

“While I Breathe, I Hope”

Her father and that woman were sitting on the front porch of the family hunting cabin as she drove toward them. It was sweltering and bone dry. Distant thunder rumbled and rolled over the fields and woods. She inched down the rutted logging road through an avenue of towering loblolly pines. Their resinous fragrance filled the air. Her hands gripped the steering wheel of her peacock-blue 1962 Ford Galaxie 500. It was a Sunday afternoon in July, and she still wore her church clothes: a short sleeve, Indigo shirtwaist dress with a white collar. A satin headband held back her shoulder-length dark brown hair. She was only 24 years old and already a wife, mother, and eighth-grade English teacher. She pressed her lips tight and remembered words previously spoken with her father. Her mother had died when she was two years old, and the sudden death had shattered him with grief. The day after the funeral, he drove her to the homeplace, left her with his sisters and father, and vanished for years. But mercifully, his family took her and raised her with tender love and the security of constancy. It was like the safety of a cocoon. She flourished despite her detached father and the shards of his broken life. But now, her father is back. She is resolved to confront him and build a firebreak around herself, her husband Robert, and their baby girl Sarah. She had rehearsed what she would say today many times; now, those words flowed from her mind like lukewarm

bathwater swirling down the drain. She sighed, set her face like a flint, and drove. Anvil-shaped thunderclouds formed in the sky.

As she turned down the last leg of the old road, she saw the sign and the new gate for the first time. A large, John Deere green metal board nailed across two tall cedar posts had these words in freshly painted black letters:

NIMROD HUNT CLUB

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“He was a mighty hunter before the LORD; wherefore it is said, Even Nimrod the mighty hunter before the LORD.” - Genesis 10:9

Her father, the notorious moonshiner and cockfighter, had a new money-making scheme to keep the debt collectors at bay and earn and earn a “legal living.” Turn this 607-acre family land into a “cash on the barrelhead” hunt club. She rolled her eyes as she thought about his idea to use a Bible verse to help him sell hunt club memberships. Since 1792, her ancestors had hunted Whitetail deer, turkey, boar, quail, doves, and rabbits in these woods and fields. She remembered visiting this cabin as a teenager with her grandfather during hunting season. After dinner, they would drink hot chocolate and sit in front of a roaring fire in the stone fireplace. He would teach her Latin words and phrases and tell her stories from the history of South Carolina. His favorite phrase was “*Dum spiro spero,*” which translates to “*While I breathe, I hope.*” It is one of the official mottos of the state of South Carolina. In a high school art class, she had worked for weeks to write and draw his favorite quote with a calligraphy dip pen in a flowing, elegant style called Copperplate script.

She wrote at the bottom of the parchment: *Merry Christmas Papa- Love, Lily-December 25, 1952.* Aunt Helen helped her pick out a frame at the five-and-dime store. They carefully wrapped it and placed it under the Christmas tree. It became her grandfather's most cherished gift. He put it on the mantle in the hunting cabin beside a fading picture of her parents, Jeb and Christine, holding her on her first birthday.

At the new gate, she stopped and put her car in park. She opened the car door and was delightfully surprised by lush and aromatic-smelling Carolina Yellow Jessamine vines that had popped up all over the fence. She closed her eyes and inhaled. She saw a large padlock on the cedar fencepost. Her father had forgotten to lock the gate. She pushed it open and got back in her car. She drove ahead. She treasured this moment in her heart.

She slowly drove up in front of the cabin and parked the car. She sat there for a moment and stared at her father. James Emory Bradford, known by all as Jeb, was a young-looking, 54-year-old enigma. He was handsome in a brawny, rough-hewn way. Jeb was a former baseball player and pole vaulter. He had sandy brown hair and gunmetal blue eyes. He wore denim OshKosh bib overalls over a sweat-stained white crew neck t-shirt. Sitting beside him was his longtime partner, Reba Agnew. She was a decade younger than him and had long, honey-blond hair with braids tied in a loose bun. She wore cutoff blue jean shorts, his Atlanta Braves t-shirt, and flip-flops. She was tall and shapely but had hunched shoulders and calloused hands from years of working in the cotton mill, where she and Jeb had met.

She took a deep breath, got out of the car, and walked toward them.

"Lily, what are you doing here," her father asked.

“I just need to talk with you for a moment.”

Reba looked at Jeb, gently squeezed his hand, smiled, and nodded.

“I’m going to go in and start supper,” said Reba. “Lily, can I bring you anything...how about a cold glass of sweet tea?”

“No, thank you, Reba. I’m fine, “ said Lily. “I can’t stay long; I need to get back home before this storm.”

Reba got up and went into the cabin, Jeb stood, and his daughter carefully climbed the steps in her Sunday heels.

“Where’s the baby,” he said.

“She is with Robert at his parent’s house,” she said. “We had lunch with them after church.”

She turned and looked him straight in the eyes. She felt light-headed but mustered her strength and went right to it.

“I can’t put this off any longer,” she said. “I’ve got to tell you some things, and you got to listen.”

“Alright, alright,” he said. “Just sit down here with me. I’m not going anywhere.”

She sat beside him, and they both looked pensively over the pines as lightning began to flash in the darkening sky. After what seemed like an eternity, the silence was broken by the soft, plaintive cry of a mourning dove...”*coo-ah-coo-coo-coo.*”

“What do you want to talk about,” he said.

She leaned back in her chair, looked up, and shook her head.

“What...” he said.

“Really, please, spare me the surprised look,” she said, her tone tinged with exasperation and irritation. “Drunk at your father’s funeral and the scene you caused the night before at the wake.”

He looked down in shame. “I’m so sorry,” he said. “Please forgive me. I was crazy nervous about coming back and seeing everybody. I was beside myself and just wanted to calm my nerves, and I got pulled under again.”

“Here we go...again and again and again,” she said. “I’m sorry, but I can’t do this anymore.”

“Lily, please, look at me,” he said. “I haven’t had a drink since the day of Papa’s funeral. I have been sober for 39 days! I haven’t had a drop of alcohol, God as my witness.”

“Well, that’s a start,” she said. “If you mean what you said in your letter about wanting to come back here and live and be involved in our lives, there will be conditions.”

“What do you mean conditions, he said. “I’m your father and Sarah’s grandfather.”

“You want to talk about your role as a father for the past 22 years of my life,” she said.

He looked away, and tears began to flow down his cheek.

“I didn’t think so,” she said.

“Please don’t say things like that,” he said as he wiped the tears from his eyes. “I’m trying my best to make a fresh start back here. Getting out of this pit I dug for myself and trying to unwind all these things will take some time. I know I can make this hunt

club work, but I got debts to pay these people, and they are..." he hesitated for a moment.

"Dangerous," she interrupted. "See, this is what I'm talking about. Do you think I want you around my husband and daughter with these moonshiners and cockfighters looking for you? It's just..."

"Just what," he said.

"Illegal," she said. "You don't understand what it's like to wonder constantly if your father is dead or in prison. I've had enough of hopelessness and anger. I have a life to live."

"I know, I know," he said. "I'm in over my head, and I'm tired of running. No matter how far I went from here, the pain and shame still haunted me day and night. I want to stay here and try to have a normal life- and God knows Reba wants that, too. I pawned my life years ago and will try to get it back. I failed you as a father. Please give me a chance to be a grandfather and your father again."

"We'll see about that down the road," she said. "I hear what you're saying and know a little about running from pain and shame. We have much to discuss and work through, but I'm weary of your words and broken promises. Papa always said let your life speak. " Love does... Deeds, not just words."

"I'll do whatever it takes to earn your trust," he said.

"Then let's go back to one of my conditions," she said. "I have a simple question. Are you going to stay sober?"

He paused, then looked at her in a way she had never seen before.

"I don't know," he said, "but I can tell you this. I'm going to stay sober one more day."

She was surprised by the strength of commitment in his voice and didn't know how to respond. There was another long silence. The thunder rolled closer.

"You got to get home before this storm, but if you will, give me a second, there is something inside I want to give you.," he said. "I'll be right back."

He returned to the porch, and in his hand was the framed quote she had given her grandfather.

"I believe Papa would want you to have this," he said, handing her the dusty framed parchment.

"Dum Spiro Spero -While I breathe, I hope," she whispered as she looked at the quote she had painstakingly written in calligraphy years ago. She held it tightly and looked at her grandfather's favorite quote with renewed longing. She breathed in and silently prayed that these words would come alive in this fragile, thin space.

"The last thing Papa told me before he died was to not give up hope in you," she said. As she declared those words to her father, her heart floated like a beautiful swallowtail butterfly back to a moment earlier in the day. She pondered the Yellow Jessamine vine's delicate sweetness and how he had left the gate unlocked. The butterfly had emerged from the cocoon.

"Well, have you," he asked as he looked toward her. "Have you given up hope in me?"

She stood up, and their eyes met; she fought back tears and said, "I don't know, but I can tell you this. I won't give up hope in you for one more day.

