

CHAPTER ONE: BAILEY BARKER

Immediately upon graduation from college, with a degree in nursing, I joined the Air Force as a registered nurse. My stint in the Air Force surpassed my original goal of fulfilling only the minimum requirement of time. My passion while there grew each day for a job which I loved more than I dreamed possible. Upon joining, my thought was that I would use my time invested in military service as a means of developing discipline and resolve, nothing more.

My parents were both driven and focused. I, however, was lazy and spacey. It surprised me when I found it impossible to walk away after the mandatory two years. Instead, I retired from the service after twenty-two years. Most likely, I would not have left then, but my mother died at the same time that I was up for re-enlistment. Demands of settling her estate became my focus, so I retired from my job as Lieutenant Colonel in service to my great country.

It was a sad day when I left. The surprise party, which my friends threw for me, did not erase the feelings of moroseness and a little fear of what I would do now with my life. At the young age of forty-two, having obtained the status of Lt. Colonel, my life had revolved around the demands of caring for my patients as well as serving in a noble field. Nothing else in the world seemed appealing after years of feeling essential and respected while serving my country. Still, I owed it to my mother to make sure that all of her affairs were in order. Clarissa's estate was vast and involved. As an only child, there was no one else to make critical decisions over her several properties and a significant amount of funds held in a sizable trust.

My plane landed on a beautiful, bright blue spring day in Mobile, Alabama. It was impossible for me not to wear my uniform despite the unseasonably warm afternoon. When I served, I bemoaned wearing the dark blue each morning. Now, I refused to wear anything else. I had become "married to my job." Purposefully, I left my home on Maxwell Air Force Base in Montgomery, Alabama very early on that bright morning, for my new home in Fairhope, Alabama. My Mother, Clarissa, had purchased this massive estate upon the death of my Father, Clarence Barker, years earlier.

"Bailey, I may as well live like a queen. Your Father was miserly for all of my life. Better I enjoy the money than leaving it to you to squander."

I guess she had forgotten that I was a Lt. Colonel in the Air Force, not the immature child of yesteryear. Clarence had built a large factory which

manufactured table linens from a tiny cottage industry into a sprawling compound. He was famous in our town of Charleston, SC.

As a child, I dreamed of breaking away from the demands of being Bailey Barker, child of wealth and privilege, to Officer Bailey Barker, the world traveler. It seems that I had always dreamed of being an officer in the Air Force. The nursing degree was merely a way of establishing myself and gaining entrance into a world of measured decorum. Dreams of becoming an officer drove me to excel in school and later in college. Working as a nurse was not my dream but provided me the means of quickly obtaining status as an officer in the Air Force. As time passed, I discovered that taking care of the wounded veterans in my charge was an honorable and sincere career. Suddenly, the status of officer diminished in my mind, and my job as Registered Nurse provided the catalyst of joy and purpose for each day.

As I now walked across the field in Mobile, I wondered if I had made a mistake.

Well, Colonel Barker, what will you do now?

Instantly, I pulled my shoulders backed and practically marched across the open area as I stared straight ahead. How did one stop being a soldier? It seemed that my adult life was spent making crucial decisions and facing demanding schedules.

As I crossed the open field, thoughts of Clarissa clouded my mind. Mother and I always had a love/hate sort of relationship. I had only visited her grand home in Fairhope one time long ago. Her lifestyle struck me as vain and wasted after I stared into eyes which had suffered so intently for the country that the U. S. soldiers risked everything to defend. Without considering my choice, I now found myself in the same boat where she ended her time on this earth. The lavish life of Clarissa Barker silently passed to her only child. I was no better than the woman whom I had criticized for so long because I discovered that deep inside, I desired to experience life spent in luxury without taxing demands each day.

The bright red Mustang convertible sat in the rental lot all shiny and appealing. I felt a smile spread across my face as I approached.

What is it like to waste a day?

Soon enough, I would discover the pampered life of none other than Clarissa Barker. The sadness, which overcame me as I drove out of the rental car lot,

surprised me. Never were my mother and I close or connected. Clarissa appeared fastidious and cold. Come to think of it; those words now summed me up pretty well. Stunned at the sudden realization that I had become the person whom I had always detested, I shook my head in disgust.

I planned to drive from Mobile to the awaiting mansion in Fairhope. Freed from a life of demands and restrictions, I finally began to relax. As the sun continued to climb in the dark blue sky that matched the color of my jacket, I put the top back and enjoyed the wind on my face. Time flew past as sand blowing in the deserts of Afghanistan! Soon, I removed the pins from my raven hair as I shook my long locks free of confinement. Finally, I could experience a freedom that I had never known. Confidently, I reached for the volume controller of the radio. *Cool Rock Classics*, from a bygone era, filled the air. All was perfect in my new world. Maybe my decision was not a bad one?

Thoughts of my newly opened world of retirement continued to soar past. All worrisome images evaporated from my mind as stress and demands of a past life blew away in the wind. I looked forward to lounging by the rich, blue waters of the pristine pool which nestled behind the vast estate. Clarissa's gallant horses waited to carry me on long rides through the acres of brilliant green pastureland. My Mother and I were about the same size. She had been meticulous in her wardrobe. Now, I could strut around dressed as a queen just as my Mom had done. I had never experienced pampering with facials and massages. Professional hands did not frequently style my dark tresses. Usually, it draped around my face, or I pulled it back without thought to how perfect it may appear. Glancing at my fingers, I realized that my hands and feet never glowed with bright red polish and lovely clipped cuticles. Ah, the life of wealth and freedom awaited for the once spoiled child who changed while serving her country with noble sacrifice.

My past childhood dominated my mind. My earliest recollection was Dad holding me as I rode my miniature white pony at a childhood birthday party.

How old was I?

Maybe about four or five?

Suddenly, I laughed out loud as Hall and Oates cooed from the radio. Mom was wrong about Dad being a miser. Nothing was further from the truth. Lavish lifestyles surrounded Clarissa and me during Dad's life. Nothing was off-limits from our selfish demands. Clarence just didn't approve of sprawling homes with a

large staff. Yes, Clarissa had done a little cooking over the years, but basically, Petra did most of the housework and preparation of our food. Mother was a fanatic bridge player and fund-raiser for just about every charity in Charleston. Poor Dad only went to all of the events because Mom needed a chaperone. Once they arrived, she floated off to be with her many friends while he suffered alone by the bar. Dad usually got “potted” but ended up enjoying himself. When we arrived home, he met with the disdain of Clarissa for “embarrassing her by getting drunk.” The same scenario played out all through my childhood.

Dad and I learned a long time ago that there was no pleasing the selfish demands of the woman whom we both adored. Yes, Mom was a complicated woman. Her beauty caused all of us to suffer her rebukes. Just being in her presence brought us great joy despite her frequent criticisms of us. Don’t get me wrong, she could be very kind and gracious, but usually, it was in the presence of someone whom she tried to impress. Mom was a superficial person. All of my life, I decided to be her exact opposite. Now, I had accepted all that she left me; it was a significant amount of stuff!

Will all of this wealth change me?

I couldn’t fathom what waited.

Dad, well, he was terrific! There wasn’t a mean bone in his skinny body. The voluptuous woman, dressed to kill, in her flowing gowns with twinkling jewels was accompanied by the thin man who appeared nervous and out of place. He usually dressed in a dark gray suit. They were opposites but adored each other with a strange sort of love.

My love life did not exist. A few guys asked me out in high school but never any serious romance. Still, I dreamed of having a man, like my Father, follow me around with looks of adoration while I floated spotlessly attired into the room. Such thoughts filled my head. How quickly I appeared to forget my military sacrifices.

Soon enough, I turned off Interstate 10 into the outlying area of Fairhope, Alabama. For some reason, I passed the small road to Clarissa’s house and continued into the little town. Fairhope resembled a miniature Palm Beach in that everything was pristine and perfect. Mounds of red and pink flowers greeted me from measured spots around the groomed village as well as each shining storefront. Private boutiques displayed beautiful antiques and expensive clothes. Beckoning

restaurants attracted with delicious aromas of Italian delights. There was a lovely French bakery to add to the heavy smell locals enjoyed all during the day. A one of a kind bookstore delighted patrons by adding wine and cappuccinos. Fairhope, Alabama was a village of great wealth.

My future home sat in Baldwin County, Alabama. The gorgeous shining Mobile Bay served as the backdrop for this incredible town of fifteen thousand three hundred and twenty-six blessed people who called it “home.” *Southern Living* magazine named it the “Best Small Town in the South” in the 2016 edition. Now, I called this unknown place “home” as well. What waited for me in this new life as I stepped into the role of Clarissa Barker? This town of wealth became known as a bastion for the intellectual and artistic during the winter months. It had a great deal to offer the gifted when they became bored with writing or painting. Mobile Bay sat like a beloved jewel in the South. Inspiration waited for the many authors and artists. Maybe I could try my hand at a few water sports? How else would I spend these long hours ahead without my beloved soldiers for whom to care?

Fairhope has a subtropical climate during the summer months. After several stints in Afghanistan, I knew uncompromising heat well. Now, the winter months in my new home were quite the draw as they boasted an average temperature of fifty-nine degrees high. These conditions sounded like heaven to my sunburned ears after sweltering in the heat of Afghanistan. Excitement at a new beginning buzzed through my veins. Maybe I shouldn’t be critical of Clarissa, the name I called my mother? You see, I had done some homework on my awaiting new town.

Since I was unsure if Petra knew of my arrival time, I decided to eat a bite before I went “home.” Those words sounded fake and foreign. This place, where I was destined to live, had never been home to me. No one could ever replace Clarissa in the house that she had named *Sunny*. That word also described her. A tall, blonde woman with striking emerald-green eyes, she pulled her long platinum hair away from her face with brilliant combs and hairpins. Her beauty was legendary. Like me, she was tall and willowy. Her demise, due to a brief bout with cancer, had been quick. As a result of my deployment to Afghanistan, I did not return for her funeral which didn’t bother me since I had not often visited during her lifetime.

Dad was also tall but dark. I must have inherited his looks. My long hair was as dark as his, and my eyes of ebony were just like the eyes of the man whom I loved more than any man on earth. That wasn’t much of a statement. He was the only man whom I loved on earth.

My arrival, on a Wednesday, was scheduled on purpose. Traffic downtown appeared sparse. Good, I wouldn't have a problem obtaining a seat for lunch. Quickly, I spied a beautiful Italian dining spot.

Maybe this is where Mother dined frequently?

How could I know? I never cared enough to phone.

The added pleasure of seating outside, on a day like this, pulled on memories of being outdoors from past summers of my childhood days in Charleston. Enjoying the beauty of outdoors was what I desired today. If this were a weekend day, a different scenario would have awaited. Tourists loved this little village. Even in the winter, people booked all the hotel rooms, and getting a reservation in the better restaurants could prove difficult. Call it impossible to reserve a room at one of the hotels in the warmer months. Many people found this the perfect place to schedule weddings and receptions. Yes, I had just retired to the idyllic Southern, small town. A town for the "haves" and a magnet to the intellectually gifted.

Excitement finally surrounded me.

Can really I be stepping into the rather large and beautiful shoes of Clarissa Barker?

Apparently, it was so.

"Miss, I asked if you are ready to order?"

A handsome young man peered with interest at me. I shook my troubled head as if trying to remove the creepy webs from my mind.

"I believe that I would love the pasta."

What happened to the quick decisions of Colonel Barker? How quickly I was changing into an indecisive, waster of time.

Pointing haphazardly into the air, I looked foolish.

Before he could walk away, I began to ramble with useless information. Patiently, the waiter stood before me with a smile. When I realized my impromptu gushing, I blushed.

What has just occurred?

“Are you visiting here? Don’t worry; I get this reaction all of the time. It *is* a beautiful place. Where are you staying?”

I felt ridiculous. Gushing is not something that an Air Force officer usually does. I shook my head as a sign for him to leave but I had opened the door into my private world. He refused to go. I sighed loudly.

“No, I’m not visiting. I have moved here recently.”

I smiled only a little hoping that he would accept that as enough small talk. My waiter did not get my body language. He continued to stand in the same spot with the exact stupid smile as he held an empty tray extended into my space.

“Where?”

He is beginning to annoy me.

“I live at *Sunny*.”

My wide grin was an act of sarcasm, but he bought it as genuine. How could he possibly not understand that I wished him to go? The military protected from gaffs such as this. An officer could dismiss questions just by rank. I figured he would think that *Sunny* was the name of a street or maybe a condo complex.

“Really? *Sunny* is such a gorgeous place. You must be Clarissa’s daughter, Bailey? Wow! You don’t look anything like *her*. Clarissa Barker was the most beautiful woman in town. We all loved her. Why did you never visit her? You know, your actions caused her pain. She referred to you often. I’m sure Oliver will be happy to have your company, finally. He and Clarissa were quite the item if you don’t mind my saying. During her death due to cancer, he remained by her side and cared for her.”

His smile grated on me.

My gushing happiness began to evaporate.

“What did you say? Who is Oliver?”

“You must be kidding? Oliver Greene, you know, the famous author? You do know who Oliver Greene is, don’t you? Do you want me to list all of his books for you?”

What is it with this man of many questions?

Of course, I knew who the “great author, Oliver Greene” was! I wasn’t entirely without culture. Who had time to read while being deployed and serving their country? Still, I knew the name.

“Why would Mr. Greene be happy to have *my* company? I don’t know him personally. Do you?”

“Well, your mother sure did. I mean ‘know him personally.’ He was her lover. They had been together since she first arrived here.”

The smile grew substantially in my face. I thought of knocking the tray from the nosey waiter’s grubby hands.

Finally, he walked away as if bothered that I didn’t know all of this. Before leaving, he shot me an irritated look.

Alone, I waited for the waiter, who knew more about my Mother than I to reappear. As he approached, he looked at me with a puzzled stare. The pasta, which I ordered, smelled divine. It had been hours since I had eaten. Greg, the waiter, also brought a large glass of cold water with several lemons on the side. My appetite had been flushed away with the news of Oliver Greene.

What is going on here?

All of this information from my waiter must be incorrect. Was he playing a sick game? This day of new beginnings was not the time to throw me a loop.

“Look, I will be living in *Sunny* now. My mother bought that house just after the death of my father, Clarence. I think that you must be wrong with your timeline?”

I asked that as a question.

“Oh, no, I’m not wrong. I remember well the day that *she* arrived. Mr. Greene showed up the next week. Immediately after that most of the town enjoyed large

parties at *their* beautiful estate. Those two people were the talk of the area. We sure hope that you continue the soirees. I haven't seen Oliver much anymore. Maybe you can encourage him to come back here for dinner? He is such a wonderful man. The two of them had a knack for making everyone welcomed in their lives."

Did he just emphasize "their" estate? I thought that I own it.

The fake smile begged removal, but I was too shocked by Greg's information to react.

Welcome to the world of, Clarissa, my mother; Oliver, her lover; and Bailey Barker, yours truly.

CHAPTER TWO: *SUNNY*

As you might imagine, after the news from the local waiter, my drive to *Sunny* was not so sunny. I passed the simple county road to Clarissa's home as my thoughts tried to make sense of this latest revelation. After I had turned around and headed in the correct direction, I calmed down. Why should I be nervous? Maybe it was the "great" Oliver Greene who should take heart? After all, I held the deed to the house where he lived without his having contributed a cent to the upkeep. All of that was about to change. Today, Mr. Greene would receive "walking papers" to vacate his home for over five years.

He doesn't understand how relentless an officer in the U. S. Air Force can be.

A smile caressed my lips as the sun did my face. Life was good again. There was no reason to hesitate in my new world of the "rich and famous." Effortlessly, I turned into the spacious drive of Mom's grand home, covering the driveway were beautiful, bright pavers of faded yellow.

Follow the yellow brick road?

Suddenly, I felt like a young child watching a mesmerizing story play out.

Where is Toto?

The massive red brick house with dark green shutters stood as a beacon of wealth and privilege. Everything Clarissa did was calculated and perfect. Each room inside the grand structure was staged just right according to my sketchy memory of the interior of this lavish home which admittedly, I had only witnessed once. Never

did she over or under decorate. Only perfection was good enough for my Mom. I wondered about Mr. Greene. How perfect was he?

When I saw the house, I lost my breath. It was unlike anything that I had ever seen. The sloping dark green slate roof glistened in the sun. There were no words to describe the structure which sprawled in front of me. Grandiose was not grand enough. I parked the bright red convertible and sighed. This gorgeous estate was now *my* home?

Clarissa, what have you done?

I walked to the door with another sigh. It was locked, so I rang the bell. Moments passed. I studied the massive mahogany doors with ancient brass lion head door knockers. The wood glistened as though someone must polish it each day. They were beautiful. Respectfully, I rubbed the shining surface.

It seemed like an eternity as I stood in the same spot with a grin the size of Texas. What if Mr. Greene had changed the locks and bolted the doors? Slowly, I began to perspire as I waited. My fake smile began to dissipate.

Again, I pressed the rubbed-copper doorbell as the melodious chimes filled the air for the second time. The footsteps, which finally greeted me, were small, dainty ones. Petra opened the door with a look of surprise.

“Miss Bailey?”

The maid posed this as a question.

Who else did you expect?

Mom’s attorney, Mr. Lattimer, was supposed to have contacted all concerned parties about my arrival on this day of fresh starts. I wondered if that covered Oliver Greene.

“Petra?”

I wanted her to feel as small and unimportant as she just made me feel. My question was posed to set the stage for the impressive arrival of the prodigal child.

“Didn’t Mr. Lattimer contact you? He should have let you know of my arrival. I apologize for the inconvenience.”

Again, I sighed.

With a smile, I walked past my mother’s maid of thirty years. Petra had worked for my parents in Charleston. She knew our family well. The small, Mexican woman followed me with a dish towel wiping her hands. I remembered that she always carried a dish towel and wiped her hands. A few times, I noticed that she also rubbed her nose but what the heck?

“Yes! Mr. Lattimer did call us, but I forgot to write down the date. Doody also forgot.”

Her answer was nervous and unsure.

I figured “Doody” was none other than the great author.

“Who is Doody?”

I wouldn’t let either of them off so quickly.

“Well, I should let Doody tell you. Would you like to bring your bag inside?”

The small, dark woman appeared, well, small and dark as she stood in the massive, brightly lit entrance.

Without emotion, she pointed to my shiny red car which also appeared small in the driveway.

Again, I sighed audibly and walked out to the car as Petra walked to the back of the house. Could no one assist me into *my* new home? Doody was probably writing somewhere as he ate MY food and drank MY wine. Again, the infamous sigh from puckered lips greeted my strained ears as I struggled to hear sounds of my house guest.

Shouldn’t Petra or the great Oliver Greene have carried my bag inside?

No big deal!

I sighed yet again.

As I entered the house, with my luggage, I heard laughter from the kitchen. Entering the bright, spacious golden room with gleaming high dollar, stainless steel commercial appliances, I noticed three dark, young women huddled together. They dressed in white uniforms just like Petra's. Each of them appeared striking.

"Hello, who are you?"

They only glared at me.

"Look, I'm the owner. You can speak with me. Who are you?"

They laughed and walked away tightly huddled together. What was going on?

Am I the owner?

I began to question why I was here.

Just then, I heard a golf cart flying up close to the kitchen window. It landed with a screeching stop. Mesmerized, I watched as the most handsome slightly older man descended. The stranger was a merry-looking man with dark hair and olive skin. He dressed in a dark linen jacket with a perfectly ironed white shirt; his accompanying cream linen slacks grabbed my attention. This handsome stranger was a dandy. The pipe, which he clinched in his teeth, made his image seem perfect; he WAS perfect. No wonder Clarissa had fallen for him. My heart fluttered as I watched him extend his hand toward Petra while he assisted her from the cart. A modern gentleman helped her down with great care. She batted her eyelashes at him with a coy smile. Then, he flashed her the brightest, most genuine smile. His white teeth shined from his dark skin in the afternoon light. I melted as I watched all of this occur only inches away from the window.

The two entered the house with joyful laughter. They walked into the kitchen as best friends without a trace of employer/employee status. They teased each other and laughed softly. I smiled. Already, I longed to be a part of this "family" of sorts. Much to my dismay, I liked this handsome and apparently kind individual who stood before me with a twinkle in his eye. I extended my hand, but this friendly person would not accept that behavior. Instead, he sauntered toward me with a big hug. The fragrance, which scooped me up, soothed my confused spirit.

What was that scent?

Sandalwood, he smelled like luxuriant sandalwood which happened to be my favorite scent. I could have stood there in his embrace smelling him forever. Mixed with the pleasing aroma was a slight trace of tobacco. When Clarence smoked his pipe, so long ago, I loved that smell. An indescribable feeling overtook me. It was as if this man represented everything that I missed: the care of a real nurturer, the smell of tobacco from a long-ago pipe of my father, the scent of sandalwood which I adored. It almost seemed staged, but how could this stranger know such things about me? Why should he care?

Finally, he pulled away from me. I reached toward him as a child who does not want Santa Claus to leave her embrace. The handsome man smiled. We didn't speak for the longest time. Instead, our eyes communicated a feeling which said, *We are on the same page. There is no need to be at odds.* Quickly, relaxation ebbed into my being.

I understood, at that moment, he was a *real* nurturer. All of my life, I found myself surrounded by cold, reserved individuals. First in my childhood with Clarissa and Clarence, then in the military; now, I stood before the persona of a man who cared.

Never, will I let him leave. He must remain close to me.

I had just completed a one hundred eighty degree turn in my thinking.

I blushed at the realization that I did not even know this man. Suddenly, peace floated over me. I looked into eyes of darkest brown. I realized that he was a little older than the image he presented. His embrace from rock-hard arms created a need for another. We smiled.

“Well, hello, Colonel Barker. It is a pleasure finally to meet you. Your mother frequently talked about you. I will soon be packing my things. Don't worry; I will remove myself from the guest cottage.”

He looked deeply into my eyes. He was sincere.

“There's a guest cottage? I didn't know. There is no need to be in a rush. It isn't like you were here, in the same house. Please don't leave yet.”

It would have been enough just to gaze upon this Adonis of perfection.

My speech did not flow. Instead, I heard myself stutter and beg. I sounded desperate. It seemed that Mr. Greene had read my earlier thoughts. I blushed again. This statement was not what I had intended to say. What happened to the officer in me? I knew the answer.

With that thought, the officer bolted alive inside me.

“Petra, who were the three women dressed in white? I thought that you were the only employee working here?”

Petra continued to stare at the man. Her infatuation was apparent. She explained that Clarissa had hired a full staff to care for the massive house and guest cottage before her untimely death. There was also a butler and crew outside. How could my Mom possibly afford all of this? Dad left her well-off but come on, not to this extent. Where was the butler when *I* arrived and was forced to carry my luggage inside? No problem, maybe he was needed by the handsome man standing in front of me. I smiled yet again.

“Colonel Barker, I am Oliver Greene. It is a pleasure to meet you, finally.”

I blushed.

In my eagerness to show my ownership, I failed to introduce myself to him. There was no need for my fanatic behavior. Now that I had met him, my entire perception of things involving him changed. Oliver Greene was a real man. One who was kind and fair; I was sure of it.

Oliver spent the remainder of the day with me. He showed me around the entire house. It was odd for this stranger to lead me around explaining the workings of *my* home. As he guided me to the master bedroom, I was confident that I caught him staring at the magnificent bed elegantly covered in the finest of silk duvets. A fluted canopy flowed from the wall at the head cascading down to the floor. Mr. Greene stared sadly at the flowing, blue ensemble.

Did he and my mother spend long hours passionately embraced? My mother was much older than her lover. Was he her boy toy?

My mind easily entered there with longing to understand the relationship which they shared. I envied Mother as never before. Shamefully, I shook my head.

Is nothing sacred?

Periodically, during the day, Petra would follow Oliver and me around as a puppy follows her owners. Yes, this Oliver Greene was a magnet for women. The entire day, we enjoyed together. At last, around 7 pm, he stood reluctantly and looked into my eyes.

“I need for you to understand, more than anything on this earth, I loved Clarissa. She loved your father, don’t ever doubt that. I never meant to downplay *their* relationship. Although I enjoy living here in Fairhope, I will leave whenever you say. Later, I’ll explain the financial side of *our* arrangement. For now, let’s just get acquainted and enjoy these moments. Is that acceptable to you?”

His words stunned me. I thought that we had decided that I didn’t expect him to leave suddenly. More than that, I no longer desired his departure at all. To the contrary, I relished having him around. All of this felt strange to me. It was as though I watched myself and could not stop what was occurring. What had happened to the “great” Colonel Barker? The strong-spirited registered nurse who quickly shouted orders? My friends would have been surprised by my placid actions. I surprised myself!

What does he mean by “our financial arrangement?”

“That’s fine, Oliver.”

I looked into his eyes with a school girl’s naïveté. He must think of me as foolish.

For a brief moment, our eyes met. The handsome man’s stare penetrated the awkwardness of the moment.

“Clarissa and I always showered about this time of the evening.”

Does he mean together?

“We met at 7 pm for cocktails and then always enjoyed dinner together at 8 pm. Are these hours acceptable? I have instructed Petra to follow your instructions.”

His smile melted any chance of disagreement from me. Although the stranger was directing the owner, I didn’t object. I considered that I had always dined at 5 pm and seldom enjoyed an official “cocktail hour.” Usually, I met a few friends on the

base for a beer and grabbed a quick bite before heading back to my lonely apartment. Air Force hours required early retiring to arise sharp and ready for a long, full day.

I said nothing. A mere nod of my head satisfied his inquiry. Silently, he departed for the small guest cottage behind the pool. It suddenly dawned on me that during his tour, he never included that piece of property which I owned. Well, tomorrow was another day. I smiled when I realized that I had another with Oliver to plan. After completing a long, hot shower, I stood before the closet in awe. How could one woman own so many gorgeous clothes? Each outfit was more beautiful than the next. She arranged her wardrobe by colors. Slacks and blouses were mixed with long gowns and shorter dresses but always by color. I had never considered such an arrangement. In fact, my wardrobe had no organization at all. It was a mess of uniforms and civilian clothes in no particular order. Those things weren't important to me as a soldier even though I appeared concise and orderly in my military behavior.

Choosing an outfit presented me with a dilemma. Of course, Oliver would be aware that I wore my mother's clothes.

What will he think of that?

Suddenly, his opinion of me mattered deeply.

Foolishly, I stood there as I inspected each outfit. I felt like a child in a candy store with unlimited money. Each of the delicious concoctions could be mine at any time. A smile covered my lips. A delightful fragrance entered my nose as I breathed heavily.

Did Clarissa spray perfume in her sanctuary?

Without warning, I began to perspire and shake uncontrollably. My thoughts of the present evaporated as the fear, which often overcame me, now claimed me once again.

I stand alone in THAT spot.

The heat is unbearable. Lights flash all around me. Adrenaline pumps in massive amounts into my tired body. I consider throwing myself into the balls of hell which blaze around me. Then all of this agony can finally end. Instead, I run forward into

the exploding flashes and sounds. Loud, violent blasts of Hell tear at my mind once again. My men are groaning. All will be for naught if I do not save them! Instinctively, I throw myself over two of my soldiers. The ground shakes mightily.

Just as suddenly, I became aware of my present status. I now stood before the bright colors of wealth and security. The sweet smell of a thick perfume eased my weary mind. My hands continued to shake. The perspiration, which earlier soaked my face and body, began to calm in the pleasant temperature of the room. The Hell of my thoughts dissipated. I stood frozen in *that* spot with vague memories of another time. Another place, where I worked fearlessly for my country, but I had been afraid. I worked beside foreigners whom I did not know. I did not trust them but knew that I *must* to survive. Those old feelings collected again in the shackles of my tortured spirit. Quickly, I had learned the art of survival. It must happen spontaneously, almost instinctively. The only thing that brought me comfort during my hellish ordeal was the thought of my beautiful mother, Clarissa. Never before had I admitted this new revelation!

Expertly, I shoved those frightening thoughts deeply into the recesses of my brooding mind. How many suppressed memories lurked there? How often did I receive orders for deployment into Hell? I could no longer remember. Such thoughts made me tired.

Slowly, I walked to the shower with the realization that something was very wrong with me. I was a Lt. Colonel in the United States Air Force. My behavior was not allowed. These wimping thoughts of reliving my pain were not allowed. Long nights of remembering the faces and cries of my men were over. It was over!

Hell can no longer touch me!

I smiled as the cold waters flowed. The old smells of perspiration evaporated under the purple scented soap of the beautiful Clarissa.

Later, I descended the stairs dressed in a flowing, full-length, white caftan. Layers of soft, shimmering gauze caressed my body. The gown contained threads of twinkling gold. I felt like an angel. Never before had I felt as if I floated. On my feet were shimmering sandals of gold. Atop my head was a golden turban. When I first put it on, I laughed.

How foolish I have become.

Now, I lived the life of Clarissa. Anything that I desired was possible. This fact was my new world. I knew that I must escape from the nightmares which surrounded my mind. Anything to keep those obsessive thoughts from draining my energy and spirit. Sometimes, it felt as if the maniacal passion in my head would destroy me. It was imperative that I fight this pain or risk destruction. If dressing in ridiculous clothes, the cost of which could feed many people, maintained my sanity, so be it!

There he stood. The elegant Mr. Greene waited for me at the foot of the stairs. I was late. The soldier in me became angry. Words from long ago yelled into the air:

You must always be on time. A good soldier is never late. Drop on the ground, soldier! You give me two hundred push-ups, right now!

Laughing, I realized that I had almost fallen onto the stairs in a prostrate position to give my Sergeant the necessary penance for my tardiness.

You are free! You are free! You are free!

Maybe only words but they released a drug into my body which stopped the tremors and all the accompanying pain.

“Oliver, I am very sorry to be late. This sort of behavior is highly unlike me. I guess the change in my status from soldier to civilian enticed me to sleep a little longer.”

My explanation sounded childish and unnecessary.

He looked shocked.

“You aren’t late. No, you are right on time.”

He looked at his watch.

“No, I am seven minutes late. Please don’t patronize me.”

The words sounded like a harsh rebuke from an officer talking to someone beneath him who has broken a rule. I sighed loudly. My eyes drifted to the face of the famous author. He appeared confused and maybe worried.

Oliver swept me into a gigantic hug. Scents of sandalwood carried me away. Safety enveloped me. No one could hurt me, not now, not ever, as long as *he* was near. A nurturer stood before me. Someone on whom I could rely. I was certain. It was imperative that a soldier trust his instincts or he would die. I believed mine.

The handsome, Mr. Greene, escorted me into the library. A small fire knocked the chill off the air. Early spring nights served to remind me that summer had not yet arrived. I shivered slightly. He gently rubbed my arms. I almost cried.

That one is my injured arm.

The left one still carried a few shards of metal. The rubbing motion released a burning feeling deep in my arm. It was as though I could feel the metal deposited into my body. I despised the pain. I smiled instead. Always when the pain presented itself, I smiled.

Together, we sat in front of the fire on a sizable gold-colored sofa. The walls were painted a deep cherry red color as hundreds of books lined the white shelves. The fire was soft and appeared almost burned out. Did the staff light it each evening? Oliver prepared two martinis. I never had drunk one, but I had watched a few Bond movies.

“Gin or vodka?”

“Gin.”

He smiled and raised his glass.

“Bond would not approve.”

I returned the smile. We laughed carelessly.

My handsome houseguest entertained me for over an hour with stories of his travels. Where had he not voyaged? It surprised me to learn that he had also fought for our country in the Air Force. He only mentioned it. There was no discussion as any good soldier who has seen active duty knows. Grateful that he did not question me about my experience as Lt. Colonel, I sat quietly transported to Kenya by his current story.

“I have always longed to visit Africa.”

“You should. It is magnificent.”

The dark mustache on his upper lip attracted my eyes. It was perfectly manicured. I longed to kiss those well-defined pink lips. Shamelessly, I stared at his full lips.

As a good writer, he shifted from suspense and allure to light-heartedness without apparent effort. Now, we walked the streets of French Morocco. I could hear the prayer chant in the background. Brightly colored silks and heavy spices captivated my senses. The smells of sandalwood quickly replaced by scents of cumin, ginger, saffron, and tanned leathers. He was good. I would read his works. Surely, Clarissa had his books on display in the library? My eyes scanned the hundreds of books.

“Miss Bailey? I asked if you are ready for dinner? Please? The food will be cold if you don’t come soon.”

A dark woman, whom I did not know, stood by my chair with a quizzical look. Her lowered eyes exhibited a little fear at this new person who just invaded her space.

Secure, reliable arms pulled me from the sofa and wrapped around me. I felt small but not alone covered in the scent of creamy sandalwood once again.

CHAPTER THREE: LIFE WITH OLIVER

Soon, we developed a pattern. Routines are essential to both a soldier and an author. Oliver enjoyed writing each morning directly after a giant breakfast. The life of an author must be disciplined and orderly much like that of a soldier, so many things clamor for attention. Without order, one would quickly waste the day.

I learned that Oliver ate the same thing each day: two slices of buttered toast with orange marmalade, two softly scrambled eggs in butter, and two crispy slices of bacon. His coffee must be steaming black and hot. It was a roasted blend from Kenya. He was a fascinating companion every morning while I enjoyed his delicious coffee with half of a powdered doughnut. We laughed that we ate such different foods. Mr. Greene explained that Clarissa had eaten his same breakfast, but that size reduced by half.

After breakfast, which lasted exactly forty minutes, the author moved to his cottage to write precisely for three hours. He told me that in his younger days, he would write for seven or eight hours. Then the day was *ours*.

While Oliver wrote, I enjoyed the heated, outdoor pool. Surrounded by towering Oak trees, I wondered how it could be so clean. It was an infinity pool with bright blue mosaic tiles lining the floor. A large gray dolphin appeared to jump effortlessly into the air from the reflection on the bottom. There were no sounds to steal my peace on this sprawling estate. Only the lonely sound of Mourning Doves. I loved the feeling of aloneness as I swam my laps and breathed the chlorinated air. Three hours, lounging by the pool, seemed to restore my sanity, I hoped. These hours were perfect to make plans for my day. Suddenly on my first day, I realized that I had no plans.

This feeling, of the lack of order from my life, presented me with obsessive thoughts of my time in service. Whenever the obsessive thoughts came to mind, I panicked because that appeared to trigger my transportation to a place that I did not want ever to visit again. Apparently, I needed help but couldn't bring myself to admit it.

Just give yourself more time. You are going to be well soon. Try not to think about the last deployment.

Consistently, I attempted to wish myself to mental wellness. I wasn't sure that it was working. Somehow, Mr. Greene appeared to be the catalyst that may set me free from the crazy thoughts. I wasn't sure why I thought this, but that feeling was intense.

Louise, who functioned now as the cook since Petra's promotion to "Clarissa's Assistant" and now mine, always prepared a perfect lunch. She was the tall, dark woman who silently moved around in the great house. Her silent nurturing felt like that of a mother. It was soon apparent that Clarissa had worked with Louise. A bowl of the freshest fruit beckoned to Oliver and me daily as our brunch. Delicious mango, bananas, strawberries, and others immediately quenched the churning acid in our stomachs. We swallowed this brightly colored assortment of natural delights effortlessly with creamy, Greek yogurt. It felt as if we made up for our slovenly breakfast with this healthful offering. We shared a glass of crisp white Prosecco which was always preceded by a jovial toast.

Often, he touched my hand as we laughed over various stories of Mother. I could tell from the light in his eyes that he truly loved her. I felt jealous. Slowly, I began to share secrets of my life. Without thought, I rambled about childhood occurrences in the Barker family. Sometimes, he laughed as he explained that he

knew that story well. To understand that Mother had discussed me freely with her lover somehow brought their relationship from something which earlier appeared as “steamy” to understandable. They loved each other but never married. I bargained that maybe they would have married if Mother had not died so suddenly. Now, I referred to her as “Mother.” The wall, which I had constructed around her memory, began to dissolve. The little girl in me missed her. Old, pleasant memories once again came to life in my scrambled mind.

Each pretty day that the weather allowed, Oliver and I rode our horses all around the extensive grounds. His magnificent White Stallion and Clarissa’s rare, Golden Akhal Teke charged through the massive green woods surrounding us. We discovered a small lake with gentle, still dark blue waters. Often, we removed our shoes and walked on the shore while the horses drank the pristine fluid. The coolness of the soil was comforting while we walked as the days began to heat up. He said that he had never seen the lake, but I doubted it. When he looked at the waters, something moved him. Sadness overcame him. For several moments, he was quiet, shaken. I wondered what memory would make it possible for him to admit that he knew this restful place?

Why did he lie?

Hours were enjoyed outside in this haven of peace and tranquility. Slowly, my damaged, war-torn spirit began to heal. Feelings of anger started to topple in my mind.

Why did I harbor such resentment at Mother?

Oliver’s stories of her portrayed a gentle, loving woman. More and more, I missed the times that I might have shared with her if I hadn’t been so angry. Now, I honestly couldn’t recall why.

One day, later in the season, the temperature soared higher than any day so far. The humidity was brutal. When we arrived at the lake, we were both drenched in perspiration. My clothes stuck to my saturated body. Usually, winds gently stirred the air presenting a cooling effect but not this day. Both of us were miserable.

“What do you say that we go skinny dipping?”

He looked uncomfortable saying it, but we had to do something or turn around and go back home.

“I don’t know. Sure, I would like to do that but what would Mom say?”

He looked at me with a sparkle in his bright coal-shining eyes.

“I don’t think that it matters. Does it?”

I giggled like a school girl.

“Okay but turn your head.”

He stood and removed all of his clothes. Although a little older than I, he was impressively handsome and in great shape. He must workout because his body was muscular and hard. Then he ran into the lake. Splashing and swimming, he refused to look my way. He appeared like a young boy as he gaily dived under the cerulean surface. Shyly, I stood and quickly removed everything but my bra and panties. Running madly into the waters, I sank beneath the cooling spray. Freshness surrounded us as the crisp smell of being outside in the water removed the grime of our earlier ride. For the longest time, we ignored each other and did nothing but enjoy the peace. We were afraid to look at each other. If Clarissa watched us from on high at that point, she would have smiled. I smiled at my angelic behavior, but this was not what I wanted.

Suddenly, Oliver turned. The fire burned in his eyes. I desired to run away from him. Instead, I grabbed his outstretched arms. Passionately, we hugged.

“I don’t want to do this.”

I whimpered.

“I don’t either. Should we leave?”

Pushing him away, I ran from the waters and quickly dressed. I ran the Teke horse too fast back to the house. When I arrived, the stable hand grumbled at me. Nothing mattered at that moment except escaping the guilt which I felt at almost having sex with my mother’s lover. Shame caused my face to turn a bright red not the scorching heat. Quickly, I ran inside even though I heard Oliver calling me.

I am a slut of the worst kind!

The rest of the day, I remained in my room. At last, sleep overcame me, but the hellish thoughts from my past returned with a fury. Maybe the passion which they forced on me would have been held at bay if I had experienced the release that Oliver could have removed from my body. His eyes had burned with such desire. Never had I experienced that intense emotion from a man. I would always remember the look in his black eyes.

I work in the makeshift hospital which we constructed in Afghanistan. The American troops fight valiantly in the local village. Several of the men are wounded. Dr. Lee Cox tries to repair the intestines of one of them. Shrapnel hit the soldier. We work quickly. The heat is unbearable. None of us have eaten all day. My hands shake from fatigue. Horrible yelling assaults the air. Our troops are running back. Their shouts are discernible. Dr. Cox silently looks at me. Out of the blue, the ground seems to open. Things fly through space. I watch our patient be thrown into the air and land several feet away from me. He remains open at the surgical site. Blood erupts from the wound as well as his face. It is impossible to make sense of what's happening. Then, the ground shakes mightily. The earth seems to open beneath me, but I do not fall into the gaping crater. Instead, I sail into the air. My eyes look into the doctor's just as he collapses into a gaping hole which penetrates the earth. There is no fear from those dark eyes. I realize that I will surely die too. For a while, I can't move. A numb state protects me from the onslaught of indescribable pain. When I am fully awake, groans and cries of my men echo around me. My left arm hangs limply by my side. It's ripped open, and blood gushes from the site. Horrible pain causes me to cry, but I ran toward two bodies which thrash on the ground. Throwing myself over my men, I watch a hand grenade land to my right. Without thinking, I pick it up. Two Taliban charge toward me. I throw the grenade and fall back onto my soldiers. Bright red flames explode into the air. Is this blood or flames? Nothing makes sense. When I awaken, the awareness that I have lived and am safe creates extreme guilt. What about the doctor and all of my men? I should have died beside them.

Slowly, I began to awaken. The sounds of Hell began to slip away. I now sat up onto the fancy, blue duvet. One of the noises, which I heard earlier, was a knocking at my door. I planned to have Petra carry my dinner up to me on a tray. I just couldn't face Oliver, not yet. Opening the door only slightly, he stood before me elegantly dressed. His cream jacket and slacks, with a pastel shirt, made him look as if he lived in the islands.

Who is this man?

“Oliver, I don’t feel well. Would you ask Petra to send my dinner up to my room? I guess the heat was too much.”

I tried to smile. Tears ran down my face. Great, the only man with whom I felt any attraction happened to be my mother’s lover.

“Sure, that isn’t a problem. Are you okay? We both know that there is nothing wrong with you. A Colonel in the Air Force deployed to Afghanistan would not suffer from the effects of heat here in Alabama. Would she?”

I didn’t mean to; I didn’t want to; with no thought to the consequences, I opened the door and pulled Oliver into my room. He looked at the blue silk bed that he knew well. Gently, he picked me up and laid me on the covers. His kisses were soft and thoughtful. Gently, he groaned with desire. It seemed that kisses were everywhere. I knew that I should stop but could not. His muscular body felt as if he might crush me. An hour later, I knew at last what it was like to be loved.