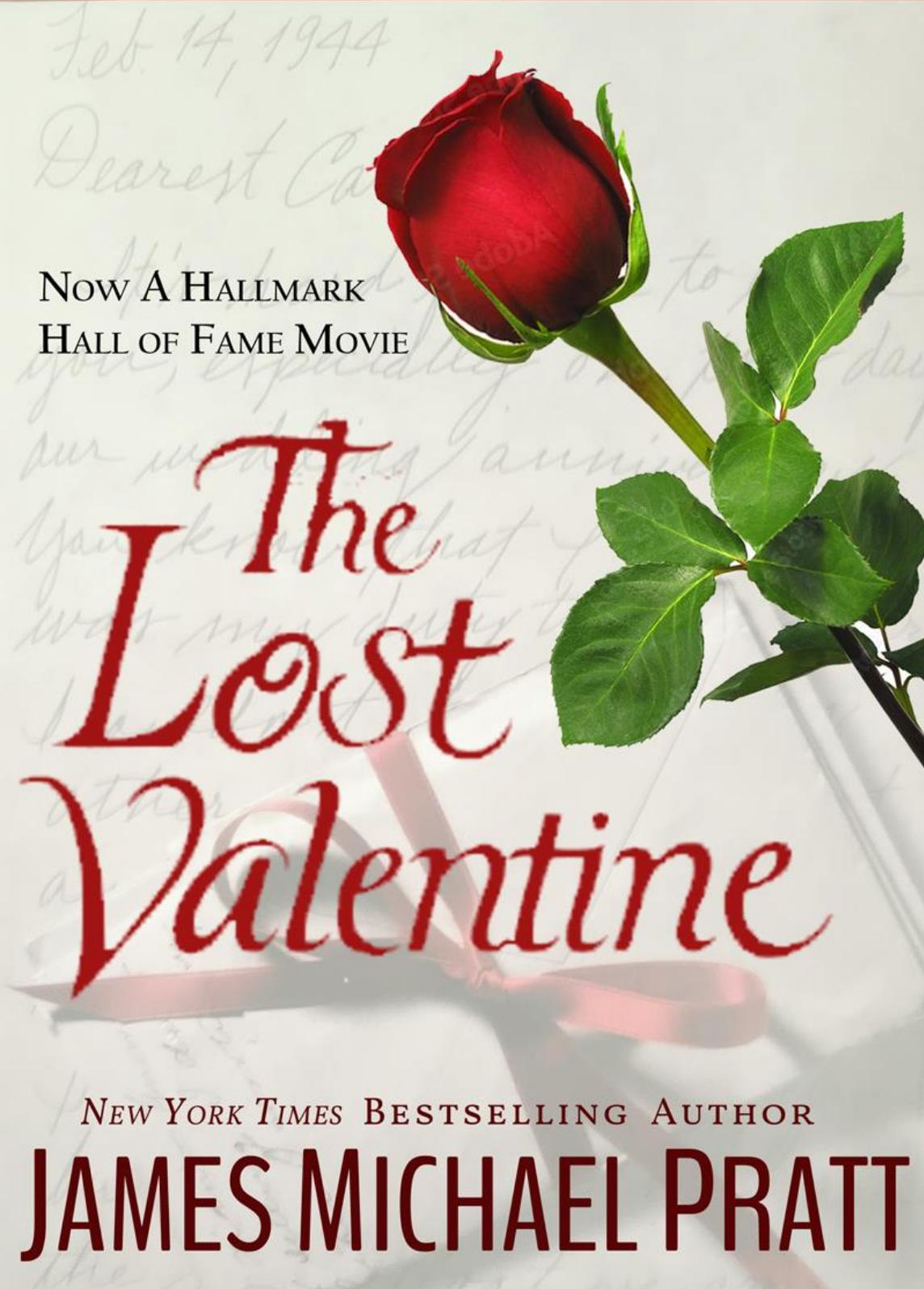


Special 25th Anniversary Edition

NOW A HALLMARK
HALL OF FAME MOVIE



*The
Lost
Valentine*

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

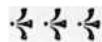
JAMES MICHAEL PRATT

THE LAST VALENTINE

by

JAMES MICHAEL PRATT

New York Times & USA TODAY Bestselling Author



Also Known As

The Lost Valentine

A Hallmark Hall of Fame Movie

~PRAISE FOR THE BELOVED NOVEL FIRST PUBLISHED IN 1998~

THE LAST VALENTINE

“Get out your box of tissues and rid yourself of all distractions because once you pick up this book, you will not put it down. Fans of *The Notebook* by Nicholas Sparks will enjoy this book.” ~*Booklist*

“Love as tested by war and time, is affectingly celebrated in this affirming novel...like *Casablanca*, it tugs at the heart and brings out the hankies. Sincere, heartfelt.” ~*Kirkus Reviews*

“Like a return ticket to *Bridges of Madison County* territory.” ~ *Publishers Weekly*

“Moving...a sweet, nostalgic story.” ~*Library Journal*

~Also Known As~

THE LOST VALENTINE

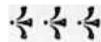
A 2011 HALLMARK HALL OF FAME & CBS MOVIE OF THE WEEK

“A huge success, the film not only won its time period in viewers with 14.53 million... the film won the *Faith & Freedom Award for Television* at the 2012 *Movie Guide Awards* and has become a beloved Valentine Day must-watch viewed by millions worldwide. Some love stories have a cheerful demeanor with that instant satisfaction reaction but no lasting impression, others use cheap gimmicks to equate love with something it’s not; and then there are the rare few timeless dramas. *The Lost Valentine* fits into the last category.”

Film Critic ~RissiWrites.Com “*Finding Wonderland*” ~

Other Books by *New York Times* and *USA Today* Bestselling Author

JAMES MICHAEL PRATT



The Lighthouse Keeper

Ticket Home

Paradise Bay

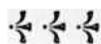
The Good Heart

The Christ Report

As a Man Thinketh...In His Heart

DAD, The Man Who Lied to Save the Planet

MOM, The Woman Who Made Oatmeal Stick to My Ribs



More on these and coming titles can be found at the author's website:

www.jamesmichaelpratt.com

THE LAST VALENTINE

Also Known As

The Lost Valentine

For the Hallmark Hall of Fame Movie

General

THE LAST VALENTINE. Original Copyright © 1996 by James Michael Pratt. All rights reserved. Printed in the United States of America.

Retitled THE LOST VALENTINE for mass market and future editions 2010 for Hallmark Hall of Fame movie “The Lost Valentine.” Based upon the original novel “The Last Valentine” by James Michael Pratt. *The Lost Valentine* and the original titled *The Last Valentine* novels by James Michael Pratt. All rights owned by James Michael Pratt, LLC.

Notification: Original Self-Published edition by James Michael Pratt, 1997. Publishing Rights for world distribution 1997 by St. Martins Press 175 Fifth Ave. NY 10010. All publishing rights reverted to author 2021 by St. Martin’s Press.

Grateful acknowledgment is given for permission to reprint lyrics from the song "Traces." Writers: Bule/Cobb/Gordy Publisher: Low-Sal Inc. Copyright © 1969

No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles or reviews.

For information: James Michael Pratt LLC 3214 N. University Ave. #253 Provo, Utah 84604
Website and email: www.jamesmichaelpratt.com

25th Year Anniversary Edition, 2023 for eBook Cover Design by Evan Frederickson, a 2021 reverted rights title edited and revised for publishing by author James Michael Pratt.

Original 1998 Library’ of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Pratt, James Michael, The last valentine: a novel / by James Michael Pratt

p. cm. ISBN 0-312-18121-3

Title. PS3566.R337L37 1998

813’.54—DC21

97-39755

CIP

First Edition: February 1998

~For Jeanne, who walked with me through the tunnel of love~



CONTENTS

Introduction	9
A Love Story	10
Roses Have Thorns	23
“I Love You Isn’t Good Enough”	30
La Golondrina	44
Susan and Neil	58
Caroline’s Valentine Story	62
Pacific War	67
Raven Leader	84
Western Union	98
Forever ... A Promise to Keep	108
Hope	120
Valley of Shadows	139
“In the Presence of Mine Enemies”	153
The Return Home	170
U.S.N. Special Delivery	196
The Last Valentine	213
Epilogue	228
Afterword	234



INTRODUCTION

Once in a while, our thoughts drift and fade, back into the recessed hiding places where our memories are safely stored. At times we recall them—the memories of our loves, our youth, our life experiences. These dreams appear to us, day or night, and for seconds, minutes, or hours we are there once again.

Memory. Our mind's powerful possessor of personal events. Powerful enough to remind us, teach us, hold us slaves, or free us. Memories of the past are forever suspended in our minds for instant recall and can have the power to possess our present lives.

Memories of love—no matter how distant the scene—can once again bring to us the sweet joys of youth, just as it was *then*. No matter our age, we all sometimes long for things to be as they were *then*; when there were endless possibilities, when life was beginning and anything seemed ours for the taking.

The Last Valentine is a story about memories of love—love, the romantic kind—love, the brotherly kind—love, the kind that endures trial and, in devotion, becomes never ending in its loyalty. In the end, it's about love that gains immortal stature. Like a torch that cannot be extinguished, this kind of love transcends time to touch the lives that now seek it.

Along with our memories of loving relationships, there are often special places, both public and private, that captivate and hold a sacred meaning for us. In recalling these places, our memories evoke reverent feelings because something wonderful happened there. So, it was with Lt. Neil Thomas, Sr., USN, and his wife, Caroline. So it is with the story of *The Last Valentine*.



A Love Story

Susan Allison guided the rented Lexus slowly down the quiet, magnolia-lined Pasadena Street, her fingernails tapping in annoyance against the console as she tried to read the house numbers passing by.

Her body, clothed in a black silk suit, was like a perfectly sculpted ornament on the sea of leather, as if the car's designers had deliberately added her as a final finishing touch. Susan felt comfortable here, cocooned within the solid steel frame of the Lexus with its immaculate interior, where the turmoil of the city life outside could not penetrate. The world inside this car was the world Susan had built for herself. She felt safe here, but irritated.

If the assignment had been politics, or a Death Row interview, or a trip to war-torn Bosnia, Lagos or Damascus, she would've gladly dropped everything at the last minute. But this! How could CNTV send her to cover some innocuous personal love story? There were plenty of people who liked love stories, who cared about them, who believed in them; who made more sense for this chore. For Susan, a story like this was a waste of her time. Fluff. But she had to be in Southern California anyway to put the finishing touches on her health care exposé at their Los Angeles affiliate station, CNTV. So, she had agreed to satisfy Craig Warren's curiosity by checking out this Neil Thomas guy before returning to Baltimore. What real choice did she have? No one said "no" to Craig.

At the end of the block, she found the house. She pulled into the driveway and stopped. A strange feeling stole over her as her eyes took in the white picket fence, the perfectly manicured lawn, the bursting flower beds in front of the house and along the walk, and the magenta bougainvillea climbing over a trellis along with roses at the front door. For a second, she almost lost sight of where she was, or of what she had come to do.

At that moment, the front door opened. A man stepped outside into the cloud-shadowed sunlight. Susan forced herself to get out of the car. As she walked toward the house, the brightly colored California poppies along the walkway seemed to bend to brush against her ankles. She smiled and gave her hand to the tall, well-proportioned, and neatly dressed man waiting to greet her at the door of this storybook house. “Hi, I’m Susan Allison,” she said.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Ms. Allison. I’m Neil Thomas. Won’t you come in?”

“Thank you,” she simply offered as he led her inside. She’d hesitated at first, standing on the front step, staring at the yard, the home, the flower beds. They seemed familiar somehow. “I hate to start out on a negative note,” she began, “but you seem like a nice man, and I want to be honest with you,” she went on, taking a seat on the sofa in front of the bay window, ignoring the packing boxes scattered around the room. “This really isn’t my kind of story.”

He sat down in the armchair facing her across the coffee table. “I appreciate your honesty,” he said. “You can count on the same from me.”

“Thank you. So, tell me your story. When my managing editor saw the article about it in your local paper, he told me not to come home until I came out here to see you. It must really be something.”

“It is. My parents were special people. They were well-loved in this old neighborhood.”

“So, you’ve written a story about their wartime romance?”

Neil leaned forward, smiling. “I don’t know about the writing. I did the best I could, but I honestly believe it may be the most inspirational love story you’ll ever hear.”

Susan remained thoughtful. “Great,” she said. “I like confidence. That’s why I’m here.”

“I pieced it together from the letters my parents wrote to each other,” he began, “and from interviews with the people who were there. Perfect love is a lofty goal, but if anyone ever reached it in their lifetime, my parents did.”

Susan almost flinched at the words, shifting her eyes toward the antique crystal clock sitting next to a packing box on the mantel. She was struggling to keep her attention focused.

“The story spans five decades,” Neil went on. “It’s about promises kept and devotion to cherished dreams. Wait. I’ve got a better idea,” he said, as if he’d sensed her reaction. He opened a box containing his writing, reached in, then extended pages across the coffee table toward her. “Here. Why don’t you read this much. If you don’t want to hear the rest of the story after that, we’ll shake hands and go our separate ways.”

Susan couldn’t look him in the eyes now, afraid that she wouldn’t be able to restrain herself from saying what she really thought about this story. But she did have a job to do, plus he seemed so sincere. She finally accepted them, laying them on the sofa beside her without saying a word, oblivious to the awkward silence.

“It’s only a few pages,” Neil said, rising. “Why don’t you take a look at them while I make us some coffee.” As he headed into the kitchen, Susan sighed and picked them up.



February 14, 1994

Amtrak's Union Station, Los Angeles, California

It had been exactly fifty years since she'd seen him. A U.S. Navy pilot, he was home on leave, before shipping out to the fight that was raging in the Pacific. To her, he epitomized the word handsome, especially in his white dress uniform, his jet-black hair combed in that carelessly meticulous Clark Gable sort of way. A perfect toothy smile complemented the blue eyes that held her as easily as his muscular arms.

But beyond her physical attraction, she was drawn to Neil most by his tenderness, his thoughtfulness, his wit. He made her smile through gloom; he laughed at his own mistakes and bad luck. "Bad luck can't be all bad," he'd say, "since I've never really had any luck at all; at least until I found you again."

She loved his ready solutions to problems, the way he worked at something until he had it. She felt loved, not only for all the little things he did for her, but because he made her feel wanted and needed.

It wasn't just this place, the aging train station, that made the flood of memories return, but the fact that they had touched each other for the last time here, before his train had pulled away. Then, as always during the few short months they'd been together, his touch was magical. When Neil held her, she felt safe and the world seemed right.

The aged woman imagined she could see him there, just as he had been then, waving to her as he boarded the train. Caroline clutched Neil's last letter in her hand as she walked through the glass doors into the massive lobby of the old depot on Alameda Street. The station was cathedral-like. It possessed a California Spanish colonial architecture with the mission flavor built by Catholic priests in the late seventeen and early eighteen hundreds which dotted the California coastal El Camino Real and valleys from San Diego to San Francisco. It felt like home to her.

Union Station had been brand-new then, when she'd entered these doors to send her husband off to war. It seemed even larger now; now that it was so empty and now that the crowds had diminished as train stations gave way to airports. She liked it that way though, as if her special place was theirs alone, this place that seemed frozen in time.

She shuffled past the photo gallery on the lower walls of the fifty-foot-high lobby, under its massive beams and huge candelabra lights. The subdued glow of overhead lighting mixed with the light from outside. The shafts of light streaming in made the polished mosaic-tile floor glisten enticingly, inviting visitors to linger and gaze at the photographs.

The aged photos, encased in glass-covered frames, displayed a history of the years of construction, especially the 1940's war years. Union Station was running at peak capacity for travelers, especially soldiers embarking into the unknown. She stopped as she always did in front of the last photo on the north wall, by the old ticketing area, which was now closed.

There it was: mobs of servicemen with their girls, heading out to gates G and H, through the tunnel leading to track number twelve. She was there, in the picture, if one looked hard enough. At twenty-three, with twenty-five-year-old Neil. He was turned to one side, looking down at her.

A photographer had captured the moment for *LIFE* magazine. She had relived it over and over again. She ached for him now, as she reached her aged hand out to gently caress the old glass-covered photo. In touching it she erased the fifty years that separated them.

But today she was happy. He would come today. She knew he would. She had seen the swallow in the window yesterday, and she held his last letter now. The royal red roses he'd planted all those years before had survived. They'd bloomed early this year, as they had the day he went away, on their first wedding anniversary, the 14th of February 1944. It was a sign that he hadn't forgotten, that he would come for her. Even if it was only a dream, she would be happy to be so deluded.

She stared at the photo with one last hard look, her fingers gentle against the glass case, remembering how heartbreaking it had been to let him go to war. She hadn't made it easy for Neil. He'd tried to leave her gently. She remembered being an emotional wreck. As she thought back to that day, she imagined hearing his voice again. She closed her eyes to savor the memory, pretending to touch him. Mentally, she was a girl once more, in his arms, saying "good-bye."

. . .

February 14, 1944 — Valentine's Day

Union Station, Los Angeles, California

"Come on, honey. I know it's hard. It's hard for me too," Lt. Neil Thomas said, tenderly holding Caroline's tearful face between his hands. By sheer fate, it was their first wedding anniversary, as well as the day that he was leaving for war.

Caroline tried to look happy, but it was no use. “I don’t want you to go. I’m afraid, Neil. Hold me,” she pleaded as they clung to each other.

The attendant was opening the metal doors at gates G and H leading into the tunnel. “First boarding call for Union Pacific Number 71, departing for San Francisco at Track 12 in thirty minutes. Non-passengers may accompany ticketed passengers to the tracks,” he called out.

“Come on, Caroline. We’d better go,” Neil prodded gently after a second call. Caroline tightened her grip on his arm, pressed against him even closer, but allowed him to lead her into the tunnel.

They walked along slowly with others, passing several boarding ramps to other tracks. The tunnel was overflowing with soldiers and their girls; an ocean of heartache in an uncertain future.

“The tunnel of love,” Neil whispered in her ear. When Caroline raised her sad brown eyes to his, he pointed to the couples standing along the walls, kissing, and repeating what he had just said. “The tunnel of love,” he breathed pulling her to him in a long embrace.

“I love you,” she said, laying her head against his chest.

“I love you, too,” he whispered. He took her hand, then turned to face the tunnel. Moisture was welling in the corners of his eyes.

At the base of the long boarding ramp, Caroline stopped abruptly, suddenly feeling as though her legs were weighted to the floor.

“What’s wrong, sweetheart?” he asked. “Are you afraid I can’t fly well enough to get through this and come back to you?”

“No, it isn’t that,” she replied, fighting back the tears. She struggled to go on, but the words wouldn’t come. Finally, almost inaudibly, she said, “I’m trying, Neil. I’m really trying. I’m just afraid that. . .”

They held on to each other at the foot of the concrete ramp as others passed by, oblivious, caught up in their own misery. Caroline fought to regain control of her emotions, then finally gave voice to her fear. “I’m afraid if I let you go now, I’ll never see you come back through this tunnel for me.” She looked into his eyes, searching for some assurance, that her fears were imagined.

“I know,” he said quietly. He gazed at her as if he were trying to imprint every detail, every feature of her face into his memory. “I’ve got to go,” Neil sadly voiced.

Seeing the pain in his eyes, Caroline knew he understood. She threw her arms around his neck and held him tighter than ever before. “Just one minute more,” she pleaded, pulling herself out of his embrace. “I have something I want you to take with you.” She reached into her bag, pulled out the envelope, then placed it in his hand. “It’s a Valentine. For our anniversary. It’s fragile. You’ll need to take care of it.”

Neil tore open the envelope and pulled out the card. Inside was a crushed red rose, a perfect rose from their garden. When he spoke again, his voice was choked with emotion. “I’ll come back before next Valentine’s Day, Caroline, I promise. I’ll bring this back to you. Safe and sound. Just be here.”



When Susan joined Neil in the kitchen a few minutes later, she sounded different, less sure of herself. The pages were still in her hand. “I don't understand,” she said.

“What’s that?” he asked, pouring the coffee, trying to ignore the power of those questioning green eyes. “What is it you don’t understand?”

“Your father and mother’s anniversary is on Valentine’s Day?”

“Yes.”

“He promised he’d return by the next Valentine’s Day—so, did he?”

He smiled. “You’re just going to have to read the rest of the story.”

She leaned back against the counter, crossing her arms thoughtfully. “They seem like genuinely warm people. I couldn’t help seeing Donna Reed and Jimmy Stewart,” she offered.

“I understand,” he replied softly. “Why don’t we take our coffee with us, and I’ll show you around the place. My mother was very proud of her rose garden.”

Rain threatened from gathering clouds. Susan was running late for her plane. They’d lost track of time, talking for over an hour about the story, Caroline’s cozy Victorian home, her rose garden, and about their own lives. Susan seemed attentive to every detail of the house. Neil had showed her the photographs hanging on the walls, along with his mother’s photo albums; and especially the one of his father aboard ship, holding the last Valentine card Caroline had given him in the train station. Susan studied the weathered photo, but made no comment.

She finally agreed to read the story. When Neil handed the full manuscript to her, she accepted it graciously; placing it into her leather attaché case and snapping it shut as if she were relieved to be locking it away. Now it was time for her to go.

“I’ll need to scoot to catch my plane,” Susan said. “I can’t promise anything,” she added.

Neil just smiled and nodded his reply as they stood quietly at the base of the front porch, under the trellis that nurtured so many roses over the years. They’d met little more than an hour before as Susan turned to face Neil with something on her mind. “This house has a feeling to it. It feels—I don’t know. Like there’s a life to it.” She seemed to be weighing her words. “It’s a wonderful place. This probably sounds silly, but I can almost feel the love your mother put into it. What would you think about shooting the interview here? I mean, if you don’t have to be out immediately.”

“Of course,” he answered. “I own this house. I’m on no one’s schedule but my own.”

It began pouring rain now, but only a few drops of rain were filtering through the winter roses overhead, glistening on her dark silken hair and the soft skin of her face. She looked toward the flowers lining the drive. “You must’ve been very happy growing up in this house,” she said.

“We were. We were very happy.”

Her next words seemed to tumble out. “This is the house I dreamed of living in as a little girl. When I first saw it, I could hardly believe my eyes.” She stole a glance at his face. “When the pipes were leaking in our apartment, when we came home and found someone had picked the lock with a bobby pin, or when I watched my mother hang the same worn-out curtains in the new kitchen every time we moved, I’d climb under the covers at night to dream that we lived in a house with its own mailbox, its own front and backyard, its own flowers. This is that house.” She stopped and looked down at her keys.

Neil wasn't sure what to say. "I've decided to sell it. Too many ghosts here. Wonderful ghosts. Family ghosts. But ghosts just the same."

She chuckled with a tease, "Maybe I should buy it."

He then filled in some blanks about his motivation to sell. Neil shared how his sweetheart Diane had died less than three years ago. He'd lost two of the most important people in his life—his mother and my wife—within twelve brutal months of each other. He hadn't talked to anyone about his feelings before, not even his children, he explained. "I guess I feel it's time to move on," he finished.

"I'm sorry," she said simply, then quickly changed the subject. "Listen, I've got some more research to do before we move on this. I'll need to contact Colonel Jackson and set up an interview with him. I also want more details on the Japanese soldier's story. We have a bureau in Tokyo, but it's still going to take some time." She extended her hand. Neil took it. "I'll get back to you next Monday. My boss is really excited about this. I'll report back in about a week."

Neil nodded as she turned and ran for the car, holding her attaché case over her head against the rain. He stood transfixed for a moment, watching her move across the lawn before jogging after her; catching up to her just as she opened the door.

"I guess you're anxious to get back and spend the weekend with your family," he ventured, holding the door open as she slid behind the wheel.

"I guess if you call Daisy, my cat, family—then, yes," she smiled, and shut the door.

He stood in the rain feeling foolish with hands in his pockets as he watched her back down the driveway, then onto Marengo Avenue. As she turned the corner, she waved. It was a small gesture, but Neil was grateful for it.

A flicker of emotion went through him as he walked back to the house; a feeling he wasn't ready for. He consciously tried pushing it aside, as his thoughts went back—as always—to Diane. Everything here reminded him of her. They had spent twenty-five years together, working hard, striving to make something of their lives, watching the children grow. They had known each other as school kids and neighbors, making it nearly fifty years in total. His parents had only one year together, but it had been enough to last his mother a lifetime. Yet—he was so empty now.

Oblivious to the rain, he walked along the side of the house to the rear porch steps, and ran his hand along the smooth stem of a budding rose. The barbs were still tender, not sharp as they soon would be. He frowned as a question resurfaced. *Could he love again; like he had known?*

It was time to leave the thorns behind and reach for the new growth. He had allowed his *today's* to slip by one by one, unnoticed, as though they didn't exist. He may not be ready for a new relationship but he was ready for a fresh start, in a place without roots, where phantoms of the past would no longer haunt him. Even the specters of love are ghosts, and in the end this place was filled with them, he considered, as he opened the door to the warmth of his mother's home.

...

Driving back to the airport, Susan considered the man she'd just met, remembering the sincerity in his face as he told her about his story. *A true believer*, she thought.

She wasn't ready to admit to herself that the pages had filled her with an unfamiliar sense of comfort, or that she'd wanted to dive head first into the world of Caroline and Lt. Thomas.

Pulling up to the Hertz office near LAX, Susan quickly pulled her thoughts back to the present. Within minutes, she had returned the rental car, checked in at the gate, and was settling into a first-class seat on the plane, anxious to get back to work. Noticing only three or four other first-class passengers, she felt a sense of satisfaction in the fact that in her early thirties, she'd earned her place with CNTV's "American Diary."

Her mother would've been proud. *Take care of yourself*, she had always told her. *Men can only be counted on to put themselves first, then abandon you.* It was the lesson of Susan's childhood. Never rely on anyone else, especially a man, to get what you want in this world.

As the plane prepared for takeoff—its engines roaring—Susan opened her attaché case. Neil Thomas's story was sitting on top. She gathered up the pages and looked at them. A strange sensation ran through her as she gazed upon his name. She stared into the page seeing Neil Thomas had written in first person narrator style. She could hear his voice again. With a deep breath and a sigh, she began. "*Roses Have Thorns*," she read...



Roses Have Thorns

I will start with a premise for a rare but true love story. All love stories weighted with tragedy possess equivalent hope for the opposite—triumph. As a pendulum may swing high in one direction, the laws of nature dictate that it must swing with equal force in the other. So it is with love. Love may be both lost and yet found once more. It all comes with risks.

But what are we to do? Should we never take risk to hold of love when it is presented before us? The poet Tennyson said it best:

“Tis better to have loved and lost, than never to have loved at all.”

So, I make this promise: I have written this story from the perspectives of those who were its main characters. By telling it as it was passed along to me, through conversation, by reading my father's letters and the last Valentine, I offer the dreams of two who first loved long ago, lost, but then triumphed in the end.

As you step back in time with Caroline, gaze at the world through her eyes, an aging woman who once dared to love, to hope, and to dream. There are many kinds of love. Read between the lines and enjoy the journey. There are secrets waiting for you there. As the poet Moore said,

“There's nothing half so sweet in life as love's young dream.”

. . .

Susan disengaged from her reading. Her intellect was telling her to put the pages away, refuse the assignment, not get caught up in this fairy tale. The last thing she needed right now was to have her well-ordered life turned upside down by a romantic fantasy. She had allowed herself to believe in love before, and she'd been deceived just as her mother had warned. Susan was in control of her life. She had no intention of letting that slip away. Now this romantic tale called to her.

What was it about Neil—about his story—that was taking hold of her, sending her back to her childhood dreams? Was it the strangely familiar Victorian house with its roses, or was it the warmth she'd seen in his pleasant blue eyes and the genuineness in his smile?

It was 5:30 P.M. The plane hadn't even taxied out of the terminal, yet Susan was already far away. She was in her favorite hiding place, under a musty staircase in an apartment building on Boston's south side, where she'd lived with her mother as a child. The staircase had been her own private world, a place where she could close her eyes and transport herself away into her dreams. A little girl's dreams. A turn-of-the-century Victorian house in a tiny seaport town. Loving parents, playful children running happily along the seashore of Cape Elizabeth, a father who picked her up in his arms and hugged her close to him. A father who sat in his easy chair at night reading his newspaper, while she lay on the rug in front of the hearth, drawing pictures for him.

The announcement that the plane had been cleared for departure broke Susan's reverie. Within minutes, the jet was in the air. She looked down at the pages in her lap as the airplane swept west over the bay, turning back toward the coastline on its course east to Baltimore. She was

headed back home, and somehow, she no longer felt like the same person she'd been when she left there days before.

By the time the plane reached cruising altitude, she had made a decision. She unfastened her seat belt, pulled a blanket and pillow out of the overhead compartment, and turned on the reading light. She began to read where she had left off.

...

“Roses have thorns.” These were the final words from the last letter my mother, Caroline, received from my father Lieutenant Neil Thomas’s battle station, aboard an aircraft carrier in the Pacific during World War Two.

It was an odd use of word to reassure her. My mother understood the words though. She couldn’t have known it then, but they would be the last words she would hear from him for fifty years . . . until the last Valentine.

It all ended in a strange way. At worst, it was tragic. At best, it was an expression of a beauty rarely found. The ending was both surprising and unexpected—melodious—like a crescendo and not a diminuendo. But then surprise endings are the most satisfying endings of all.

...

Valentine's Day 1944

Union Station, Los Angeles, California

The conductor called for final boarding. Soldiers streamed by Caroline and Neil as they struggled to say their last good-bye.

“Caroline, you need to be brave for me, okay? Come on, baby.” Neil was looking down at her as they stood below the steps of the last car on the train. She had worn his favorite dress, with the red-and-white spring floral design, showing off her curves so well.

“You’re such a doll,” he went on, then growled in her ear and nibbled it, which usually made her laugh. But she could only offer a weak smile. “Come on, now,” he prodded softly, lifting her chin up with his hand. “How could a guy get so lucky?” He kissed her on the forehead, wearing that smile she found so irresistible.

Caroline put her arms around his neck, searching his eyes. “I thought you didn’t believe in luck.”

“I said I didn’t believe in bad luck when you don’t have any luck at all. That only applies to marbles, crap shoots, and horseshoes. You’re my luck, and I’ve felt that way since the first time you kissed me. The first time—back at Adams School. Remember?” When she smiled, tears rolling down her face, he pulled out a handkerchief. “I almost forgot, I bought this for you on Olvera Street today. Look at the word embroidered in red. You minored in Spanish at City College. Let’s see if you know what it means.”

“*Felicitades*. It means—it means happiness to you,” Caroline replied.

“See? What did I tell you! It’s a sign of good luck. Look, it’s got little patterns of flowers in the corners. Cute, don’t you think?”

“Just like you,” she said, trying her hardest to smile.

“That’s my girl, Caroline.”

The conductor’s voice sounded again. “All aboard!”

They were running out of time. The crowd pulsed around them with final good-byes. The engines roared for departure.

He raised his voice above the noise. “I’ve loved you since Adams School, through the years in Eagle Rock, through all the good times, and I can’t remember any bad. I think I’ve always loved you.” He scooped her up into his arms. They melted into one last embrace.

He stepped back to face her, then bent down to pick up the heavy “sea bag” he’d dropped on the platform. As he pulled away, he let go of her grasp. “No matter what happens, Caroline, I promise before God, I’ll come back for you. We’ll hold each other gain right here!”

“All aboard!” the cry came from the conductor. “Last call! All aboard,” he repeated.

“I’ll be here waiting,” she cried out as he stepped up and into the last car on the train.

He had to see her face one final time if he could. Throwing his bag on the seat next to the window, he flung it open and thrust his upper body outside, searching the crowd for her face.

The engines picked up steam. Caroline caught view of her man as she turned to leave. Running and breaking through the crowd of sweethearts, parents, and friends waving farewell to their men in uniform, she reached for his arm as half his body reached out for her.

“I love you isn’t good enough, darling. I’ll return...I promise,” Neil said, smothering her with his lips. They held on in the struggle to kiss and embrace, until they couldn’t any longer. As the train pulled away, their hands seemed linked through the space separating them. Just as a photograph seemed to be aging before her, he and the train faded gradually from her view.

Caroline walked numbly back up to the tunnel, which ran under the tracks and through the turnstile doors, passing more soldiers and their sweethearts. She knew they were feeling the same pain her heart felt, but it cut like a knife, making her feel all the more alone. Finding herself in the front lobby, she headed outside.

“Read all about it! Marines take Marianas Atoll! Seven thousand Japs die! Allies land at Anzio,” cried a newsboy, hawking his papers on the sidewalk.

The news sent a shiver up her spine. Behind the words was the unspoken message that American boys had also died. Silently, she cried out to God. “Protect my sweetheart,” she prayed. “Please bring him back to me.”

She found her way to their tan 1938 Ford V-8 sedan and put the keys in the ignition. Leaning her head against the steering wheel, she breathed deeply, trying to control the feelings consuming her. She didn’t care if anyone could see her, knowing they’d understand. There was heartache all around her.

But there was happiness too. Boys who’d been gone for two years were rotating home, and it hurt to see young women squealing in delight as they spotted their husbands and boyfriends. The place oozed both heartbreak and romantic joy as one couple tearfully kissed their goodbyes, while right next to them stood another couple smothering each other with the welcome home embrace they couldn’t seem to believe was happening. Some were in wheelchairs, others on

crutches, and still others unscathed by the war. But all the returning men seemed to be utterly in awe of being “home” and of those loved ones running to their outstretched arms.

Caroline had to hold on to the belief that she would have that experience, here as she promised Neil she would. She sought for composure to drive the ten miles on the new Arroyo Seco Freeway back home to Pasadena. Sitting still, her light auburn hair brushing against the black leather seat, she wondered: *When did I start loving him?* The scene played out quickly in her mind.

Eight-year-old Neil had asked, “Caroline, why did you kiss Richard yesterday over there, by the drinking fountain?”

“Like this?” Caroline answered. She giggled, kissing him on the cheek and hugging him tight. He tried to pull away, but they both lost their balance and sprawled to the ground.

She found herself lying on top of him. “Naughty girl!” scolded Miss McCullough. She leaned over and picked Caroline up by the arm, then marched her toward the office. Neil, the new boy at school, had picked himself up and brushed off his clothes, ignoring the jeers of the other kids standing around.

She could still see him. The little boy in a red-and-white striped T-shirt, with holes in the knees of his jeans and silly suspenders. She smiled, remembering. He never needed them—his body was solid and slender—but he wore them until the navy made him take them off. He wanted to be like his dad. Caroline remembered turning around as Miss McCullough opened the office door of the old country school, where she blew Neil a kiss. The other children had hooted and howled, pushing him as they teased, “Neil has a girlfriend! Neil has a girlfriend!”

The poor kid, Caroline thought, turning the key in the ignition. It would be a short trip back to Pasadena, but her heart would ache every mile.



I Love You Isn't Good Enough

Caroline pulled into the driveway of the white frame Victorian sitting on an acre behind Marengo Avenue. They had purchased it in 1943, just one week after their marriage, when her uncle offered them a bargain they couldn't refuse. It was a wedding gift, of sorts. Built in the early 1900s, the house needed some work. One hundred dollars down payment, take over the monthly payments of fifty dollars, and continue paying until the five thousand was paid in full. The house, with four bedrooms and two baths upstairs, a living room with kitchen and small bath on the main floor, a mud room and surrounding porch; this was all she had ever dreamed of.

She sat in the car, thinking how wonderful the past year had been. It had been a blessing to have him there, even though he was in the service. She stared at the house. She loved their "fixer-up mansion," as Neil liked to call it. It was a lovely yet suddenly lonely place. Now she was expecting their first child. She hoped that being occupied as a mother would help fill the empty space. She wondered how it could.

She was selfish. She had loved to see Neil there. He would smile as he worked up a sweat, whistling a tune or imitating Frank Sinatra as they worked on each room of the house, sanding, painting, turning it into a place to be proud of. His navy assignment, as a flight training officer at the Santa Monica and Long Beach airfields, was almost too good to be true. He was home most nights, but serving the war effort at the same time. Deep down inside, she'd always known it was too good to be true and to last. But she'd refused to believe he would have to go to the battle front.

She thought about the hand-carved sign Neil had hung over the entry on the inside of the front door. She could still hear him driving a nail through its center, then calling her over to see what he'd done.

“Caroline, come see if this thing is level.” He was standing on an old wooden stepladder.

“Neil, where did you get that? I love it!”

“An old-timer friend of mine from the train station carved it. He used to work for my dad in the shipping department. Does it look level to you?”

“Not only level, but well thought out. Did you think that up or did someone else say it?” Caroline laughed.

“It was my idea to hang it over the door, but it was my mother’s favorite quote. Some guy named Paul from the New Testament,” Neil responded through his teeth, two nails hanging between his lips.

“*Belief is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen,*” Caroline read as he finished nailing the small sign into place.

He stood back to inspect it. “Yep. Level the first time. Belief, Caroline. That’s all you need. Then, as you work for it, the miracle happens like magic. Just like the blueprint your uncle followed to build this house—” As he turned toward her, her arms went around his neck, and her lips met his in a kiss.

“See? Just like I said, the substance of things hoped for,” he laughed. “Turn out the lights, chicken. It’s time to hit the sack.”

Now after just one year, he had been called up to combat duty. Caroline's eyes roamed the front of the house and the porch as she sat daydreaming in the car. She thought about all the nights he was home. They'd had a warm beginning. Nothing could have been better than that.

When he came home from the airfield in the evenings, they'd sit on the porch swing, holding each other, staring at the San Gabriel Mountains and the star-filled sky as they talked. Sometimes they'd play records on the old Victrola or listen to the Philco broadcasts of Radio City Music Hall, and the war would seem a million miles away.

Then the news would come on the radio. Neil would be suddenly alert, anxious, all of his attention focused on the events taking place on the battlefronts. Caroline knew what he was thinking. That he should be there, not here, with his cushy flight-training job that allowed him to go home to his wife three, even four times a week. He was cheating death without honor. It was written all over his face each time the news came on.

Some of the neighbors made her aware of it, too. They'd comment on how nice it must be to have her husband safely at home while their husbands or sons were risking their lives overseas. "Damn them... I don't care that they thought I was being selfish!" she voiced with one fist pounding the steering wheel.

Caroline sat in the car, caught up in the visions of how it had been. An empty house awaited her, and she wanted to stay in the past, in the year that her dreams began to take shape—those "things hoped for." She pulled out the handkerchief he'd given her just hours before, stared at the word in her hands. A smile came to her face as a memory flashed through her mind.

It had been one year earlier, January 30, 1943, that she'd found the love she thought she had lost. It had been years since she'd seen him. She had been, that day, one of three USO girls

serving free coffee and donuts to service men at Union Station, the place where they'd just now said their good-byes.

...

Twenty-four-year-old US Navy Lieutenant, Neil Thomas was arriving back home to LA. It had been six long years since his father was transferred by Union Pacific Railroad to the Ogden, Utah, train station. The Thomas family didn't want to leave Los Angeles, but it was a "take the transfer or lose the job" kind of option during the midst of the Great Depression. So they moved to Ogden. He thought about all that had happened since he'd been gone; how fate had had its way with him.

Walking down the wooden ramp, he'd entered the tunnel leading under the tracks and into the main lobby waiting area. It was packed with servicemen, most of them shipping out to the fronts. Here he was, being shipped out to Long Beach to fight-training school as an instructor. He never dreamed that he'd be assigned state-side duty during the biggest war the world had known, and it bothered him. He'd be training other men to fight, maybe die, in his place. Both of his brothers had been shipped overseas...*and then there was Billy*. He shook his head and sighed deeply.

But he was home. Neil wasn't sure what to do with his two-week pass. His Uncle John still lived in Santa Monica, and he knew he'd be welcome there. Perhaps he could borrow the car and visit his old friends in Eagle Rock and Pasadena, if any of them were still around.

His sea bags bumped against other people, but no one seemed to notice. Union Station was crowded, and everyone had too much on their minds. Most of the guys had girls hanging on their arms, making him feel even worse.

Passing through the turnstile at gate H, Neil entered the main lobby and noticed the grand beauty of the Spanish style architecture. Last time he'd seen it, the station was still under construction. The main lobby carried an echo of love, some quiet weeping, but also happy voices with chatter indistinguishable from a foreign language as it all mixed with the business of war. The walls reached at least twenty feet high to a wood-beamed ceiling, with mosaic tiles surrounding the walls and covering the floors. The handrails and door knobs were brass, and the chairs and hardwood benches were covered in leather. *Los Angeles. Home. A pure class-act*, he thought.

Neil noticed the USO tables, where the pretty young women were serving the soldiers. He was in no hurry to go anywhere. Coffee, donuts, and a little conversation sounded perfect right now. He moved to the back of the line, trying to get a look at the women at the table, but a group of noisy, raucous sailors was blocking the way. He cleared his throat loudly. "What's your name, sailor?" he said, tapping one of them on the back.

The young man turned around slowly, as if ready to fight, but quickly saluted at the sight of Neil's uniform. "Peterson, sir."

"Peterson, are you coming in to LA or shipping out?" Neil asked in a commanding tone.

"Shipping out, sir."

"Quite a group of you here. All on the same ship assignment?"

"Yeah. I mean . . . yes, sir."

"I just heard the boarding calls have been changed on one of the trains heading out. Looks like it's leaving at track 11 in a few minutes. What's your train number?"

"Forty-nine, sir."

“Well, sailor, I think you’re missing your train. I sure wouldn’t want to be missing my ship. Would you?”

“No, sir. Hey, fellas, this officer says our number’s been called. Departure time was changed. Come on.” The group grumbled, grabbing extra donuts as they left.

Neil moved up to the table. One young woman was serving. The other two were looking for something on the floor. His eyes were drawn to one of them immediately. Even with her head down, he could see she was attractive, and her profile was familiar.

He wasn’t sure why his heart was suddenly pounding but decided to find out. He stepped around the table to offer his help.

“What can I do for you?” asked the brunette without looking up.

He couldn’t help noticing her petite figure. The top of her blue blouse was unbuttoned; revealing more than she probably intended.

Neil cleared his throat. “Uh, hum, I wondered if I could be of any help,” he said.

She straightened and quickly put a hand to her blouse, clearly annoyed. But her expression changed instantly when she looked into his eyes. She gasped covering her mouth with her free hand.

“It can’t be—you’re—” she stuttered, backing away, her hand still clinging to her blouse. Neil smiled. He couldn’t believe his luck. Maybe there was a God after all. “Caroline. Caroline Jensen? I mean, Caroline Terry? What are you doing here? I heard you got married.” Neil took off his officer’s cap, revealing his wavy black hair in a military cut. He stood waiting, offering a boyish grin.

“Neil? It can’t be!” Both hands flew to her mouth. “I thought you were dead, that you were killed over Europe in a bombing raid. Is it really you?” she said, a thousand questions in her eyes.

“It’s me, Caroline. I’m alive,” he said, his voice soft, reassuring. “It was my brother—Billy. He was killed in a B-17 raid two months ago.” he solemnly answered. “We all took it pretty hard.”

His voice brightened. “Hey! How about a hug for a resurrected man?” He held his arms out to her. He had been in love with her once, and the years that had separated them melted away.

“Oh, Neil!” She threw herself into his arms. As they held each other for a long happy moment, the soldiers waiting in line cheered, helping themselves to donuts and coffee. One of the girls whispered to the other as if she understood what had happened.

“By the way, I didn’t get married,” Caroline said, pulling herself from his arms. She looked into his eyes asking, “But, Neil, how—?”

Animated, he leaned over and kissed her gently on the cheek. “I owe you. That’s for the water fountain at Adams School.”

Her eyes teared up easily as she let go with a loud laugh, suddenly struck at the idea that what goes around, indeed does come around.

“Got orders for state-side duty. I’m a pilot; a Navy flight-training officer. I’m going to be working with pilot trainees at the new schools opening up in Long Beach and Santa Monica.” Neil suddenly didn’t feel so bad about missing the war action. He was feeling seventeen again.

“I’m shocked, Neil! Stunned! You’ll have to forgive me,” she said, turning to one of the other girls, her sister, who was happily taking in the drama. “Jenny, it’s Neil. Neil Thomas.”

“Yeah, I can see that,” Jenny replied, grinning. “It’s so good to see you, Neil.” She walked up to his and gave him a warm embrace. “You look—well, so good!” She stepped back and turned to Caroline, then whispered, “My gosh, he’s handsome! You’d better not lose him this time. You do, and I’ll be after him.”

Caroline nudged her sister on the shoulder and wiped away the moisture in her eyes. The shock on her face had become a welcoming smile.

“Hey, I’m kinda hungry, and donuts won’t do the trick. Jenny?” Neil said.

“Sure. You two go get reacquainted. Sally and I will be fine here. Besides, these guys seem to be helping themselves anyway,” she laughed. The other girl nodded, winking at Caroline.

“Thanks, guys!” she said. Caroline grabbed Neil’s arm and asked, “Where to?”

“Mexican food sound okay, across Alameda at Olvera Street? It’s been a long time since I’ve had any LA-style Mexican cuisine. Utah hasn’t discovered it yet.”

“Sounds good to me. I’ve got a favorite place over there.”

“Are my bags okay here for a while, Jenny?” he asked.

“Sure, just scoot ‘em under the table there,” she said, gesturing with her elbow as she began pouring coffee.

“Thanks,” he said, then smiled as he turned to escort Caroline out of the station. “I can’t tell you what this means to have you with me. I was kind of down, but seeing you again—well, I guess we have a lot to catch up on, with me being dead and all,” he nervously laughed.

“Yes, I think we do.” She held his arm close as they exited through the front doors to Alameda Street and the place called “Pueblo de Los Angeles,” Olvera Street. “I’ve never quit thinking about you, Neil,” she added softly as they walked along.

Neil looked into her eyes, feeling an urge to say it—the words he’d blurted out years ago at the Rose Parade; their last date before he moved. He stopped her on the sidewalk leading to Alameda Street. “I feel like a kid again, and I wasn’t very shy as a kid, was I?” he said, searching her eyes for a spark of memory. Her facial expression said everything in return as she offered a wide smile.

“Remember the words I spit out that day long ago, at the Rose Parade? It was the last one we went to together. We were still in our teens. Remember what I said?”

“Yes,” she whispered as she drew closer to him.

“I’ve felt that way about you since grade school, Caroline,” he said tenderly, wanting to reach out to her, hold her.

“You kind of get right to the point, don’t you?”

He nodded with a smile. “Time is short. There’s a war on.”

“Say them again, Neil,” she responded, a smile creasing the soft skin of her face as she closed her eyes.

“I love you isn’t good enough. Not for you, Caroline,” he whispered in her ear. Neil held her by the waist as they stood on the sidewalk. “There’s a war on,” he repeated.

Her eyes and smile revealed her thoughts to him.

Slowly, carefully, he moved his lips toward hers.

Caroline welcomed him home.

Back in Pasadena, Caroline sat in her trying to shake off the mental flashbacks; remembering how she'd found Neil in the train station that day, one year before. Memories. She had just seen him off to war. Now she was facing an uncertain future. Memories of being so in love, with nothing interrupting it. *A mixed blessing*, she thought.

Today was their first wedding anniversary, February 14, 1944. Today she'd tearfully said good-bye to him at that same place. Today he'd got his manly wish, to go off to war. She hit the steering wheel with her hand as she sat there in the driveway of their home, not wanting to go inside. She was alone and feeling empty as she sat there, thinking, remembering. Memories could be so sweet—and now?

It all weighed so heavily on her now. She stepped out of the car to see something lying on the driveway. Bending over to pick it up, she saw it was a copy of a picture, a wedding photo taken one year earlier. She was in her wedding gown, Neil in his naval officer dress whites. Finding it there sent a chill through her body. *Bad luck!* The thought came suddenly. “No, just silly superstition,” she voiced, trying to convince herself by mumbling the words out loud.

She fought to put it out of her mind as she walked up to the porch, staring at the photograph intently, wondering how it had gotten there. The last time she'd seen it, it was with the others she was arranging for the family album. Maybe Neil had picked it up, meaning to take it with him, and it had dropped out of his hand somehow.

She was glad she had found it. Turning it over, she noticed his writing. “Lt. Neil Thomas and Caroline Jensen Thomas, husband and wife—forever. February 14th, 1943.” It brought a smile to a face that had so recently been covered in tears. She was glad to be home, safe, even if he

couldn't be there. Just moments ago, she hadn't wanted to go into her empty "mansion." Now she couldn't control the roller coaster of emotions she felt.

She opened the screen door, fumbling with her keys as she unlocked the solid oak raised-panel door with the small window in the center. The window was at eye level, letting light into the entry hall with its small coat closet and mail drop. She took off her coat and hung it there.

Picking up the mail from the box, she found a letter from Neil. She hurried into the living room, set her purse down on the end table, and fell back into the cushioned sofa. Anxiously, she opened it, thinking he must have slipped it into the box as they left the house.

Feb. 14, 1944

Dearest Caroline,

It's hard for me to leave you, especially on this day, our wedding anniversary. You know that I felt it was my duty to volunteer. I couldn't keep sending other guys off to fight, maybe die, without guilt hitting me hard. I would never leave you. But so many are in the same boat we are. Please understand. I love you. It will all work out right.

Bing Crosby says it better, in that song we danced to as we listened to the radio last night:

Because you speak to me, I find the roses 'round my feet...

Because God made you mine, I'll cherish you, through all life, darkness, and all time to be...

Because God made you mine!

I left you a fresh rose by the bed on the nightstand before leaving today. I even wrote an original poem. Not as elegant as Bing's verses, just schoolyard childish and silly; but I like to think of you smiling, so here goes:

Roses are red, violets are blue,
This poem isn't perfect, but my love is for you.
The flower I leave with the card, here behind,
Is a symbol of beauty, a picture of mind.
And the picture I'll hold in my thoughts are of those. . .
Your face, your love, and this symbol—the rose!

I'll come back and be your last valentine. Forever is a promise to keep! Your loving husband ~ Neil

She could still feel him close as she held the card to her breast. She leaned back in the sofa, her eyes closed. Even the smell of the greasy clothes thrown on the floor of the laundry room was evidence that he had been there just hours before. He had used the overalls to tune up the car once more. “Good enough to last one full year,” he had said.

She got up, weary from the anxiety of making the last few hours with him meaningful. Entering the small main floor study, she gazed out the bay window to the rose garden they had planted together, then walked up the stairs to their room.

She turned toward the dresser. The smell of his after shave still lingered in the room. Old Spice. She went over to the white cologne bottle with a sailing ship on it, uncorked it, holding to her nose with her eyes closed. It was as if he were still here. It smelled like him—clean, smiling, holding her in his arms. “Neil,” She whispered.

Hearing the unmistakable roar of B-17 Flying Fortresses overhead, she put the bottle down and peered out the window. They were heading northwest, probably to the Burbank Army Airfield, she thought. As she watched them disappear over the hills that created Arroyo Seco and surrounded the Rose Bowl, she thought about Neil’s excitement to fly. But also of his brother Billy. He was looking forward to a career after the war. “Aviation is the future,” he’d say. Once the planes had passed out of sight, she looked back to the roses. Spring was just around the corner, and the first hints of leaves and buds were showing.

It had made perfect sense to her when Neil had suggested it. A rose garden, some gardenias, carnations, and chrysanthemums. Gradually, as they'd cultivated them, his plan to sell them each year to Rose Parade float designers could indeed payoff. He called it their “retirement account.” He had put a lot of care and love into those first roses.

She filled her lungs with a breath of the fresh, springlike air that had entered the empty house, then laid the card down on the nightstand next to the poster bed and picked up the single-stem rose. Inhaling its fragrance, she left the room to wander outdoors.

More planes appeared, high overhead. These were the fighters, Hellcats, the plane Neil flew. *That’s a good sign*, she assured her mind. “The noise of war,” she muttered. “It never seems to end.” The engines weren’t frightening, but comforting. Perhaps because they were friendly sounds; sounds of an entire nation gearing up, turning out equipment and machines.

Everyone seemed to have something to do behind the scenes for the war effort. They planted victory gardens, collected scrap metal and rubber for recycling; everyone was united, bound together in a sense of patriotism. The ugliness of war was distant, only coming too close on the theater screen.

You could go down to the cinema, the Jensen Theater on Raymond Street, where the latest film clips from the battlefronts would be shown every Saturday. But it all seemed so far away, and the patriotic sounds and music behind the announcer's commanding voice made it feel somehow right, as if the war was a good war. The boys would be marching home soon, with their proud tokens of battle, as they filed by shoulder to shoulder; victorious. After all was said and done, all would be right with the world.

Looking up at the war planes, it was hard for Caroline to envision them being used for the total destruction they were designed for. Neil killing. Others trying to kill him. The thought made her shudder. Her eyes returned to the rose garden. They'd be blossoming soon.

Caroline whispered, "Every rose, every carefully planted flower, will remind me of him." Then, taking another deep breath, she walked back to the house to pray.



La Golondrina

It was evening. Caroline sat in the living room, waiting for her sister, Jenny, to arrive. She had a fire going and had turned the small table-size Philco radio on. Dialing the tuner, she found the CBS Radio Network. The music made her smile. She was listening to the broadcasts from Radio City Music Hall in New York, one of the songs reminding her of their honeymoon. She remembered the hotel and the beach near Santa Monica, as the announcer presented Capt. Glenn Miller and his Army Air Corps Orchestra.

Caroline sat curled up on the sofa, holding a pillow to her as she stared into the glowing fire, listening. She wondered how long, how many days or months, it would take before missing him got any easier. The songs continued when she heard the knock at the door.

“Hi, doll face!” Jenny said, peering through the small window.

“I’m glad you’re here,” Caroline said, hurriedly opening the door to give her older sister a hug. “I need someone to talk to.”

Jenny hung her coat in the hall closet, then followed Caroline to the sofa near the fireplace. After a brief silence, with the radio down low, she finally urged her sister on. “How’d it go today, Sis? I mean, what did you do before seeing Neil off? I know it must’ve been hard,” she offered in a soft, comforting tone.

Caroline tilted her head back and stared at the ceiling, searching. “Yeah, real hard,” came her reply with a sigh. “Oh, Jenny, it’s got me so scared. I’m afraid—he won’t be coming back. I

keep thinking about Tommy Jones, Phil Johnson, Neil's brother Billy—some of the other boys who've been killed and seriously wounded, and it's got me scared.”

Jenny drew herself closer and put her arms around her younger sister. It wasn't realistic to say she knew he'd be coming home, but she had to reassure Caroline. “Hey, sweetheart, come on now. He'll be okay, you'll see. He's a top flight trainer, he's tough, and he's smart.”

Caroline looked up at her sister, imploringly. “He may be Superman to me, but he can't stop bullets. He can't stop bullets, Jenny.” She looked at her sister, wanting her to tell her she was wrong, that he *could* stop bullets.

There was nothing Jenny could say but, “It'll be all right,” she tried. “You'll see, Sis.”

They sat there, the music washing over them. Caroline gradually composed herself and they started to talk. “It's normal, the way you feel,” Jenny said. “You're afraid. We're all afraid. The best thing to do is write letters, send things, and plan for the future. If you plan for the future, then you have hope. You can live in the past, Sis, when you want to be alone with him, but look to the future. See him coming back to you, there at the station. Remember what Mom always told us before we went to bed?”

“Yeah,” she replied, and they voiced it together. “*Don't forget to say your prayers, girls.*” They were holding hands, both smiling as Caroline wiped away the last tears staining her face.

“That's what's holding me together, I think.” They were more than words to Caroline. Her mother's admonition was now her lifeline.

A quiet moment followed as they listened to the radio, which was still turned down low. The crooner, Frank Sinatra, was singing to Tommy Dorsey and his Orchestra. Both of them starred

into a glowing fireplace and listened for a long moment as the lyrics seemed to stall in Caroline's ears with:

In the blue of evening when you are here... close to me dear one,

There in the dusk we'll share a dream... reverie...

Jenny cleared her throat and decided to try to get Caroline to open up. "So... Tell me about today. What did you do before Neil boarded the train? Did you go out or something?"

"We had a good time," she responded in a quiet tone as she moved to the hearth, adding a small log to the fire.

"We walked around town for a while. We went up to Chinatown, then back to Olvera Street. You know, the place across from Union Station with all those souvenir shops. We had lunch at La Golondrina Restaurant, where Neil gave me the ring one year ago. The old Catholic cathedral, built in the late seventeen hundreds, was open. Neil stopped there and asked me if I wanted to join him, to go inside and pray. I shook my head and left him alone for a few minutes. When he came back out, we bought some souvenirs and I tried out my Spanish. It was fun."

Without thinking, Caroline had pulled out the handkerchief. She was twisting it in her hands as she stared at the fire, remembering the afternoon. Her sister sat quietly.

"He gave me this," she said, showing it to Jenny. As she said it, she realized that Neil wanted her to be happy. She had to try. "Oh, Jenny, you've got to hear this. We were sitting in

La Golondrina, waiting for our order to arrive. The mariachis were playing. Neil got up and took my hand, leading me out to the dance floor. He started to dance, trying to cha-cha or rumba or something like that. He had me in hysterics. People started to clap and whistle. Pretty soon every sailor, marine, and soldier who could find a girl was up and dancing. The rest sat there, cheering and clapping to the rhythm.”

“Neil. Always the life of the party,” laughed Jenny.

Caroline continued, “A Mariachi placed a Mexican sombrero on his head. I guess I really got into it then. I started stomping my feet, and some sailors started whistling, which egged me on even more. I really didn’t want the day to be all doom and gloom. Then I did that thing with my skirt—you know, flinging it around from side to side.

“The sailors started yelling, ‘Go, Lieutenant! Kiss her,’ and the whole place chimed in as they clapped. Neil finally gave in, leaning me back first, like they do in the movies. They all whistled and clapped. Soon guys were kissing girls all over the place. It was a riot. We left the dance floor laughing so hard, with good happy tears gushing from my eyes. After we finished our meal, we went to the station.” Caroline paused... “My legs felt like weights were tied to them. I dragged them slowly, not wanting to walk across Alvarado to Union Station.”

Jenny was enjoying the laughter and the light side she was seeing in Caroline. But she understood the heaviness. Who wouldn’t feel that way, she reasoned. “Caroline,” she finally mustered, “I wish I had the love in my life you do. You have to remember that it is special. A lot of us are still looking, hoping for the kind of love story you and Neil have. I’m jealous—in a good way, of course.”

Caroline had never thought about how Jenny and other single girls must have felt as they witnessed Neil and her enjoying each other so thoroughly. “Wow,” she replied. “That is the best thought I’ve been given all day. Oh Jenny,” she whispered, choking back emotion. “I love you. Thank you for reminding me,” she added.

They talked for hours after that about the old gang and growing up in Eagle Rock. Eventually, the conversation turned to the yearly trek the Jensen and Thomas families made to the Rose Parade, turning it into a tradition.

“Remember the parade in thirty-seven—or was it thirty-eight?”

“It was thirty-seven,” Caroline said with a smile. “The month before Neil moved away with his family. For all of those years, I had such a crush on him, and I finally found out that day how he felt about me.”

• • •

Since childhood, Caroline, Neil, their brothers and sisters—along with hundreds of thousands of others—had lined the route of the famous Rose Parade in Pasadena on New Year’s Eve. The tradition had started in 1933. The families would find a spot on Colorado Boulevard the day before and camp out, then start celebrating.

On Raymond Street, the bells of Saint Andrew’s Cathedral would ring out at midnight. When they sounded, the street would burst into sound. Horns honking, firecrackers exploding, party whistles blowing. Sometimes a few cars would get together and turn up a radio station that was bringing in the New Year with the hits of the year before.

Colorado Boulevard and Raymond Street made up a prime corner—within short walking or running distance, depending on the need, to Saint Andrew's, where Neil and his family attended mass. The church had one of the most important features for a long evening of partying—rest rooms, made available to the public.

Also on Raymond, just two short blocks south of Saint Andrew's, was the Jensen Theater, built in the 1920s. Although it belonged to a distant relative, it carried her name. In Caroline's mind the street was theirs.

She recalled the first time, at that Rose Parade, when she'd first thought she had noticed him noticing her. Soon they were making eyes and teasing each other. She was sure Neil knew how she felt about him. She had given him plenty of hints.

On that 1937 Rose Parade Eve, the gang was huddled closely together. The boys had stoked a fire in a trash can and they were singing songs, but it was cold, and Caroline couldn't stop shivering. They all had blankets, but Neil must have noticed her's wasn't enough. He brought his over, putting it over her shoulders. He stood back then, and warmed his hands over the fire with the other boys, who were laughing and cracking jokes. Caroline remembered smiling appreciatively, then suddenly sensing something different about him. He kept glancing her way, as if checking on her.

She wanted to make sure he knew how she felt. She decided to risk it all on his next glance. "Thank you, Neil," she whispered, then added, "I love you," mouthed in silence.

He stood, staring back at her. Then he blurted precious words in a stream of consciousness that would become the refrain of their growing feelings. "I love you isn't good enough. Not for you, Caroline!"

His brother Billy, who was laughing it up with their brother Johnny and Caroline's brother Pete, caught Neil's look and heard what he said. He teased his brother unmercifully by chanting the romantic remark. Neil had finally had enough. Instead of striking back, though, he sat down next to Caroline and pulled a part of the blanket over his shoulders to share it with her. He turned to her and winked, then reached for her hand.

There was silence for a long minute. Neil's brothers had expected him to fight back or leave to escape the harassment. But he put his arm around Caroline. She snuggled up to him unabashedly in front of their families.

With morning came an event that would make that Rose Parade even more memorable. As it began, and the queen's float passed by, a bouquet of roses bordering the stand on her float fell to the ground near the group. Seeing a mounted policeman's horse was about to crush the roses under its feet, Neil ran out and grabbed them. Returning to stand in front of Caroline, who was cheering along with the other onlookers at his rescue, he bowed before her, then went down on one knee and handed her the bouquet. The crowd cheered louder. A photographer from the *Los Angeles Gazette* caught the scene as the mounted policeman stopped his horse in front of them. Neil announced, "For a True Rose Queen," and the crowd roared its approval. The newspaper reported the scene, with the caption, "Rescue of the Roses! Gentleman of the Court Honors a Rose Parade Queen."

...

The glass-enclosed photograph of that New Year's Day event graced the mantle over the small stone hearth of their fireplace. Jenny laughed with her sister as they relived that and the other New Year's they had spent together on Colorado Boulevard.

"How about some coffee and donuts? I made them fresh this afternoon," Caroline said, standing up.

"Sure, Sis. Anything'll be fine," Jenny said, following her into the kitchen.

"I wish we could go back to those days, Jenny, but it all ended with the attack on Pearl Harbor. And it was never the same after Neil moved to Utah," she said as she poured the coffee, placing it on a tray with the donuts.

As they returned to the living room, Jenny said, "Sis, what do you think you'd be doing right now if you hadn't been at the USO table in the train station last year?"

"What do you mean, Jenny?"

"You know, if you and I hadn't filled in for Mary and her partner. What are the chances that you would have gotten a marriage proposal that day?"

Caroline smiled. "I guess there is a God."

"See! You're happy just thinking about it. The risk of marrying a man who you knew could be shipped off to war was worth it, wasn't it?"

"Yeah," Caroline agreed, biting into a donut.

"So... Answer my question. What would you be doing right now, this year, if you and Neil hadn't found each other again. You know. He would have thought you married Fred Terry, and you'd probably still think he was dead."

“I never thought much about it,” she replied. “I just assumed it was the hand of God in our lives, that it was destined to happen. To meet him again,” Caroline answered. They were silent for a moment as a warmth in their moods grew. It was getting late, but Jenny was staying the night.

“So, before you saw Neil off today,” she began, “you had lunch at the restaurant he proposed to you in. What’s the name—La Goldrina? La Golrina?”

“La Gol-on-drina,” Caroline said, pronouncing each syllable slowly for her sister.

“La Gol-on-drina,” Jenny repeated. “What does it mean? Is it food or something?” She laughed at her own remark.

The question made Caroline remember what she’d seen in the window that day. It was a small bird. A sparrow. The thought caught her off guard, causing a shiver to run up her spine. Her mind went back to another day, a year earlier.

She had been picking up a few things for a birthday party at the market near her mother’s home in Eagle Rock, when she ran into an old friend. Her friend told her a swallow had shown up one day on the kitchen windowsill while she was doing dishes, and that it just sat there. She broke down and cried as she told Caroline that a Western Union telegram arrived three days later. Her brother had died the same day the swallow appeared, killed in action in North Africa.

“Superstition. Silly superstition,” Caroline muttered, folding her arms over her body, fighting the chill.

“Caroline, you’re cold! You have goose bumps. Honey, what’s wrong?” Jenny asked, moving closer to rub her sister’s arms.

Caroline turned to her sister, trying to suppress her sudden fear. “Swallow,” she said. “Golondrina means ‘swallow’ in Spanish.”

...

One hour into the flight home, Susan placed the manuscript in her lap and tried to take the drama in. Caroline's heartache, her husband's promise to her, and those forebodings... It did make for a good *Valentine's Day Special* for CNTV, but also it was deeply moving to her. *That's something that doesn't happen every day*, she posed in self-talk. She picked the story up once more and read: *February 14, 1994...*

...

February 14, 1994 —11:30 A. M.

Union Station Lobby, Los Angeles, California

"Who's the old lady?" the custodian Armando asked his friend, motioning toward Caroline, who was sitting in the waiting station chair.

"That, my good man, is none other than Mrs. Caroline Jensen Thomas. She's a regular here. Like clockwork. I can always tell when it's February 14th, even if I don't have a calendar. Come Valentine's Day, she'll be here, no questions asked," answered Josiah Williams, the Union Station security guard. "We been good friends twenty-five years now. I kinda watch over her, wake her up a few times, just in case, makin' sure she's okay. She's one fine lady, I tell you that, Mando, a real sweetheart, yes sirree." Josiah reached over and tapped the old woman on the shoulder as Armando swept the polished tile floor of the old train station lobby.

"Miss Caroline—you okay, sweetheart? Miss Caroline?" Josiah shook her gently to let her know he was there. She slowly opened her eyes and reached for the glasses she had set on her lap. Struggling to put them on, she finally focused as she looked up at her Union Station guardian.

“Oh, Josiah. I’m so glad you’re here. For a minute, I thought it was Neil coming to get me.” She dropped her brown eyes in confusion mixed with embarrassment.

Josiah chuckled. “I understand, Miss Caroline. It’s just old Josiah, makin’ sure you’re okay. I’m glad to see you’re still gettin’ down here, little lady. Another year gone by, and you’re still comin’, for how many years now, honey?”

“Fifty years since I last saw him. I’ve come for fifty years, including Valentine’s Day 1944. It seems like yesterday. This place doesn’t change, Josiah. Come sit with me, won’t you?” she replied, weakly patting the empty seat beside her.

Josiah knew he shouldn’t take the time, but seniority did have its privileges. Besides, he thought, he could chalk it up to public relations. “Sure, little lady. Why sure. I’d like to take a minute,” he answered, sitting down.

“You know, this makes twenty-five years since I started workin’ here, Miss Caroline. You remember the first time I caught you sleepin’ here on the bench, and I thought you was some sort of bag lady?” Josiah laughed loudly, then went on, “You was the prettiest old bag lady I ever seen though, and I was determined to do my job. You really straightened young Josiah out, didn’t you, honey?”

Caroline’s lined face broke into a wide grin. “Pretty fancy dresser for an old bag lady, and pretty good with this walking stick,” she said, raising her cane toward him as he pretended to block it. “I guess you startled me. I was too quick with my cane, but it was good training for a new security man, right, Josiah?”

She was so happy to see her old friend. He had been so comforting during all those visits, year after year. He had watched out for her. He had come to work at Union Station back in 1970, when she had just turned fifty years old. Hardly an old bag lady.

Josiah relaxed a bit as he sat next to her. He reached over to take her slightly trembling hand from the armrest. He turned toward her, cupping one hand gently over hers, then reached over to give her a kiss on the forehead. “Thank you, Caroline. Thank you for what you did for me and my Martha. If it hadn’t been for you—well, she’s dealin’ real well with our boy Charlie dyin’ over there in Vietnam. I tell you this every year, don’t I, honey?”

She looked up at him with compassion in her eyes, simply answering, “Yes.” Her voice had aged gracefully. It was slower and shaky, but each word was soft, deliberate.

“You remember me tryin’ to help you, and then feelin’ that you’d been the one helpin’ me?” he asked.

Caroline gazed up at him with a smile and a gleam in her eyes. She nodded in reply.

“I wasn’t sure what to make of you,” Josiah continued. “Then you got up and walked over to McCarthy’s Cafe, and told me to follow you. You waved me over to a table; and just when I thought I was gonna have to listen to an old crazy woman talkin’, you told me to sit down.”

“I told you to sit down and be quiet,” she corrected.

“I was just gettin’ to that,” he laughed. “Then you told me to take a break, and you bought me a cup of coffee. I’ll never forget how it hit me when you said you wanted to tell me some history; a war story. It had been just three weeks since our Charlie’d been killed.”

“I didn’t know about the loss of your son, Josiah. I felt so bad when you told me.”

“How could you know, Miss Caroline? You know, what you said made so much sense, about your husband being lost over the Philippines during World War Two and all. How you knew he was probably dead, even though he’d been officially declared missing in action. Well, it sure did help to see how someone who lost a loved one was behavin’, you takin’ life with a smile and a song and all. And then you said:

“Josiah, as long as love is alive, the dead never die. It’s not in the end alone that we love, but along the way. A love that endures the thorns of life calls out to us. When we listen, it lights the ground on which we walk and we know that we’re not alone. And when the flame of life flickers out and is no more, the love you showed to others will light the ground for them to walk upon.”

“Josiah, you’re eloquent! Did I say that?”

“You sure did. You wrote it down on a napkin right then and there when I was fumblin’ lookin’ for some way to remember what you said. I’ve been sharing it with others all these years.”

“I see,” Caroline said with quiet humility. “My Neil wrote that to me from the war.”

After a moment of silence, Josiah added, “He was a special boy, my boy Charlie was. Never wanted to hurt a soul. Had a girl too. Was goin’ to marry her. Now, because you helped show us how we could handle it, we got dozens of kids calling us Mom and Pop. That was real good of you, teaching Martha how to reach out and lose herself like that. She sees a hurt in other people’s lives, and she’s there for them.” A hint of tears came to his eyes as he looked away. He cleared his throat. “She’s been a real good teacher too. Just like you, sweetie.”

“I remember talking to you, then having dinner with you and Martha, but my mind—sometimes I think I leave it at home,” Caroline said, looking at him with questioning eyes. “I’m

having trouble remembering a lot of things these days, Josiah.” Then she suddenly brightened. “I wish I could go see Martha one more time. Tell her that I said ‘I love her,’ and that ‘I’m proud of her,’ will you?” Caroline’s voice was imploring, soft, and gentle.

Josiah could see how tired she was. It worried him. “Yes, ma’am, but what do you mean, you wish you could see her one more time? Miss Caroline, you’re invited any old time. We live just up the road a piece from you. You going somewhere, moving maybe?”

“No, not from here anyway Josiah,” she said, fumbling with the fifty-year-old letter in her lap. “This is from my Neil. The men from the Navy brought it to me. He’s coming to get me and take me home today.” She gestured weakly with her hands to the old card, trying to pick it up in her trembling hands.

Josiah, standing up to position himself in front of her, knelt down to look her in the eyes. “You don’t mean your husband, Neil. You mean Neil Jr., don’t you now, Caroline.” It wasn’t a question.

“No, Josiah. Neil Jr. is with my grandson Eric at his basketball game. He won’t be coming to take me home. Lt. Neil Thomas is coming today. I know he will.” She stated it with clarity, then stared off toward the windows and the old wall clock, hanging over the doors to the patio on the south side of the waiting area. She fixed her gaze on the birds at play.

He followed her eyes. “What are you lookin’ at, honey?”

“*Las golondrinas,*” she whispered, a smile on her face.



Susan and Neil

January 14, 1998

Baltimore, Maryland

It had been five days since Susan's meeting with Neil in Pasadena. Since then, she hadn't been able to get him, or his story, off her mind; but the frenzied pace that greeted her when she got back to the office had kept her from reading beyond the first half. What she had read had been enough, though, to tell her she wanted to do this interview. She was hooked.

Craig Warren hadn't bothered to tell her until she got back that he'd scheduled the story to air on February 14th, if they decided to do it, as a Valentine's Day "Special Event." Only four weeks away. She'd fought him at first, arguing that she needed at least sixty days to get a show like this together, but she'd finally agreed to take on the challenge. It was, after all, a brilliant idea. Film producers had gotten wind of the story already—no doubt well placed calls by Craig—and were considering to do an "option" on the story if it gained a respectable audience.

By the time she got back to Baltimore on Friday and put the pages of Neil's story back in her attaché, she was beginning to resent the pace she normally thrived on. It was keeping her from reading; forcing her to focus on the mechanics of doing the interview, when all she really wanted to do was bury herself in the past, lose herself in the story of Caroline and Lieutenant Thomas's 1940's wartime romance.

She checked the clock on the control room wall across from her desk. It was 10:00 A.M. She'd had at least four cups of coffee already, checking the clock every few minutes, struggling to concentrate on digging her way out of the mounting pile of paper work on her desk. She was already two days late getting back to him. She'd had to do a lot of schedule shuffling to make sure she could make the deadline, and it had taken some time to set up the interview with Colonel Jackson.

Yet everything seemed to be working out perfectly. Late yesterday afternoon, the colonel had finally returned the call she'd made to his office early Monday morning, explaining that he'd been away on personal business. When she told him what they were planning to do with the story—that they wanted to interview him as part of the broadcast—he said he'd be honored, then graciously offered the use of his office in the Smithsonian Air and Space Museum. By the time they'd hung up, the final arrangements were firmly in place. They would tape the interview a week from today, Wednesday, January 21st, at 10:00 A.M.

Susan had tried to call Neil as soon as she finished her chat with Colonel Jackson, but no one picked up, and his land-line answering machine didn't appear to be turned on. "Man, this guy is behind the times," she mouthed to herself. She was anxious to let him know they were going to do the show, that in fact, it was already in the works. She also wanted to invite him to D.C. for the interview, as a professional courtesy. Maybe she could spend some time with him afterwards, get more information for the story by talking to him.

She picked up the phone to dial his number once more. It was only 7:00 A.M. in Pasadena, but she didn't want to risk missing him again. It rang three times before he answered—his voice sounding husky with sleep.

“Thomas residence.”

“Neil? Susan Allison. Sorry to call so early, but I’m already late getting back to you.”

“Don’t worry about it. It’s nice to hear your voice again,” he said.

“I’ve got good news. We’re going to do your story. I talked to Craig Warren about our meeting Friday; told him what I know of the story so far. He told me to drop everything and do what I had to do to get it aired on Valentine’s Day. That’s just four weeks from now.”

“I don’t know what to say,” Neil replied, suddenly sounding fully awake. “To tell you the truth, I was beginning to think you’d changed your mind.”

“Not at all. In fact, I’ve already set up an interview with Colonel Jackson. We’re going to shoot it at the Smithsonian Air and Space Museum in Washington, D.C., next Wednesday. I thought you might like to be there for it. It’d give you a chance to see him again, too,” Susan offered.

“Actually, I’ve never met him in person,” Neil replied. “We’ve had several phone conversations, and we’ve emailed each other back and forth, but that’s it. I’d love it,” he said, then added, “I need to use up some frequent flyer miles anyway. I can’t think of a better reason.”

“Great!” Susan smiled to herself, then went on to give him the details of the interview, including her personal work number in case he needed to get in touch with her. She concluded by saying, “So, I’ll see you Wednesday at ten sharp. I’m looking forward to seeing you again. And oh,” she added, “purchase a mobile phone. It’s 1998, for crying out loud.”

He chuckled, “Perhaps. Until then.”

Susan hung up the phone, pleased. She had been completely professional. She would see him again in a week, and she hoped she hadn't given him any reason to suspect that her interest in him and his story was anything other than business.

She opened Neil's manuscript to the chapter heading, "Caroline's Valentine Story," intending to spend just a few minutes more before her scheduled afternoon meetings. She hoped that she could understand more clearly where Neil Thomas was leading her.

Once again, she began where she had left off her reading from days before. It was that last day of waiting at Union Station for Caroline. "*February 14, 1994,*" she read...



Caroline's Valentine Story

February 14, 1994

Union Station, Los Angeles, California

Up from the Alameda Street entry, Caroline saw a group of noisy schoolchildren pass by Josiah as he walked away, ignoring their guide's lesson on the history of Union Station. She smiled at the youthful display unfolding before her, as she rested there with the sound of the playful children echoing in her ears.

As she watched them, her thoughts went back to her days as a schoolteacher. *How I loved the children*, she thought. She had truly been fortunate to have lived her life consumed in caring about the children who had passed through her classroom doors. It all caused her to think back.

Each February fourteenth for forty years she had taught her schoolchildren about the lover's holiday. Gazing up, she pictured herself standing in front of her fourth-grade class at Woodland Elementary and recounting her version of the famous and classical Valentine story.

...

"Class, your attention please. Who can tell me what we are celebrating today?"

The entire classroom of children hands would shoot up into the air as they all seemed to chime in a loud chorus, "It's Valentine's Day!"

“That’s right, children. And I want to tell you who Valentine was. There once lived a man who, long ago, died for his beliefs. His name was Saint Valentine. The legend goes that he was a prisoner of an evil king because of his belief in God. The King demanded that Saint Valentine deny his belief in God, and bow to him instead. He would not deny his beliefs or bow to the tyrant,” she told her pupils. “Then God sent a miracle,” she continued.

“Saint Valentine had a great love for his wife and he wanted to let her know that feeling one last time. He prayed to find a way to tell her. Then a strange thing happened. A pigeon appeared at the prison window. It was one of the pigeons he recognized from his home. He and his children loved to feed the birds and this was a special one that would eat right out of his hand. It brought him comfort to have his little friend there with him and he shared his food every day with the white-and-black spotted creature. He wondered about his problem as he fed the bird.

“There was also a rose bush that grew near the prison window and it had one beautiful red rose on it. He was close enough to touch it and to smell its fragrance. It reminded him of the love he felt for his wife and he wondered how he might get a message to her since he had neither paper nor pen. Then an idea came to him—he could share the rose with his wife! He reached through the bars and gently plucked the rose from the stem. The thorns caused his fingers to bleed, but he didn’t care.

“He decided to write words of love on the rose petals and give them to the pigeon. He hoped the bird would take the petals and fly away to his house. He had to hold onto the hope that his wife would find them and know that he loved her.

“He plucked a piece of straw from the pile the guards gave him to sleep on and used the sharp end to press the words, ‘I love you’ on the petals of the rose. He sent the message, one petal

at a time, with the pigeon. The pigeon would take the petal from his hand and quickly fly away. It continued to do the same thing every day until all the petals were gone.

“Then came the appointed day for his execution. Again, the king’s emissaries asked him if he would renounce his belief in God. He would not do it. The guards took Saint Valentine and cut off his head. He had been true and faithful: true to his love for his wife, true to his love for his God. *True love*,” she emphasized, “demands a price be paid and an effort made.”

The children would always gasp at the gruesome part about Saint Valentine’s execution; yet she had been determined to instill in them values. Love did not come cheaply. She would continue: “The prison windows had great iron bars to keep the prisoners in, but the bars did not keep Saint Valentine from sending his love out. Saint Valentine was free!”

Invariably the children would furrow their little brows and gaze at her strangely because of the puzzling paradox in her words. Then one brave, inquisitive child would raise her hand and ask, “If there were bars on the windows, and he was in prison, then how was he free?”

“Because when you love truly,” Caroline would answer, “and then when you believe in something as strongly as Saint Valentine did, no one can lock away your soul. The jailer can imprison your body, but not your spirit. Your heart is always safe,” and she would point to the center of her chest. “And then those you love stay with you forever.”

“Remember children, no matter what bad things happen to a person, if they feel love for someone and believe in something, then they too are free. The Valentine card is a symbol of love or kindness for others and the rose is the symbol of hope and of sharing that love. When you see a rose, think about how Saint Valentine loved his wife and family so very much.

“And as you grow, look for someone you can love in the same way. And then, every rose will remind you of your special love. It’s one reason your daddies may give a rose to your mommies along with a Valentine card.”

Again, the children would appear a little bewildered, but just as surely, one would also ask, “Did you get a rose from your husband, Mrs. Thomas?”

“Oh yes,” she would answer. “Yes, I did, a very long time ago. And I knew he loved me then and I believe he still loves me now. And do you know how?”

A few heads would shake but all would invariably wait their teacher’s final words:

“My husband was going to the great World War Two, and he wrote me a last Valentine, and then he did something else. He planted a red rose bush which still gives me as many red roses as I can count today, all these years later. That was his way of saying he would never leave me, and always love me...”

Her mind drifted back to the present moment after the noise of children in the station lobby grew faint as they passed back out to their school buses. She wished she had been able to continue teaching but she was getting so forgetful now. Except for daydreaming, her mind seemed more and more detached from the present moment.

Caroline fumbled to pick up her purse from the floor. As she did, her chest grew tight, her breathing became labored. “I forgot to take my pills when I left this morning—or did I?” she mumbled in a low voice. She found the prescription holder and flipped the long white top open, her hand trembling. The pills inside were separated into days. Easy. That way she wouldn’t take

too many or forget a day. Trouble was, she could barely remember what day it was. She would laugh—if the pain wasn't so great.

Her fingers trembled as she reached for the small white pills and brought them to her mouth. She let them sit on her tongue for a minute, then reached back down for the small plastic juice container she'd brought, its plastic straw already inserted on top. She coughed as she drank, almost choking. Struggling, she then relaxed back in the chair, trying to control her breathing.

Caroline bent over to return the container to her large black purse. As she did, her hand brushed an envelope. She lifted it out, setting it on her lap with Neil's last letter. Taking deep breaths, she composed herself as best she could, leaning her head on the back of the chair.

She glanced at the old clock. 11:00 A.M. The place was so much the same, but much less busy. Amtrak was the name of train service now. It had been Union Pacific back then. Her mind roamed back as she looked down at the letter.

Neil would need to come for her by 3:00 P.M. That's when the men from the US Navy said he would be there. That's when they said his remains would be returned to the United States. Neil would keep his promise to her, right here at Union Station. Those were his last words to her. It might've taken fifty years, but she believed in the signs she had seen.

She closed her tired eyes and took deep steady breaths, trying to regain her strength. The pain in her chest seemed to ease. She remembered his first letter as she held on to his last. That was one month after he left her in 1944.



Pacific War

March 15, 1944

Pasadena, California

After one long agonizing month, a letter had finally arrived from Neil. Caroline had been fighting her own war, a war of nerves. She anxiously removed the gardening gloves that she wore as she worked the soil around the flower bed. She had seen Mr. Myers, the postman, coming up the street and was hoping he'd turn up the drive to her home.

She had made a point to be out working in the yard every day for the last week at a quarter to twelve, pretending to busy herself in the yard. She was secretly hoping and praying that she would get her first letter from her husband.

“Hello, Mrs. Thomas. Well, lookie here,” Mr. Myers said. “Looks like a letter from someone with the same last name as yours,” he teased, holding it up to the sun, as if trying to make out its contents. Her foot tapped impatiently.

“Says, U.S. Navy Postal Service, San Francisco. Hmm. Then it must be for you, Mrs. Thomas,” he smiled, extending his hand as she reached for the letter.

“Thank you, Mr. Myers,” she called as he walked down the driveway.

She hurried into the house to sit down and enjoy these first words from her husband. Dropping down on the sofa, she opened the letter.

Somewhere in the Pacific

February 28th, 1944

Dearest Caroline,

I miss you! We shipped out of San Francisco and made it to Pearl Harbor in seven days. The accommodations were spacious—only six pilots to a ten-by-ten bunk room. Pearl Harbor is a sobering sight. The wreckage from the attack on December 7th, '41 is still visible. It's eerie to think that the Arizona is now a tomb to a thousand sailors—makes the war suddenly more real.

Because we are replacements, we're awaiting assignments to a carrier. I have a fair idea where we're headed. The fighting right now is in the Mariana and Caroline Islands. We certainly can't let them mess with your islands, can we? It'll bring me good luck to fly out there, you'll see.

I guess you're keeping up on the news down at the theater. If I get on a newsreel, I'll be sure and wag the wings for you.

How's Johnny and Pete? Have we heard anything? Let me know, will you? It sounds like it's been rough for Johnny in Italy. That Anzio beachhead is really taking a beating, from what the 'Stars and Stripes' say. I worry about him, eyeball to eyeball with the enemy and around the clock shelling. Hope Pete is out here somewhere, giving a hand in that submarine he got assigned to. I'll feel a lot better to know he's working below to protect us.

You won't believe who I saw my first day in Pearl. Fred Terry; your ex-fiancé. He says hello. I think losing out on taking the prettiest girl from Eagle Rock to the altar still bugs him. He's got a cushy job as a typist at Naval H.Q. processing center. How do some guys rate?

I can't think of a whole lot more to say. It might take a while to get letters back and forth. Just write me often. I live to hear from you. I made this little paper rose out of napkins. Maybe I've finally found my calling. It's the next best thing to our garden, and doesn't need water.

I pray for you and our baby. I'm proud to have you for a wife, sweetheart. I love you more than I know how to say in words. "Forever" is a promise to keep. Your loving husband! ~Neil

Caroline carefully folded and placed the two-page letter back into its envelope, placing the paper rose on her pillow. She had been sending letters through the naval post office with his name, rank, and serial number, and she hoped they were getting to him. He sounded good, and hearing from him had soothed her frazzled nerves.

She was dealing remarkably well with their separation, she thought. It was good to stay busy every afternoon at the Jensen Theater. Working at the ticket booth gave her the opportunity to see a lot of old friends and exchange news on how things were going for all the boys.

Weeks passed before she heard from him again. She was out in the yard, hoping as usual that the postman would bring her the letter she longed for. He always had some new quip about who was sending the letters from the Pacific. She had gotten used to knowing by the look on his face if he was carrying a letter from Neil.

"How're the flowers, Caroline?" Mr. Myers asked soberly, startling her. She was down on her hands and knees, working a new area of soil in the garden.

"Oh!" she said, throwing her hand to her chest as she turned, getting up. "How'd you sneak up on me?" She brushed off the full one-piece dress, now far along in her pregnancy, and removed her gardening gloves.

“Practice,” he replied, his voice serious as he gave her the mail in his hand.

“You don’t seem your normal self, Mr. Myers. Is something wrong?” Caroline’s brow creased with worry as she reached for the mail. She quickly looked through, making sure there wasn’t a telegram.

“I’ve had to deliver two Western Unions today. It’s almost more than I can take sometimes. I know all these people, their boys. I don’t know why they all seem to hit at once, but they do. This time, one of the boys was Ricky Bell. Killed over Germany in a bomber. He was a gunner. That boy was really something. And only eighteen years-old, too.”

Caroline gasped at the news. Mr. Myers told her that the other was Bob “Lightning” Richards, a star football player from high school and good friend of Neil’s. He was married and had one child, a daughter. Her eyes filled with tears.

“I’m sorry if I upset you, sweetheart. I didn’t mean to,” Mr. Myers went on, the dull expression on his face telling Caroline how much he hated the deadly business that was taking their best men away from them. “Looks like a letter from someone in there that you should probably go read. It’ll make you feel better. Have a nice day, young lady. Don’t worry.” He turned slowly to walk away.

Caroline liked him. He was clearly a sensitive man and there weren’t enough of those in the world. “Thank you, Mr. Myers,” she called. He waved in acknowledgment.

Tossing her gardening gloves on the porch swing, she opened the door and went into the house, kicking off her shoes in the entry. She curled up on the sofa, then opened the letter.

July 6, 1944

USS Princeton

Dearest Caroline,

You must know from the newsreels what's happening out here. We've been chasing Japs from island to island. You should see a fleet in action. It is a sight unlike any other. Sometimes I can't see the horizon without ships covering for our flat-top on all sides. Within a year we'll be knocking on Tokyo's door. I wish things didn't have to go this way, but they do.

You know I felt I needed to be here so I guess you ought to know some other things, too. I've been holding a lot inside. Every time I think I've just about got the worst battle experiences behind me, something new happens that humbles me. Flight training is one thing—I won't kid you, sweetheart—dodging bullets is a totally different story.

I wondered if I should talk about it, or if I should just gloss over the fact that this business out here is a far different life-and-death struggle than one imagines, even if you're watching actual film footage from the front lines.

War isn't the thing Hollywood makes it up to be. They can't show everything. We all smile for the cameras, and we fight for our families. There's no band playing, no bugler playing taps, no marches in parades, when one of your friends gets it. Nothing that can make up for the loss when your buddy takes a hit and goes down, then disappears under the waves of the Pacific.

We all have to swallow hard and see the world the way it is. The Japs and the Germans aren't giving up; not easy anyway. We are all at risk and have to do what needs to be done. Listen, honey. This thing is for keeps for a lot of guys. I just don't want you to feel like I'm in it alone, or

that you are. There are a lot of married guys out here, and a million men at war in the Pacific. The odds are on our side that I can come out of this okay. Please know I'm doing my best.

I know you don't want to hear this, but I want at least one of my letters to be as honest as possible so that you know I believe there's a God who is aware of us and our situations, and if my time is up—well, I believe he'll make everything right for you and me. The good news is that I've definitely been protected plenty, and your prayers help.

I guess I'm telling you this because I want to get it off my chest. I also need you to know that I believe we are engaged in a just cause here. I couldn't do this if I thought for one minute that we're not. Just be proud of us and pray for us. I'll be more cheerful now.

Got the picture two days ago of you in the garden. It looks great! How's our baby behaving in that growing tummy? How come you're so beautiful, no matter how big you get? Wish I was there just for one hour to hold both of you in my arms.

Don't worry, sweetheart. I'll keep my promise and we'll plant flowers and go to Rose Parades together for fifty more years. You'll see. You are my inspiration, and I need you. I've got to close for now. I love you with all my heart. You're the first thing on my mind when I wake up, and the last thing I think about when I hit the sack.

Caroline, don't let all the stuff I've said in this letter get you down. Even roses have thorns.

Your loving husband, ~Neil

The letter disturbed her, fanning her deepest anxieties; but she understood that he had to try to tell her about his fears. She had never heard him talk so openly about the danger. She knew

what he meant. She knew he was tough. He had to be. It must really be getting to him, or he wouldn't have been so brutally honest. And those last words he used: "*Even roses have thorns.*"

Caroline continued to follow every bit of news from the Pacific Theater. The enemy was tenacious. Suicide attacks upon the ships at sea was something new in modern warfare. It was terrifying to her. The enemy must be using their final cards, she considered. Without being able to push the American advance back, they began to try to slow it down in every way they could. It all angered her.

Is he being shot at today? she wondered. It was all too much to think about. *Thorns in deed*, she anxiously mused as she hungered to hear from him once more.



October 14, 1944

U.S. Fifth Fleet, Task Force 58

Aircraft Carrier USS Princeton

Lieutenant Thomas was taking his dinner at a relaxed pace while he read the *Stars and Stripes*. Things were swinging the Allies' way on all fronts. He reflected on the eight months of battle he had experienced. He considered how he had built up a shell to keep him from thinking about the killing and the loss of friends. He wondered about his surviving brother, Johnny over in Italy, and the dirty work he must be going through as a rifleman in the infantry.

In eight months, he had experienced more danger, more exhilaration, more fear, more loss of friends, and more of a part in killing than one thousand men his age would ever experience outside of battle and war.

He considered the killing capability of modern weapons; something the world had never experienced before. The slaughter of millions had taken place in World War One, “the war to end all wars,” and it had been brutal just because of the invention of machine guns and advancements in artillery. But the awesomeness of destruction that could be wrought on an enemy force by a single well-armed plane was almost incomprehensible.

This war was hundreds of times more deadly from above than anything ever imagined before. One good hit with a well-placed five-hundred-pound bomb or torpedo could cost the enemy hundreds, even thousands of lives in a matter of seconds. With hundreds of planes moving in at one another at speeds up to four hundred miles per hour, Neil and his comrades in their F6F Hellcat fighters were frightening in the extent of damage they could inflict. The pilot seat wasn’t only a seat in a deadly piece of machinery, but a witness seat in a court of war that was rapidly heading toward higher levels of mechanized destruction.

Caroline. *How was she doing?* he wondered. *What was she doing?* Their little boy had come a month early. How he wanted to be there. Home. The sweetest place on earth. The war. It was a just cause. It was for them, his wife and his kid. If it wasn’t for that, he could never do it. It had to be just.

“Hey, Neil, old buddy. What ya say I join ya.” Lt. Comdr. Chad Watson sat down at the mess table with his tray opposite Neil. “How’s the war going for our comrades in Europe?” he asked.

Neil looked up from his paper and smiled, “The Nazis are getting their rear ends seriously kicked, Skipper. I’ve got a brother on the ground somewhere over there. If anybody can kick hard, it’s my older brother.” He laughed with a knowing appreciation for their days of youth.

“He a pilot?”

“No, sir. Infantry. He was always a better shot than me,” Neil replied.

Commander Watson smiled at the affectionate look on his lieutenant’s face. “I guess I owe you congratulations. Some of the boys told me your wife gave birth to a son. I’m really happy for you, Neil.”

“Oh, yeah, I almost forgot.” Neil reached inside his shirt pocket and pulled out a cigar. “I saved this for you.” He handed the red-and-white-banded cigar over the table to the squadron commander.

“Thanks.” Watson held it to his nose and asked, “Cuban?”

“The best,” said Thomas. “Bought ’em in LA the day I shipped out. Thought it’d be good to have them to celebrate with when the big day came. Funny. I don’t even smoke.”

“A good smoke now and then would do you good, Neil,” replied Watson, grinning as he slipped the cigar in his pocket, then started to eat.

There was a pause while they worked at their food. Neil was just about done, getting ready to head back to his quarters, when his commander spoke up.

“You’re an Ace. You’ve got seven kills, Thomas. Today could have been your eighth. What’s wrong, Neil?” he queried his wing leader. The seriousness in his lieutenant smelled like stress, like fear. He had seen it before. It could get a man killed if he didn’t get a grip on it.

“I froze,” Neil shot back, looking up at the commander with apparent ambivalence. “I don’t know why. I just froze. I’m sorry.”

“Is it your boy? Being a new dad?”

“No, sir.”

“Then what?”

“I saw his face,” he replied simply. “He knew I had him.”

“Don’t do that, dammit,” Lt. Commander Watson ordered. “You are here for one purpose. That is to kill the enemy. Each one of those SOB’s are out here to kill you. You understand?”

“Yes sir,” Neil replied.

There was silence between them for a long moment before the commander spoke up again. “Look; sometimes it happens. We start thinking about the wife and kids and we get cautious, tense, lose the aggressive edge. But losing that edge has gotten a lot of good pilots killed. Better them than you. Remember that.” The commander looked at Neil as he continued to eat. “I’m grounding you; giving you some time,” he ordered, his mouth full of food. “Unwind. We need you, Thomas. We don’t need you dead. No missions for a few days. I want you on the bridge. Work with Captain Keller. I’ve already talked to him about it. It will give you some good experience, besides.”

“Listen, sir. I appreciate what you’re trying to do, but—”

Watson cut him off. “I don’t need more dead pilots, damn it!” he responded, jabbing his fork toward Thomas’s face. “You ever see another Jap face up close, I want him dead!” he coolly remarked with that questioning glare asking if his pilot understood.

Neil looked down at his empty plate and nodded. He realized that if his commander hadn't splashed the same Jap he'd had in his sights, the enemy pilot would have lived for another day to come back and maybe kill one of theirs.

"Besides, you deserve the break," Watson continued with a full mouth of food. "I'm not picking on you, Thomas. It happens to the best of us. And, frankly, you're one of them. I'm the commander here, and it's my squadron. If we get into trouble, then the no-flight order is off. But for now, no missions for a week."

"Has it ever happened to you, sir?" Neil respectfully shot back. "The hesitation?"

"Never," he answered. Watson glared at Neil sternly and shoveled another fork of potatoes into his mouth. "Oh, yeah. I almost forgot," he went on. "Once this next campaign is over, I'll be sending you and Bobby down to Australia. We've got some new F6Fs to pick up. Take some time. Have some fun. Know what I mean?" The commander winked. "Oh, and Thomas," Watson looked up from his food and continued, "the brass says we'll be opening the way for the Army Air Corps in the Philippines. It all starts in a couple of days. It shouldn't take too long before the army has a couple of airstrips. Then we'll turn it over to them. Get some rest." He turned back to concentrate on his plate.

"Thank you, sir. Is that all?" Neil stood up to leave.

"That's all, Thomas. Loosen up, boy."

"Aye, aye, sir," Neil returned. Dropping his tray off, he headed out of the officers' mess, down the stairs to the pilots' quarters and the bunk room he shared with Ensign Bobby Roberts.

He was uptight and he knew it. He hated what he was becoming. *Yeah, sure*, he reasoned silently, *it was a duty, war, that's all. Them or me.* Talking to himself, trying to get pumped up for

more battle. He was slipping. It was more than the battle taking place in the Pacific skies. It was the war going on inside him that worried him most. Had he gotten soft? Was he afraid of something; something bigger than dying? He wasn't sure what was eating at him, but it was eating him from the inside out.

Neil thought about the Nip that Watson had splashed that day. He replayed the whole scene in a matter of seconds on his way to his bunk room. It should have been his kill; an easy kill. It would have been his eighth. He had the Jap on the run. Like a movie it all unfolded again and he could see the Jap Zero in his gunsights.

He not only froze with the Jap in his sights and his finger on the trigger of the six wing-mounted 50. caliber machine guns—he had some crazy thought go through his head when he should have been concentrating on combat. It had never happened before.

There was the enemy fighter, a Zero, the sole survivor of a group of six fighters that Neil and his squadron had just tangled with. His thumb was on the trigger. He watched the Jap pilot maneuvering wildly, trying to escape. But Neil had him cold. The Jap would die in seconds when he let go with a targeted burst from his guns.

Then something happened. He couldn't do it. The callous shell of protection a pilot must throw up around himself had broken. He had been blocking a troubling event out, and it all came rushing back at the worst possible moment.

An image had flashed through his mind like a scene in a movie. It was Cameron. He could see Jim Cameron running, two Jap Zeros on his tail. It had happened one month earlier, over the island of Tinian. He and Jimmy, accompanied by a new guy, Ensign Roberts, were caught off guard. Jimmy decided to try a maneuver to draw off one of the Jap fighters, but two followed him

instead. Neil and the new guy, tangled up with two other Jap planes, got lucky and splashed the Zeros, then went to help out Jimmy, who was frantically calling for backup. He could still hear Jim's voice over the radio.

"I can't shake these guys! Where are you, Neil? Oh, man, I'm hit. I'm going down! May Day! May Day! Anybody read me? Come on, Thomas—you there?"

Neil called back, "We're on our way, Jimmy. Hold on, buddy. Roll and dive! Maybe they'll peel off and we can pick 'em up. Jimmy? Come in..." He heard no response.

He caught sight of what was left of the aerial duel. They had Jimmy, and he was going down on the deck, flying just above the surface of the water, followed by the Zeros. He was smoking; fire coming out of his left fuselage at the cockpit. But the Tojos showed no mercy; no mercy at all. They fired at him again, making sure he wouldn't survive. Jimmy's plane broke apart from the impact of hitting the water.

Neil had been filled with white-hot rage. A feeling of hate swept over him. He closed in from twelve o'clock, coming in on them out of the sun, with Bobby Roberts right behind. He opened up immediately, nailing one Jap pilot cold. He saw him get hit as the 50. caliber bullets tore the canopy to shreds, then watched as bits and pieces of airplane exploded around him. He felt satisfied that he'd evened the score. He watched what was left of the Nip's plane cart wheel and skip across the waves—kill number seven.

Bobby was chasing the other one. After a minute of dueling, he had made his second kill. Neil turned back and flew over the spot where Jimmy Cameron had gone down, hoping that Jimmy had somehow gotten out of the cockpit; was down there alive. But no sign. His buddy had been swallowed up in the great expanse of ocean, as if nothing had taken place.

It was strange. His fellow pilot and comrade flying next to him one minute, then gone the next. Not a trace that he had even existed. Nothing to say. Nothing to do. Just fly back to the carrier.

Neil entered the deck hallway to his quarters, his mind far from that day when they'd lost Jimmy Cameron. His thoughts had shifted to the scene of the dogfight on that morning's mission. He could see himself with the enemy plane in his sights. He could see the moment when he should have blasted the Jap out of the sky, but he'd frozen instead. With his thumb on the trigger, he could down the Nip. More payback. But the thoughts of the two Jap pilots who hadn't shown mercy to Jimmy one month earlier had a sudden and unexpected effect on him.

In his mind, he saw Jimmy instead of the enemy pilot, trying desperately to live, his fear, and desire to survive to get back home to his wife and little girl. He had hesitated as that image had flashed before him, and he couldn't kill the Jap.

His bravado vanished. He lost his edge. His inaction could cost another American his life, and he knew it. Then the skipper moved in. Watson yelled over the radio for him to get out of the way or get shot down, then moved in and splashed the Jap. It was over. The ocean took the enemy pilot and his fighter, and swallowed them, just like it had with Jimmy.

Neil opened the metal door to his cabin and entered the small cubicle. He was confused. He was supposed to be a killer. It's what he was paid to do. It was war. He sat on the edge of his bunk, staring at the floor, knowing that Watson was right. He needed a break, to sort the strange feeling out. If he didn't, it might cost him his life next time.

He swung his legs onto the bed and lay back, hands behind his head, looking up at the ceiling. He saw Caroline and the rose garden on Marengo Avenue. He pictured his little boy

playing there. He was suddenly sick of the violence, afraid of the prospects of growing stone cold; insensitive, mean.

Reaching over for the picture of his wife he had pinned to the wall, he brought it down and laid it on his chest, his thoughts still uneasy. He had lost everything gentle since the last time he'd touched her. But the people back home would call him an "ace," patting him on the back when he returned. He scored five kills plus two. He had become good at downing the enemy.

He tried to put aside any remorse creeping in over the Japs he had killed. Remorse didn't belong in a warrior's mind. The enemy were trying to kill him. It was a fair duel when he tangled with the enemy pilot. The best or luckiest won. Nothing more. Killing was the job. But... he struggled with the feeling he might never be the same. His past life felt a million miles away, and another lifetime as well.

He had to fight this new battle with an unfamiliar inner voice. He had to get back to the love that used to sing in his heart; the carefree spirit that made life so meaningful. Caroline, their new little house, simple dreams, and peace.

He wanted the war to be over. He wanted to go home. He had a promise to keep by their anniversary, February 14th, 1945. After these many months the wind of war was blowing west, to the Philippines. Perhaps they could get this thing over with soon, and all the foreboding, the mixed-up emotions, could be left out in the Pacific where they belonged. Buried at sea.

He suddenly thought about that day on Santa Monica Beach back in February, a few days before he'd shipped out. He and Caroline had gone there to be near the ocean and walk along the beach at sunset. He'd picked up a seashell and handed it to her. Lying on his bunk with his hands behind his head, he could see himself with Caroline.

"Here. Listen Neil," she said, handing the shell back to him, "What do you hear, honey?"

"Peace," was his quiet reply.

"Don't you hear the ocean waves?" she teased, poking him in the ribs.

His mind was on a visit he had made to see Father O'Donnell. He looked down at her with a weak grin and simply said again, "Peace."

What was it? What had father O'Donnell told him? Neil had gone to St. Andrews looking for a benediction of sorts, not a lecture. But the words deeply impressed him and they still echoed in his ears:

"Keep your head and your heart linked together, Neil. Don't fear the death of the body, boy. Fear the death of love. No one can take that from you, Neil. No one. Only you can let it die, and you can't let it die. Take care, my boy. Here's a scripture from Proverbs I want you to reflect on: *Keep thy heart with all diligence, for out of it are the issues of life.* No matter what happens, don't let any man take your heart," the priest continued. "Know what's most important, then do it. Do your duty in all things, even in the deadly business you will be asked to take part in. To know what matters most, you've got to keep your wits and your heart."

It was the last visit he'd had with his friend, the good father. He had shared other thoughts with him, reminding him of his family name and the catechisms. Then he prayed with him and gave him final confession before Neil headed for combat.

But those words. Words about love, the heart, what matters most. The words seemed like the idle bantering of a pious man who didn't understand how much Neil cared about the life of his body. He thought the old priest was just trying to do his duty. Yet Father O'Donnell was an ex-

U.S. Army chaplain. He had seen men die in World War One. Maybe the priest had seen something or knew something that Neil could only know after tasting the bitterness of battle. Now he knew that the old priest had been wise.

He felt the warmth of innocence through distant recall of memories. But tomorrow he might be asked to put that aside and flip the switch to “kill.” He pondered long and hard on the questions proposed by his experiences and what Father O’Donnell had no way to warn him of; *then*.

He couldn’t fathom love dying—*then*. He felt so full of it—*then*. Before he had killed, before he had tasted war’s ugliness; before he had become an “ace.” Surely his older brother Johnny would also be affected by the brutality of it all. Neil pondered Father O’Donnell’s words.

He thought back to that day on the beach. He remembered Caroline’s questioning look when he’d spontaneously said the word “peace.” His mind had been on what was out there, out there in the Pacific, six thousand miles beyond Santa Monica Pier.

“What are the words for ‘Pacific Ocean’ in Spanish, Caroline?” he recalled asking.

“*Mar Pacifico*,” she said. “It means ‘peaceful,’ or ‘tranquil’ sea.” She had looked up at him with a confused look, wondering what he was thinking.

Pacifico. War. “Peaceful war,” he joked quietly, indicating the irony of it. They had walked down the beach, hand in hand toward Venice, with their eyes on the surf and the setting sun. The same sun rose for others and it was painted red on their wings. Soon he would be there with them...



Raven Leader

October 20, 1944

Gulf of Leyte, the Philippines

Lieutenant Thomas put down his pen and read the letter he had been writing. It was man talk. How do you tell a woman about war, the way it really is, without depressing the hell out of her? The one thing he wanted most? To share what he was going through; not just the military stuff, but what he was feeling on the inside and what was causing it from the outside. But then—everything he felt on the inside had to do with outside events. Aircraft coursing through the air at speeds of up to four hundred miles per hour. So much enemy fire coming at you. Experience made a difference, but in the end, it was all in the hands of God. All of it.

He knew God was real now. Not because of war. but in spite of it. *There must be a devil, too*, he mused. Hate, death, war. It all contrasted so diametrically with love, life, peace. The only person he could talk to was God. Or Caroline. Was he becoming too unsure of himself to do his job? He had men to think about who counted on him.

He gazed down at the letter again. He read the writing, his attempt to get it all out. He knew if women could see this first-hand, war would probably end. They'd hold out their most precious feminine offering from men until they all surrendered and signed peace treaties. He smirked at the odd stream of consciousness. He wondered if any combat comrades talked to themselves like this.

Strange thoughts, but probably accurate. For him, now, women and sanity seemed to go hand in hand. They had the sensitivity and instincts to find a better way. “It’s a big operation, Caroline,” he began again. Frowning, he crumpled the letter up, threw it in the wastebasket, and walked out of the briefing room. The military censors would probably cut it all up anyway.

Neil had an uneasy feeling. The attack against targets in Manila would commence at 0600 hours. The planes were on deck even as he filed out of the briefing room with Bobby Roberts and a new pilot by the name of Tony Martinez. Tony was from Oxnard, California, just up the road from LA. Neil liked him and vowed to take extra care of the new guy.

He didn’t like it when that uneasy feeling came over him. It usually meant someone was going to die—one of his men or someone in the squadron. He knew the possibility existed that it could be himself. He just had to suck it up and do his job. Everyone depended on him being there for them.

This operation was going to be big. It was backed by an armada of over a thousand warships. The Seventh Fleet, under Admiral Kincaid, and the Third Fleet, under Admiral W. F. “Bull” Halsey, were out to crush the naval and land forces of Imperial Japan in preparation for the move against mainland Japan itself.

The first order of business was the “back door” and keeping the “I shall return” promise of General Douglas McArthur. With more than ten thousand Americans taken prisoner in 1942, and many still held in the Philippines, the Allies could not afford to allow the Japanese to have over 300,000 men behind them as they approached the islands near Japan. They must wipe out the enemy’s ability to reinforce troops from the Philippines not to mention save their imprisoned men and Filipinos from a slaughter which certainly would come at the hands of the vengeful Japanese.

The big day the Filipinos had been waiting for was coming soon. MacArthur, commander of Allied forces in the Pacific, had promised he would return after Manila, Bataan, and Corregidor fell in April 1942. The U.S. Navy was going to make sure he did. After three long and bloody years of war in the Pacific, today he would do so.

The planes were on the flight deck. Pilots were headed toward their F6F Hellcat fighters. Each plane carried ammo for the six 50-cal. machine guns and two 500-lb. bombs. Their primary mission was bomber protection and strafing of enemy targets, but today they were to be prepared to take on any enemy ship or target that could threaten the invasion.

“So, it’s Manila and Clark Field,” LT. J. G. Billings commented to Neil.

“Yeah. You look out for yourself, Billings. By the way, congratulations on your promotion. The guys in Raven 2 are some of the best. You’ll do fine as their leader.” He could tell how nervous the young twenty-one-year-old lieutenant was. He felt the same way, but hoped he didn’t show it.

Billings gave him the thumbs-up sign and split off to his flight division, which was positioned ahead of Neil’s group. Neil’s division was known by the call sign Raven 3. All of its flyers were under twenty-five years of age. At twenty-six, he was the old man.

“How you feeling today, Tony?” asked a confident-acting, smiling Lieutenant Thomas to the new guy, as he patted him on the back.

“A little nervous, Skipper,” came the reply.

“You just follow Bobby and me. Remember what you’ve learned and you’ll be okay.”

“Aye, aye, Lieutenant,” said the anxious young pilot, with a look on his face that said, “If you say so.” Everyone seemed to look to the lieutenant for assurance and support.

“Every new pilot goes through the same thing. Just ask Bobby here. He splashed two Zeros in his first week. No sweat. Right, Roberts?” Bobby, staring off toward the planes taking off, was busily engaged in his chewing gum as if faster chewing would fix whatever was going on in his head. They would get their call any second to man the planes.

“Yeah, that’s right, Skipper. No sweat,” he finally replied.

“Okay, gentlemen. Our turn. Let’s go.” Lieutenant Thomas called out above the cacophony of roaring engines as they were given the signal to board their Hellcats.

Man, I go through this every combat mission, he was thinking as he ran to his plane. The uneasy feeling, that he was trying to put aside, was still with him. The older pilots had the same fears and anxieties as the newer ones, they just learned how to swagger through. Becoming cavalier about a face-off with death was a way of coping. He pulled himself up into the cockpit. The wind was high and the noise from the engines was deafening.

“Hey, Lieutenant,” came a shout from the deck. It was Johnson, the crew chief.

“Yeah, what is it?” The petty officer had something in his hands.

“You dropped something,” he called over the noise, holding it up for the lieutenant to see.

“Oh, yeah. Thanks.” Neil motioned for Johnson to climb up on the wing.

Johnson handed the lieutenant a small brown paper package. “Good hunting, Skipper!” he shouted over the din. Then he jumped back down to the deck. He gave him a salute, which was returned by Neil’s grin and a thumbs-up.

Lieutenant Thomas, his hand to his throat-collar mic, was now giving the flight command to his pilots. They began to taxi out.

He reached into his Mae West life-jacket's zipper pocket, took the small brown package out and kissed it. Replacing it, he zipped the pocket securely and offered a silent prayer followed by the sign of the cross; his way of settling into the mission. Once he had done that, he focused. The small package contained a framed picture of Caroline and three-month-old Neil Junior. He didn't have time to read the letter. Mail call was just minutes after the briefing; now he had something to look forward to after this morning's mission. Wrapped up in the brown package, Neil had placed his "good luck" charm, the Valentine with the crushed red rose given to him by Caroline at Union Station. It had always brought him back safe, and he promised to return it to her—safe.

He taxied into position. He now let go of any gnawing, uneasy feeling, fighting it through his mechanical flight check as he waited for the signal to take off. The flag dropped. He gave his engine full throttle. In minutes he was airborne with his squadron alongside him.

"Okay, gentlemen, listen up. We will be on radio silence after this. Our objective is Red Bird. I repeat, Red Bird. Everybody got that?" They all acknowledged with a "Roger, Skipper." Red Bird was the code name for strafing Clark Airfield, the former U.S. Army air base that had fallen with the Philippines to the Japanese in April 1942. Planes from the *Princeton* were attacking with two objectives: the primary target was the captured Clark Field Army Airfield; the secondary was the Japanese ships at Manila's docks.

Within thirty minutes they sighted the billowing smoke from the first squadron's attack on Manila fuel depots and shipping. They were headed northwest, over the Sierra Madre Mountains and into the center of Luzon itself. No enemy aircraft had been sighted. They had caught the Japs flat-footed.

“Okay, boys. There’s our target. Eleven o’clock. Let’s knock ’em out with one big punch—then we go home. Follow me in.” Lieutenant Thomas banked hard to the left and each of the Hellcats followed.

“Stay tight, Tony, and just follow Bobby.”

“Aye, aye, Skipper,” the new pilot said.

They made two passes through heavy antiaircraft fire. One of the planes was hit instantly; Wilkerson’s. “Looks like I caught some fire, L.T.,” Wilkerson radioed. “My right wing flaps. I’ve lost a little oil pressure, too.

“Okay, Wilk. Let’s see if you can nurse your baby home.”

“Roger, Skipper.”

Their first mission of the invasion over the Philippines went better than he had expected. One plane hit, but no losses. Lieutenant Thomas looked over to his right-wing man. There was Tony Martinez with a thumbs-up.

“Looks like we left ’em smokin’, huh, Lieutenant.” The voice was Martinez’s.

“A fine job, Tony. You get a couple of Zeros there on the ground?”

“Yes, sir. Only three to go until I’m an ace, right?” the young pilot joked.

“Sorry, Martinez. They have to be airborne—at least one foot off the ground. That’s the rules of the game.” It was Ensign Roberts.

“Yeah, them’s the rules, Martinez,” chimed in Wilkerson, as he guided his smoking Hellcat back toward the carrier. It helped calm him to be part of the ongoing chatter.

“Raven Leader to Raven 3. Raven Leader to Raven 3, come in Raven 3.” It was the squadron commander, Chad Watson.

“This is Raven 3. I read you, Raven Leader. Go ahead,” Neil radioed back.

“Raven 3. What kind of shape you in?”

“All accounted for, sir. Wilkerson hit, nursing it, and we’re headed home.”

“I’ve got a little change in plans. We need you to make a run against Black Dog. Come in.”

“Aye, aye, Skipper. Same coordinates?”

“Same, Raven 3. Send Wilkerson home. We’ll keep radio contact with him.”

“Roger, Raven Leader.” Neil hated abandoning one of his men. But they all knew the score.

The mission came first.

“Okay. Listen up, gentlemen. Raven Leader gave us a follow-up mission. The target is Black Dog. I repeat the target is Black Dog. Wilk, I hate to do this, but you’re on your own. Maintain radio contact with Raven Leader at...” he said, giving Wilkerson the radio frequency. “We’ll follow your flight path back home. You read me?”

“Roger. I copy that, L.T.” Ensign Wilkerson saluted as the group peeled off to head south for Manila.

Within minutes they had Manila’s docks in sight. The previous bombing runs had awakened the sleeping enemy and they had opened up with a fury from every gun emplacement not destroyed by the previous waves of Navy carrier aircraft.

“Okay, boys, one run and we’re home free. Let’s make it a good one. Follow me in.” Lieutenant Thomas peeled off to a hard two o’clock and headed into the firing, which was creating

puffs of black smoke around his cockpit. He was headed for the ships that were still afloat and returning fire at the American planes. “Remember Pearl Harbor!” he voiced as he let go with every gun he had. He pulled up hard, felt a thud as his plane shook around him. He had been hit, but the plane was still manageable.

He glanced back at the ship he had just strafed. A ball of flames shot up into the air. “Bingo!” he exclaimed, as the explosion was followed by a second.

They regrouped at 5,000 feet. A plane was missing. “Where’s Martinez?” Thomas called over the radio to Ensign Roberts.

“He was right behind me. Perry, did you see Martinez?”

Perry had just joined them. “Yeah. He got it. Saw him get hit and then he took it into the docks.”

“Damn!” Instantly Lieutenant Thomas was filled with the same rage he felt over the downing of Jimmy Cameron months before. Rage was the only way he could make sense of the losing a man. He was glad he felt it. It allowed him to cope with the lunacy of it all, the confusion that kept playing a tired bitter melody inside his head.

“Hey, Skipper, you don’t look so good yourself. You got oil starting to make a mess of things. You got a good chunk of left-center fuselage gone, too.”

“Yeah, I know. Neil had to get control of himself. They were over Manila Bay, heading west before looping around east to their carrier. He had only two options. He could try to make it back to the *Princeton*, one hundred miles offshore to the east of Luzon, or he could ditch in the bay. If he tried to make it back and had to bail out over Luzon, he would face capture from an

enemy that beheaded their prisoners. If he ditched it in the bay, there was a chance he'd be picked up by a sub or rescue plane. He felt safer with the latter option.

"Looks like I'm a swimmer today, Bobby. You're Raven 3 now." Just then his plane stuttered. He felt a jolt. Oil engulfed the canopy. "This baby just froze up on me. Can't see a thing. I'm going down. Call me some help, Bobby," Thomas commanded as he opened his canopy for visual help in piloting the Hellcat down toward the bay.

"Roger that, Skipper," the Ensign replied. "We're calling for the cavalry now, sir. You hang in there. If you can't, nobody can."

"Thanks, Bobby. Follow me down and then get back home." Neil struggled to level out his plane at five hundred feet. "Bobby?"

"Yeah, Skipper?"

"There are only two things that fall out of the sky. You know what they are?"

Roberts laughed nervously. "Yeah, Skipper. I think I do. Fools and bird crap."

"That's right." Thomas angled his plane into the surf below. Pulling hard on the stick, and with the engine freezing up, he was in a glider against the wind. "Just a wet deck on a bobbing carrier," he reassured his fellow pilots. "Come on baby. Love me back like I loved you," he urged the crippled craft in his struggle to text-book land his plane on water without dying. His tail hit the water first, dragging the plane to a skipping halt. The nose hit a small wave, causing him to strike his head hard against the instrument panel. He was bleeding, but alive.

"Roberts to Thomas," came the anxious voice over the radio.

"I'm okay, Bobby. Bump on the head is all. Breaking out the raft."

“You got this Skipper.”

“Tell Caroline I’m...” he answered as his mic went dead.

Ensign Roberts looked on as his comrade climbed up and out of the cockpit and onto the wing of his plane, which was barely afloat. He saw the life raft inflate as he radioed a May Day distress call for his flight leader. His signal was received. He gave the ship the coordinates for the downed pilot. *Good luck, Skipper*, Bobby said to himself. “Okay, boys, we’re going home.” He swooped low over his friend, wagging his wings to let him know he had called in the May Day. With a deep feeling of resignation, Bobby offered a silent prayer for his lieutenant.

Neil waved back as he pushed his raft away from his downed aircraft. His mind was both here at work and at home. “Got to keep my promise,” he offered to no one but God and Caroline.

...

Caroline was with him... For two nights in a row, he had been with her in her dreams, wearing his dress uniform. Neil was happy, he was home; but it seemed somehow strange. He was holding her in his arms. They were standing among the roses. He brushed the back of his hand gently against her cheeks as she stood there, her eyes closed, feeling his tenderness. He spoke to her:

“I came home to tell you I love you, Caroline.” He looked at her with an intensity that seemed to ask silently: *Do you understand?* He held her hands to his chest, cupping them in his. “I’ve

never loved you more!” Then he would turn to the rose bush and pick a long-stemmed single red rose in full blossom.

“Your hands are bleeding, Neil. The thorns—they’re hurting you. Let me go and get some bandages,” she would say to him in the dream.

“No! Don’t leave. Not yet. It’s nothing. Caroline, the thorns don’t hurt. They protect us.”

Why? she could remember thinking, and it was as if he could read her mind.

“Because no one would risk anything if they were afraid of the thorns. Love means more, grows deeper, because of the thorns.” He then kissed her softly and tenderly.

Looking at her, as he slowly pulled away, he said, “Can you do it, Caroline?” He carried a pleading anxious expression on his face.

She melted into his arms for one final embrace. Then she was left standing there, watching him disappear into a bank of fog. Barely visible he would turn one final time. He was mentally asking her: *Can you do it?*

“Do what?” she would question back, but he would be gone.

She wanted to run to him but her legs were heavy, as heavy as lead. They wouldn’t move. “I’ll be back for you,” answered the fog-enshrouded field.

Somehow, she felt right, even though she couldn’t run to him. She accepted it, but would awaken with moist eyes. But she knew it was as if one more mission needed to be flown before he could finally return home to her. Caroline was grateful to wake and feel as if Neil had been with her in the night. She found herself praying for the dreams to return. Then the swallow had invaded her peace.

La Golondrina. It appeared at her window on the morning of the second dream-filled night. Would the postman be delivering mail soon, or...

...

I've got to get away from this sinking bird, Neil thought. He had scrambled up and out of the cockpit onto the wing of his Hellcat, now barely bouncing on the waves. He had inflated his life vest and raft, waved a hand signal to Ensign Roberts, who had wagged his fighter's wings in a response, then eased himself into the rubber raft. Neil tried to paddle away, but the waves kept pushing him back toward the slowly sinking aircraft.

"God, let me live," he mumbled aloud. He felt dizzy. The whack on the head must have been harder than he had thought. Blood streamed down his face from a cut over his right eye. He pulled a handkerchief out of his trouser pockets and held it to the wound. "Let me get out of this to see my wife and kid. God, if you can hear me, I—" Neil said as he blacked out and fell prostrate in the small raft.

He drifted for hours, fading in and out of consciousness. Every now and then a swell would lift his body up, then send him and the raft down the other side. It started to rain. He would awaken to the sound of engines and wonder where the rescue planes were. He hoped for a submarine, seaplane, someone to see him. He knew the Navy would be looking for him. He remembered one case where Admiral Spruance held up his entire task force for two hours while they searched for one downed pilot.

The memory gave him hope. The waves and the rain increased. He had to hold on, just a little while longer. "Got to keep myself alert, watch for the plane," he whispered under his breath.

The wind and rain grew more violent, but it also gave him cover from any Jap patrol boat that might be searching for downed airmen. It took everything he had to hold on.

Hours passed. As did, at last, the storm. When night fell, the moon reflected an eerie light that shimmered across a vast expanse of water. He was in Manila Bay, floating among sharks, Jap patrol boats, but hopefully too, a friendly sub.

He longed to be home. *Can't think of that now, can I?* Neil's head was injured and wandering. *Yes, I can think of that.* Fighting for them was the key to making it out alive. *Stay alert, Neil.* His body was drained from its efforts to stay afloat, bail out water, paddle, keep awake. He hadn't had real sleep the night before the mission. He was glad for one thing, though. He was glad that the sea had finally become a calm surface. With the moon out now, he could see the silhouette of a mountain range above the distant shoreline. He estimated it to be only five miles away. With any luck, and help from the current and his paddling, he might make it to shore before sunrise.

He began to talk to himself through the pain: *"For Caroline. Okay. Think, Neil—You've got a kid now. Come on, Neil—they're waiting on the shore. Come on, man, just make it to shore. You can do it! For little Neil. Come on, man, you can do it."*

He put his effort into paddling and continued being his own coach. His thoughts weren't the only source of his strength. He believed in God and the help he might get from his weak prayers, but he also needed these images of the cozy home on Marengo Avenue—the same images he used every time he took off for another combat mission.

Neil visualized holding Caroline there in the rose garden. He visualized handing her a rose. And he visualized asking her to be tough for him. *"Can you do it, Caroline?"* If he would ask that of her—then he had to be tough and make it through the fire burning in his muscles, the pain his

cracked throbbing head protested against. His arms now trembled with fatigue from paddling. His mind was tired and vision blurry. His back and shoulders were one stroke of the paddle away from total surrender.

Hours passed. He had lifted off the *Princeton* at 0600 hours. His watch showed 0400 hours. Twenty-two hours since he'd taken off with his squadron from the carrier deck. He and Roberts had spent hours talking about God and religion into the night before. The questions and answers that conversation created had kept Neil up most of the remaining hours, thinking, until early morning. Over forty hours without real sleep.

His lungs felt as if they were on fire. He wanted to just stop, lay down in the raft and sleep. But his squinting eyes could see the white foam glistening in the moonlight as it lapped in small waves along the beach.

His paddle finally hit something hard. He was on a reef. He lifted himself over the side of the raft and began to walk unsteadily in waist-deep water over the bed of jagged coral. It was awkward to stand, let alone walk on the stuff. He stumbled and staggered like a drunk, pulling the small raft along with him. Several times he fell, cutting his arms and legs on the sharply calcified sea formation. He must have fallen a dozen times before he realized that the shoreline was only fifty yards ahead. Then he would be on solid ground.

He finally stumbled onto the beach, falling headlong into the sandy cushion. He lay there, physically drained, unaware that he had let his raft float back out into the surf. He knew that he must move—move into the palm grove a hundred feet or so off the beach. But he couldn't move a muscle. His body wouldn't respond to his commands. Cut, bruised, exhausted, but grateful to be alive, he fell into a deep and complete sleep.



Western Union

October 20, 1944

Pasadena, California

Caroline awakened to the pleasant chirping sound of a small bird outside her bedroom window. She wrestled with getting out of bed. For two nights in a row, she had dreamed that Neil had come to her. She felt warm, whole, loved. Since little Neil hadn't yet stirred, she could just lie there, listening to the song of the bird. Then it hit her.

Caroline threw the covers off herself and angrily flung her arms toward the small winged creature. "Shoo—fly away! Shoo—leave!" She rapped on the window with her hand. Then she covered her shivering body with her arms. She was shaken; her hands and feet weak.

"It means nothing. Absolutely nothing," she told herself as she walked out of the bedroom and into the kitchen to start a pot of coffee. It was 8:00 a.m., time for the morning news broadcast. She turned on the Philco and began to work with the water on the stove. The announcer started with war news:

THIS BRINGS YOU TO THE END OF THE FREE READ!

As promised the full ebook **THE LOST VALENTINE - 25th Year Anniversary Edition** will be made available in PDF

for my personal **ONCE UPON A TIME Book Club** members by
March 1st at just **\$1.99!**

I will be contacting you with a special email reminder...

Grateful for your friendship, I hope you will share
this opportunity with friends to become Book Club
Members to be able to enjoy the offers, and reading
fun!

Yours,

James Michael Pratt AKA "Jim"

January 2023