actually want the crazies. The crazier you are, the more suited you’ll be for the job,” chimed Lieutenant Henry Baker from Maxwell AFB in Alabama.

“Then you oughta fit right in, ole’ chap!” joked Lieutenant Albert Foster from Keesler AFB in Mississippi.

“So,” I ventured to ask our band of misfit brothers, “give any thought as to what the hell this is all about?”

“Damn straight. The second Colonel Wiseman told me not to ask any questions. Just like a kid, tell me nothin’, swear me to secrecy, and I’m more curious than a cat likin’ up a damn oil spill. This shit probably going to get us all killed. But, hell, ain’t that the reason each and every

one of us signed up?"

A chorus of affirmatives rose in understanding.

"I bet we're going to Cuba," offered another pilot. "I heard the CIA is training and equipping Cuban rebels to overthrow Castro."

"Yea, but they're training in Guatemala? Why're we here, instead of over there?"

"Hell, we're in Florida. One step away from Cuba if called to action."

"Yea, gotta get that Commy bastard outa there somehow. Who better than us? Drop a bomb on his ass and be done with it."

"Sure, until the next dictator comes along."

"And I hear them bastards have missiles aimed right at us."

"What about the whole Israeli-Palestine issue? Don't the Russians still have an interest in Palestine?"

"What're you talking about?" someone asked.

"Russia supported the Arab nations during their war with Israel. Even though Israel won and has been a free state for more than ten years, the Arabs refuse to recognize it or make peace with them. The Soviets are supposedly still aiding them," Foster explained.

"What of it? Jordan's King Hussein's been working on a peace treaty between Jordan, Palestine, and Israel. No one's concerned with them anymore. Not right now, anyway."

The guys discussed political unrest in other parts of the world before leaping into more absurd conspiracy theories. Caleb guided the conversation back toward more realistic possibilities.

"What about Vietnam?" Caleb asked.

"Where's Vietnam?" someone asked.

“Southeast Asia, over by China. In ‘53, our government put their own guy in power when the French pulled out. The CIA is right there in the mix, trying either to take control away from the Communists or start a war.”

“That’s as much hearsay as claiming the Masons drink goat blood and decide the fate of the entire world in the basement of their lodge.”

“Think about it. The Vietnamese were supposed to vote on which party they wanted to affiliate with and run their country, right? Then what happened? The voting keeps getting pushed back. Since Diem is losing support now, we have to do something. If Minh wins, Vietnam becomes another Communist country. Our government won’t allow that.”

“How do you know so much?” I asked Caleb. No one else, including me, even heard of Vietnam before he brought it up.

Caleb shrugged his shoulders. “I just pay attention is all.”

“Damn Commies,” Henry cursed. “They’re taking over the world. If they’re in Cuba and Palestine and . . . and Asia and Europe . . . how the hell we supposed to fight the world? World War Three? All the Communist countries against who? The US and Britain?”

“You know, Communism in and of itself is not evil,” offered Lieutenant Mark Mayfield, also known as Apostle, of Luke AFB in Arizona. This remark was met by death stares and pistol motions to the skull. “Hear me out. What are the precepts of Communism—commune—communal—share and share alike—equality for all? Jesus taught this to his followers. The disciples made no money the traditional way. The original church tithed. What’s tithing? You give a percentage of what you earn. If you are a farmer, you gave a percentage of your grain. If a rancher, you gave a percentage of your livestock. First fruits as the Jews teach. This tithe is given to God, but does God actually eat that stuff or use the money? Of course not. They used it to feed

the poor, house the homeless, dress the naked. See? Jesus Christ directed the original church to live as a community. If it worked as intended, no one would want for anything. And, if no one wanted for anything, there would be no need for war or militaries or governments.

“But, unless every single person on the face of the earth believes the same principles and worships the same god, Communism will never work. When there is sin in the world and men corrupted by greed, Communism turns into something truly evil. Only a few have everything, and everyone else has nothing.”

After Mayfield concluded his mini-sermon, we quit playing guessing games. No matter where in the world the government planned to send us, we were certain of the enemy. Deployment orders received six months later tamed our curious tongues.

Until 1960, the Communist Party of Vietnam aimed at political reunification in accordance with the Geneva Peace Accords, signed by France and Vietnam in 1954. According to the Geneva Accords, Vietnamese delegates agreed to a temporary partition of their nation at the seventeenth parallel. After two years, Vietnam would hold elections to reunify the country and, thus, realigning the divide which ran along the Ben Hai River in Quang Tri Province to the village of Bo Ho Su and from there due west to the Laos-Vietnam border.

However, almost immediately after securing the nomination for the Government of the Republic of Vietnam (GVN of South Vietnam)—created with astronomical amounts of American military, political, and economic aid—Ngo Dinh Diem accused the Communists from the North of plotting to take over his government by force. With the help of the American Central Intelligence Agency, Diem identified these suspected militants. He passed Law 10/59, making it legal to arrest and imprison anyone believed to be a Communist without bringing

formal charges.

Unsuccessful attempts to cause Diem's collapse by exerting tremendous internal political pressure, along with his attacks on suspected Communists in the south, caused the North to change tactics. In 1959, three years after elections were to take place under the Geneva Accords, the Communist Party approved the use of revolutionary violence.

As military conditions worsened, US Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara sought ways to dispatch military forces to test counterinsurgency techniques in Southeast Asia without breaking the Geneva Peace Accords, which held that the United States of America believes people are entitled to determine their own future and that the government would not join in any arrangement bent on hindering this process.

In response to McNamara's queries, Air Force Vice Chief of Staff, General Curtis E. LeMay, suggested the use of the 4400th Combat Crew Training Squadron, now operationally ready for service as an Air Force contingent. On October 11, 1961, President Kennedy directed McNamara to deploy the squadron for the purpose of "training" Vietnamese forces.

Reasoning for the questions asked in the base commander's office became obvious.

Would I be willing to fly and fight in support of a friendly foreign nation in situations where I could not wear the US uniform?

Since the mission was to be covert, orders required commandos to maintain a low profile while in Southeast Asia and to avoid the press. All pilots wore plain flight suits void of all insignia and name tags identifying us as Americans. They even configured our planes with South Vietnamese Air Force insignia.

Would I be willing to fly and fight on behalf of the US government and to agree to do so knowing that my government might choose to deny I am a member of the US military, or even

associated with this nation, and thus might not be able to provide me with the protection normally given to a US citizen?

They sanitized our wallets, getting rid of anything suggestive of our nationality. They even destroyed the Geneva cards all military personnel carried. In dispatching the 4400th to South Vietnam, the United States violated the Geneva Accords. By stripping us of our home, the government denied involvement with any military forces operating in the South.

A few of us went to Smitty's, the local beer joint, to celebrate our call to action. We all knew that even though our official command stated our sole job would be to train the South Vietnamese Air Force, our time was about to come. We felt it in the air. The rumors sounded in the media. The whispered truths echoed in the private halls of the base.

Even though I seldom drank alcohol—alcoholism ran too deep down the family line—I celebrated with the same raucous bravado as the rest of my comrades.

“Teddy, ole’ man,” Caleb wrapped his bulky arm around my shoulders as we staggered from the bar to the pool table. He came to call me ole’ man since the first day he met my Abbey. “Lift up that . . . that . . . what the hell you drinking?”

“Coke.”

“What the?” He turned us back around toward the barkeep. “Sir, my man here needs him a real drink!”

I met the barkeep’s stare and declined with a look. “I don’t drink, remember, Caleb?”

“Yea, but tonight we’re celebrating. Finally going to kick some commy Vietcong ass. You gotta celebrate with us, ole’ man. You gotta.”

“I’m having a hellova time. I don’t need to drink to have any more fun. Let’s shoot pool.”

I led my drunk friend back toward the pool table and wracked ‘em up, ready to conquer the unconquerable for the very first time. This was my night.

“Ten buck says I gotcha tonight,” I wagered.

“You’re on. Think you can beat me just because you drink Coke? Think you’re better than me, huh Teddy boy?” Caleb chuckled with good humor. “I’ll break.”

His first shot landed the white ball clear over all the others, landing with a thud on the floor. It rolled into a group of other party revelers.

“Dimmit, Caleb,” Erickson grabbed the ball and aimed it right at Caleb’s head, acting as if he intended to throw it. “Why I oughtta . . .”

Caleb covered his head in mock fear. “Can’t kill me tonight, not before I getta chance to blow at least one of them birds out of the air.”

“Just make sure it’s the enemy you shoot at, not you’re lead man,” Erickson teased as he tossed the ball back onto the table.

Caleb’s and Erickson’s exchange gathered a crowd around us. “Watch out, Teddy,” Henry joked. “Your wingman’s liable to get an itchy trigger finger and blow you outta the damn sky before you ever see any action.”

“I’ll take my chances. If he ain’t killed me yet . . .”

“Yet, being the key word there, Buddy.”

Brandon, our very own comedian, shared his musical rendition of our little exchange:

He’s braving the skies

Looks to the west and to the east

Looking for them damn North Vietnamese

Hoping to spot one
So sure he'll be an ace
But when he looks for his lead man,
He finds he's lost his place.

But what's that up ahead?
He's anxious for a fight.
Instead of radioing his lead man,
He chases that spot in the night.

Oh, no! It's getting bigger. It's getting closer.
Is it a bird? Is it a plane?
With hand on the trigger,
he quickly takes his aim.

Then POW.
The rocket fires and the spot explodes.
He starts cheering for victory, cursing his enemy.

“George,” he calls,
The lead won’t answer, and he don’t know why.
Blew his comrade out of the sky.

Everyone hooted with laughter. Drunken taunting strengthened the courage of youth. As the whooping died down, another rowdy voice began the bridge of the Air Force Song, aptly titled, A Toast to the Host:

Here's a toast to the host
Of those who love the vastness of the sky,
To a friend we send a message of his brother men who fly.
We drink to those who gave their all of old,
Then down they soared to score the rainbow's pot of gold.
A toast to the host of men we boast, the U.S. Air Force!

We ended the evening with a proud salute to ourselves and the colors of our beloved Air Force:

“Air Force Blue”

They took the blue from the skies and a pretty girl's eyes
And a touch of Old Glory too,
And gave it to the men who proudly wear the U.S. Air Force blue.

The U.S. Air Force blue!

Oh, they are men with a dream on America's team,

They're a rugged and brave crew.

And you can bet your boots the world looks up to the U.S. Air Force blue.

To U.S. Air Force blue!

They know where they're goin', they've set their course,

The sky's no limit in the Air Force.

They took the blue from the skies and a pretty girl's eyes

And a touch of Old Glory too,

And gave it to the men who proudly wear the U.S. Air Force blue.

And you can wear it too!

The U.S.

Air Force . . .

Blue!

Officially titled Det. 2A of the 440th CCTS, code named Farm Gate, 155 of us airmen departed Hurlburt Field on November 5, 1961—with eight T-37s and four modified and redesigned SC-47s—for Bien Hoa Air Base twenty miles north of Saigon.

Our new home, built by French forces, was in bad shape. The steel-plank runway required daily maintenance, and the short length made for dangerous takeoffs and even more

dangerous landings. Our sleeping quarters begged to be burned down and put out of its misery. A dilapidated ceiling threatened to cave in with the wind and offered no relief from whatever the dust blew in. Mites and fleas and ticks claimed the beds. The dry, humid air leaked through the porous walls. Torrential rains gathered in puddles on the floor, inviting more vermin to nest. But since our squadron technically did not even exist, we were on our own.

Chapter Twenty-Four
Abigail Louise Bailey
(Abbey)

Five children ranging in ages from three to thirteen stormed past me when I opened the door. “Where’s little Clarence?” the eldest girl asked. I pointed behind me. My happy one-year-old mimicked the sounds of planes and cars as he crashed them into one another in play. The other children gathered around him in the living room, the younger ones eager to enter his imaginary world and the older ones content with cooing the newest recruit.

“Ready to go?” my friend, Marie, asked.

“Oh, wait. Not yet. My friend Nadia hasn’t arrived.” A group of mothers intended to take our children to the beach for the day.

Nadia, Caleb’s wife, joined him in Panama City just before he and Teddy were quietly taken away.

“Baby,” he pleaded with her. “You’ll love Florida. So much sun. Not all that snow in the winter. Things are good here. We’ll be happy. I promise.”

“He said *we’d* be happy here,” Nadia complained. “I thought that meant the two of us, me and him.”

“He had no way of knowing they’d be called to active duty so fast,” I assured her.

“But, he’s technically not even out of training yet. What does the military want with our men? Why not take more veteran flyers?”

“We don’t even know what they’re doing, where they’ve gone.”

“And that’s another thing. I get sporadic letters here and there, but so much is marked out, he might as well not bother. What kind of military takes a man away from his family and

doesn't even let us, their wives, know anything?"

I smirked at her bitterness. Even though I empathized with her grievances, I knew whom I married, and I knew what that meant for me and our family. Besides, not only was Nadia a newlywed, but also she was very pregnant. As a matter of fact, we were both pregnant, although neither of our husbands knew. All these issues caused her emotions to be on edge. For that reason, I tried my best to keep her occupied.

"Who's Nadia?" Frances asked.

"The new woman. You know the one," Claire said these words as if describing a stinking stray dog who had just messed on her perfectly manicured lawn.

"You don't mean?" Frances gasped, shocked at the horror that such a woman as Nadia dared to pollute her neighborhood. Both women glared at me. Their looks betrayed their disbelief.

"Abbey?" Marie asked.

"What?" I admonished, just as surprised by their reaction as they were at my revelation. Marie held my hand in hers and looked at me with watering eyes. Her head tilted ever so slightly to one side as if consoling a dear friend who recently learned she is about to die.

"You are such a good, caring person," Marie said. "But you can't be seen with a woman like her."

"Why? Because she's black?" My tone expressed my anger. The sounds of children at play quieted. Only the shrillest voices echoed in the background. I looked at each woman in turn, challenging them to come out and say what I now knew each woman thought. I let my gaze linger on Marie. "You mean *you* can't be seen with her."

“It’s not that. We’re not the enemy here, Abbey. You have to believe me. It’s the rest of the world. We can’t be seen with her. What would people think about us? How would our behavior reflect on our husbands?”

My chest constricted, and I felt the blood pumping through every inch of my body, pooling in my cheeks and finger tips. “Caleb Jenkins serves his country as a proud member of the United States Air Force. He has worked right along side all your husbands. He and Teddy have been together since the Academy. The Air Force chose Caleb Jenkins, along with Teddy, above any other man here, to serve our country on a special mission. If he is not worthy of your respect and honor, then no one, and I mean no one on this base, including your husbands, deserves your respect and honor. Nadia, as Caleb’s wife—and as a child of God, equal in God’s eyes with you and me—deserves your respect and honor.”

No one looked at me, but I could tell my tirade made no difference to the single-minded bigotry of the three women I once called friends. “You may all leave my home. I now see you for what you are, and none of you are welcome here ever again.”

“But, Abbey,” Marie pleaded. “We’re not the enemy. Yes, Caleb is a great pilot. And I’m sure your friend Nadia is a great woman.” Claire snorted at this remark, cutting Marie’s defense short.

“Your husband’s pal Caleb is only in the Air Force because they had to let them in. He’s a token soldier. Those civil rights activists are breathing down Kennedy’s throat. He made promises he can’t keep, so he’s forced to make concessions. Allowing niggers to attend public schools and join the military is just his way of creating peace so that King’s followers won’t start running around in the streets throwing their dung around like monkeys let loose in the zoo.”

I turned to meet Claire head on, facing her almost nose to nose. “If you intend to address

me again, you better get your facts straight. First of all, Brown versus the Board of Education, which found segregating schools to be unconstitutional, was passed in 1954, almost a decade before Kennedy ever took office.

“There has been no war fought by the United States, either on our land or in foreign countries, where African Americans did not participate in some capacity. In most cases, they fought the enemy—on the front line—to protect your freedoms! In 1948, President Truman—not President Kennedy—integrated the military and mandated equality of treatment and opportunity for all military personnel. *All*, not just your white husbands! His order also made it illegal, per military law, to make a racist remark. Obviously, you know nothing about the history of the country your husband has sworn to protect.

“And one more thing, *Doctor* Martin Luther King, Jr. is a man of peace. He fears the Lord, *his* God, and fights only for what is right in the eyes of his maker. He fights with words, righteous words, not with guns and hate, which is more than I can say about you.”

Claire hissed as she turned on her heel and stormed out my front door. “Come on Elisabeth, grab your brother. We’re leaving.”

“You two should follow.” Frances and Marie stood rooted in place. “Nadia is my friend,” I continued. “I will not leave this house without her. If you believe, as Claire does, then I demand you leave my home. You are not welcomed here. If, however, you see the absurdity of her hate, you are free to join us.”

Frances tilted her head as close to the ground as possible. With her child right beside her, she back tracked out the front door. Marie took my hand once more and tried in vain to plead reason into my mute ears. “You must understand,” she tried.

“No, *you* must understand. You are not welcomed in my home. I must insist you leave.”

With tears brimming her eyes, she picked up her twins from their innocent play and took her leave of me.

“Sorry I’m late,” Nadia apologized. The self-righteous trio crossed the street before encountering a woman whose lone cross to bear was the color of her skin. She had not heard their remarks or seen the malicious looks on their faces, but the fiery red hue of my cheeks told the tale.

Clarence, mourning the loss of his fair-weathered friends, tossed aside his toys and screamed his lack of understanding.

Nadia rushed to his side to console him with a present of a new T-37 toy airplane. “Just like your daddy flies.”

“Just like Daddy flies,” Clarence howled as he grabbed the plane, jumped off Nadia’s lap, and ran in circles, twirling his present in the air. “Vroom! Just like Daddy flies! Vroom! Whoosh! Just like Daddy flies!”

She bowed her head to the ground after looking at me. “I’m sorry,” she whispered as if all too familiar with what took place moments before on the threshold of my door.

Her sorrow added intensity to the heat of my raging emotions. “You have nothing to be sorry for,” I said. “Those . . . little . . . I . . . just . . . what . . . right . . .” I fought to find the words to describe my building resentment and anger, ready to blaspheme their good Christian names and call down hellfire on their haloed heads.

“Let it go,” Nadia sighed. “You will never get through to women like that. There’s no use in trying.”

“But, Marie? Of all people. I never expected . . .”

“She’s not a bad woman. She simply never learned how to stand on her own convictions. She’s never been anything but nice to me.”

“What? She’s just as bad as the rest of them!” How could my friend defend a woman whose heart allowed her to judge another based solely on the color of her skin?”

“She doesn’t believe what the others believe. I can tell that much about her. She’s just scared. She likes her world the way it is. If she stood up against them the way you obviously did, where would that leave her? She’s not strong enough to stand up to them.”

“See! That’s the problem right there!” I said. “If people like her see others in society doing something so blatantly wrong and do nothing about it, they’re no better than the rest of them! How can they be so stupid?”

“That’s just the way it is.” Nadia resigned herself to her fate. I, having never experienced such blind hatred, refused to let the issue drop so easily.

“They call themselves Christians. They think their god is a good white man.”

“Well, my people think he’s black! My mother has a picture of Jesus hanging in the living room. And, don’t you know, he’s as black as tar in that picture!” Nadia laughed, trying without success to soften my rage.

“But he wasn’t white or black. Look at history. Look where he was born. He looked more like a Mexican than one of them. Imagine if they could hear me right now. I’d be run out of town! Claiming Jesus was not white would be a worse fate than defending my friendship with you!

“And what would He say about all this? Do you think He loves you any less because of the color of your skin?” Nadia, assuming I asked a rhetorical question, kept silent. “Well, do you?” I asked again.

“Of course not,” she answered.

“Do you think He would love them more, knowing the hate in their heart, just because they happen to be the ‘right’ color?”

“Of course not,” she answered. “Look, I appreciate your love for me. I appreciate Teddy’s love for Caleb. You both have been wonderful friends. But that’s just not the world we live in. Yes, according to law, we are gaining more freedoms, and I believe, some day, we may be able to eat side by side in a restaurant. Maybe these desegregation efforts will be more than just words written into law. Maybe, just maybe, people will one day judge me for who I am and not what I look like. But today is not that day.

“I may never see the day when women like your three friends don’t hate me for no good reason. But you know what? We have been treated better here on base than we were ever treated back home. At least here, I can shop in the PX and not have to leave base. At least I can live in the same community as you. I can sleep at night and not be so afraid that someone is going to break in and try to hurt or kill me just because I’m black.

“I don’t know why those women are the way they are. Their attitude does not reflect the attitude of their husbands. All the men Caleb works with have been nothing but gentlemen. I truly believe they would defend him if anyone ever tried to hurt him, whether while in uniform or walking down the street in civilian clothes.”

“Not all,” I corrected, remembering stories Teddy told me about Caleb fighting with a racist recruit. “Remember Tracy?”

“Abbey, there will always be Tracys in the world. But, even then, once Tracy got to know Caleb and Caleb got to know him, they set aside their differences. And even if they never became great friends, they respect one another. I believe even Tracy would defend Caleb if

anyone tried to hurt him.

“What’s most important to me is that the men out there with Caleb—wherever they may be—those men love one another. They see Caleb for who he is. They may have only seen the color of his skin when they first met, but now? Now they only see the man. He truly is one of them.”

“Let’s get out of here,” I suggested, eager to change the topic. “I don’t want those women to have the satisfaction of knowing they got the better of me.” I shrugged off my frustration before gathering my son in my arms and accompanying Nadia out into the cruel, godless world.

Although public beaches near the base boasted of civilized fun for all, an invisible line of hatred still separated the salty sea as if sharing the water contaminated pure white skin. Nadia and I spent many hours building a friendship based on common interests and common men. But we spent most of our time together within the borders of our little military community. We spent most of our time confined still further within the walls of her home or mine. Our trek beyond the safety of the gates marked my birth into a world I heard told in stories, but never quite believed.

“We should go,” Nadia warned as we arrived; she painted the only color on an otherwise blue and white canvas.

“Cushhhh...” Clarence drove his new T-37 to the edge of the beach and nose-dived it into the sandy shore.

“Clarence,” I yelled, waddling to meet him and scold him for going too far without his momma. He picked up his plane and ran a few paces back. “We’re just two very fat, very pregnant women with one itty, bitty, little boy,” I told Nadia. “We’ve got nothing to worry about here.”

She shrugged her shoulders in reluctant acceptance, too tired to argue. Setting up her

chair just beyond the edge of the waves, she settled down to read. I plopped my big belly down far enough into the water to cool my legs, allowing Clarence to play where he could not get sucked under by the merciless waves.

“Bucket, Momma. Shells. Look.” I handed him his little bucket and watched as he searched the sand for the perfect shells, his tiny fingers digging them up with delicate precision. The toy T-37 floated back and forth upon the shoreline.

“Look, Nada, see?” Clarence held a piece of a sand dollar for her to inspect.

“Very nice, Clarence! What a beauty!”

A young couple walked hand in hand close enough to hear the exchange between woman and child. The young man snickered, “Nada! What an appropriate name!” The young woman slapped him playfully across the chest. He feigned hurt as they walked on, enjoying their tired joke at the expense of an innocent woman.

I kept my focus straight out to sea, watching as the waves grew, dreaming of running further than my eyes could see. *I wonder if it's like this everywhere*, I thought to myself. *I don't remember anyone being so rude back home. I certainly don't remember anyone in Texas acting like such ignorant imbeciles.*

I snuck a peek behind my shoulder. Nadia's eyes remained glued to the pages of her book. Her face looked calm and serene, as if deaf to the dark words taking aim around her. Clarence played at her feet.

“You better watch your child,” a woman addressed me. “There's a nigger sitting right behind you.”

“I know,” I snapped. “She's with me!”

“Oh, pardon me,” she said. “I didn't realize she was the boy's nanny.”

“She’s not!” I shot back.

Nadia looked over the edge of the book, mouthing the words “calm down” to me.

“Clarence? Ready to go?” I wanted the world to accept my friend, but this day showed me the reality of her warning back at the house. I wanted her to enjoy the same pleasures I enjoyed, but not at the expense of her good name.

“No. No. No.” He threw down his bucket and stamped his protest up and down and up and down.

Nadia scolded me with her eyes. “Don’t take it out on the boy. I can handle them,” She told me without saying a word. “Clarence, Honey, Momma didn’t mean go home. She meant, do you want to go for a walk? Find some more pretty shells?” He bent down and collected the fallen treasures into his bucket and trotted on ahead of us.

The walk proved too treacherous for us pregnant women. We could not match the stamina of a toddler. Even though we enjoyed a time without verbal interruption from curious onlookers, we soon needed relief from the heat and expedition.

“You’ve got a full bucket, Clarence,” I congratulated my son, planning our exit strategy.

“Mommy, I wanna send one to Daddy.” He looked at my hands and then at Nadia’s hands. He soon realized we forgot his airplane. His eyes grew wide with fear. “My plane, Mommy? Daddy’s plane? Daddy’s plane?”

Nadia and I looked at each other and realized the last time we saw it, the toy came to rest on the wet compacted sand. “It’s either washed out to sea or some other kid has picked it up by now!”

“We have to go back that way anyway. Might as well look for it. See if anyone’s seen it?” Nadia could never disappoint my son. She loved him as if he was her own. I knew, by the

way she treated her godson, she would make an outstanding mother.

We returned to her chair, still in the same spot she left it. Her book still open to the last page she read. The toy was nowhere in sight. "Mommy, my plane. My plane?" Clarence begged. "It's not here, Honey." I picked him up to console him. "We'll get you a new one, I promise."

"No! I want Daddy's plane. Daddy's plane!"

"We'll go to the store right now and get you another plane just like Daddy's. I promise."

"I want Daddy's plane!"

Clarence could not be consoled. His outburst caused other conversations to pause. Nadia met the eyes of everyone around. "Anyone seen a toy airplane? It was a model of a T-37. We live at Tyndall Air Force Base. His daddy flies a T-37, and it was right here. The toy, I mean. Please, if anyone has seen it, please give it back. His daddy's been stationed in . . . in . . . another country. The plane reminds him of his daddy. It means so much. Please."

The story of the importance of a child's toy softened the hearts of many fellow beach goers.

"Sorry, I haven't seen it."

"So sorry. I hope you find it."

"What a precious child. Poor thing. The waves probably took it."

"I wish I had it to give to you."

"Can we help you look for it?"

With the help of a few good Samaritans, we combed the beach for over thirty minutes, looking for a toy everyone except Clarence knew was lost. As soon as his sobs slowed and his eyes grew heavy, we ended our search. I hoped to make it back to base and buy a replacement

before he awoke from his fitful nap. “We found it, Clarence!” I would fib as I handed his beloved toy back to him.

I cradled Clarence on my hip, careful to keep his knee clear of my stomach. Nadia carried her book and chair along with our bags. We scuttled back up the beach to our car, bragging to one another about the kindhearted charity shown to my sleeping son.

A drunk man stood between us and the walkway built over the sand dunes. The sun baked his shoulders, but the liquor in his system numbed the pain. His breath told the tale of where the contents of his bottle lingered.

“Excuse me, Sir,” I said without looking him in the eye.

“Tyndall, huh?” He stammered.

“Yes, Sir. As you can see, my boy is sleeping, and we are very tired. Please let us pass.”

He stood as erect as he could make himself without tumbling head first into us. “Make me.”

“Make you what, Sir? It’s been a long day. We are both very pregnant. And we just want to go home.”

“Make me move.”

“Sir, please,” I sighed, growing impatient with him, but knowing my physical limitations. “I’m tired, too, you see. I used to work over at that Tyndall, you see? Mechanic. Lost my job to one of yours,” He sneered as he pointed to Nadia. “Walk around me.”

“Sir, I’m sorry you lost your job, but that’s no business of ours. And, as you can see, we’re in no position to walk through those sand dunes. Be a gentleman now and . . .”

“What’s your man do, Nigger? I assume you got yourself a man who knocked you up?

He at Tyndall, too, or did her man knock you up, too?"

"Now that's enough," I demanded. He ignored me and waited for Nadia to answer.

"My husband is a pilot. Yes, we're at Tyndall as well. Now, please, Sir. I do apologize to you, but I swear, I don't know who took your job or why. I'm sure you were great at what you did and . . ."

"Don't patronize me, Nigger!" He slapped her across the face. Just then, others made their way down the boardwalk toward the beach. The drunkard moved just enough for the newcomers to pass. He nodded his head in greeting and smiled a toothy smile. "Ma'am."

We took that opportunity to sidestep our assailant and make our way onto the boardwalk. Before Nadia reached the second step, he stuck his foot out and tripped her. She landed stomach first onto the ascending steps.

"Nadia," I screamed, waking Clarence. He looked around unsure of his surroundings.

"Momma?" He asked. "Plane?" He had not forgotten.

The drunk man pulled the toy out of his back pocket. "Looking for this?"

"Plane!" Clarence called out and reached for his precious toy lingering in the stranger's hands, oblivious to the danger.

"You like airplanes?" He asked as he took a step closer to my son and pretended to fly it in circles.

"Daddy's plane! Daddy's plane! Daddy's plane!" he exclaimed. Clarence reached both hands for the toy as he tried to wriggle from my clutch.

He handed my son his toy and mussed his hair. "Step away from my child and my friend this instant or I'll . . . I'll . . ."

"Or you'll what?" he sneered, stepping into me, touching his nose to mine. "You nigger

lover. What're you gonna do?" His breath made me gag.

Nadia stood up. She took our handbag and slapped him across the back of the head with it. He stumbled back down the few steps and landed on his behind in the soft sand.

By this point, others who had helped us search for Clarence's toy heard the commotion and came to our rescue. "Did you see what that nigger did to me?" he screamed. "You're going to get it now, you bitch!" He tried to stand, but stumbled and fell back down.

One of our rescuers placed his hand on the drunkard's shoulder. "You better stay right there for just a minute." Others helped us gather our belongings.

"You okay?" they asked Nadia.

"Yea. Yea. I'm fine," she lied.

"You best get out of here," the man with his hand on the drunkard's shoulder advised. I can't hold him for long, and he's stupid enough to come after you again. This time, I think he'll really try to hurt you."

We needed no convincing. We walked the rest of the way down the walkway and never looked back. Clarence tucked his toy airplane into his arms and rested his head back on my shoulder, ignorant of the danger we faced. I patted his head, smoothing down the strands of hair our attacker messed up. "To be as innocent as a child," I laughed. "I was that innocent just this morning."

Nadia looked at me with a new kind of pain in her eyes. I dropped Clarence off with a sitter and took her to the base hospital. Because of ignorance, she and Caleb lost their only chance at building a family together.

Chapter Twenty-Five
Theodore Francis Bailey
(Teddy)

In 1962, when all Air Force units in Vietnam were reorganized under the 2nd Advanced Echelon (2nd ADVON) or the 13th Air Force, night air strikes became more commonplace with the aid of flares dropped from Special Ops C-47s. Our new secret mission to conduct sustained air operations aimed at destroying Vietcong forces and resources within the borders of South Vietnam prepared us for later counter attacks.

The sound of enemy forces awakened the black night of Bien Hoa. We spent the day flying a leaflet drop mission in the highlands near Bao Loc, and most of our pilots spent the night in drunken slumber. Those of us still awake and sober enough to react on cue raced to our planes and took off to combat incoming Mig-17s. Security troops fired flares from the ground to illuminate air activity as well as fire up their Triple A. North Vietnamese fighters dodged away from the tracers and glare, mistaking the rupture of light for ground attack and giving our flyers the opportunity they needed to counterattack.

Although not designed for close in combat dog fighting, we knew what the hard wing F-4D could do in the sky. Our hulky beasts held their own in a straight up, nose-to-nose fight. Its higher power-to-weight ratio offered an advantage to birds with more bulk such as machine guns and armor plating. For a plane with such a bad reputation, its light, responsive, balanced controls made it predictable. In a hassle, the F-4D offered all we needed to combat the North Vietnam MIGs, especially the MIG 17 used early in the conflict. The slow 17s were designed to shoot down US bombers, not to engage actively in dogfights. With both sides flying similar fighters, success rested more in the hands of the man than in the machine.

None of us saw any real action before this night. Some fighters provided air support on

bomb runs. A few fighters dropped their own bombs. However, hitting an immobile building or bridge offers as little excitement as firing a gun at a paper target. We became fighters to fight and now the North Vietnamese gave us our chance.

I ran to the runway, anxious for my dogfight. Others pilots beat me to the show and began engaging enemy aircraft. I ran with a purpose, but kept visuals on the dark action above. Flares burst, guns popped, and the sky lit up like the last 4th of July Abbey and I spent together before we married. This time, I felt another sort of anticipation and excitement.

I took off with Caleb, my wingman. “Looks like we’re too late Bailey. Looks like them Gooks are buggin’ out.”

The guys took to calling me Bailey after the James Stewart character, George Bailey from *It’s a Wonderful Life*. Not only did our last names match, but “ya’ll look alike when you walk and you have the same ‘awe shucks’ attitude about you.” Although not as cool as some of the others who earned nicknames based on anecdotes related to their missions or some quirky attribute, I never minded the name. After all, Jimmy Stewart played the part of a real life war hero. First used as a publicity pilot, he paid the expense to learn to fly and quickly rose from commissioned pilot to operations officer, flying over twenty missions and eventually rising to the rank of brigadier general. If this unassuming good ole’ boy could pull the wool over the eyes of a nation and be more than a Hollywood pretender, then I could be more than the small town farm boy from Illinois.

“All smoke and mirrors, my friend. Light up the sky and pop off a few teasers and they run away. This thing will be over long before we’re allowed to admit we’re already here,” Caleb predicted.

“Damn luck,” I cursed. “I ain’t ever gonna see any action.”

“A virgin in war. Boring, but at least your ass won’t be shipped home in a body bag.”

“This crap’s bull shit.” I felt like a little boy chasing after the older kids with my bat and glove in hand only to be told to go home.

“Well, Bailey, let’s not waste the fuel. How about a fly over the supply route back in Bao Loc, drop a little more than leaflets, give ‘em more than paper to clean up, eh?”

“Orders’re not to fire unless fired upon. Besides, our quiet little decoys aren’t sleepin’ in the back. We’re alone out here, buddy.”

“Orders? ‘Sustained offensive, defensive, and reconnaissance air operations aimed at the destruction or neutralization of Vietcong forces, resources, and communications.’ That’s exactly what we’re doing here, brother. Besides, we were fired upon, at least all that raucous and light coming from those MIGs sure made me a believer.”

“Like a hand shake at the end of the night when you could’ve kissed the girl. Better than nothing, I guess.”

After dropping a few well-placed white phosphorous rockets and firing at least one hundred rounds along a supply route of the Bao Loc plateau, leaving a pockmark trail of dirt and debris to obstruct the flow of food and weapons, I pulled off target and reversed to the right.

“Moose, look at that target we just bombed,” my misplaced comment pulled our attention away from all else. “Looks like we got us some casualties down there.”

“Snipers all over the damn place! Look at ‘em run!”

“They’re shooting at us! What the . . .” I swiveled my head in panicked frustration, dodging ground fire while looking for the direction of roaring thunder closing in around us.

Caleb trailed behind me as four MIG-17s flew between us, one swooping down into position.

“Check your seven o’clock. He’s comin’ fast!” Caleb warned.

I had been looking in the opposite direction. Just as I turned my head, MIG-17 tracers flew right outside my cockpit window. The first MIG overshot and his wingman went straight up vertical. With his nose high, I knew he could not get to me before I got to him.

“You wanted some lovin’, Bailey? Go get her!”

I rolled underneath as he kept shooting, reversed and aligned myself right behind him. In position and without a thought, I pulled the trigger. The MIG blew up, and pieces of fiery debris rained from the sky.

I reversed back and the first MIG’s nose came down straight for me. I unloaded to get away from him. “Get him, Moose. I’ll drag ‘m for you!”

“I can’t, buddy. I’ve got two MIGs bearing down on me.”

With no help from Caleb and my plane locked in the gook’s sight, I broke left and fired, breaking away from my pursuer. Making a hard one hundred and eighty degree head reversal and aiming my nose vertical, I intended for him to fly right by. Instead, he met me move for move. Neither of us managed to gain the advantage.

In the midst of my battle, Caleb broke away from his chasers. “Fuel’s running low, man. Maybe you oughta let this guy go.”

I grit my teeth and pulled on the control stick. “Caleb, no.”

“Well then get the damn MIG already and let’s get home!”

We came around again on a head-on maneuver. Only this time, he pulled his nose up first, hoping to gain the advantage. I out-zoomed him on the other rounds. As he pulled up his nose, I came back to idle, put on the speed brake, and dropped my flaps. I pulled some lateral *gs* as hard as I could and slid in behind him.

Even though I now had him in front of me; less than six hundred feet separated us, giving him the advantage once again. If I fired within that range, I would have blown up with him.

To correct my error, I stood on the rudder and disengaged. As I rolled left, his plane banked and unloaded. I expected him to pull back in and shoot me, but, instead, he started running. I wanted to follow him and regain my advantage, making my second kill in less than ten minutes, but two MIGs still engaged Caleb, exhausting his fuel and weapons' supply.

I came behind the MIG's "3-9 line," trying to knock them off Caleb's tail. Just as I broke up their formation, others came around behind me.

"Look up. Two MIGs at your ten o'clock high," Caleb warned.
They strafed our aircraft with heavy fire before climbing out of sight.

"Watch'm, Moose."

"Bailey, they're comin' in again on your belly side."

I reversed and broke up into them. They fired going by. I stayed away from them and reversed again. They kept on running.

Caleb engaged his MIGs clear across the circle from my position. I screamed down toward his location, and, as I did so, he banked right, leading one MIG into position behind him. I followed the rear and blew that gomer right out of the air. The last MIG saw his buddy blown up and wanted no part in it. He disengaged from combat and took off in the opposite direction from our position.

"Damn it! He's buggin' out. I gotta go after him. You've got three, and I haven't got a damn one!"

"Actually, I only have two. Could've had three, but I let one go," I laughed. "Let it go," my tone grew more urgent. "I'm Bingo."

“Just two seconds. I can get him. Come on, Teddy. You’re not the only one hungry for a little action.”

I sighed, knowing I could not leave him nor deny him his kill. “One minute. Take the lead.”

We followed his descent, and he never saw us coming, never expected us to keep up the chase. Caleb lined up behind him and locked his sights. He pulled the trigger, and another MIG bought the farm.

“Bailey, do me a favor. When we get back to base, let everyone think this guy actually put up a fight, okay? Don’t let them know it was such an easy kill.”

“You got it, buddy. Let’s go home.”

On the way back to base at Bien Hoa, a single MIG came at us. Machine gun tracers from his aircraft started flying by, surprising us. I rolled out and Caleb went vertical.

“He’s gotta be headin’ home. Hanoi’s back that way.”

“Unless he’s got some kind of advantage. Keep watching, Moose.”

“I see ‘im. I see his gomer goggles and gomer scarf.”

I looked behind my ejection seat and saw Caleb and the MIG flying canopy to canopy. Caleb came over the top of the MIG and the MIG shot ahead of him. Caleb broke right to get out of his tracers.

“I lost him, Bailey. I lost him! Do you see him? Do you see him?”

I craned my neck from side to side looking for the MIG. “Can’t see a damned thing. Must’ve gone home.”

Confident in our victories, Caleb and I returned to formation and resumed our course

back to base. Then, from the corner of my eye, I saw the explosion before I heard the MIG return or felt jet wash from the actual blast. I let down my guard, and, because of that, I lost my best friend.

The enemy MIG, whom I suspected also lacked adequate fuel levels, turned for home without taking a single shot at me. If he tried, he would have won an easy victory. My mind reeled like a plane spinning out of control after a stall. My eyes burned as if flames from a fire licked my face. I turned to the spot where Caleb flew just moments before. There was no trace in the sky that he or his aircraft ever existed. Less than twenty minutes before, we both stood on solid ground. Now, nothing remained to fill his coffin.

God Himself must have flown and landed my plane after that fight, the fight we got into because of my pride, the action my friend so desperately wanted to give me. I made it back with two victories and without a scratch on me or my plane. I came back to congratulations and pats of condolences. I returned to base alone—without Caleb—without me.

Drinking after a run became commonplace in Bien Hoa. Tonight, we celebrated both victory and defeat. The men straddled an awkward line between wanting to raise their voices to toast the host and remaining silent to honor those who never made it back. Men chased away escaping laughter as if glorifying success took away respect for the lost. Not all, though, lost a friend. Not all respected our right to grieve.

A kid by the name of Montgomery slapped me on the back and handed me a beer before inviting himself to join me.

“Why you sitting all alone? Two kills on your first run. Man, what I wouldn’t give to be up there with you guys instead of being a grease jockey.”

“It wasn’t our first run,” I said flatly.

“You know what I mean. Your first fight!”

I looked at the boy, giving him the coldest, meanest stare I could muster. Either my namesake proved quite appropriate or he was just too stupid to take a hint.

“If I were you, I’d be partying, livin’ it up. Not sitting by myself in a corner.”

“Hmph . . .”

“I guess we all celebrate in our own ways. So, what’s it like to kill a man?”

My heart stopped, and it hit me for the first time. During my years of training, all the time I spent dreaming about the dogfight, even while in the midst of an air battle, I never once thought of killing a man. I fought a machine. It was my bird, my ability against his. Caleb’s face flashed across my memory. I saw the men I shot down sitting in the cockpit. They both wore Caleb’s face. I felt sweat bead along my hairline. I grew faint and needed to run away.

“Excuse me,” I said to Montgomery. “I need some air.”

“So?” he continued with boyish anticipation, ignoring my cues once again. “Tell me about it. What’s it like up there? What’s it like killing someone?”

“You do realize, don’t you?” my tone accusatory but flat, “We lost two guys today.”

“Did you know them? I saw that nigger around some. Not much of a loss there if you ask me.”

I charged at the boy, grabbing him by the neck, lifting him off his seat and slamming him against the wall. “You son of a bitch. You wanna know what it’s like up there? Do ya? You white trash piece of shit. You wanna know what it’s like to kill a man?”

I pressed my thumbs deep into the tender part of his throat until his eyes bugged out like a frightened child and his face turned a deeper shade of red than my own. I had every intention of

killing him. It took several men to pull me off him.

“Men,” Colonel King entered the mess tent, “we lost . . .” His words stopped cold as he evaluated the scene in front of him. “Is everything alright in here?”

“Yes, Sir,” several men echoed.

“Bailey, everything okay here?”

The men pinned me on the floor in a corner. I gained a little more control with each breath I took. The blood drained from my face, returning my cheeks to a healthier tone. “Fine, Sir.”

“Montgomery?”

Without looking any of us in the eye, he replied, “Sir, everything’s just fine, Sir. Just a little misunderstanding, Sir.”

“Bailey, be in my office in fifteen.”

Colonel King walked out. The men helped me to my feet. The kid hurried out the door to his own quarters.

“Teddy, have a seat,” King relaxed protocol. “Look, I know you and Caleb were like brothers. I know this can’t be easy on you, but you’ve got to know what’s coming.”

“Yes, Sir.”

“I can’t protect you from any review board.”

“I understand, Sir,” Caleb and I should have never been in that fight. I knew that. King knew that. Once the boys back home reviewed the incident, all those involved and still alive would be sent home, maybe with a dishonorable discharge.

“That’s why we’ve got to get our story straight. As you probably know, we’re not playing by the same rules here. Hell, them dope smokin’, peace lovin’ long hairs back home would shit right there on the White House lawn if they knew what we were doing over here.”

The image of this new breed of youngsters pulling down their pants and crapping like dogs, wearing worn military jackets and smelling of their own refuse while holding protest posters made me laugh out loud despite myself.

“They’re too high to be able to understand what we’re up against. We cannot let the Communists win. We can’t.” King’s words cracked like a gavel on a judge’s stand. “And, unfortunately, I don’t think Kennedy or Johnson are strong enough to stand up against public sentiment, even if they know the public is ill informed and, well, wrong. That’s why we can’t screw up now. Understand?”

“Yes, Sir.”

“Okay, so, why did you continue to fight when the MIGs turned tail to run?”

“We had no intention of engaging those MIGs. Caleb and I just wanted some kind of action, so we headed back to Bao Loc. The MIGs found us.”

“That’s right. You had no intention of engaging in any action. You were simply reacting to an air attack on our base.”

“Originally, that’s correct. But when I got up there . . .”

King cut me off. “When you got up there, you tried to find your bearing. They attacked our base with no warning. You weren’t looking for action. The action came to you. You were protecting your turf and the other men down here.”

I shook my head in understanding. I now realized the direction he wanted me to follow. Our cover story was for both my own skin as well as a fledgling US military campaign whose

mission still lacked proper direction.

“You followed the MIGs toward Bao Loc, sending a clear message to them to stay away from us. That’s all. Once you got closer to Bao Loc, ground forces opened fire. You had no choice but to fight back. Then you realized they set you up. Once the ground troops started firing, the MIGs turned back to fight. All well within protocol. Isn’t this correct?”

“Yes, Sir.”

“That’s why the other fighters followed suit. Once they realized you, Caleb, Mike, and Rich were in trouble, they joined to aid in defense.”

The others—the truth of the situation hit me as soon as he said the words “followed suit.” Because of me and my need for action, two innocent men died. If we failed to convince the powers that be of our version of events, I could also be solely responsible for the failure of our mission.

King must have read my thoughts because he added, “They were just as hungry as you were. No one wants to be a paper pusher. Those leaflet drops are a big waste of time, and we all know it. We train for war, not to drop little notes of warning. It’s too late for that. What does the government think is going to happen? They’ll read our flyers and think, ‘oh no! We better cut it out or those big, bad Americans are going to come clobber us!’ They’ve got nothing to lose. These guys know how to fight. We’re the underdog here, and they know it. They’re not afraid of us.

“We’re all just biding our time. If the damned government would just let us do our job, we could beat those Communist bastards and be home by Christmas. If we fight like this much longer, we’ll be here forever!

“I’m speaking to you right now as a friend, okay? Trust me. All you guys have the same

fighter instinct in you. You're all cut from the same cloth. That's why you were chosen for this mission. That's what makes you such a damn good fighter.

"Those boys would have done what they did without you and Caleb taking the lead. And Caleb would've done the exact same thing whether you were up there with him or not. He wanted it just as much as you did."

"I should have at least made him come home. We were already low on fuel and . . ."

"And you could've denied him his chance after you had two kills? Come on, Teddy. You and I both know better than that. All the other MIGs had bugged out and gone home. You had no way of knowing what was coming. Besides, he would have gone after his kill without you, and you know it."

"I could've made him. He'd be mad as hell, but he'd still be alive."

"Not necessarily. That MIG may have come out of the blue, or he may have been gunning for you. You have no way of knowing. Look, we may have a lax mission right now. It may never get any better than this. But, chances are, we'll see more action before this thing is through. And, unfortunately, that means more good men will die. You or I may be the next one to go. It's the price we pay for the job we do. It's real now. The question is, do you believe in what you are doing, and are you going to be able to put Caleb behind you and go up there and do it all over again tomorrow?"

"Yes, Sir," I knew if I wanted to continue in Bien Hoa, I needed to let go of Caleb, at least in the eyes of the rest of the world. I could not confide in King or in any other of my comrades. I did not want to get sent home, not now that I had a vendetta. Instead of fighting America's secret war, I fought my own secret war—revenge for Caleb, salvation for my guilty conscience.

“Let’s finish debriefing. Then I want you to go talk to the Chaplain. From now on, we must have a South Vietnamese Air Force pilot with you at all times. Did you have one last night?”

“No, Sir. Everything happened so fast. There was no time.”

“Wrong. Tran flew with you. Ly flew with Caleb.”

“But, if Caleb went down, then this Ly fellow . . .”

“Don’t worry about the details. Tran flew with you. Ly flew with Caleb.”

“Yes, Sir.”

“Your action was strictly defensive, and no one went in the air without his Vietnamese counterparts. Is all understood?”

“Understood, Sir.”

“If you are depositioned, you will tell the truth as you remember it?”

“Exactly, Sir.”

“Good. Now the Chaplain is expecting you. Lieutenant Mitchell is waiting outside. Tell him to come in, will you?”

“Yes, Sir,” I saluted and turned on my heel, resuming our formal relations.

Chapter Twenty-Six
Abigail Louise Bailey
(Abbey)

We celebrated Clarence's first birthday the day before the United States stripped Teddy of his military identity and shipped him to an unknown land. The Air Force forbade Teddy from telling his family his final destination. To ensure the secrecy of the mission, the men chosen to carry it out speculated until the moment they touched down amidst a foreign war.

After enmeshing himself in duty, some unknown hand scrutinized and polished every letter he sent home. By the time they made their way into my hands, black marker deleted sensitive material. I sometimes received typed letters instead of Teddy's shorthand. The postmark offered no clue as to his whereabouts. They sent each letter from a different location within the United States border.

At least with each handwritten letter I received, I knew he was still alive. The formal typed greetings lacked his emotional and personal touch. My mind reeled about the meaning of such communications. I imagined him stranded across enemy lines, hands tied behind his back with a blindfold covering his eyes. His captors beat him to the brink of death, demanding details about his orders.

I imagined his plane sinking out of the sky, no one to help him or claim his body once it hit the ground. My Teddy no longer alive. The government sending letters as a ruse, creating a fictitious life to protect their secret actions.

After he finally came home, I asked what these communiqés meant. He shrugged and said, "Some days, I wanted nothing more than to tell you I'm fine and I love you." I wondered what he meant by that. Did he type those letters? Or did the government type these simple notes after destroying his original thoughts?

On one or two occasions, letters passed under the scrutiny of the editors, which divulged the pain locked inside of him. They even left his tormented revisions untouched.

Abbey,

This letter is difficult for me to write. ~~This isn't what I thought we would be, well, I know we're not technically at~~

First of all, I want to tell you how happy I am to hear that you are pregnant again. Our little family keeps growing. I'd give anything to be there with you right now. To hold you hand and watch our child grow inside of you. Calculating the time since I left, you should be about due. That means, our son or daughter may be born by the time you get this letter ~~if you ever get this letter~~

The baby is mine, isn't it? I mean, Charlie isn't back in the picture, is he? I'm sorry. Bad joke. Besides, I don't think I ever wrote to you about that dream. Anyway, I had a dream that you were with him instead of me. I can't wait to meet my new son or daughter. I miss you and Clarence so much.

Well, the real reason I'm writing is to tell you that ~~I killed Caleb. It was all my fault. Because of me, my best friend is dead and for what~~ (He tried his best to scratch out these words completely, but I managed to interpret enough to understand.) Caleb passed away. By the time you get this letter, Nadia should already know. I'm not

~~sure what they told her, but I promise it's not the truth. Then again, who knows if they'll say anything at all. If this letter comes as a surprise to you, go to her. She's going to need you more than ever.~~ (Again, he attempted to delete his own words.)

I have so much to tell you, but the words just won't come. I'm sorry, sorry for everything. Tell Nadia I'm sorry, more than words can say.

Your ever loving husband,

Teddy

PS. Give Clarence a great big hug for me and tell him Daddy says to be a good boy and to be a good big brother to his baby brother or sister. I love all three of you with all my heart. What do you think of Christopher if it's a boy and Francis if it's a girl? Just a thought.

The paper fell through my fingertips and rested on the floor in front of me. When I looked down with tear blurred vision, my eyes locked onto the words "my fault." His handwriting illustrated the confusion and urgency he felt, as if his hand tried to race his thoughts and lost. He labored to voice the upbeat attitude of an expectant father and failed to suppress the guilt ravishing his spirit. I pulled Clarence to my breast and held him close to me, longing to hold Teddy as close to my heart as I held his son.

"Mommy?" Clarence asked as he squirmed from my embrace. He looked at my face and

saw my tears. "Mommy?" he asked again, deep concern in my little boy's expression.

"I'm okay, Baby. I just miss Daddy."

He rested his tiny head against my chest and wrapped his tiny arms around my neck. He patted the top of my head with one little hand, mimicking what his mommy does for him when he cries. "It's okay, Mommy. It's okay."

His sweet embrace made me want to weep that much more, but I fought the urge for his sake. Taking in a few deep breaths, I dried my eyes and forced a smile. "Daddy wrote you a letter!" I said, thankful that he could not read.

He bounced off my lap, eager to see the precious piece of paper and hold it in his own hands. "Read, Mommy, read!" I read him the postscript.

Clarence held out his arms so Mommy could give him a hug just as Daddy told her to. "Tell Daddy I been a very good boy. I be a very good big brother." He pondered some secret thought before asking, "Am I going to have a Christopher or a Francis?"

I laughed at his seriousness. "I don't know, Baby. We'll have to wait until the doctor takes him or her out of my tummy!" I thought to myself, *Either way, we are not having a Francis. The name left a bitter taste in my mouth. I would never plague a daughter with a name that reminded me of one woman so filled with misguided hate.*

Still looking at me with that unsmiling face, Clarence admonished me. "Mommy. I am not a baby anymore. I'm a big boy!"

My son brightened the darkest mood. "Well, you are absolutely right. You're going to be a big brother soon. You won't be Mommy's baby anymore."

No matter how hard I tried, my mind refused to dismiss the notion of hidden agendas

behind Teddy's letter. All other mail I received, whether handwritten or typed, spoke in lackluster language. Even if Teddy intended to send me this particular letter as written, why had they—whatever they were—allowed it to pass through their hands without one bit of censor?

I checked the postmark. None. Tyndall Air Force Base official envelope. Did they intend for me to be the bearer of bad news to Nadia? If so, what could I tell her? I knew nothing myself. Where was Caleb? How did he die? Why does Teddy blame himself for Caleb's death?

I knew I needed to be with Nadia whenever news of her husband's fate reached her. She consoled herself with the loss of her daughter by clinging to hope for the day when she could once again find comfort in his embrace. He never knew about his little girl, never had the chance to miss what he would never hold:

“Are you going to tell Caleb?” I asked Nadia after the death of her daughter. “I told Teddy about your pregnancy. If he received my letter, surely Caleb knew you were pregnant.”

“He never mentioned it. I know him. He wouldn’t wait for me to say something if he even suspected. Besides, we may not know exactly where he is, but if it’s so important that it has to be kept a secret, they have to be fighting someone somewhere. He needs to stay focused. The last thing he needs to hear is that I carried his baby and then lost her.”

She needed to cry on his shoulder, to mourn their baby’s loss. She needed someone who felt the same agonizing pain she felt to comfort her in her hour of need. But she chose to battle her emotions alone, toughening her exterior for the sake of her husband’s sanity and safety.

Teddy,

I know you may never read this letter. I may never send it. You

have enough on your mind without worrying about me. But, Teddy, I don't know what to do. How do I console a friend who has lost everything? This world is a cruel place. I never realized that before. So much has happened here in the past few months. The world is changing. Some things are getting better. Dr. King is really making a name for himself, and for the civil rights movement. But the more popular he becomes, the more good he does, the more evil I see all around me.

Maybe the evil was there all along, and I never realized it until I spent time with Nadia. I don't know how she, and others like her, survives at all. The weight of what she bears on a daily basis would crush me.

She lost the baby. Because of pure meanness, she lost her child. She had a name all picked out. Caleb Jr. for a boy and Norma Jean after Caleb's mother for a girl. They let me stay with her in the hospital. Things didn't look good. They had to perform an emergency caesarian section. The baby was blue. Norma Jean wasn't breathing. They took her away. Nadia got to hold her only after they pronounced her dead. The fall on the stairs was too much for that precious child to endure.

I stay with her as much as possible. No one should be alone at a time like this. I try to keep her busy, but it seems every time I try to do something nice for her, Satan has other plans. I took her to a movie. Everywhere we went, people called her names. Some tried to do more than that. What do you do when staying at home is too painful, but going out is too dangerous?

I wonder what she thinks when she sees my big stomach. I am due any day now. How does it make her feel knowing that no one hates me simply because I am white? That I have a better chance of having a healthy child for no other reason than the color of my skin?

Now this. How can I bring her more bad news?

Of course I can't send this to you. If you truly blame yourself for Caleb's death, what will this letter do to you after you read it? I love you so much. I don't know what happened out there, but one thing I know for sure: You would never kill Caleb. I know you are not responsible. I wish I could hold you and tell you as much. But what I know and what you think are two very different things. I can't add this burden to you.

I crumpled up the letter and tossed it into the trash can. I needed someone to counsel me. If I intended to be the kind of friend Nadia needed, I needed someone to guide me and strengthen me. One name popped into my head. One face shined like a beacon before me—my son's namesake.

Time fought against me. By the time Father Clarence responded to a letter, the truth, at least the truth as told us about Caleb's fate, would be public knowledge. I needed him now.

“Is Father Clarence in?” I asked the woman on the other line.

“Just a moment.” I waited for what seemed like an eternity. *What am I going to do if he's not available?* I thought to myself.

“Father Clarence speaking.”

“Oh, thank God,” I exhaled. “Father Clarence. This is Abbey. Abigail Bailey. We met . . .”

“Abbey! Abigail Bailey, formally Abigail Sullivan! How are you, my Dear? How's Teddy? And Clarence? How's that adorable little boy?”

“Clarence and Teddy are fine. Sort of. Father Clarence . . .”

“Now, Abbey, I know we haven't seen each other in quite some time, but we are still friends. Call me Clarence.”

“I'm sorry. Clarence, I need your help.” I told him all I knew. “So what do I tell someone who's lost everything? What do I do for someone who has nothing?”

“My Dear, it sounds to me like you've forgotten the most important person in all of this.”

“I have? Who? Caleb?”

“Your Heavenly Father. Have you asked Him for help?”

I admitted I had not. In all the suffering surrounding those I loved most, I forgot about

Him.

“Abbey, does your friend Nadia know Jesus Christ?”

“Yes.”

“I thought so. The Negro populace tends to have deep rooted faith. Search the course of history. Those who have suffered as they have suffered tend to be more intimately in tune with the Lord than those of us who have never struggled. It’s been rather educational for you, hasn’t it? Being her friend?”

“You have no idea. I thought I lived through hard times.”

“From what you have told me, she is a strong woman. Some of that may come from life experiences, but I’m willing to bet most of it comes from her faith. However, even strong women hurt. Even strong women need someone to be there. It is good that you want to help her.”

“But how? How do I help her?”

“Abbey, you are a strong-willed woman, too. You want to be in control. You like to have a plan, a goal, and you stick to it.”

“Yea? Is that a bad thing?” He made my God-given attributes sound wicked.

“In this case, yes.”

“Thank you for being so honest!”

“You can still do practical things to help her. Offer to clean her house, cook her supper, take her to a movie.”

“Tried that. The movie, I mean. Didn’t work out too well.”

“Well, yes. But you’re missing the point. You can do practical things to make her life a little easier, but what she really needs right now is a friend.”

“And that’s what I’m trying to be!” I could tell he was growing frustrated with my

incessant interruptions, but I felt hurried. I needed answers now.

“Sometimes, the best friend you can be is a quiet one.”

Now I grew impatient with his roundabout counsel. “What is that supposed to mean?”

“It means there is nothing you can say or do to make this situation any better for her. Put yourself in her place. You lost your only child, and then you lose your husband. Could anyone, even me, your old pal, say anything to make it better?”

“No. I suppose not.”

“Sometimes, there is no greater way to show your love for someone than by merely being there. Sit with her. Hold her hand. Pray for her. You may even pray with her.”

“That’s it? Just be there? Shouldn’t I show her Teddy’s letter? Whenever she finds out, shouldn’t I tell her they are lying about how he died?”

“Are they? I thought you didn’t know how he died.”

“Teddy hinted that they may lie.”

“Will knowing the truth ease the pain of his passing any?”

“Probably not. It may even make things worse. But what if they don’t tell her anything? What if his letters simply stop coming? How long should I wait? I can’t hold this secret!”

“Give them time.”

“How much more time do they need? Surely I didn’t receive the letter before someone else here at Tyndall found out.”

“Have you ever considered the fact that she may already know?”

I wasted no time between hanging up with Father Clarence and racing to Nadia’s door.

My mundane life now imitated the scenes of someone else’s story.

“Abbey, Clarence! What a pleasant surprise,” Nadia greeted. The expression on her face showed her frustration with our intrusion.

“We haven’t seen you in a few days. Clarence and I decided to go for a walk and found ourselves here!” She stood rooted, unwilling to invite us in.

“You really should be resting, Abbey. You’re too far along to risk walking around like this. Get home and get yourself in bed! I’ll be over later, bring the two of you some supper.” She feigned concern for our welfare.

“Oh, nonsense. I’ll be fine. But now that you mention it, I would like to sit and rest a bit before we head back home.” I moved forward, ignoring her obvious coldness and forcing her aside.

Empty and half-filled boxes littered the living room. The walls and shelves stood bare, a testament to defeat.

“You know, don’t you?” I asked, my back to my friend. Her silence answered my question.

Nadia went into the kitchen and brought Clarence a snack before inviting me to join her on the sofa. She knew and concealed the pain even from me. Instead of a broken woman mourning over her misfortunes, she wore an expression of stone. No emotion seeped from her eyes. No sadness cradled her features. I feared for her.

“When? How?” I asked in an almost inaudible whisper.

“A few days ago. Two men came knocking. I thought it was you. Didn’t even question why you would be at my door when I just left you at your house. Wore their class A uniforms. Nothing good comes from that. I knew. They didn’t have to say anything.”

“What did they say?”

“Not much. Handed me a letter, said ‘I’m sorry,’ saluted and walked away.”

She took the worn letter from the coffee table and handed it to me. “I thought letters were a thing of the past.” I said under my breath. I noticed the smudge marks on the note from Nadia’s tears after reading these words over and over again. I read the short message aloud.

Mrs. Nadia Jenkins:

The Department of the United States Air Force deeply regrets to inform you that your husband, Caleb Christopher Jenkins, Lieutenant First Class, was killed in the performance of his duty and in the service of his country. The department of the Air Force extends to you its sincerest sympathy in your great loss. On account of existing conditions, the body, if recovered, cannot be returned at present. If further details are received, you will be informed.

Nadia continued, “The next day, Colonel Murphy paid me a visit. He apologized for what he called the callousness of the letter, but said it must be done. They were afraid word leaked and wanted to be sure things were handled according to protocol before I found out anything that may or may not be true.”

“Teddy’s letter,” I said as a matter of fact.

“He didn’t say, but I assumed as much. He said I deserved a better explanation. ‘I knew Caleb well,’ Colonel Murphy told me. ‘Flew with him. A good man. Worked hard to achieve all he achieved.’ I could tell he wanted to tell me more, but struggled with the words, what he could and could not say.

“ ‘There’s a lot I cannot tell you, you understand? What I can say is that I have rarely seen such a fine pilot.’

“ His momma will want a proper burial. When will he come home?” I asked him.

“He said they wouldn’t be bringing him home. Said there was nothing to bring home. We’ll end up burying an empty coffin.”

“Did he tell you what happened?” I asked.

“Said he acted as a military advisor in Southeast Asia. He and the other pilots were there to train the South Vietnamese Air Force. Colonel Murphy told me that Caleb was flying a routine training mission with a man named Sam Ly. Sam Ly flew and Caleb sat in the back giving instructions on maneuvers.

“Without any warning, some North Vietnamese MIGs attacked the base. Those up in the air already were unarmed, flying over friendly skies. They had no way of knowing what was coming and had no way to prepare. The North Vietnamese shot down their plane. A bullet hit the fuselage, exploding the plane in midair, before they had a chance to escape.”

“Do you believe that?” I asked.

Nadia sighed. “It doesn’t matter. He’s never coming home. I just don’t know what I’m going to tell his mother.”

Nadia and I sat in silence for several hours. Clarence napped in Nadia’s arms. After he awoke, I went into the kitchen to make us all something to eat. We ate in silence. Without saying a word, we made Clarence a pallet to sleep on at bedtime and packed up the rest of her boxes.

After losing her baby and her husband in the course of days, Nadia returned home to her family in Michigan. My journey through reality disillusioned me, and I yearned for life as I knew

it back in Illinois. With no friends left and the crushing realization that I was powerless to help the man I loved, I called my mother. She, in turn, called Teddy's mother. Both women stayed with me in Florida until the birth of Christopher Theodore Bailey.

Chapter Twenty-Seven
Abigail Louise Bailey
(Abbey)

“Come home with us,” my mother pleaded. “There’s no reason for you to be here all by yourself raising two boys.”

“That’s right, Honey,” Teddy’s mom reiterated. “Teddy would want you to be home, surrounded by people who love you and who will watch over you three while he’s gone.”

I found no flaw with their simple reasoning. The gates of Tyndall suffocated me. The stares of former friends shot daggers of misplaced suspicion through my heart. An overwhelming sense of despair nestled in my soul. Like a child returned to her mother’s bosom after running away from home, I ached for the comforts of childhood.

“It’s settled then,” my mom said. She called my father and dictated a list of chores to be done in preparation for my return. Past doubts begged me to ask to stay with Teddy’s parents. Instead, I held back my waning hesitation and embraced the thought of using the move as a chance to reconcile with my own mother.

Whether age graced us with wisdom or the innocence of my two little boys offered a new perspective, after more than twenty years of resentment, we became the kind of family the child within me always wanted. We shared meals as a family. We went out as a family. We attended church as a family.

Before returning home, I befriended a Catholic Priest and made peace with God about the differences between church doctrine and my interpretation of scripture. However, I never reconciled with the faith of my family. I blamed the Church for my lot in life. I blamed self-righteous religion for what I deemed the lack of spirituality among ordinary worshippers,

specifically my own mother and father. I found comfort in blaming Catholicism for the rift separating us.

It amused me to think that it took the worst sort of tragedy and my own sense of helplessness to smooth the edges of my anger. Once forgiveness worked its way from my lips into my heart, God sat me down in the same pew of the same church I once loathed as a child, the same church I suspected to be too traditional for God to reside.

“This is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. Happy are those who are called to His supper,” Father Jeremiah recited.

“Lord, I am not worthy to receive you, but only say the word and I shall be healed,” the faithful voices answered.

As I walked the aisle to receive His body and blood, a terrible foreboding clawed at me. The misery I thought I left back in Florida seeped back into my soul. “What is it, Lord?” I pleaded. The voice in my head screamed His promise. “ONLY SAY THE WORD AND I SHALL BE HEALED!”

“The body of Christ,” Father Jeremiah said as he placed the host on my tongue. Christopher swatted at the priest’s hand.

“Amen.” I made the sign of the cross as I bowed before my Lord on the altar, then turned to face the deacon.

“The blood of Christ,” he solemnly offered.

I took the cup and drank His blood. “Amen.”

The walk back to my seat felt like a march toward death. “ONLY SAY THE WORD AND I SHALL BE HEALED!” my inner voice screamed again.

As I kneeled in prayer while waiting for others to make their way through the

communion line, I searched for Him. “Where are You? I know You’re here. I feel Your presence. So why are you silent against me?” With Clarence squirming in the pew and Christopher fighting sleep, I had no time to wait for Him to answer.

Before the conclusion of mass, Father Jeremiah offered his sheep the peace of Christ. “The mass is ended. Let us go in peace to love and serve the Lord.”

“Thanks be to God,” my voice mingled with the rest of the congregation.

“Thanks be to God,” Clarence chimed in a beat behind the rest. He looked up to me and smiled, waiting for congratulations for being such a big boy and participating with the grown-ups.

I patted his head and smiled, but my insides quavered. “Have I ever truly known Your peace?”

In the weeks that followed, this internal chaos tortured me. I faked my way through happiness, assuming my apprehension would go away if ignored. Everyone blamed the occasional woeful sigh on loneliness because of my husband’s prolonged absence. An unannounced visit from my uncle Jack brought deliverance from the battle raging inside me.

My mother showered her baby brother with hugs and kisses and food to stuff a gluttonous pig. “But I am a vegetarian,” he pleaded. “I have grown quite accustomed to modest living.”

“And you are too thin because of it,” she reasoned.

“Have you forgotten the story of Daniel? King Nebuchadnezzar insisted he share in the choicest foods and wines of the royal throne. Daniel refused to defile himself by eating the foods the other young men enjoyed. The chief official grew nervous, afraid if he fed Daniel only vegetables and water, he would grow frail. The official feared losing his head because of Daniel.

He asked the chief official to test him. Remember what happened?"

"He grew healthier and stronger than all the rest."

"Well, there you go, Sister, my love. I know you mean well, but if I ate all you put before me, my body could not take it. I'd be forced to spend the rest of my time with you tending to my aching belly rather than visit with my beloved family."

She surrendered and instead begged to hear fables of his spiritual journey around the world searching for religious truth. He told the stories of his adventures countless times since his days in seminary. We never grew tired of hearing how God called him to search for his faith.

"Why do you want to become a priest?" he heard God ask while on his knees in prayer one night at seminary. He sensed a calling, but offered no other explanation or defense for his religion. God wanted more from him. Before Uncle Jack could, in good conscience, lead his own flock, he needed to understand the precepts of his own faith by exploring the religions of the rest of the world. By the end of his mission, he knew the who, what, where, when, how, and why of most of history's theology. All roads led him back to his intended path. Uncle Jack took his vows able to answer the question God posed years before.

Ever since I was a child, I loved hearing of his exploits, believing him to be more entertaining than any writer of children's fiction. As I grew older, I began to doubt his fables, believing him to be nothing more than an imaginative storyteller. Nonetheless, I, too, enjoyed listening to him and watching as my Clarence stared at him with bulging eyes and his mouth hanging wide open. Another generation entertained by good ole' Uncle Jack.

With the boys tucked in bed, I intended to sit by the fire alone with my Bible. I thought everyone else had gone to sleep. Uncle Jack stooped by the fireplace, stoking the logs. His

presence took me by surprise.

“My apologies. I didn’t mean to frighten you.” He looked at the Bible in my hands.

“What are you reading?”

I looked at him quizzically. Could he not tell what I held? “The Bible?” I naively answered.

“I meant, what book in the Bible.”

I felt stupid in his presence. “Oh, um, nothing in particular. Thought about reading the Book of Daniel,” I joked.

Still stooping down with his head tilted over his shoulder, he looked me dead in the eye. “Looking for answers?” he asked. His voice gave me an uncomfortable feeling, as if he saw me from the inside out, uncovering every secret thought.

Uncle Jack stood. He seemed to tower over me. Pointing toward the sofa, he said, “Abbey, have a seat.”

I obeyed.

“Do you know why I came here today?”

I shook my head no.

“I came here to see you.”

I said nothing.

He let his stare linger on me. Quick seconds passed before his expression changed from one of stern concern to understanding empathy. “During my prayers the other night, you came to mind. I sensed your need for prayer. You still need prayer.”

I looked at him, my face a mask of dumbfounded confusion.

“Abbey, I’m going to tell you a secret, but you have to promise me you will never tell a

living soul as long as you draw breath on this earth.”

He piqued my curiosity.

“Ever since I came back from my pilgrimage,”

My expression mocked him.

“You still believe my stories to be nothing more than old wives’ tales?” he asked, amused and not the least bit offended. “No matter. Ever since I took my vows, I made it a point to get away once a year to be alone with God.”

Breaking my silence, I asked, “But you’re a priest. Aren’t you alone with God all the time?”

“You may be surprised how little time a ‘man of God’ actually gets to spend with Him. Life gets in the way.”

“I befriended a priest once. He said something very similar. He used to go fishing or hang out by the creek to get away.”

“So, you understand, then? Anyway, once a year, I take a little pilgrimage to a monastery where I could be alone with God. There are no worldly distractions, and they take a vow of silence. One must only speak in certain areas. Out in the middle of nowhere, God can truly be found.”

“I thought God lived everywhere. Why do you have to go to a monastery to find Him?”

“He is everywhere. However, the world gets so loud sometimes. It can be very hard to hear Him. So, I go away, let go of the world for one week. The world can be just as addictive and can destroy you just like any other drug. One must take time to detox from the noise of the world before he can be open to receive God’s message.”

“Oh,” I said, thinking back to the noise and distraction during my one hour in church.

“Once you free yourself from the world and are open to receive Him,” Uncle Jack sighed as he stared up toward heaven, “there are no limits to what can happen.”

I waited for him to continue, caught up in this story just as my son was caught up in his other stories earlier in the evening.

“The first time I went, God’s message to me was simple: ‘Slow down,’ He said. I sat atop a hill, on my knees in front of a giant cross. I heard His voice as clearly as if He spoke right into my ear. It was a simple truth, but a lesson I needed to hear. I felt like Moses on the mountain of God.

“The second time, I wandered off the path. After several hours, I realized I could no longer hear the church bells. I was lost. The sun began to fade, and the temperature began to chill. If I failed to find my way back before sundown, I was afraid I would not survive the cold or wild animals. I kept the sun behind me and walked straight ahead, up hills, down hills, through brush and branches. I returned home with quite a bad case of poison ivy.

“But I’m getting ahead of myself. I finally came upon one lone house in the middle of nowhere. The thought of knocking on the door frightened me, but the thought of staying lost terrified me even more. An old, gruff man answered the door. My circumstance left me no choice but to put all of my trust in the hands of God and this stranger. He pointed me toward the monastery and offered me a ride back. Common sense told me to decline his offer, but the rest of my body accepted his generosity. All the way back, I prayed for God’s protective hand to guide me to safety. Before letting me out of his truck, the man told me I was lucky to have gotten lost when I did. ‘Had this been next week, you’d’ve been lost during opening week of deer season. Opening weekend is for the kids. They ain’t gonna look where they shoot. They hear a noise and POW. You’d’a been dead!’

“During the third trip, God revealed why I felt so homesick even when I was at home. ‘Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.’ You feel like a stranger because you are not of this world. But I have chosen you out of this world. Your home is with Me in heaven. You will be like a stranger in a strange land until you return home to Me.’ ”

Tears streamed down my cheeks. I knew this feeling of homesickness.

“That is the message He told me to bring to you. You and I are a lot alike, you know that? I know the doubts and questions that plague you. But I also know your spirit. You, too, feel like a stranger in a strange land, don’t you?”

I never considered myself to be special or to have any sort of favor with God. As I grew older, I believed most everyone experienced the same disconnect I felt, whether Christian, Muslim, Buddhist, agnostic, or whatever else. Most people—rich or poor, man or woman, young or old, no matter the race or nationality—hunger for something beyond the visible or tangible world. We all long for someone to give us an explanation, to make everything worthwhile. I believed we all, at some point in our life, felt like a stranger among friends. However, not all had an Uncle Jack to teach them how to cut out the noise and simply listen.

“What do I do in the meantime? Until He calls me home?”

“Seek the meaning of life,” he said as a matter of fact.

“And what’s the meaning of life?” I asked.

“ ‘If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not

love, I gain nothing.

“ ‘Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails.’ ”

“First Corinthians Chapter thirteen. Teddy had that passage reference engraved on the inside of my wedding ring.”

“ ‘And now these three remain: faith, hope, and love. But the greatest of these is love.’ ”

The very next day, Uncle Jack packed my bags and sent me to his secret sanctuary.

Chapter Twenty-Eight
Abigail Louise Bailey
(Abbey)

The weather during my travel promised great blessings. The sun warmed without causing burdensome weariness. A light, cool breeze promised perfection for the days ahead. I went to bed anxious for Uncle Jack's stories to become my own.

When I awoke the following morning, my first full day at Uncle Jack's sacred monastery, the threat of winter washed away my perfect fall weather. The sound of icy rain pelting against my window mixed with early morning church bells. *Go home*, the bells chimed. Six times they brooded in the darkened sky.

I dressed and ate a quick bite before making my way to mass. The monks lined their bitter chambers as they recited a monotonous Terce. *Is this it?* I wondered. What did Uncle Jack expect me to get out of this cold, damp prison? *Give it a chance*, I heard him urge.

God mocked me. I could stand cold, and I could stand rain, but I hated cold rain. The skies showed no signs of reprieve. The noise of the world grew louder with each falling drop rather than evaporating with rays of the Son. *All this beautiful land surrounding me and I am forced to stay inside, trapped like an animal in a cage. No peace.* I scurried through the halls looking for something to occupy my quiet hours. Perhaps a book from the library. No matter which manuscript I chose, my mind refused to slow down long enough to concentrate on the written words. My body yearned to escape these ancient walls and get lost in the foliage of the surrounding hills.

I sat on the porch, hugging my jacket around my shoulders. The rain quieted to a mist, but my mood still reeked of despair. *Come.* I heard a voice calling from across the street. *Go.*

Another voice beside me urged. I felt a hand pushing my back from off my seat. The monks walked a path through those trees, a path hidden from naked eyes. Uncle Jack told me how to find my way.

But it's cold and rainy, I protested.

But you must come. I believed my life depended on whether I obeyed or gave into my pity. The white robes of monks long gone walked before me. *This way*, they beckoned.

I let heavenly hands lift me from my seat. I followed their lead through the garden and across the street toward their holy hill. The rain still fell, but I no longer cared. The temperature still chilled my nose, but nothing else mattered except going where God called me.

The moment I crossed the street and stepped through the narrow path between two overgrown thick-necked trees, I sensed His presence by my side. I felt so confident that I walked with Jesus. Before I knew it, we talked as if He literally stood beside me. An immediate sense of peace filled me. His charming and whimsical and comforting manner contradicted with His appearance. He looked like a soldier, haggard and filthy from days of sleepless battle. But His love overpowered me, and I knew He called me to walk with Him for a reason.

“I know you don’t care much for the rain, but stop one second.” I stopped. “Look around you and listen. We’re all alone here. No one to disturb us.” I understood the reason for the cold, dreary rain.

We walked on, and He talked about Teddy. “You keep praying for me to uproot the cause of his suffering and to burn it in the fires. You pray for me to do whatever it’s going to take to get to the root of his pain and to heal him.”

“Yes, Lord.”

“But, Abbey, I hear your heart prayer as well. Some things aren’t always so easy. Do you know what you’re asking? Are you really willing to put yourself through anything for his sake?”

“Yes, Lord.”

“Are you sure? Have you thought of what you both may have to go through? And let me ask you this? Are you asking for your sake or for his?”

“Both, I suppose. I can’t bear to think of him hurting. What is he thinking? What must he be going through? I’m powerless to help him. What happens when he comes home? Will he be the same man who left? I know what happened to his father. I know what happened to other men who’ve returned from war. Will he even come home? Would it be better for all of us if he . . . died over there?

“In his letters, there’s such deep sadness. I hurt for him. I know something big took place, but no one will tell me anything. What if he comes home and never opens up? Never tells me what happened to him?”

“What can you do if he does tell you?” His voice never condemned, never blamed or accused me. He spoke with a gentle whisper as if speaking to His most beloved child.

I said nothing, knowing in the pit of my soul that I feared Teddy’s secrets and knew how ill equipped I would be to make the circumstances better for him. “You alone, Lord, know what’s at the root of it all. You alone can help.”

We walked on and came upon a still lake with tall trees lining the edge of the water, forming a V at its base. The fall colors shook the leaves from the limbs as the weight of the rain sprinkled the damp earth. We stood at the edge of the water facing the troop of trees around the back side of the lake. A plush green meadow opened up behind us. Whispers of rain drops pelted the water’s surface and tiny fish peeked from below in search of food.

“Stop and look around you. I am here. Whenever you need me, I am here. I’m not just talking about here at this lake near this monastery. I’m everywhere. All you have to do is look for me. The peace you find here, you can find anywhere.”

“But I’m scared. I hear You here. I feel You and see You. This is holy ground. What happens when I get back to the real world? What then?”

“It won’t be easy, but it can be done. Just listen.” He paused. “What did you hear earlier today?”

When I first arrived the night before, I joined the other first timers to listen to a welcome speech given by one of the monks. I attended services that evening and this morning. Before venturing into the woods, I listened to a sermon echoing in the background as I ate breakfast and again during lunch. “Every message I heard told me to love trials because they build character and will build me spiritually,” I sighed.

Those sermons replayed in my ears, terrifying me. In Paul’s letter to the Romans, he told them to rejoice in their sufferings because suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope.

Jesus finished my thoughts, reminding me to look beyond the here and now to the promised blessings ahead. “And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out His love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom He has given us.”

Even with His calm reassurance, my heart glimpsed a faint reflection of my future, and I had no desire to take that next step. The passage needed no explanation, but I waited for one anyway. He said nothing. Jesus cocked His head forward, calling me to follow as He walked on.

The rain ceased, but the ominous clouds kept others from intruding on our path. He stopped in the middle of the trail and turned to face a tree.

“Look closely at this tree,” Jesus said. I looked up. “See how it separates in the middle and comes back together at the end?”

His meaning needed no explanation. I knew He used the tree as a metaphor for my relationship with Teddy. A single tear blurred my vision, and, as I wiped it away, I saw Jesus stand next to the trunk and rub the bark.

“Come, touch it,” He said.

I mimicked the actions of Jesus. As I did so, I noticed that even though the trunk broke apart, it still traveled upward, side by side. As the tree grew taller, the two limbs became knotted and jagged before reuniting in perfect unison at the top. Without shedding tears, my heart mourned for what awaited us.

Teddy and I, though separated by miles, still meshed as one. Our love lingered just below the ugly, chaotic divide. I clung to the hope that no matter how battered and bruised we become, Jesus promised to bring us together again with a stronger love and support than ever before. Even though the size of the knots blinded me from fully accepting His gift, I put my faith in the One who led me. Saying nothing more, He continued our forward trek.

Jesus and I came to a dead end at one of the forks in the trail. “Look,” He said. “See how this trail leads into the ravine? It appears as if nothing is down there. However, a stream once ran through that space, but it has long since dried. See the row of trees directly in front of us? Look past them. See the other row of trees in the distance? Look all around you. Nothing but trees. We are all alone in the forest. All alone.” He stretched out the syllables of those two words for effect. “That’s what Satan wants you to think. However, between the trees right here in front of us and the row of trees beyond is a road. Farmers and hunters use that road. We’re not alone. We can’t get lost where we are on this trail. If you start to get scared, think you are lost, feel alone, and

walk toward the road, someone will come along and lead you to safety. Remember, no matter how much things seem to close in around you, you are NEVER alone.”

We walked on. As we walked, I drifted into my own thoughts, forgetting about my companion. I recalled Uncle Jack’s remarks about the meaning of life. Love is the meaning of life. It is the entire message of God’s written Word. Love in an unlovable world. To love Teddy despite Satan’s hold on him. To love parents who decided to give me away rather than love me. Love, despite a government and a war I was told to revere because of my status as a military wife but whom I secretly blamed for my husband’s living death. Love, despite a world in which a man is hated and killed for no better reason than the color of his skin. Love, when I can do nothing else.

A simple phrase yanked me out of my self-pitying litany—*Give it to God*. I came across a small shack filled with pictures and prayers tacked to a wall. A pad and paper waited on a desk for the next seeker. Without realizing where I sat or what I wrote, I read the words in my own script: *Give it to God*. I laughed at myself and thought. *I ruined a beautiful moment by leaving my Companion. Yes, I must give it all to God.*

I got up and took my place back on the path. I noticed the trail parted the same as the tree and came back together up ahead. I looked over and saw Jesus on the other side. We smiled at one another. “Are you ready to continue?” He asked.

We walked on and came across two statues. The first statue portrayed three disciples sleeping. “Come,” He said, leading me onward and stopping by the image of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane before He was betrayed and crucified. He kneeled in prayer, crying out for God to take the cup of suffering from Him.

“I died here. Well, not HERE, but . . .” I knew what he meant. I stood and stared at the

statue for some time. I contemplated how Catholic interpretation believed the deity of Jesus made it impossible for Him to beg for mercy in the same manner as an ordinary human man.

“Okay, what’s so wrong about You wanting out of it? Some say You weren’t really praying as a human being prays, for God to give you an out so You would not have to go through with the crucifixion. They say you were praying . . .” I stopped, unsure how to communicate my thoughts.

“I prayed for you.” This revelation stopped me in my tracks. I turned back around and looked at the statue again, his anguish gripping my heart. “I was afraid, too. It’s okay to be afraid. But it had to be done.”

Silence. His torment etched in marble haunted me. I stood still, unable to move.

“It’s okay to be afraid,” He said again. My gaze shifted from the statue before me back down the path. “The important thing is that you walk on, straight into the fire. You’re not a child anymore.” I wondered what he meant.

“It’s time to move on,” He answered. Jesus encouraged me to grow up spiritually and to stop looking back, stop stalling. The moment I stared down the trail in front of me, the fear of a child gripped me. I turned and looked back down the path from which we came.

He turned my face back around and carried me forward along the path not yet travelled. “The important thing is to keep your head up, look straight ahead, and walk into the fire.” As soon as we walked away, the fear left me. The trail led us out of the woods and ended in an open field.

I asked, “So who’s right? I have no doubt You walked with me today. But my priest back home wants me to believe You sit at the right hand of the Father and cannot possibly be present with me here on earth. He wants me to believe the Holy Spirit is merely speaking to me. But my

heart sees You right beside me. Are You, then, just a figment of my imagination or what? I mean, Father, Son, Holy Spirit, You're all one, right? So . . .”

He laughed as He grabbed my arm. “You’re both right,” he said.

“So we are!” I chuckled. His unspoken truth put all the questions about my religion into perspective. The little details causing so much inner turmoil have no bearing on the bigger picture. Every so often, heaven and earth collide, and God reveals His love for His children.

“I don’t want to forget this walk with you. Help me remember.”

As I said these words, He brought my gaze to a red leaf from a redwood tree hidden in the forest. “Take this, and put it in your Bible as a reminder of this day. Romans chapter five verses one through five: ‘Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us.’ ”

After I picked it up, cleaned it off, and put it in my pocket, I realized I had come to another fork in the trail. I could go back through the forest or take the farmer’s road hidden between the two rows of trees. I headed for the cover of the trees, but Jesus stayed behind. “Which way do I go?”

He did not answer. I panicked, eager to do his bidding yet distressed to see our journey end. I closed my eyes and prayed. I felt a strong force pulling me to the left, toward the dirt road. “But I don’t want You to leave me. I don’t want this to end. Does it really matter anyway? Am I making a big fuss over nothing?”

I closed my eyes again, and again the stronger force pulled me left. “Don’t look back. Go forward.” I walked along the road and Jesus remained beside me for a while. He pointed up and said, “See, that’s where we started. You couldn’t see the road from there, but here we are. You’re not alone.”

He left me. I felt Him behind me at the crossroads waving goodbye. “You’ll be okay. I’m right here.” I felt Him beside me again. “And right here.” He jumped ahead of me. “And right here.”

I finished the walk alone, but never alone. I walked back to the monastery with a newfound sense of peace in my soul.

Chapter Twenty-Nine
Theodore Francis Bailey
(Teddy)

While my father served his country during World War II, my mother taught us to consider his absence not as a deprivation, but as an honor. "Your father," she often scolded if any of her children bothered her with unending pleas for his return, "is dutifully serving a cause greater than self-interest. We cannot rush him or the other men fighting for your freedoms, for your right to whine and carry on the way you do. You could learn a lot from his noble action." My mother properly shamed us into obedience every time she reminded us of my father's selfless acts.

When my father returned, I longed to sit on his knee and beg for stories from the warfront. My mother demanded we abstain from confronting him, fueling the fire of my curiosity. I waited for just the right time to approach him with my barrage of questions.

Mom left Dad alone with the kids one Sunday afternoon. I cannot remember where she needed to be or who she needed to see. Sundays were usually days spent together as a family. Her whereabouts mattered little to me. By leaving the house, she left me alone with my father. My siblings busied themselves with other activities, and my father sat alone at the kitchen table reading the paper.

"Dad?" My voice sounded almost inaudible, and my hands trembled. "What was it like?" With the newspaper still in front of his face he asked, "What was what like?" "You know . . . the war?"

He turned down one edge of the paper and peered in my direction. "What do you want to know?"

My father did not seem angry or bothered by my question. Rather, he seemed surprised it

took me so long to ask. After all, he returned home almost one year earlier, and not one of his children asked him about the time he spent on the other end of the world. Since fire did not shoot out of his ears and nose like I half expected, I summoned the strength to continue.

“Mom says you did a great thing, going to fight for people you don’t even know, for people you will never meet, all because some bad guy tried to hurt them and they couldn’t fight for themselves.”

“I suppose that’s right.”

“We’d hear things on the news. Mom didn’t mean to let us hear. She’d turn off the radio whenever the news man started talking too much, but I heard.”

“What did you hear?”

“A lot of people were dying. I saw Momma crying some nights. She didn’t know I saw, but I did. I think she was afraid you died. Were you ever scared, Dad?”

He put down his paper and stared at me. “You sure are growing up,” he said as he pulled me onto his lap. “Honestly? Yes. There were a lot of times when I was scared. I was afraid I’d never see you or your mother or your brothers again. But I think this fear—and hate—kept me alive.”

“Hate, Daddy? Who’d *you* hate?” I never knew my father to dislike anyone.

“The enemy. You see, Son, when those Japs bombed the harbor, it stirred up a lot of bad feelings in a lot of Americans.”

“Because they killed so many innocent people for no reason, right?”

“That’s right. And when you go to war and fight, a man starts to despise his enemy, to want him to go away.”

“You mean to die?”

“Yes, Son, to die.” He smirked at the look of fear etched on my face. “You know how you and your friends play Cowboys and Indians?”

“We played war while you were gone, but no one wanted to be the bad guys.”

“Okay, do you understand what you were playing? Why the bad guy is the bad guy?”

I gave him a quizzical look in response to his question. “Back in the days of Cowboys and Indians, the Cowboys and the Indians hated each other for many reasons.”

“Because they fought all the time?”

“Well, there’s more to it than that. Remember, the Indians lived here first. When the Cowboys came along and started taking their land, some Indians got really mad and started killing them.”

“So the Cowboys are the bad guys? I always thought the Indians were the bad guys.”

“It depends on whose side you’re on.” My look of confusion did not go away. “I guess this is too hard for you to understand now. When you get older, it’ll make more sense.”

“But, why . . . I don’t . . . you . . .” I had no idea how to put into words the questions I wanted to ask my father. I wanted details such as what scared him and why he hated his enemy. What made them the enemy? And now I wanted to know what the Cowboys and Indians had to do with any of it and why determining the bad guy depended on whose side I was on. Instead of relieving my curiosity, this conversation confused me even more.

During my time in Vietnam, the answers to those childhood questions became clear. I came into a foreign land to keep a concept thought to be void of Christian and democratic values from overtaking another part of the world. I fought against people who did not want me there.

Did I fight for a greater cause or was I merely an intruder? Did I fight on the side of the

good guys or the bad guys? I guess it all depended on the point of view taken. In some ways, I represented both sides. The same could be said of the Viet Cong. They fought for their country—the same as I. They fought for family and honor—the same as I. They fought for a cause—the same as I. Not only did I have enemies, but I was the enemy.

My first dogfight taught me both fear and hate. I never feared my own death. I lived a good life and trusted in the promise of Jesus Christ—*I will come back and take you to be with Me that you also may be where I am.* Instead, I feared the death of those I loved. I feared failing in some way, causing the death of other men. I feared leaving my wife without a husband and my children without a father. I feared letting them down. I feared getting shot down and captured and becoming a prisoner of war. I feared torture. I feared going up and fighting again. I feared going home. I feared facing Abbey and Nadia with the truth of Caleb's death. I feared failing my government by failing to keep their secret. I feared my fear and what harm could come to me because of it. I feared being wrong.

I learned to hate my enemy for making me afraid, for taking away Caleb and other good men. I hated them for hiding out among the innocent—their own people—forcing good men, honest American soldiers, to kill civilians unwittingly in order to kill the enemy. I hated our government for surrendering to college students and other protestors, thus, prohibiting the military men, who lived the battle every day, who knew what it took to win the war, from doing their jobs. I hated Kennedy and later Johnson for proving Ho Chi Minh right when he said his war would be won on the streets and campuses of American cities. I hated the military for making my family wonder where I was and what I was doing. I hated Caleb for abandoning me. I even hated God for taking him from me and leaving me with all this guilt. And I hated myself for hating my country and my God.

When I returned to the air, I began to accept the hatred and anger I harbored for the enemy. I also began to trust in and rely on that fear and hatred. It sustained my devotion to complete my missions to destroy the enemy and helped me to overcome the impulse to recoil from otherwise atrocious acts of violence, acts few outside the context of war could fathom committing against another human being.

Each passing day also nurtured my anger toward my own government. The squadron intelligence center provided information on the target for each mission. Ninety-nine point nine percent of the time, the day's tasking required re-bombing the same target for the umpteenth time.

Even though bridges, SAM firing sites, convoys, and other useful targets were within reach, orders forbade us from attacking areas not on the target list. These restrictions forced us to hit the same targets over and over and over again, doing little more than kick up the dust of useless rubble. The government's misguided tactics crushed our confidence in our country's ability to win the war.

McNamara demanded strike-pilot ratios from squadron commanders. He wanted to make sure the numbers accorded with what he deemed a successful war. Washington believed the number of missions flown relative to the number of bombs dropped determined the success or failure of the war. This fallible statistic—leaving out the invaluable detail that each mission wasted bombs on senseless targets—led the White House to assume American victory.

Those of us in the air knew the devastating truth. We knew attacks limited to trucks, trains, and barges not only failed to break the enemy's resolve, but served to bolster their confidence, leading them to believe they could withstand American airpower.

The legend of the flying ace vanished during the Vietnam era. The rules of engagement forbade American pilots from engaging enemy aircraft unless a clear visual and a clear threat of danger existed. Even if allowed to fight as common sense dictated, the North Vietnamese avoided situations that might result in a dogfight. Since they knew they could withstand the full measure of U.S. fighters from the ground, they saw no need to engage us in the air.

Because most of us felt like we were treading water until the liberal majority back in the states called us home, several pilots flew a mile or two off course, blaming faulty intelligence or high winds or low visibility, and dropped bombs on worthier targets. At first, our commanders grounded these pilots. Because of our relentless protests, they gave in and returned them to flight status, turning a blind eye to our little “mistakes.”

Washington dictated our every move in Vietnam, including the route from base to the intended target. This made our government dangerous for us pilots. Their interference allowed the North Vietnamese to strategically position their surface-to-air missiles along our flight path. Washington’s actions caused the death of its own people.

Other pilots, disillusioned by the lack of genuine support from their civilian commanders back in the states, simply walked away. Since their own government stripped them of their citizenship before shipping them off to “war,” they cared little about the chanced dishonorable discharge or other reprisal.

Those of us not yet disillusioned to the point of quitting, those of us too stubborn to give up, ignored official commands and took our battle to the air, leading our enemy off the pre-determined course and taking the fight to a safer location away from SAMs.

Colonel Robin Cleaveland, a veteran of World War II and Korea (and a double ace),

restored our confidence in our mission and our country by ordering an escalation of bombing campaigns. Unlike McNamara, he believed the aftermath of a mission defined its effectiveness better than the number of bombs dropped. He intended to muddle regulations if necessary to achieve these results. After assuming command of Bien Hoa Air Base on August 17, 1962, he set out to teach his crew how to dogfight. The new pilots brought in to replace those killed in action or shipped home cared more about their own safety than proper training. They knew little more than how to start the engine, take off, drop a few bombs, and land. Colonel Robin Cleaveland changed all this. Part of active training now included mock dogfights.

Even though increased action equaled an increased chance of pilot loss, no one questioned our support for combat intensification. For the first time since arriving in Bien Hoa, we took pride in our work and in the country we served.

Colonel Cleaveland brought with him a few F-4E Phantoms. He chose me, along with a small handful of other veteran pilots, to fly these new birds in combat missions. He gave my beloved F-4D to a less experienced fighter to use in actual training missions as intended.

Like most pilots, I was a little superstitious. I completed over half of the allotted one hundred combat missions in Vietnam without incident. Each time, I performed all preflight tasks myself in the same exact order as the time before. I trusted no one else to do anything as simple as check the fuel caps secured. I convinced myself that an unvaried routine foreshadowed a safe and successful flight. When I traded in my D model for the F-4E, I continued to allow superstition to dictate my actions. My bird. My responsibility.

My first few bomb drops in the F-4E brought little excitement and three easy kills. I became an ace, a minority throughout the entire Vietnam war. One of the first targets aimed to destroy a thermal power plant in Ben Thuy by the Gulf of Tonkin. After two months, however,

the North Vietnamese rebuilt the plant, and we received orders to attack again. I begged the operation's officer responsible for putting the flight schedules together to let me fly the mission. My cocky pride needed to attack again. I flew with the squadron responsible for demolishing the plant the first time. I wanted to send a clear message to the Viet Cong by being part of the same squadron sent to destroy the plant yet again. I wanted them to know that no matter how hard they tried, no matter how many times they rebuilt, we would be back to take away any advantage they thought they possessed.

Colonel Robin Cleaveland, Lieutenant Colonel Henry Baker, Captain Mark Mayfield, and I took part in the mission. Cleverly named Operation Hai—meaning two in Vietnamese—we devised an intricate trap to lure unsuspecting MIGs into a fight after dropping the bombs. We disguised our planes to mimic slow and agile fighters.

As we approached enemy airfields, cloud cover diminished the visibility of the land below. We circled around, provoking the MIGs into taking the bait. A single MIG emerged from the thick clouds, moving directly behind Baker at his six o'clock. Mayfield spotted a trailing MIG and radioed a warning. Cleaveland ordered a defensive split, breaking us into two groups. Cleaveland and Baker flew off in one direction, and Mayfield and I flew off in the opposite direction. No matter how we maneuvered, the first MIG stuck to Baker's tail. We needed to act quickly to protect our comrade.

Coming around behind him, I aimed a missile at his tailpipe. The MIG reversed its turn, causing the shot to miss the target, but still managed to clip his wing. He spun out of control and disappeared back behind the low clouds.

After our initial attack, the other MIG realized he fell into the trap we set for him.

Because the North Vietnamese instructed their pilots to follow orders from ground command and forbade them from reacting on instinct, his vulnerability caused him to panic while waiting for air support. Mayfield took him down seconds after the MIG's comrade fell from the sky.

As he plummeted, more MIGs shot up from out of the clouds. One approached at my eleven o'clock. I broke left and zeroed in for an easy kill. Two sparrow missiles lost radar lock and tore past him. I stuck with him and fired a sidewinder heat seeking missile. This one found its target and blew him up.

A third MIG appeared 180 degrees to my left, too close for me to make a flat turn and get behind him. I pulled straight up and rolled to my right, hoping to make a wide, swooping downward curve, positioning me directly behind him. Instead, my engine stalled. I managed to line up just above him and took my chances with another sidewinder, careful to avoid collision as I continued my decent. The missile tore off his nose and shattered the canopy. The pilot bailed out before the plane dove in a flaming heap toward the earth.

Heading into a dive straight into enemy territory, I tried again and again, without success, to restart the engine. As the plane approached the speed of sound, I lost all control of my machine.

I pulled and yanked on the controls as hard as I could but got no response. It was a terrifying experience—forced to face death head on. Blue and white and green and brown hues swirled together like paint on a canvas. My body grew numb, and my eyes drifted beyond the horizons of this world. Recalling lessons learned during our spatial disorientation exercises, I shifted my attention inside the cockpit and focused on tangible objects.

“Lord God,” I prayed. “I need you NOW!”

As those desperate words left my lips, the plane hit denser air and the controls began to

respond. I jerked the yoke with every ounce of my strength, lifting my nose from out of a high speed freefall until I came parallel to the rice paddies below. A string of tracer fire shattered the canopy before I leveled out, pulling me back into the fight.

I turned a hard ninety degrees to the right and climbed as high as I could to gain room to maneuver. The plane shuddered into another high speed stall. This gave the MIG the advantage he sought to take out my already wounded bird. He shot his tracers at me again, hitting my fuselage. With my plane on fire but still in flight, I pulled up and angled for control. Crashing here meant becoming a prisoner of war if I survived. I needed to get to the Gulf of Tonkin if I stood a chance of walking away a free man.

I bailed out as soon as I glided over water. My g suit caught on fire, but the water, although as warm as a pool in late August, put out the sparks before consuming me. Shrapnel from my drowned fighter pierced my body.

Before drifting in and out of consciousness, I managed to inflate the life preserver attached to my survival vest. In my dreams, I stood face to face with God. Bright white light engulfed me. My body floated in nothingness. I felt His presence, but I could not see His face. Only light.

“Am I dead?” I asked.

“Not yet,” I heard a booming voice answer.

“I should be dead,” I said. “Even if I survived the crash, this water’s only about sixty meters deep. Am I dreaming?”

“In a manner of speaking.”

“Then, this is not real? Am I not talking to You?”

“What do you think?”

“Seems pretty real to me,” I pondered this experience for a moment before continuing my interrogation. “You said I’m not dead *yet*. Does that mean I’m going to die here?”

I awoke with a start. It felt as if something tugged at my leg, trying to pull me under water. But when I wriggled in search of my predator, I found nothing. Scanning the horizon, I saw bits of my mangled F-4 poking out of the water. A small raft with two armed men circled the wreckage. I had drifted into deeper waters, and pieces of my plane embedded in the shallow shoreline. The men were too far away for me to be able to determine if they were friend or foe. If enemy and I called out to them, they might shoot me dead, or worse, take me to a prison camp.

My only chance of survival was to play dead. If the boat belonged to friendlies, they would pull my body into the raft regardless of my condition. If the boat belonged to the enemy, they may leave me alone rather than mess with a bloody corpse. With blood coating the water, I expected to die anyway, but I wanted to die a free man.

I rotated my life preserver—nicknamed May West due to the fact that someone wearing one often appeared to be as physically-endowed as the actress by the same name—so that the inflated side pushed my face underwater. Since I still wore my helmet and since the hose still connected the helmet to the suit, I disconnected the suit end of the hose and stuck it above the waterline. The color of the hose blended in well with the shade of the water. I prayed to God no one noticed my makeshift breathing apparatus. I stuck my head face down in the water and relaxed, freeing my body to float naturally. I prayed anyone looking at me assumed the crash killed me.

The boat made one slow pass around me. I heard their words, foreign to me. I felt a jab in my side again and again. They laughed and made remarks I could not understand. The waves

rocked my limp body as they made one last circle around me. I heard a few more mutterings before they floated away. It worked. They bought my lie. I survived the enemy. Now, I had to figure out a way to survive nature herself.

I could see the shoreline, but with my strength nearly depleted and my gear weighing me down, it might as well have been hundreds of miles away. I had two choices: wait in the water and hope for rescue or take my chances and swim to shore. I decided to take my chances.

I would need my gear once on dry land, but this same gear hindered my ability to maneuver effectively. I decided to deal with one issue at a time. Stripping to nearly nothing except my skivvies and the life preserver, I attempted to swim, but the life preserver encumbered my arms. I took a few deep breaths, removed it from around my neck, and continued swimming.

All too soon, my arms burned and my legs cramped. The shore still seemed miles away. When I wanted to give up, I thought about Abbey and my kids. I longed to go home. Her daddy's accusatory words rang in my head. He called me selfish for asking her to love a man intent on dying young. I refused to give credence to his prophecy.

"God, I need Your help," I prayed. With eyes closed, I pressed on, using every bit of strength I had left. Before I knew it, I made it to shore. Exhausted and hungry, with no food rations and no boots, I collapsed on the beach and passed out. I awoke in the cover of night to the sound of silent steps beside my head. Sun blisters burned my face, blood caked my body, and the torrential rains beat my already battered muscles.

The shadow of a man hefted me over his shoulder. Faint voices echoed all around me. "Will I die here?" I asked God after I landed in the gulf. I thought I now knew the answer.

As the strangers carried me away, I passed out again, expecting to see His face the next time I awoke.

Chapter Thirty
Abigail Louise Bailey
(Abbey)

“Sure, I can help out,” I told Sandra when she asked me to assist with the potluck dinner after church on Pentecost Sunday. “But I have a prior commitment later in the day. I need to leave around noon.”

Setup began at eight-thirty that morning. We finished organizing the entrees within seconds of the choir’s final notes of the concluding hymn. The twelve o’clock hour came and went and parishioners continued to feed and converse in droves. By twelve-twenty-five, I said my goodbyes and rushed out of the building, anxious to meet up with Teddy and the kids for a picnic in the park with some of his Air Force comrades and their families.

A homeless man, who often helped in the kitchen in exchange for a free meal, sat on the curb in front of the church. As I stepped into the street, intending to cross, I looked back to say hello. Blood seeped from his head and nose, masking his face in a bright red hue and dripping into a puddle at his feet.

The reality of his condition failed to register for the first few seconds. I stared at the growing pool of blood gathering next to the potato salad and fried chicken lying in the road and assumed he spilled kool-aid or some other water-based liquid. Once I locked eyes with him and read the fear on his face, I knew this man needed immediate help.

“If I help him,” I thought when I first understood his need, “I won’t make it to the picnic.” I am ashamed to admit I thought about ignoring him and walking away.

Looking back now, I see God’s hand in every motion of the day. I remember looking at the clock, emptied dishes and crock pots piled one on top of another in the kitchen sink. *“Ten minutes after noon. Still so much work to be done. I can stay a few more minutes and still make it*

in time, " I reasoned. Had I left when I intended, I would have missed him. My choice to stay a little while longer set the rest of the events in motion.

Because of Teddy's busy training schedule and my constant fear of being alone should my son fall victim to one of the many accidents that could occur with a newborn child, Teddy enrolled me in a first aid course prior to the birth of Clarence.

As soon as I recognized the urgency of the situation, instinct took over. "Are you okay?" I asked. He made no reply. He simply looked up at me, the answer obvious to anyone.

"Call an ambulance!" I demanded of the first person I saw.

"I'll be right back," I promised the man before running into the church to find a first aid kit. Before I made it to the front door, the driver of the church van stepped from his seat and offered the use of his supplies. I found gloves and put them on, but I could not find any gauze suitable to treat a cut as large as his.

From the corner of my eye I saw another man exit the building. Before his hand let go of the door and before his feet hit the outside pavement, I insisted he return inside to find proper dressing.

I took what I could find from the bus and ran back to the homeless man. "I'm trained in first aid," I told him. "Can I help you?" Again, he did not answer with words, but gave me a blank stare. I told him exactly what I intended to do before I did it, applying pressure to the cut on his head and mopping up the blood around his nose and mouth. The man who went inside to fetch what I needed brought the pastor back out with him and handed me my provisions. Our spot on the curb just outside of the main church exit prevented anyone from leaving the potluck without stumbling upon the commotion. The faint whispers behind me grew louder as each kind-hearted passerby offered assistance. Focused solely on keeping the injured man conscious

hindered my ears from processing their words.

“Do you want to lean back against the wall?” I offered.

“I can’t move,” he cautioned. “My head hurts and my back hurts.”

I kept pressure on the head wound with one hand and cradled the back of his head with the other. I kept him talking to me, aware that he could have a serious head injury and falling asleep would be dangerous. Because of his possible back injury, I left his backpack in place.

“You’re the one who helps out on Wednesday nights. Aren’t you?” I asked.

“Yes. They told me I could eat if I helped.”

“Well, you certainly are a big help. I’m just sorry they decided to stop meeting during the summer. What did you say your name was?” I felt guilty. I worked in the kitchen on Wednesday nights and saw him every week. I never once introduced myself or invited him to sit at our table.

“William.”

“Hi, William. I’m Abbey. The ambulance will be here soon and the paramedics take care of you.”

“I have to go,” he said as he rocked back and forth, trying to get up.

“I pulled him to me and put my face close to his ear. “You can’t go,” I pleaded. “You’re hurt. You need help.”

“But they’ll arrest me!”

“For what? You did nothing wrong!”

“I have to go.”

“But it was only an accident. You didn’t do anything wrong,” I said again.

“Do you promise they won’t arrest me?” His childlike terror and need for my reassurance mimicked those of my own child after skinning a knee in play. Even though older than I by at

least twenty years, I consoled him as if soothing the tears of a beloved son.

“I promise. You didn’t do anything wrong. It was just an accident.”

“I can’t believe I did that. I wasted all that good food.”

“Don’t worry about it. We’ll make sure you get more. Besides,” I leaned closer as if sharing a secret. “Do you know how many people I’ve seen trip over that curb? I’ve done it myself! If you weren’t carrying a plate of food, you would have been able to catch yourself.”

“Really?” he asked, momentarily relieved of the humiliation he felt.

“I have to go,” he said again after a moment’s pause.

I held him tighter. “No. You can’t go. If you go now, I’ll be so worried about you. You don’t want to do that to me, do you? If you wait for the ambulance, I promise, I’ll go to the hospital with you. I won’t leave you alone.” As I said this, part of me regretted my own words. I sealed my fate. I could now forget the plans I made with my family.

He agreed, and the ambulance soon arrived. The drivers took off his backpack before securing him to the stretcher. “What about my bag?” William asked, afraid to let it out of his sight like a child afraid to let go of his blankie. “Everything I own in this world is in that bag!”

I picked it up off the ground and promised to keep it in my possession until I handed it over to him at the hospital. I touched the pastor’s sleeve. “If I go with him, I’ll have no way of getting back to my car,” I said, pleading for help without asking.

“Even if you come with us,” the ambulance driver said, “You’d have to ride up front. You can’t ride in back with him.”

“Then I guess I’ll follow,” I said to both the pastor and the ambulance driver.

I leaned over William before they loaded him in back. “William, what’s your last name so I can find you at the hospital?”

“William Louis Moss.”

“What hospital are you going to?” I asked the driver.

“General.”

“Pastor, will you call my house? Teddy should still be at home. Let him know what’s happened and tell him I’ll call as soon as I can.”

“Are you going to the hospital?” the pastor asked.

“Yes. I promised William.”

“I’ll call. Thanks, Abbey.”

My racing heart mashed the gas pedal as far as I dared. Intersection lights responded favorably to my pulsating nerves, and the few cars enjoying a leisurely Sunday afternoon cruise sensed my urgency and hastened to other lanes. Even as my car completed a haphazard turn into one of the emergency wing parking spaces, my trepidation surprised me. A man I met less than one hour prior caused as much worry and panic as if we had been the most intimate of friends.

As I approached the emergency room entrance, the two ambulance drivers reloaded the cart used to transport William. Even though I made eye contact with one, he stared without recognition or greeting.

“I’m here to see William Moore,” I said to the clerk at the front desk.

“Who?” she asked.

“William Moore. He fell near Saint John’s Catholic Church on Seventeenth Street.”

“No one has reported a Mr. Moore as having been checked in. When did he arrive?”

“I saw the ambulance drivers outside. He hasn’t been here long.”

“They must not have finished checking him in yet. Have a seat, Ma’am. I’ll call you as

soon as I hear something.”

I paced the waiting room floor, sizing up others sitting in quiet remorse as their loved ones fought medical demons on the other side of the door. An African-American woman limped toward the front desk, her feet and legs swollen, the tremors of every step echoing through her body. The nurse sat her in a wheelchair and told her to wait for the next available doctor. I wondered if the color of her skin determined the length of her stay.

As I re-read the handwritten list of warnings on the wall, cautioning visitors on how to protect themselves from the spread of disease, the nurse from the registration desk called for me.

“What was the name of the man you’re looking for?”

“William Louis Moore,” I repeated.

“A William L. Moss has been checked in. Is it possible you have the name wrong?”

“Moss. Yes. I think that’s it. I just met him today. William Moss is correct.”

After a mere five minutes of waiting, she allowed me to pass through security to see a stranger.

The halls smelled of antiseptic and chlorine. Faded white paint plastered the bare walls and large black numbers marked the bulk of each room door. Nine. Fourteen. Twenty. Twenty-three. “Excuse me,” I stopped the first nurse I saw. “Where is room twenty-one?”

“Your kidding!” a haughty air of superiority challenged my inexperience. She pointed behind her back to a room whose number could not be seen from where I stood.

Rage replaced my anxiety. My hand begged my conscience for permission to slap the woman across the face.

How dare you! I thought to myself. Remember where you are and what you do for a living! Do you think it's easy for people to wander into a place they've never been before, into

an emergency room none the less? You don't know me or why I'm here! I could have a loved one dying in room twenty-one, and you have the nerve to treat me like I'm walking into a McDonald's looking for a restroom? Do you know how emotional and shaken I am right now? And I don't even know this guy! What if my husband or one of my kids waited for me in there? Shouldn't you, as a trained nurse, have compassion for those in your care?

I wanted her to feel my frustration and to empathize with those she promised to treat. Instead of mouthing my protestations, I followed her finger to William in room twenty-one.

Other nurses crowded around William, hooking him up to machines and monitoring his heart rate and blood pressure. The blood dried around his nose and mouth. A moist bandage stuck to his cut forehead. The nurses acknowledged my presence with a nod of the head and promised to be out of my way in a few short minutes.

“Are you his daughter?” one asked as she walked out of the room.

“Just a friend,” I corrected.

“Glad you’re here. Try to keep him still until the doctor arrives. He keeps trying to get up to leave.”

I stood above William. His arms were still strapped to the gurney. A neck brace secured his head. “I’m here,” I said, trying to sound more calm and upbeat than I felt.

“I didn’t think you’d actually come.” His quizzical gaze questioned my actions several times throughout the day. I never grew accustomed to those suspicious eyes.

I dragged the chair from the wall by the door to the head of his bed and tried to comfort him with conversation as we waited for the doctor. Every time silence prevailed, guilt admonished him for wasting my time.

“My entire body aches,” he winced. “My head, nose, neck, back, and ribs.”

I jabbed him on the shoulder. “Then quit trying to move, silly. When the doctor comes, let him look you over and decide when to unstrap you or when to take off the neck brace. You may have some serious injuries,” I playfully admonished.

“So where do you live?” I asked, trying to keep his mind off his desire to flee.

William looked at me with a mixture of reprisal and despair as if my ignorance explained all my ill-fated actions. *Of course, I imagined him thinking, if she knew I was homeless, there's no way she'd be here with me. No wonder she's being so kind. She has no idea what I am.*

“I'm homeless,” he confessed. I could see that he expected me to run out of the room screaming in horror once those words passed his lips.

“I know that!” I said. “I guess a better way to ask is—where do you stay? Do you go to the shelter downtown?”

“Oh no. I don't stay in *that* shelter.” He turned up his nose as if smelling a foul odor.

“Why not?” I asked. I often heard many homeless individuals balk at the thought of spending even one night at the mission, preferring to take their chances outside during the worst conditions of nature. Assuming their strict no drugs or alcohol policies were the root cause of William's protestations, I labeled him a drunk before hearing his response.

“For one, the overnight shelter is too cold and cramped. They've got beds practically stacked on top of each other. They pack us in like sardines. Besides that, it's safer to sleep on the street. If you want to sleep in the shelter, you've got to be there by a certain time and can't leave until morning. They lock you in! You've got to sleep with one eye open. Otherwise, you're liable to wake up or wake up with your stuff gone!”

“It can't be that bad,” I reasoned.

“Have you ever been there?”

“Just on a tour when I used to volunteer down there.”

“Count your blessings and trust me: if you ever find yourself on the streets, stay away, especially being a pretty young lady. Stay in that shelter without a man with you and . . . well, none of that matters. I don’t suppose you’ll ever find yourself homeless.”

“Fortunately. My family and my husband’s family would take us in before they ever let us go hungry or homeless. So if you don’t stay at the shelter, where do you stay?”

“I spend most of my time downtown by the library. The cops haven’t run us out of there yet!”

The conversation lulled as the clock ticked away the minutes. William bent his arm at the elbow and tried to unstrap himself from the gurney, twisting his wrists in an awkward motion as he struggled with the buckle.

“I need to go,” he insisted once again.

I put my hand on his chest both to soothe him and to insist he remain still. “You can’t go. I’ll stay here with you until they either admit you or release you if you promise to be still and let the doctor check you out. If you left now, I’d be so worried about you. You don’t want me to worry about you, do you?”

“No,” he said as if reprimanded by his mother.

“Besides, I don’t think you could even stand up. You’d probably take one step, fall down, and be right back in this bed.”

“You’re probably right,” he agreed. “But I know they won’t admit me. You should go ahead and leave. There’s no reason for you to be here.”

“If you hurt your back or neck, they may admit you at least overnight for observation.”

“I’ve been through this before. They’re not going to admit a homeless man.”

“You don’t know that! And I’m not leaving until I find out for myself what they plan to do with you!”

Another nurse entered the room armed with a clipboard pressed into her belly and a pen poised for action. The corners of her mouth aimed to the ground, and her brows furrowed in malicious scrutiny.

“I need to get some information from you for your chart,” she said, each word sounding forced and monotonous. “Name.”

“William Louis Moss.”

“Address.”

“I don’t have one,” William admitted, seeking understanding from a callous medical tyrant.

“Employment.”

“I can’t remember his name. He . . .”

“Place of last full-time job,” she said. She rolled her eyes and huffed in an obvious display of annoyance.

“It’s been several years. I do work,” William insisted, begging her to see him as more than a simple homeless good-for-nothing beggar. “I work every day if I can, but I’m not full time.”

“Military.”

“I was in the army.”

“Date of service.”

“Nineteen-forty-one. Army. I didn’t fight in the war,” he apologized. “I . . .”

She did not wait for an explanation. "Insurance,"

William closed his eyes in shame. "No," he said.

Each stabbing question pierced him deeper and deeper until any sense of pride oozed out.

I saw his spirit surrender. I stood behind the nurse, eager to grab her by the throat and humiliate her the way she humiliated William.

Her chest heaved, oblivious to the needless pain she inflicted on a fellow human being.

Her utter disgust at having to perform such menial tasks with her unworthy opponent caused me to feel embarrassed for him. He cowered at her coldness like a puppy getting spanked for shedding on the sofa.

He spoke one last time to her while pleading with me. "I don't mean to be difficult," he promised. "I just don't have the answers you're looking for."

She tucked her pen into her pocket and lowered the clipboard to her side. Without looking either of us in the eye, she did an about-face and headed out the door. "The doctor will be in shortly," she mumbled as she departed.

With deflated words, William begged me to leave. I could see in his eyes that he found comfort in my presence. We had become friends in a very short amount of time, but he grew increasingly uncomfortable as I watched person after person humiliate him in front of me.

"I'm not going anywhere," I promised. "We made a deal, remember? You told me you're a man of your word, right?"

"I'm glad I bathed and shaved yesterday and put on some clean clothes. I couldn't stand to be here and smell like a homeless person." He prided himself on cleanliness. This admission righted some of the wrong done by the nurse, restoring some sense of dignity.

He asked me to hold his hand and say a prayer. I took his hand in mine and held it even

after my fingers grew numb. I prayed a short prayer, thanking God for our newfound friendship and asked for healing and blessings for William.

After we said amen, William looked up to heaven and said “Do you think God is punishing me?”

“Why?” I asked, surprised by his question.

“I drank mouthwash this morning. I’m sure God doesn’t appreciate me showing up to church drunk.”

“Is that why your breath is so fresh?” I joked. I never heard of getting drunk from drinking mouth wash. “I don’t know why this happened,” I confessed. “God’s reasons don’t always make a lot of sense to us mere humans. Maybe it had nothing to do with you.”

“What do you mean?”

“Maybe God was punishing you. Maybe he wants you to stop drinking. Or maybe he wants you to start going to church for reasons other than a free meal. Or maybe you fell so that I could learn something. Maybe someone at the church or here at this hospital needs to learn something from this experience.”

“What could you have to learn from all this?”

“Obedience,” I said as a matter-of-fact. “And there are quite a few people I’ve met today who could learn a thing or two about some compassion.”

Something about what I said caused him to consider my actions and made him feel guilty all over again. “Did you have plans this afternoon? You should really go home and spend time with your family,” he insisted.

“Do you know why I’m here?” I asked William.

“No,” he said. I was about to answer the one question that weighed on him all afternoon.

"I'm here because we have the same Daddy, and our Daddy told me to stay with you. No one should have to go through this alone. No one."

I looked him in the eyes as I said this, and something passed between us. As those words floated from my mouth into his ears, I saw him as Christ saw him, and everything made sense while, at the same time, made no sense whatsoever. I felt, deep within my soul, just how much Jesus loves the world and just how much the world hates Him. I had never experienced such a clear vision of spiritual reality. It was as if a chasm between this life and the heavenly realms opened for a split second, and I stood with one leg firmly planted in each world.

I felt like Elisha's servant when, as told in Second Kinds, he found an army with horses and chariots surrounding the city. The Aramean king planned to kill Elisha because the prophet warned the Israelites of his military strategy.

Oh, my lord, what shall we do? the servant asked Elisha, terrified that his master would soon be dead at the hands of his enemies. He could not see beyond his fear.

Don't be afraid, Elisha told his servant. *Those who are with us are more than those who are with them.* I can imagine Elisha's calm reassurance in his God.

Elisha prayed, *O LORD, open his eyes so he may see.* When the LORD opened the servant's eyes, he looked and saw the hills full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha. He witnessed God's army poised for battle.

My God gave me the precious gift of opening my eyes so that I, too, could see His reality. The revelation disappeared as quickly as it manifested. But the scar left by coming that close to God's perfect love ate at me from the inside out like a virus killing my body with deliberate and meticulous accuracy.

"I'm tired of this," William said, temporarily delaying the spiritual paralysis creeping into

me. "I'm here too often. God's telling me I need to quit drinking. I used to use cocaine and got off that. I was sober, too—for five years. I need to stop this."

I knew he meant what he said, but I also knew, once out of the hospital and back out on the streets, sleeping in uncomfortable stairwells and doorways, as the pain from his fall set in, he would seek out the only medicine available to him. Alcoholism ran in Teddy's family. I knew enough to understand how much the addiction controlled the addict. Without changing his circumstances along with his thoughts, he had little hope of carrying this righteous anger with him beyond the walls of the hospital.

"Are you familiar with Hebrews thirteen two?" William asked. "That verse describes you."

"I'm not familiar with it. What does it say?"

He winked. "Look it up when you get home." He did not want to recite the passage for me.

"Do you have a Bible in your bag?"

"I hate to admit it, but I don't own a Bible right now."

"I have a whole box of Bibles in the trunk of my car. The pastor gave them to me for times such as this. If you promise to be here when I return, I'll run out and get one for you."

He gave me his word, but, when I returned, he was gone—bed and all. A nurse informed me that the doctor finally arrived and took him to get x-rays. "He should be back soon," she promised.

I waited for over an hour before he returned to the room. While I waited, the doctor walked by and noticed me pacing in circles and staring at the floor.

"Are you his daughter?" he asked after introducing himself.

“No. He helps out at my church. We officially met today.”

He patted my back and gave me a look of shocked awe before returning to his rounds.

“Why are you still here?” Another nurse asked. “We’ll take care of him.” The contempt she harbored for both William and me etched itself in the creases around her eyes.

“I promised him I’d be here when he got back,” I defended.

I spent the next hour sitting in the chair by the door or pacing the expanse of that tiny room. I listened to the incessant beeping of the monitor the nurses failed to turn off after William’s departure. The high-pitched squeal kept mismatched time with the silent second hand of the clock on the wall.

My eyes glanced at the clock too often, mocking me as time slowed down. *Four pm. I’ve been here for almost three hours. Four-o-two pm. I wonder what Teddy and the kids are doing right now. They have probably eaten already. I wonder if anyone has asked about me.*

Four-o-six pm. I wonder what’s taking so long. How long does it take to get x-rays anyway? There’s the doctor again. Maybe I should ask him.

Four-eleven. I need to quit looking at the clock. I went to the nurse’s desk and asked to borrow a pen. I wrote a note for William inside the Bible and left it for him inside his bag.

Four-fifteen. I imagined the kids playing with their father and saw the empty place where I should have been sitting, watching my family and talking with friends. I can’t believe I ruined my day in this hospital. If only I left the church when I planned. If only I kept my mouth shut. I could have left after the ambulance took William away. No one would have expected more from me, not even William.

I wish I left the first time William told me to. The nurses have been pretty rude, but that

doctor sure was nice. Very professional. Just as a doctor should be. William would have been just fine without me.

Guilt struck me across the face. I can't believe I could even think such thoughts! There will be many more days to have picnics with my friends and family. William needed me today. Even if no one else cared whether I came here and stayed here all day, God cares. He's the one who told me to be here. If I had it to do all over again, I'd do exactly the same thing.

So, if I truly believe that—and I do—then why am I so bitter and angry all of a sudden?

I refocused my inward conversation from me to God. I asked for this, didn't I? I wanted to draw nearer to you. Lord, don't punish me because I didn't want to see Your face anymore after the glimpse into heaven You gave me. That scared me. I don't want to know love the way You know it. It's too much to bear. Instead of feeling blessed by what You showed me, I feel angry. But I don't want You to stop blessing me either. Help me work through the pain and confusion I'm feeling. I don't want to go backwards. Keep drawing me closer to You.

As I struggled with my dueling emotions, another nurse returned William to the room.

“They forgot him!” the merry nurse screeched. “They forgot to log that he could return to his room. You didn’t mind, though, did you?” she asked William. “Slept the whole time!”

“Took a good nap!” my groggy friend answered.

The doctor returned as the nurse chatted with her special patient. “She’s been waiting the whole time,” he told William, referring to me.

“They lost me,” William said, his face refreshed and his smile giving thanks to the gentle attention of his African-American caretaker.

“You’re lucky to have a friend like her,” the doctor said about me as he prepared fresh bandages and syringes.

William looked on me with tenderness and smiled once again.

“Okay, William. X-rays look good. Nothing wrong with you except a few cuts and a broken nose. Nothing we can do about it, though. We’ll stitch up that nasty cut on your forehead and get you out of here in no time! I’ll give you a little something for the pain now, but you’ll have quite a headache by morning!”

“I can’t watch this!” My head felt light at the mere thought of witnessing the doctor sew up the loose flesh on William’s head.

The doctor smirked. “I don’t generally let people watch anyway. Go out into the waiting room. I’ll come get you when we’re done.”

I waited for thirty minutes, and no one ever came to get me. Assuming the procedure could not have lasted this long, I returned to the room. William, alone in the room, stood leaning against the bed buttoning up his shirt.

“Told you they wouldn’t admit me,” he said.

He stood erect, and we hugged in farewell. “I’ll be okay,” he assured me, sensing my hesitation. “Go on home to your family. You’ve comforted this old man long enough.”

I gave him what little cash I carried with me. “I know it’s not much, but I wanted you to have something since you lost your meal at church. You sure you’ll be okay?” I asked.

“I promise,” he said. I knew he lived his life on the streets long before he met me and managed to survive this long. But something inside me changed. Knowing where he planned to sleep and how he intended to live his days tormented me. I now knew him as a person and was reluctant to let him return to his former life.

Without any better options, I left, turning back to look at him one last time. As I stepped out into the fresh air of this sunny Sunday afternoon, a dark cloud of doom followed me. I

carried the cloud like a badge of honor for weeks that seemed to merge into one unending hour of spiritual agony. After days of silence between me and God—no matter how hard I tried I could not pray—I turned to Father Clarence for support.

Dear Father Clarence,

Something unusual happened today. I'm writing you because I don't know where else to turn. I keep trying to talk to God, but I can't. I need him more than ever right now, but I feel so unworthy. He gave me the greatest gift, but instead of being thankful, I am angry. Is it righteous anger? I don't think so. If it was, shouldn't I be able to still talk with my Lord?

When I got home from the hospital, Teddy was angry with me. He was not upset because I spent the day comforting someone in need. Rather, he was worried because I was gone all day with a stranger and never attempted to contact him to let him know that I was okay.

I know he was right and had a legitimate reason to be concerned, but I yelled at him, accusing him of trying to steal my

joy. I ran to my room and lay on my bed sobbing. Even as the tears fell, I could not understand what was going on inside of me. I have been overcome with such emotion that I have never experienced before. I am not angry with William or Teddy. I am angry at the hospital staff, and I am especially angry with God. But, why? I did exactly what He wanted me to do, and I would do it all again, exactly the same way. Help me understand what is going on inside of me.

Abbey

My Daughter,

You did a good thing for the man you told me about. Thank you for trusting me with your story. I especially like the image of Elisha's servant witnessing the glory of God manifest. The hour you spent alone caused some deep emotions to surface. It seems to me that, up until this moment, you did not have time to process all you and William had been through and shared together.

It sounds to me like you are experiencing spiritual warfare. Satan is not happy with what you did. You were more of a daughter to William than his own daughter. You were more of a friend than most people will ever be lucky enough to know.

Did you ever look up the verse William told you about? Hebrews 13:2 says "Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing some people have entertained angels without knowing it." Contrary to how the verse reads, I believe William was referring to you as his angel.

Take your Bible and study Matthew Chapter 25. Pay specific attention to verses 31-40. They read,

"When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his throne in heavenly glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left.

"Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.'

"Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?'

"The King will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of

these brothers of mine, you did for me."

As Satan watched the interaction between you and William, or between you and the medical staff, when he heard the thoughts of your heart, he became angry. He knew he lost you. But Satan is shrewd and does not give up that easily. He saw a chance to attack you with doubt and guilt (two very powerful weapons) while you waited for William to return. Do you think it was an accident that the nursing staff forgot to bring him back right way? Satan did that.

But, never fear, my daughter. Remember God's righteous servant, Job? Satan cannot act apart from God. He allowed Satan to tempt Job, knowing the outcome. Nothing Satan did turned Job away from his LORD.

Satan is playing with you, but your LORD is still right beside you. He understands your anger and other range of emotions. He understands why you cannot pray the way you want to pray. Remember, too, that prayer is more than getting on your knees, bowing your head, and saying a few words. Your life is a prayer. Your thoughts and emotions are your prayer. We are called to live beyond the emotion of this world. God sent His Son to be an example to us. He has called us to love.

Your life, your actions that day for a stranger were the most supreme act of love. It was a prayer without words. When you are ready, forget about what you know about prayer. Take a picture of our Lord and sit in front of it. Talk to Him as if He were sitting in front of you in the flesh. Talk to Him the way you would talk to me or to Teddy. He will wait for you, Abbey. He loves you. Never forget that.

With all my love,

Clarence

PS. You have been gone too long. I am your friend. You do not need to be so formal with me. You do not have to call me "Father."

Clarence,

Forgive me if I sounded too formal in my last letter. Ever since my uncle Walter died, I felt like I had no father. As you know, I was never particularly close to my own. When I met you, you became more of a father figure to me than I had known since losing my dear uncle.

Thank you for your last letter. In my head, everything you said made sense. I even tried to pray as you recommended, but I could do no more than stare at the picture. Nothing means anything anymore. Every time I try to pray, I see William's face and imagine what he is doing now. I see him walking the streets and sleeping in doorways. I see the hurt in his eyes when passersby taunt him. I hear

the thoughts of those passersby, judging him without knowing him. I feel his pain when his stomach rumbles with hunger and taste his thirst as his dry throat cracks and coughs.

The things I used to pray for seem so petty. Even as I write this letter, my kids are asleep and safe in warm beds. Teddy has provided us with a roof over our heads and plenty of food on the table. We want for nothing. How can I pray about things that seem so insignificant compared to the life people like William lead?

I told Teddy how William had only two sets of clothing, the ones he wore and another in his backpack. Those he wore were covered in his blood. Teddy gave me a few pair of pants and shirts for me to give to William. I drove around town looking for him. I never found him. He had promised to come to church. He wasn't there. I ended up giving the clothes to another homeless man.

I don't want to forget William or this experience, but I can't stand thinking about him so much. I long for the day when life as I knew it will return.

Abbey

Abbey,

I am honored that you consider me like a father. Having never had sons or daughters of my own, I am touched by our familial bond.

I understand you wanting to return to a more comfortable existence, days you knew before Pentecost. However, you will never be the same again. God has called you for some special purpose. The gift He gave you, revealing His glory to you the way He did, is a rare and precious gift. You can never go back. And I don't believe you really want to. Rather, you want to move forward, to feel joy again.

The emotions you described are similar to survivor's guilt. I see the exact same thing with members of the church who go on mission trips. I experienced it myself when I first went to Liberia, one of the poorest countries in the world. People live a life so far removed from our own. You have seen the size of my belly. I am not an overly large man, but I obviously love good food. After witnessing and experiencing their diet, or lack thereof, I found myself in a state of shock upon my return home. My body craved a cheeseburger, but my heart could not enjoy it. I took one bite and spit it out.

How could I come home and eat my fill when men, women, and children are dying of starvation? How could I pray for things like help getting over my cold when others were dying because they didn't have basic vaccines prevalent in American society? I had never seen poverty like that in all my years in Ireland or America. With the help of others in the church, I was able once again to eat good American foods and I could once again pray for myself and for the needs of others.

You do not live William's life. You should still care about your own life because God still cares. You must still live your own life and you still need God to be a part of it. Whatever and wherever you are in life, pray about it. Even if it seems pointless right now, pray about it. Again, God still cares. Continue to pray for William and others like him. Continue to help where and when you can. But never stop living your own life and never stop inviting God into that life. You need him. I will pray for you as well.

With love,

Clarence.

Clarence,

I am beginning to understand my anger better. Your last letter helped tremendously. I now understand that one of my biggest issues was not what I did or did not do. It wasn't what William did or did not do. It was not even the way the medical staff treated him. It was the way the medical staff treated me.

Every time someone patted my back for my "good deed" or looked at me, bewildered by my actions, I wanted to lash out at them. They acted as if what I did was so extraordinary, something beyond comprehension.

However, what I did should be the normal reaction, especially for those who call themselves Christians. I read and re-read Matthew Chapter 25. If we call ourselves Christians, and truly believe what Jesus taught, then why is what I did so unusual? This is what has angered me more than anything.

Remember what I told you about glimpsing Christ's love? With that love, I also saw the hate the world harbors in its heart toward Christ. He loves us beyond any measure, and how do we repay Him? We hurt each other every day. We spit in His face by treating His beloved sons and daughters like refuse under our feet. I could feel just how deeply that rejection hurts Him. That love and that pain was too intense to be reconciled.

Abbey

Abbey,

There is good news, though. Jesus Christ can and will reconcile those two extremes you mentioned. You are proof of that.

I understand your anger and agree that your act of righteousness should be the

normal behavior for all, especially if we claim to be Christians. Unfortunately, it is not. Most people cannot and will not understand why you would do what you did. Most would help out, the way others at your church helped, but they would wash their hands of it once the ambulance arrived. Some, I am sorry to say, would not even do that much for a homeless man. They would have pretended that they did not see anything and walk on by.

You once told me you had difficulty with the passage from Matthew 6:1-4?

"Be careful not to do your 'acts of righteousness' before men, to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven.

"So when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honored by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you."

You did not know how to accept the praise of men without becoming a hypocrite. By chance, is this part of the reason why comments from the good doctor upset you? If so, know that God knows your heart. He knows you didn't do what you did for William so that others would praise you and pat you on the back. He knows you did what you did because you love Him. You need to share your story.

You will not be a hypocrite by sharing your experience with others. As a matter of fact, if I may be so bold, I think you would be a hypocrite if you did not share it with

others. Is not our purpose in life to love one another as He first loved us? Is not our directive to go make disciples of men? What better way to teach others how to love as Christ loved than to tell them about William? Make others care about him as much as you do. Make others see that homeless person on the street and think differently about him. Be God's agent for change.

All my love,

Clarence

My correspondence with Father Clarence helped me process my thoughts and emotions. He was right. There was no going back to the woman I knew before I met William. God revealed Himself to me and changed my life forever. Without this experience, I may not have been as well equipped to deal with the more demanding situations in life awaiting me.

Chapter Thirty-One
Abigail Louise Bailey
(Abbey)

“He’s home early, isn’t he?” Father Clarence asked when I called him to tell him the news. “What happened? I hope all is well.”

I told him what I knew of his experience in Vietnam and how he survived crashing into enemy territory. “The last thing Teddy remembers is shadows moving around him, lifting up his body. He heard hushed whispers, but understood nothing. At first, he thought the same men who poked at his body while he floated in the gulf returned to finish the job. But the shadows he saw towered above any Vietcong he ever saw, and their gentle hands filled him with a sense of peace. Because of the condition of his body and the state of his soul, he gave in and allowed his captors—whether demon or angel—to carry him away to his new home.

“When he awoke, a bright light blinded him. The light reminded him of his vision after he crashed, and he assumed he now stood in the presence of God. Then the smell of antiseptic aroused his other senses, and he realized those gentle hands brought him to a hospital.”

“Did you get to see him?”

“No. They took him to a hospital in Saigon, but when he never woke up, they transferred him to a facility in Japan.”

“Who were his angels?” Father Clarence asked.

“A nearby US Army Special Forces Unit saw the plane go down. They waited for the cover of night to recover the body. From what they saw, they never expected to find him alive. That’s all anyone ever told Teddy about his rescue. At least, that is all he told me.”

When I received word about Teddy’s return, I still knew nothing about why he left,

where he went, or what brought him home before expected. I cared nothing about the details as long as my Teddy came home to me safely.

I noticed the change in him almost immediately. My shy and reserved husband now acted even more withdrawn. Even though he showered his friends and family with kindness, he spoke very little and seemed to be lost in deep thought. The man who preferred to be in total control now spent most of his waking hours with a drink in his hand. At night, he tossed and turned and often awoke with a start, soaking the sheets with his sweat. I hoped with time, after readjusting to civilian life, my old Teddy would return. He never did.

Teddy served his country well, keeping their secret even from those he loved. No one knew the inner torment he endured every day of his life. Had it not been for the letters, I may have never known.

“Clarence, he needs help. I try to talk to him, to reach out to him, but he won’t let me in. My uncle Jack has tried to talk to him, but he smiles and assures him he’s fine. He’s not fine, though. It’s as if I’m living with a stranger. He’s living with a terrible secret buried deep inside, and it’s killing him.”

While unpacking his gear, I came across a stack of sealed letters without postage or addresses. Teddy concealed them inside a makeshift lining on the bottom of his flight bag. Unless someone knew what to look for, they would never have found it. The material matched perfectly and the stitching was seamless. It looked as if he sewed one bag inside another.

I found the secret compartment by pure chance. The zipper from a pair of pants snagged on a loose thread. As I pulled it free, the seam tore. I inspected the seam and found the letters and some personal effects belonging to Caleb.

I never told Teddy about my discovery. After reading the letters, I put them back where I

found them and repaired the stitching. I even tried to put them away without reading them, but I could not help myself. I had to know what happened to my husband. I needed to understand what caused a piece of him to die inside.

Teddy addressed all the letters to either me or Nadia, Caleb's wife. The tone started out energetic, showing his youthful naiveté. The more time he spent in Vietnam, the more his mood grew darker and more somber.

"Clarence, these letters are a cry for help. It's obvious he needs and wants to share his burdens with someone. This is too much for him to carry alone." I read a few of the dozens of letters to Father Clarence.

January 24, 1962

Abbey,

I wish you could be here with me. I miss you and Clarence so much, but the conditions here are horrendous. We're in Vietnam.

We're here officially to "aid in training" of the South Vietnamese Air Force, as you know. But, so far, the guys flying with us take a back seat and are already very skilled. We're not doing more than dropping leaflets over parts of the country.

These leaflets are supposed warn the people about the coming destruction. "Psychological warfare" they call it. Personally, I think it's all a big joke. I mean,

some of the guerrilla fighters are civilians, including women and children. Even the South Vietnamese think this is a waste of air power, but we simply do as told.

Lieutenant John (He's a Vietnam pilot who flies with me. His real name is Lanh La, but we call him John.) Anyway, Lieutenant John translated one of the leaflets for me. I put a copy in here for you to see. That's a picture of the B-52 Stratofortress on the front there dropping the leaflets in bottles. Looks like it's dropping bombs though, doesn't it? I guess that's the point. The writing on the back is Vietnamese, obviously. Here's the translation:

"This is the Mighty B-52. Now you have experienced the terrible rain of death and destruction its bombs have caused. These planes come swiftly, strongly, speaking as the voice of the Government of Vietnam proclaiming its determination to eliminate the Viet Cong threat to peace. Your area will be struck again and again, but you will not know when or where. The planes fly too high to be heard or seen. They will rain death on you again without warning. Leave this place to save your life. Use this leaflet or the GVN National Safe Conduct Pass and rally to the nearest government outpost. The Republic of Vietnam soldiers and the people will happily welcome you."

Personally, I think the Viet Cong will take this as seriously as the Germans did during WWII. Hell, they may even use it against the South like the Germans

did against Britain and the US.

Well, I wish I could actually send you this letter. But simply writing it makes me feel somehow close to you, as if I were actually talking to you. I close my eyes, and I see your face. I pray each night that you know, somehow, how much I love you.

February 2, 1962

Abbey,

Still no action. I'm starting to wonder why we are here. We're not really training anyone, and we're not really serving any purpose other than those damned leaflet drops. I think Caleb and I have had more to drink since we've been here than either one of us have had in our lifetimes. There's nothing else to do. We complete our "mission" for the day, then go kick some back and play poker or dominoes or something.

I'm ashamed to tell you that to ease the boredom, I've even allowed the guys to talk me into trying some marijuana. I know how you feel about drugs of any kind,

and I hate to think that I'm a disappointment to you. Please don't think less of me.

When I get home, I'll teach Clarence to be better and stronger than I am.

It's just so relaxing. And it helps when I start to feel a little too lonely or homesick. The food here stinks. The accommodations stink. There's really nothing else to do. I'm sorry. I'll quit defending it. But I promise I'm not doing anything harder than that. And if I'm still smoking when this tour is through, I'll stop before I get back home to you.

April 17, 1962

Abbey,

I had the worst dream last night. We had three kids, two boys and a girl. (That's not the horrible part!) Our other son's name was Christopher, and our daughter, the youngest, was named Frances. We called her Franny. Anyway, we were driving back home either on our way to or from my folks house. You were driving and noticed that the person in the car in front of us was Charles. (I'm groaning right now just thinking about him.) You pulled him over. I didn't want to,

but I didn't stop you. The two of you chatted like old friends, and you invited him over for dinner.

The next night, he came over. It was you, me, the kids, my mom, and Charles. Somehow, the conversation turned to the kids, and it came out that Franny wasn't mine and possibly Christopher wasn't mine, either. My gut sank. My mom even knew about the two of you and never told me. You two kept in touch and started seeing each other again when I left. I stood up, took my plate of food, and smashed it in your face before walking out.

I was so devastated. It felt like I was going to vomit and have diarrhea all at the same time. I felt like I had been kicked in the gut, and I started to sweat. My head started spinning as if I had a hangover.

I remember the mix of emotions. Not only were my children not my own, but I could not believe that the woman I loved with every being of my body could do this to me. I woke up, and I felt as if it had actually happened. It was the worst feeling in the world, and I'm glad it was just a dream.

Later in the day, I thought about our past, how I cheated on you. If I put you through even a fraction of what I felt just from that dream, I am so sorry. I would do anything if only I could take it back. I just hope I have done justice to you since then and have proven to you that I am someone you can trust.

May 10, 1062

Abbey,

I killed Caleb today. Well, I didn't actually kill him, but I might as well have. What was I thinking? I was so eager to get up there and fight that I forgot reason. He wouldn't have been up there if it wasn't for me. If nothing else, I should have listened to him when he first said I should back down and come home.

I can't close my eyes without seeing that ball of fire outside my cockpit window. What we're doing here is real to me now. This is not a game. But I can't talk to anyone about it. If I do, they'll ground me or, worse, send me home.

I love you, Abbey, with all my heart, but I can't go home now. Not like this. I owe it to Caleb to fight. I owe him. It's personal now.

Abbey, something happened out there today. I can't quite describe it, but it's like the me I used to be stayed out there with Caleb. When I landed, I almost killed a kid for calling Caleb a useless nigger. I know he's just a stupid, naive kid, but this rage just sprang up from out of nowhere. The Colonel tried to get me to talk to a Chaplain, but he also made it very clear that he would have no problem

taking away my wings if I proved unfit for duty.

I just have so much emotion all wrapped up deep inside of me. On one hand, I just want to go home to you. I know you'd just hold me and make it alright. I know I could let it all out and you'd love me. (I'm fighting back tears right now, but I've been having such a hard time controlling myself lately.) I feel such guilt over the loss of Caleb. No matter what Colonel King says, I know it was my fault. What about Nadia? What's she going to do now?

Then, I'm angry at the Gook who shot Caleb down. It was a cheap shot. But then I feel guilty about that, too because we took a couple of cheap shots ourselves.

Then, I feel haunted, not just by Caleb, but by the other men I killed. I shot down two enemy birds today. Before I tried to kill Montgomery, the maintenance kid I just mentioned, he asked what it was like to kill a man. To be honest, I never thought about killing another human being before he made that comment. I was just shooting at another bird. It was a game with cool explosions. Even after Caleb got shot down and I felt the pain of his death, I never really put it together that I had killed two men myself.

What am I doing here? On the one hand, I want to get up again so bad I can taste it. I want to fight again and shoot down other enemy planes. On the other

hand, I don't have a clue what I'm doing here. Yes, I believe in our mission but who am I to take another man's life? Who am I to take away someone's son, brother, husband, or father?

I'm afraid to go back up, but I'm also afraid not to.

May 10, 1962

Nadia,

I'm sorry that you may never get to know what a truly incredible pilot your husband was. If it wasn't for my duty to keep silent, I would let the whole world know. I am alive today because of him. I am the pilot I am today because of him.

Our base in Bien Hoa was attacked early this morning. Caleb beat most of the other men, including me, to the flight line. He showed no fear. In an air fight, defending our base and our crew, Caleb shot down one enemy craft before getting shot down himself.

The letter ends abruptly. The paper is torn in half, and he scratched out the rest of the writing, making it too unintelligible to read.

May 11, 1962

Nadia,

How can I tell you all you need to know? How can I say that because of me, your husband is dead? We weren't defending anything. Those gooks had already left. We should

This letter also ends abruptly. It is crumpled as if he intended to throw it away, but he sealed it in an envelope instead.

May 12, 1962

My Precious Son,

Someday, when you are all grown up, you may have a lot of questions for your old man, such as why am I not there with you instead of here fighting a war that doesn't exist. Son, some people in this world will be taken advantage of by godless

and powerful men. Those men do not have a right to treat others in an inhumane way, but they will try and will succeed if others do not intervene on their behalf. That's the problem with Communism. It's good in theory, but it just doesn't work. I'll let your mom explain that, though. She's a very smart woman, much better with words than I am.

I used to think it was my job to help defend the defenseless, and, in many ways, I still think so. However, I have done some things here in the name of pride of which I am not proud. Because of my pride, I have lost those very near and dear to my heart. I almost lost your mother because of pride once.

My point is, Son, that you have to be very careful in this life. We can too easily do things to others without meaning to, and in essence, ruin the lives of so many people, some we have never even met.

I hope I live to see the day when you become a man. And, when that day comes, I will tell you all about what's going on here and what will eventually happen. I'll answer any questions you have as honestly as I can. In the meantime, I hope you can forgive your father for not being there for you right now.

May 12, 1962

Nadia,

All I can hope is that someday, when you learn the truth of our mission here in Vietnam and how Caleb died, you can find it in your heart to forgive me. I cannot and will not forgive myself. I am sorry for taking away your future family and lives together. It should have been me.

June 30, 1962

Abbey,

I flew my first combat mission again today. You know? I wasn't scared at all. I've flown since Caleb was killed, but we've never run into any trouble until today. I felt like a machine. No emotion. It is all so personal now. It's just me against the bad guy and I know I'm going to win. And, while I'm up there in the fight, I get this tunnel vision even greater than I've had any other time. Every one of them is the plane who shot down Caleb. Every one of them is my personal enemy.

Remember when I told you how it was a strange and new sensation to know I was actually killing men and not just shooting down their birds? That sensation is

gone. I feel nothing.

July 4, 1962

Abbey,

It's the 4th of July today. Some of the men shot up flares in place of fireworks. Colonel King let us fly the American flag just long enough to sing the national anthem. We can't fly our flag here. Since we're not supposed to be here, we can't draw attention to the fact that we are here. And, obviously, it would end up making a damn good target for the Viet Cong.

Today's the best day I've had in a while. Instead of participating in all the festivities, I've been lying in my bunk thinking about you and Clarence, imagining what we'd be doing back home. It makes me smile to think of how much Clarence would like the fireworks. They always put on quite a show by the lake. We'd be eating hamburgers and hotdogs. Boy, how I miss good ole' American food!

I wonder if any of the old gang's around. Ever here from Bobby? I wonder if he comes home much anymore since he's such a big shot now. Listen to me. I'm talking as if it's been a lifetime since I was home. It just feels like it, I guess.

August 2, 1962

Nadia,

It's very early here in Vietnam. Even though the air is as sticky as a midday sun and the bugs keep feasting on our flesh, it's as dark as a tomb. Sorry for using "tomb" as an example. I can't sleep. Caleb should be home with you. I shouldn't have robbed you of your time with him. I'm sorry that

Teddy never manages to finish a letter to Nadia.

August 2, 1962

Abbey,

I keep trying to write Nadia, but words fail me. What do you say to your best friend's wife that will make her feel better? What can I say to make me feel less guilty for taking him from her? I had such a horrible dream again tonight. This time, it wasn't Caleb's face I saw. It was his kids. He kept asking me why I took his

daddy away from him, saying now he will never get to be born. His momma will never get to hold him and love him. It scared the hell out of me. Now children who don't even exist are accusing me. I wish I could turn off my brain and just become a machine all the time like the way I feel when flying.

August 13, 1962

Clarence,

It's your birthday today. I'm sorry I'm not there to help you blow out your candles. You're actually old enough to understand what today is. Have fun, my boy. My thoughts and prayers are with you. I love you very much. Give your beautiful momma a huge hug and kiss for me.

"Clarence, the death of Caleb did mean the death of Teddy. He became a war machine. His flying became, for him, a battle of wits and skill. The best pilot won. Nothing more. Nothing less. Up there, he feels nothing. Down here, he's tormented by his own demons."

"Abbey, I know you love him, but there is only so much you can do for him. Yes, there is no doubt he needs help, but he needs the kind of help you cannot offer him."

"I know, Father, that's why I'm calling you. I need you. Teddy needs you. Will you come to us?"

Chapter Thirty-Two
Clarence Patrick Brennan
(Father Clarence)

“Father Clarence, good to see you,” Teddy greeted me. He wore a forced smile and shook my hand with vigor. He held a cold bottle of beer in his left hand. “What brings you to our little city?” he asked before offering me a drink.

I accepted his generosity and took a seat beside him on the back porch. “Missed you all, especially my name’s sake. When Abbey told me the good news, I decided to take a little trip. Not only are you home, but you two are expecting your third child. Congratulations. Know whether to expect a boy or a girl?”

“Don’t know yet, Father, but I’m hoping for a little girl. Boys are great, a lot of fun, but I’d like to have a daughter, one as smart and as beautiful as her mother.”

“You’d be one lucky guy,” I said as I patted him on the back. “So, I hear you are a hero, saved your South Vietnamese counterpart when you crashed. Heard you coached him to safer airspace. Because of your skill and training, he became an ace, revered among his people. And, because of your quick thinking, he will live to fight another day. La . . . Lo ha . . .”

“His name’s Lanh La, John for short!” I watched as Teddy tried to act modest and humbled, yet I saw the truth in his eyes. Whatever happened out there, very few men knew all the facts. “Well, what’s done is done. Not much to talk about really.”

“Not so! I mean, if the President of the United States wants to honor you and if the United States Air Force wants to reward your bravery by giving you your choice of assignments, that’s a pretty big deal, something of which to be proud.”

“Did Abbey tell you all this?” he snorted, failing to conceal his disgust with the recent accolades he received.

“She’s proud of you. I think, though, she hopes you will choose to work at a base close to home, like Scott Air Force Base in O’Fallon. You given any thought to what you’d like to do?”

He took a long sip and looked at me out of the corner of his eyes. He gave me a half smile and shrugged his shoulders. “I’m on medical leave for a little while yet. No hurry. Just enjoying the family now.”

“Good. Good. No rush,” I said, knowing he had made his decision long ago. “Abbey and the kids enjoy having you home, I’m sure.”

“I’m sure,” he grunted.

Abbey and the kids joined us. Teddy lit the coals on the grill and tossed me another beer. We watched as little Clarence and Christopher played in a plastic pool. “How do you like your burger, Father?”

“A hint of pink, if you don’t mind. Too well done and all the flavor’s gone. Might as well nibble on one of them coals.”

“Amen, Father!” Teddy agreed.

“I really wish you would call me Clarence. Father is too formal among friends.” He kept his back to me and faced the grill. He met my request with silence and continued to call me Father during the course of the day.

I took the hint and momentarily shifted my focus to Abbey. She looked at me, asking for my diagnosis without saying a word. I nodded my agreement with her assessment. We sat and watched the boys at play.

“Haven’t they grown?” Abbey asked.

“Well, I haven’t seen Clarence since he was a baby and I never had the pleasure of

meeting little Christopher. Each boy looks so much like the both of you.”

“Clarence acts more like his daddy, though. Wants to be with him all the time and always talks about airplanes. We may have another pilot in the family. Christopher, on the other hand, is my little shadow. He’s definitely a momma’s boy!”

“Tell me, Abbey, how has your life changed since your hospital incident?” Teddy turned and faced me, warning me with his stare. He mistook my innocent inquiry as an attempt to meddle into his personal life.

Abbey noticed his sudden change of mood and quickly came to my rescue. “You mean after I took that homeless man to the hospital?” I nodded. Teddy turned back around and resumed cooking. He pretended to ignore our conversation.

“You were right. My life has never been the same. However, no one would know just by looking at me.”

“I can sense a change in you,” I offered.

“Yes, but you know me. You know all about what I experienced and how it made me feel. I don’t discuss religion or spiritual encounters with too many people. My own friends and family think I’m crazy. I have no desire to try to explain what I myself don’t understand.”

“Sure, but have you ever stopped to consider that people may understand more than you think they do? After all, you’d be surprised how many people have gone through the same exact situation and experienced the same exact emotions. Do you realize how much help we could be to one another if we trusted each other with our secrets?”

Teddy mumbled under his breath and shook his head. He accused us of trying to engage him by disguising the true intent of our conversation. Abbey and I ignored him.

“It’s not that easy. I trust you. I trust my uncle Jack. And I trust Teddy. I have already

been chastised by family members who claim to know God. They judge me based on their own limited experience. I have learned that some Christians know God and others simply know about Him. Others are what I call creation worshippers—they worship the creation and not the creator. How do you share with someone who has never experienced what you experienced?”

“It’s difficult, I know, but you just named three people you do trust. That’s more than most people think they have.”

Teddy grunted again. He grew weary of our exchange. Abbey and I sat in silence and watched as the boys laughed and played together.

“Clarence sure does take good care of his baby brother. They do so well together.”

“It’s a blessing. I look at them and know without doubt that God exists. When I think about my three men, I know love in its truest form.”

Teddy looked at his boys and then at his pregnant wife. He smiled a genuine smile. He, too, understood this kind of love.

“You know,” Abbey continued. “The priest at my church once told me there are two types of Christians—those who do just enough to go to heaven and those who seek a deeper, more personal relationship with God. He said if we don’t want a relationship with Him, both God and Satan will leave us alone. If we choose to seek a more personal relationship with Him, both God and Satan will fight for us. You asked how I have been since my experience with William. I have grown closer to God and felt the full impact of evil.

“Some people don’t believe in evil. How can you believe in good, but not in evil? Anyway, the closer I get to God, the more real evil becomes. It’s unbelievable!”

“Draw near to me and I will draw near to you. Resist the evil one and he will flee from you.’ From the book of James, chapter four, verse seven,” I quoted.

Abbey looked at me as if staring at an apparition. “God gave me that verse once I was finally able to pray again. After spending time with William, Satan took over and pulled me away from God. The longer I went without praying, the worse I felt. I even became angry and short tempered. Then, while reading the Book of James, I found that this verse stood out to me. When we draw closer to God, Satan will get upset. But we have the option of resisting him. After all, he has no true hold over us, not with the help of God. After I read that verse, I said out loud, ‘The Lord rebuke you, Satan. You have no power here.’ And you know what, the second—less than a second—after I said those words, the anger and sadness and bitterness left me. I felt whole again. I felt restored.”

Teddy cocked his ear to listen as his wife spoke. I could tell she had never shared this encounter with him.

Our spiritual conversation ceased when Teddy announced he finished grilling our meal. Abbey excused herself to fetch a few side dishes and drinks. As we ate, the three of us talked about less serious subjects, enjoying each other’s company and forgetting about the worries of life. After dinner, Abbey took the boys inside to give them their baths and to read to them until they fell asleep, leaving me alone with Teddy once again.

“So, Teddy,” I said, hoping to engage him in small talk, “How have you been? Heard the crash left you a bit beat up. You recovering okay?”

Teddy stared at me. I felt him searching for something deep inside of me. “We can’t all be like you and Abbey,” he confessed. “She’s my angel. I have always known there was something special about her, something other-worldly almost. I’ve never felt truly worthy of her.”

I sat in silence, listening to his words and watching his body language. He ached deep inside. Something frightened this man. Something beyond my level of experience or expertise scarred him. As I looked at Teddy, God reminded me of the demon possessed man living in the tombs. Jesus asked his name. The demon living in the man answered, “My name is Legion, for we are many.” I saw Teddy’s soul pleading with me through his eyes, but I knew I sat in the presence of evil.

Even though I lived my entire life seeking and serving my Lord, I felt ill equipped to minister to him. “God, speak through me,” I begged. The moment I thought that simple prayer, His Essence filled me.

“Do you know why I wear black?” Teddy asked. The demon asked this question. His challenging stare replaced Teddy’s compassionate eyes. I remained silent. “You and Abbey sit here and talk about love, but God doesn’t love me. How can he?”

“That’s why I envy Satan. He is stronger than your god. If your god does love us all, then he’s a coward. If your god is so all loving and all powerful, then why does he let bad things happen to good people? What do you say to that?” Teddy challenged.

He asked the question of the ages. I never knew how to respond to this query. My Lord promised men throughout human history to speak for us if we allow Him. My Lord never lies. I closed my eyes and waited for the Holy Spirit to speak through me.

“Teddy,” I exhaled, still speaking with eyes closed, “that’s the problem with the world.” I opened my eyes and stared at him, focusing my gaze on the pupil of his right eye. “We are called to love one another and to take care of one another. If we all did as He commanded, we would all know God in an intimate way. Instead, we choose to act with selfish ambition, failing both our God and each other.”

His accusations infuriated me. I have ministered to the hungry, but had never truly witnessed to those who sacrificed themselves so completely to the enemy. A paralyzing fear gripped me when I allowed myself to compare my human weakness with the strength of my foe.

“God will never forgive me,” Teddy wept. His eyes pleaded for healing.

Before I knew what happened, I kneeled before him and placed my hands on his thighs. My soul drifted above my body, and I watched as the Holy Spirit took control of my actions and my tongue.

“God can forgive anything,” I promised.

He stared at me. “That’s easy for you to say. You have no idea what I have done.”

“I know what war is like, Teddy. Even if whatever is going on where you were is not a technical war, I know enough to realize men have died. You almost died. I believe other men died because of you. None of that matters. God forgives you.”

“No. You don’t know. You wouldn’t understand. I’m an evil man, Father Clarence. I don’t deserve Abbey. I don’t deserve God’s forgiveness.”

“Teddy, what do you think is the worst sin ever committed? Don’t you think killing Christ is the worst possible sin? Yet what did Jesus say while He hung on that cross? ‘Forgive them, Father, for they know not what they do.’ So, if Jesus can forgive the men responsible for killing Him, He will forgive you, too, no matter what you did.”

I hugged him and held on to him. I rubbed his back, and we both wept. “I’m so lonely,” Teddy moaned. “It’s his birthday today, you know? It’s Caleb’s birthday. Nobody’s left. I have no one.”

“That’s not true, Teddy. You have me. You have Abbey. You have your two boys and your unborn child. You have God.”

“No. No. No. No one can love me. How can they if they knew what I did?”

“Teddy, your family loves you. Nothing will change that. Your Father in heaven loves you. He will never stop loving you no matter what you do.”

“He can’t. If you knew what I did, you’d understand.”

I pulled away from him, but remained on my knees. Abbey’s silhouette in the sliding glass door startled me. Her hand reached for the handle. I shook my head no before shifting my gaze back to Teddy’s pupils. Her shadow walked away, but I suspected she still strained to eavesdrop. “Look at me, Teddy,” I demanded. “Look me directly in the eye and tell me what you see.”

Tears streamed down his face. He looked down, unable to meet my stare. “Look at me, Teddy. Look at me.” I repeated this command until he reluctantly obeyed. “Tell me what you see.”

His pupils grew wide, and I read the shame on his face. “I see love,” he groaned.

“That’s right,” I responded. “What you see in my eyes is the only thing that matters. When you hear those other voices in your head, remember they are all lies. Remember only what you see in my eyes. What you see in my eyes is the only truth. You see love because I love you. But I’m not the one you see who loves you. It’s God living in me. I can love you only because your Daddy loves you. And, he’s my Daddy, too. Since he’s my Daddy and your Daddy, we are brothers. You are not alone. You are never alone.”

“It’s not the same for me,” Teddy argued. “I don’t see Him like you and Abbey see Him.”
Teddy hung his head in shame.

“Look at me. Look at me.” I repeated this command again until he reluctantly obeyed.
“When you look at me, you are looking at the face of God. Listen to my voice. These are not my

words. They are God's words spoken through me for you. I am not God, but I have surrendered my soul to God. He lives inside me. So when you look at me or at any other person who knows God, you are standing face to face with the living God."

I hugged him again. "This is Jesus hugging you, telling you how much He loves you. You are His precious son. He bought you the day He died and rose again. He hung on that cross for you. He has already forgiven you."

We wept together. I knew Jesus healed his beloved son. "May I pray for you?" I asked. He agreed, but requested we move to the garage, away from the prying eyes and ears of his wife or his neighbors.

We kneeled near a fresh oil stain. The smell of car parts and wood shavings tormented my nose. I wrapped my arms around the back of his neck and pulled his head into my chest. He wrapped his arms around me. I felt his tears soaking the front of my shirt.

"Father God," I began, overwhelmed by the presence of the Lord. I felt caught between heaven and earth, as if carried away by the light. Nothing and no one else existed except for me, Teddy, and our Father. A heavenly fragrance even replaced the smells of earthly progress.

"I thank You, Lord, for being here with us today. I thank You for giving me and Teddy this moment together. Lord God, he needs You. He suffers, Lord. Reveal Yourself to him. Wrap Your arms around him. Lord God, send your angels to protect him.

"Father God, You alone know the torment Teddy carries with him. I pray, Father, shower him with forgiveness. Open the floodgates of Your love. Fill him so completely with Your presence that he can no longer deny how You truly feel about him.

"Father God, I lift up this prayer in the name of Your precious Son, our Lord and Savior, our Brother, and our Friend, Jesus Christ. Amen."

I withdrew my embrace, intending to stand up. Teddy pulled me back to him and with gritted teeth he said, “We’re not done here.” His heart-felt release made my spirit rejoice. His chest heaved as he tried to breathe through sobbing tears.

“Oh God,” his heart cried out. “Oh, God, forgive me. I am a sinner, unworthy of your love. Forgive me! FORGIVE ME!” His anguish reached the depths of my being. My own tears mingled with his.

Teddy took a few deep breaths, trying to collect himself. “I feel you, Lord.” The heat of early fall warmed our bodies, but Teddy’s soul shook as if the touch of winter chilled his bones. A new peace washed over him. “Thank You, Father God. Thank You for Father Clarence. I know You brought him to me. I know You orchestrated this whole day. Thank You for my Abbey and for her faithfulness to both You and to me.” He paused. “Thank You.” Teddy let out a deep breath, releasing all the burdens that once plagued and suffocated him.

We stood up and embraced each other. The Spirit of the Lord left me, and I regained control of my own body and my own tongue. “Teddy, there is no doubt about what happened here today. You and I stood in the presence of God. He did indeed speak through me. That alone should tell you how much He loves you.” Teddy nodded his head in understanding and wiped away his tears with the back of his hand.

“But I need to warn you,” I continued. “Satan is not at all happy. He will try to win you back. Those voices you heard in your head just moments ago will return. They will be loud, and they will be persistent. Whenever you hear them, remember what you saw when you looked into my eyes. Satan is a liar. God’s love is the only truth.

“If you look for me or for Abbey or for any other human being to fill that void or to meet

a certain need, we will let you down every time. We are only human, after all. Even the best of us lives with sin. Even your pastor or priest will let you down.

“Your Father in Heaven is the only One who will never let you down. He has never and will never lie to you. Put all your faith and all your trust in Him alone, and you will never be disappointed.”

“I’m scared, Father Clarence,” Teddy confessed. “I can look at you now and see the love in your eyes, but what happens when those voices return and you are gone? How do I remember all you have told me?”

“Take a picture!” I teased, smiling a big stupid grin. “Seriously, you don’t need me anymore. Close your eyes and allow this day to replay in your mind. Your beautiful wife knows her Lord. Look into her eyes, and you will see the face of God. Let her love you.”

“I’m still scared,” Teddy admitted.

I pulled a Bible out of my back pocket and handed it to Teddy. “Carry this Bible wherever you go. Whenever the voices begin to taunt you, as soon as you recognize Satan’s lies, open this Bible and start reading. Don’t stop reading until those voices go away.”

“What should I read?”

“The Book of Job is a good place to start, but it doesn’t really matter. Simply open it and read anything. This entire Book tells the story of Jesus. The entire Book is His Word. Jesus is the Word.”

Although the sun barely settled in for the night, the emotion of the day left us feeling exhausted. Teddy retired to bed, and I passed out on the couch. Abbey tossed and turned all night, fighting the temptation to wake us to find out the details of her husband’s miracle encounter.

Chapter Thirty-Three
Henry Thomas Baker
(Call sign Muff—short of Muffin Man)

My time in Vietnam was scheduled to end soon after Teddy's bailout over the Gulf of Tonkin. Because of my lack of familial ties to my home country, I extended my tour before my DEROS (Date of return from Overseas). I loved the men in my unit like brothers and felt called to continue fighting beside each and every one of them.

The Air Force granted Teddy medical leave after his release from the hospital. He spent his time with his wife and children back home in Illinois. His wounds earned him a Purple Heart and the military awarded his bravery with a promotion and his choice of assignments. Any sane man with a young family would choose a post close to home. Contrary to reason, Teddy elected to return to his squadron in Bien Hoa.

The rules of evasion usually forbade the return of a pilot to combat status after being shot down. The Air Force implemented this policy to protect both the pilot and the overall mission of the United States military. They feared that if the enemy managed to shoot down a pilot for the second time and took him prisoner, the pilot may be more susceptible to interrogation, and thus, become a liability. Even though the evasion rules were strict, Teddy appealed his case and won. I suppose the circumstances surrounding our involvement in South East Asia skewed the lines of standard protocol.

“So, Bailey, find the rice paddies and jungles safer than the land mines waiting for you back home?” I asked as soon as I saw Teddy. He looked at me quizzically. “Heard some of the men returned home to spitting, heckles, and fists.”

“What do you mean?” he asked, bewildered by my statement.

“Callahan lives up north somewhere. Said people who suspect what we’re doing here

called him all kinds of names before he shipped out. He almost came to blows a time or two with some chicken shit protestors who threw fruit at him then hid in the crowd.

“Said small groups are gathering on the White House lawn. Some suspect our government intends to start another war. They’re demanding we pull out, no matter what our official reasons for being here. After the whole Korean War fiasco and with this whole Cold War mess still going strong, people back home are getting angry. They don’t want another conflict, no matter what the cause.”

“Naw,” Teddy said. “None of that going on back home. Everyone treated me as if I never left. Benefits of living in a small town where everyone knows me, I suppose.”

“Okay. Let me get this straight. People back home are good to you. You have a chance to get outta here without losing face. Yet you chose to come back to this hell hole? Are you nuts?”

“If I am, so are you,” he laughed. “Why’d you come back?”

“I don’t have a beautiful, doting wife and two and a half kids back home. Seriously, man, what’s up?” I saw the sadness in his eyes, but he merely shrugged and walked away.

Teddy and I flew several missions together. Because of our experience, Colonel Cleaveland assigned us to the more high risk tasks. This suited Teddy just fine. I noticed a focused determination in him absent during our first tour together. It seemed as if he wanted to prove something to both himself and everyone else in his world.

His last chance came with the call of a downed pilot near Ha Tinh on the southern border of North Vietnam. Teddy took the lead, eager to come to the rescue of a comrade suffering the same fate he himself endured a short time before. I flew as his wingman. Our mission was to use our cannons to ward off enemy ground troops in support of the rescue chopper (call sign Sandy)

sent in to save the injured pilot and his back seater before the enemy took them prisoner. Little did we know we were on a collision course with our own destiny.

When we arrived, we noticed the chopper still on the ground. The crew stood outside maneuvering toward their charge.

“SANDY-7 to BUICK-1,” the chopper pilot radioed Bailey.

“BUICK-1. Go ahead.”

“We took fire as we landed. Blades locked. Can’t get her off the ground. Performing service on the floor while we wait for another band aid.”

“Copy that,” Bailey acknowledged.

We orbited twelve thousand feet above the site, burning fuel at a rate of one hundred and fifty pounds per minute. Bailey suggested we jettison our empty centerline fuel tanks to reduce drag. Even with the lowered weight, we were burning too much fuel as we waited for the second chopper to arrive.

This left us with only two choices. We could either wait on the second Sandy to arrive and risk running out of fuel or use our remaining fuel for our secondary mission—protecting the airspace by hunting North Vietnamese MIGs. Teddy surprised me with his command. I expected emotion to influence his decision. Instead, sound logic prevailed. He radioed in our position and called for assistance before bugging out.

The MIG 21, like its predecessors, was renowned for its speed and agility. Unlike the MIG 17, however, it fashioned a triangular delta wing, excellent for subsonic maneuverability. The new style allowed for sharp turns. Because of its small size and lack of smoke coming from the engine, the MIG 21 could hide and sneak up on unsuspecting enemy aircraft. Their new bird

proved lethal in close encounters, but acted sluggish at high altitudes. Their lack of rearview capability served as a great advantage for us.

Our F-4 Phantom reached top speeds of more than two times that of sound and travelled approximately one hundred miles per hour faster than the MIG 21. It was the first aircraft that could detect, intercept, and destroy a target within its radar range without any assistance from surface radars. It held fifteen thousand pounds of weapons with a two point five to one kill ratio against our enemy's fighter. The MIG 21 may have had a better turn radius, but, all else considered, our F-4s had a better power advantage in vertical maneuvers, all of which came into play in the coming moments.

With no MIGs in sight and our relief fighters in place, Bailey led us home. With many miles still separating us from our destination, he made an unexpected one hundred and eighty degree turn before diving toward earth.

“Muff,” Bailey radioed to me. “Hero spotted two bandits on Boomer’s tail. We’re goin’ in,” Teddy named his South Vietnamese navigator Hero because his name, Hu’ng meant heroic and strong in his native language.

“Copy that. Let’s get ‘em” I said.

“Boomer, Saint. Got two MIGs closing in behind you. Stay on course. Muff and I will pull in behind ‘em.”

“Where? I don’t see them.” Boomer asked. Their silver bodies blended well with the hovering clouds. “Okay, I see ‘em. Just flew right past!”

“Maybe we got lucky, and they didn’t see us!” I suggested.

“Let’s not take that chance. Fall in behind them,” Teddy ordered. We rolled into a

climbing turn and swung around, maneuvering to get above and behind the two enemy MIGs.

“I’ve got a lock. Ready . . . NOW!” Teddy took the first shot. An easy kill.

This got the attention of the number one MIG. He turned his wings up and down trying to see the threat behind him. His blindness made for another easy target. “Take the lead, Muff. Go get him.”

I angled in directly behind the remaining MIG. I took my shot, trusting only the radar lock. I saw nothing in front of me until the missile met its target and the plane burst into flame.

“Dang if that ain’t the most beautiful sight I’ve ever seen!” Teddy hollered, his excitement evident in his voice. “If you boys got it from here,” Teddy radioed to Boomer and Saint, “we’ll be going home.”

Before we even returned to formation, Boomer called a warning. “Better wait up, boys. Think I spot another bandit circling low. Blends in with the ground.” We angled in to provide cover as Boomer and Saint dived in to investigate. As they descended, another MIG camouflaged with the earth below maneuvered in to Saint’s six o’clock position.

Suddenly, what looked like surface to air missiles flew past my window, falling from the sky instead of shooting up from the ground. Two MIGs spewed thirty seven and twenty millimeter cannon fire. The blasts looked like fiery tennis balls and golf balls.

“Looks like we fell into their trap,” I stated the obvious.

“Looks like it,” Bailey confirmed. “Saint, you’ve got a MIG at your six o’clock. Boomer, the other’s turning to meet you head on. Sorry to have to tell you this, but you’re on our own. If you haven’t noticed the unusual fire raining down, we’ve got two more problems up here.”

“Copy,” Boomer said. “Let’s dance!”

Bailey and I broke right and climbed to chase after our pursuers. As soon as we

positioned ourselves behind them, the MIGs broke left and disappeared into a cloud, a clever tactic because, as we flew blind, ground crews could track us and launch SAMs. By following them into the clouds, we also took a chance of an accidental collision. Our new aircraft radar system proved its worth. We pressed the attack, and, as the MIG broke through the clouds, Teddy got a lock on him. Another easy kill.

As we turned our attention to the MIG's friend, Boomer's MIG burst through the clouds in a steep climb, so close that it caused Bailey and me nearly to crash into one another as we veered a hard right to avoid him. Boomer charged up behind him, struggling to catch his prey. As soon as he caught up with his MIG, we heard him curse, "What the . . ."

"Damn it, Boomer. Watch your radar. You nearly got us killed!"

"Sorry, Bailey. But . . . but . . . there's no one flying that MIG!" Just then, the enemy plane rolled and dove toward the ground.

"We fighting ghosts up here?" I laughed.

"Man, I was chasing him at very low altitude, too close to get off a shot so I backed off. When I finally locked and fired, nothing happened. I saw tiny black pieces fly by. Didn't know what to make of it. Guess that ole' Gook raised his nose before ejecting."

The Gook's finale managed to distract us momentarily from the task at hand. We left Saint alone with a bandit on his tail, giving the enemy their first kill of the fight. The flames from his bird as he crashed into the earth snapped us back to attention.

The remaining MIGs regrouped and took us by surprise in the rear. We still had them outnumbered three to two. Boomer, Bailey, and I each flew in a different direction—north, east, and west—intending to surround the MIGs and take them out.

"Let's make this quick, men. We're all shot up and dangerously low on fuel."

“Roger,” Boomer and I echoed.

One MIG climbed to ten thousand feet. Bailey, who flew north when we broke formation, took off after him. The bandit made sharp turns back and forth trying to lure Bailey into a turning fight.

“Don’t fall for it, Bailey,” I warned. “Make him work for it.”

“Copy that.”

As the MIG turned horizontally, Bailey used his speed advantage to maneuver vertically up and down to position for a shot. They looked as if they flew in slow motion as they both flew straight down, circling each other at less than two hundred feet apart.

Tracer fire from the ground shot up at both planes. It looked like a twirling dance amidst a spectacular Fourth of July fireworks display over North Vietnam.

They made five rounds, and still neither tried to take the advantage. Because of their close-knit circular motion, none of us could offer any assistance. “Do something, Bailey,” I warned. “Either get him all ready or get the hell out of there. You’re too low.”

On the sixth pass, just as the MIG got out in front of Bailey and made a hard back turn into him, their noses met at a one hundred and thirty-five degree angle. Bailey had less than a second to pull off a front snap shot. He squeezed the trigger and shot a stream of lead across the MIG’s canopy.

“You got em! Boomer took out the other. Let’s go home,” the adrenaline that got me through the fight suddenly left. My body grew heavy, and I wanted nothing more than a hot shower, a beer, and a bed.

“No can do, Muff,” Teddy said, his voice calm and calculated. “Those tracers knocked me up pretty good. I’m losing hydraulic fluid. I can’t get her to climb, and she’s doing un-

commanded rolls every time I slow below two hundred and fifty knots. Gonna try to limp her back to friendly airspace before we eject.”

My heart sank as I watched him struggle to keep his aircraft level. “Boomer,” I radio.

“I see him,” he acknowledged.

“Call for help. We need another Sandy team quick. I don’t think he’s going to make it across the border.” I heard a solemn “roger” in reply.

With my fuel levels desperately low, the smart thing would have been for me to trust in my buddies and head for home before I became another casualty. But Teddy was my best friend. I could not look away. I could not turn away. Risking my own safety, I stayed put and watched the drama unfold before me.

The standard ejection sequence called for the Weapon Systems Operator to eject before the pilot. Even with Teddy’s superior flying capabilities, he would lose control of his already unstable aircraft if Hero ejected first. Teddy had the option to change the sequence, allowing him to go out first. But this would be certain death for Hero. My heart choked in my throat, and I fought to breathe. Tears swelled in my eyes, making it difficult to focus on the scene in front of me. I knew one man would die. The seconds ticked off like days as I waited for the inevitable.

True to form, Bailey kept his F-4 flying long enough to reach the friendlies, but his plane descended down to three hundred feet above the deck and was about to flame out. He struggled to keep the ship upright.

“See you at the bar, Hero,” he said before initiating the ejection sequence. As the canopy exploded and smoke and flames belched out of the rockets in the seats, the F-4 snap rolled to the inverted position out of control. Teddy’s seat exploded up the rails, but he hurled toward the ground instead of toward the sky. His WSO shot in the right direction to safety.

My friend's bravery failed to calm my anguish. Tortured sobs screamed through the radio, alerting Boomer of my own distress. Low on fuel and numb with sorrow, Boomer coaxed me back to base and back to safety.

Back at the bar, the men sang "Throw a Nickel on the Grass" and "Toast to the Host" in honor of the courage of Bailey and Saint. Hu'ng sat in a corner weeping. He learned of Teddy's death only after returning to base. He knew what his pilot sacrificed for his sake.

Every time I opened my mouth to join in, the words choked back in my throat. I drank a warm beer and sat alone, stuck in a state of shock as the last moments of Teddy's life replayed in my head over and over and over again.

In my mind, as I watched him eject and hurl head first to his death, I saw a smile come across his lips. Teddy knew where his next adventure took him, and he knew his actions saved the life of his WSO. I heard him laugh, and I knew his selfless motivation defined him as a genuine hero unmatched by the brawn of any mythological figure.

"Well done," I pictured Jesus saying as he embraced Teddy. "And welcome home."

Chapter Thirty-Four Daughter

My earliest memory takes me back to the day my mother discovered the last letter my father wrote to her. After mourning his loss for several years, she remembered the hidden compartment of his flight bag—the place where she discovered the letters he once wrote to her and Nadia.

We lived with my grandparents—my mother's parents—and I awoke from the nap I took with Grandma. I slipped off the bed and tiptoed around the house, anxious to do anything other than sleep. As I crossed the threshold of my mom's bedroom, I saw her standing on a chair and reaching for something in the very back of a high shelf in the closet. Curious to spy on her without getting caught, I backed up and hid myself behind the partially closed door. I peeked at her from the crack between the door and the wall.

Mom gently placed the bag on her lap after she sat on the edge of her bed. She hugged it to her chest and buried her face into it. The sound of her muffled tears made me sad. Her sorrow triggered in me a sense of loss for the man I never knew as Daddy and ignited in me a deep longing to know more about him.

She took out the contents of the bag one by one, investigating every item as if one might hold the key to bringing him back to life. My mother smelled each garment, searching for a remnant of the man she still loved. When she reached the bottom of the bag, she found one single letter addressed to her in the secret compartment her husband made a long time ago.

When I grew older and began asking questions about my father, my mother shared his last words with me. The introduction served as an explanation and apology to his beloved wife and children. The rest—the majority of the undated letter—detailed his experiences in Vietnam

and why he carried so much guilt about the death of his friend Caleb.

Abbey,

My most precious wife and mother of my children. You are my everything. My reason for living and my reason for dying.

I know you would have preferred if I took a job nearby after my homecoming from Germany, but I am a United States Air Force Pilot. This is what I do. This is who I am. This is my destiny.

I don't want you to think I came back here chasing ghosts. Although I have never found the courage to bear my soul to you, I knew God forgave me the day Father Clarence came to visit. I also know you orchestrated that visit. Thank you.

I tried to talk to you about all of this time after time, but I was afraid you wouldn't understand. How could you? I myself don't exactly understand. I was afraid if you knew the whole truth, you couldn't possibly love me anymore.

I know this is the most cowardly way to tell you, but I don't have the strength to face you. Not yet anyway.

If you're reading this letter, that means I can never come home to you, but rest assured, my love for you will not end in death, and I will be waiting for you on

the other side.

I need you to understand that I didn't choose this assignment to run away from you and the kids. I am not on some kind of suicide mission. I simply have something to prove to myself. I need answers. I need closure. Besides, I truly believe I am meant to be here. My gut is telling me my purpose is here—now. I am sure this makes absolutely no sense, but I believe this is the only place I can be.

My Abbey, my angel. After you read this letter, I hope in time, you can forgive me for the things I have done. I hope you can forgive me for my selfishness. Tell your father I'm sorry for proving him right. If I had it all to do over again, well, I'm sure I would have done the exact same thing. I can't help myself. I love you too much. There's no way I could be near you and not be with you. Again, I'm selfish.

When the kids are old enough to understand, share my story with them. Ask them to forgive me, and tell them I never intended to leave them fatherless. I simply know no other way.

Abbey, I know about the letters. I went to retrieve them once and saw the broken seals. I'm not mad. I know I came home a different man. I know you needed answers. I thank you for keeping my secret. I thank you for loving me and treating me with kindness in spite of what you read. The broken seals are how I know you

will eventually find this letter. Knowing you, this is probably the first place you will look when they return my belongings to you.

I wish I could communicate just how much I love you and my boys and little girl to be. I know you'll have a girl. When she asks about her daddy, tell her no man ever loved a daughter more than I love her.

Okay now, enough stalling. You deserve to know my story. You deserve to know the truth.

At the time, I understood nothing of the papers in her hand that made her cry so much. After reading it, she curled up in a ball on her bed, hugging the letter, and stared out the window. I jumped in fright when I felt a hand touch my shoulder.

“What do you think you’re doing young lady?” my grandmother asked before peeking in at her own daughter.

“Why’s Momma crying?” I asked. I noticed the look of concern washed all over Grandma’s face.

“Never mind. Go now and play.” She shooed me away without answering my question before closing the door behind her after she entered my mother’s bedroom.

My mother found comfort in my father’s words of farewell, but she became a staunch supporter of the anti-Vietnam movement. When questioned about her loyalty to her deceased husband, she said she owed it to his memory to save other husbands, fathers, sons, and brothers from suffering a similar fate.

The confessions in the letter also severed her own relationship with God for a short time. Years after the end of the Vietnam War, when she finally found peace in her own soul once again, she told me about her walk with Jesus and about the tree He showed her.

“For years I hated Him because I thought He lied to me. Then one day, my Uncle Jack encouraged me to go back to the monastery. After much prodding, I relented. While there, I took that same walk, alone this time, and stood in front of the same tree. I stared at the point where the two branches reunite and realized He did keep His promise after all.”

Between the time my father spoke with Father Clarence until the day he left to return to Vietnam, my parents grew closer than ever. “Those were some of the happiest days we ever shared together. Jesus promised to reunite us, and He did. But He never promised forever.”

I stand here now, in front of the same tree where my mom stood with Jesus all those years ago. The tree tells the story of my mother and father—of their lives, their love, their failures, and their accomplishments. I wonder about my mother’s interpretation of the promise of Jesus. He promised to reunite them, but He never said it would happen in this lifetime. I smile as I gaze toward the top of the tree and imagine them together—stronger than ever—once again.