

CHAPTER 1: BILL

Happy Valley, Oregon — Friday, May 27, 2022

Bill felt like Ebenezer Scrooge. For a moment, as he stared at a flat granite gravestone — *his* gravestone — he felt like a man who had reached the end of the line. He felt like a man facing change.

He did not fear the future. Unlike Scrooge in the climactic scene of *A Christmas Carol*, he was confident he would proceed to a better place. He would join his beloved wife in heaven just as surely as he would join her in this peaceful corner of Willamette National Cemetery.

He was less sanguine about the present. For the first time in decades, he did not have his rock to lean on. He did not have the love, support, and guidance of a woman who had stood by his side for fifty-seven years.

Bill, a retired professor of folklore and mythology, mulled that unsettling circumstance for a moment. He lifted his head and gazed at the dreary sky. Then he looked again at the marker and noted its particulars.

WILLIAM HENRY CARPENTER
PFC US ARMY

ALICE BLAIR CARPENTER
JAN 17 1942 - APR 18 2022

Bill wondered if Alice, a former editor and a stickler for grammar, was searching for a red pen in God's newsroom. He knew she wouldn't rest in peace until someone added a few periods — and two more dates.

He suspected she would not have to wait long. Though he was as healthy and physically fit as a man of sixty, he was not the man who had once climbed Shasta, Rainier, and Denali. William Carpenter was eighty-one.

Bill gathered his thoughts. Then he spoke to the people who had accompanied him to the cemetery. He spoke to the only family he had left.

"What do you think?"

Paul Carpenter answered first.

"It's not bad for a work in progress."

Bill managed a smile. He appreciated his younger brother's humor as much as he appreciated his presence on this day. He pondered the obvious observation for a moment and then turned to his sister.

"What do *you* think?"

Annie Carpenter gazed at the stone.

"I like it. I like it a lot. It's simple, modest, and unpretentious, like the people it's meant to honor. It does the job."

Bill nodded in agreement. He was glad his siblings approved of his decision to remember a humble woman with a humble marker.

He turned to Paul, who stood at his left, and noticed sadness and regret in his piercing blue eyes. He also noted some irony.

While Alice, a military spouse, had a place in a military cemetery, Paul, a combat veteran, would *never* have a place. He had lost that privilege, along with others, when he had returned from Vietnam under a cloud.

After leaving his unit for two days without authorization, during Operation Junction City in 1967, Paul was drummed out of the Army and

sent home in disgrace. As a soldier with a "bad paper" discharge, he could not qualify for any veteran's benefits. He was *persona non grata*.

Paul did not fare better as a civilian. He bounced from job to job, married and divorced three times, and battled drug addiction, alcoholism, and post-traumatic stress disorder. Now he coped with terminal lung cancer.

Bill gazed at Paul with affection. Then he returned to his sister, the baby of the family, a woman fighting her own demons. He could only guess what she was thinking as she held an umbrella in the late spring drizzle.

Once a vibrant, cheerful soul, Annie was a quiet, reflective woman who approached each day with dread. She had never been the same since losing the use of her legs in a fatal automobile accident in 1964.

Confined to a wheelchair at age fourteen, she had struggled through high school, college, and her twenties. Though she found success as a writer, she never found lasting love, the thing she wanted most.

She never married or had children or danced in a ballroom with a handsome stranger. She spent her life wallowing in regret.

Bill felt Annie's pain. He felt Paul's too. He felt their *grief*. He knew that each of his siblings missed Alice as much as he did.

Alice had been more than a wife and a sister-in-law. She had been the best friend the Carpenters had ever had. She had been their cheerleader.

Unable to have children and unwilling to adopt, Alice poured her energy into her career, her husband's family, and a succession of charities, causes, and pursuits. She found fulfillment in making others happy.

Alice guided Annie and Paul through many personal and professional crises, served as their advocate, and even brought them together one last time in the twilight of their lives. She reunited three siblings who had spent much of their adult years scattered across the United States.

In 2006, a few weeks after Bill retired as a full-time professor at the University of California at Berkeley, Alice convinced him to purchase his childhood home and move back to Portland, Oregon. She persuaded him to retire to a place that was both comforting and familiar.

Two years later, Alice encouraged Annie, then a longtime resident of New York City, to do the same. She asked her to trade a view of the Hudson for a view of the Willamette. She invited her protégé to come home.

Annie accepted the offer. She welcomed the chance to leave the rat race and spend her golden years with people who supported her.

Paul was a tougher sell. He loved New Orleans, where he had worked for decades as a chef, and relished his independence. He did not change his mind until a risky business venture went belly up in 2012.

Bill gladly accommodated the others. He remodeled three bedrooms and two bathrooms, added ramps and rails for his disabled sister, and expanded the elevated deck in back. He made the most of an opportunity.

For seven years, the Co-Dependent Carpenters, as Alice called them, lived as they had hoped to live. They made a home; traveled to France, Brazil, and Hawaii; and enjoyed each other's company. They thrived.

Then misfortune struck. Annie suffered a mild stroke. Bill slipped on the driveway and broke a leg. All four seniors battled COVID-19.

Paul, a lifelong smoker, fared the worst. He spent two weeks in the hospital and ten days on a ventilator. He dodged death by a whisker.

Five months later, Paul learned he had cancer. He took various treatments until he could take no more. In March 2022, he accepted his final diagnosis with typical grace. He hoped to survive the summer.

Bill looked into assisted living. He visited four local facilities and made a commitment to one. With the blessing of the others, he reserved two adjoining units that opened in August. He did not want to rush.

He planned an orderly transition until Alice dropped dead in their kitchen from a heart attack. He contacted a realtor on May 1.

Now Bill was here, at a cemetery, saying goodbye to his wife and mentally preparing for another farewell. He broke the moment of silence.

"We should go."

Annie eyed her brother.

"We don't have to."

Bill let out a breath.

"Yes, we do. I have an appointment with our realtor to go over some important particulars. I don't want to be late."

Paul turned his head.

"What are you going to tell him?"

Bill considered his reply. He knew what Paul was asking and wanted to give him a comforting answer. He owed his brother that much.

"I'm going to tell him to go slow."

Paul bristled.

"Don't do that for me."

Bill put a hand on Paul's shoulder.

"I *will* do it. I want you to spend your final weeks at home, surrounded by familiar things and family. I won't debate the matter."

Paul managed a smile.

"Then don't."

Bill accepted the concession. He put his arm around his brother, pulled him close, and stared one last time at the marker on the wet lawn.

Then he spoke to Alice. In a voice only she could hear, he thanked her for fifty-seven wonderful years, promised to live his life to the fullest, and said so long to the only woman he had ever loved. He brought an end to a difficult stretch of his life. He closed a door to his past.