Estrangement between a husband and wife and both from God seed journeys culminating in grace, forgiveness, and reconciliation, each traveled by different paths – logic vs. introspection and self-examination.

Written on the Pages
By Curtis Dykstra

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CHAPTER 1

Everything was wrong at the right time. Offices in the Pentagon looked like a government-wide call-in-sick day, the exception being there were no family pictures on walls or desks, no papers or files evidencing activity—no secretarial pools supporting important military projects. A few housed what remained of a repurposed military, serving an increasing mosaic of social needs—occupying stepchild status in a family of government programs: the oldest is never cancelled, and the newest is never rejected. Interest on a ballooning federal debt was asserting its ever-increasing priority claim over and indifferent to other feeders at the government trough. Forsaking its mandate to legislate, Congress was focused on retaining its partisan grasp on power while removing the President from his. Its legislative priority was to obstruct a president who was a foreigner in Washington's circles—one trying to lead a country deeply divided along ideological lines. A growing number of states were aggressively adopting expanded state's rights platforms and enjoying support from a sympathetic judiciary.

The President was pondering his two plans, each placing him in the crosshairs of a constitutional conundrum. His march to the presidency was ordered by the platform *A Reunited States*, and now he sat uncomfortably in the Oval Office prepared to deliver one of two messages to the American people. One of these would affirm the goals of his platform within the existing constitutional framework; one would not.

When the just-completed vote in the Senate to remove the President from office became breaking news on networks across the country, the President pushed the send button on a pre-arranged text message to his military commanders that would initiate *Operation*

1776 and signaled for the second of the two messages to be projected on the teleprompter. This carefully crafted message would throw the country into chaos. Now he would usher in a coordinated remaking of America based on its founding principles, engineered in utmost secrecy with the Secretary of Defense and enabled through the cooperation of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the military apparatus under their command. Drawing from his considerable talents as a leader, statesman, politician, and visionary, he began the impossible task of re-uniting the Ununited States, knowing full well that above all, his plan was treason in its purest form.

Such was the plot of the third five-star film that featured the versatility and creative endowments of Clayton Douglas Black—one that garnered the best picture award; and for him, an Oscar for best actor. Scenes from this highly charged storyline which spoke to the soul of the country at the time of its release were being replayed in Clay's mind as he nudged along in stifling traffic on his way home. And from there, he replayed in his mind the evening where those special awards were conferred.

Exiting the stage with the sustained applause of his peers invigorating his steps, Clay Black was basking in the glory of the moment. In the film *The Last President*, he excelled in the role of President of the United States who, together with the Joint Chiefs of Staff, plotted to reinvent a self-serving government and return it to its first calling: a servant of the people. His commanding performance reaped praise by both critics and the viewing public. Passing by where she was seated, Clay gave a quick wink to Jill Markham, who was co-starring with him in his present film. His eyes sought those of Carly, his wife, from whom he would welcome adoration for his achievement and the parting shots he took at the current President as part of an acceptance speech that gave meager recognition to the contributions of many who were part of this extraordinary production.

As he turned onto an exit ramp, the self-aggrandizing thoughts of that evening were interrupted by a person—veteran, homeless, jobless or all the above—holding a sign asking for rent money. “Why don’t you get a job instead of living off someone else’s money?” barked Clay as he sped away when the light turned green. As he entered the last turn on the drive home from a day on the set of his latest movie designed to leverage the momentum of that recent award-winning performance, he had already dismissed that image.

* * *

Carly’s stomach was in knots tied by uninvited strands of anger and uncertainty. From early afternoon when she received evidence confirming the rumors, she had been locked in an emotional struggle. Tears of despair mixed with tears of anger had poured out, leaving both mind and body drained of their vibrancy. She paced in agitated anticipation of Clay’s arrival home. Tonight, he would not enjoy the soft touch of her lips as he greeted her. There would be no smile, cheerful conversation, or energetic kids happy to see their dad. There would be no home-cooked meal waiting for him, only raw and unabated fury.

The throaty sound of Clay’s Corvette interrupted the placid atmosphere that occupied everything outside of Carly’s mind—courtesy of a soft breeze that gave voice to leaves producing a soft whispering sound as it coursed its way through the black oak and pecan trees that populated their front yard. The loud music from his car stereo that annoyed anyone within two car lengths was now squelched as the Corvette followed the serpentine driveway, seeking its place in the attached four car garage, where a quick blip of the throttle fathered the exhaust bark which resonated off the walls and ceiling creating a fitting capstone to the usual harried drive home.

Carly sat down, then thought, *No, don't sit. That's a position of weakness. I need to show strength.* Rising, she quickly adjusted her fitted blouse in and around her designer jeans which were faithful to the task of highlighting her long, athletic legs that supported her five-foot-seven frame. While her attire had been purposely crafted to be somewhat understated and business-like, it failed to mute the natural beauty of her body. A quick movement of her head to the side and back gave just the right fall to her platinum blond hair, partially obscuring the sharp features of a beautiful face radiating untamed energy. Her hazel eyes, normally sparkling with life, now penetrating and dark, locked on Clay like a laser as he paraded through the side-entrance door.

"Your Oscar-winning husband has arrived to brighten your day. Any calls from the President while I was gone?"

Ignoring his bluster, Carly said, "Is there something you would like to explain to me?"

"What do you mean?"

"This!" came her harsh reply as she lifted the tabloid she had partially concealed at her side, slamming it down on the table next to where Clay was standing.

Clay spun it around and quickly recognized the photo on the front page and the place where it was taken. He figured this could happen but had deluded himself into thinking it could go on just a little longer, or that they were too clever for the paparazzi—anything to postpone reality. His status had elevated him above consequences. He knew he shouldn't be surprised—that he'd have to think of a way to deal with this sooner or later. He just thought it would be later, and hoped it would be never.

"Ah, Carly, that's just one of those publicity photos."

"A picture of my husband and his co-star arm in arm leaving a bar and clearly enjoying each other's company? You call that a publicity photo? Does that strike you as the proper conduct of someone with a wife and three children? For them to see plastered on the front page of a tabloid newspaper? Is that what you think? You ought to have better sense than that!"

"Carly, you're overreacting. Maybe we ought to talk about this after you calm down."

"What makes you think that with a few ticks of the clock I am going to be calm? And why would you even think a conversation about this should be conducted calmly? So, you have nothing to say to me? Well, I guess I'll just ask you straight out. Are you having an affair with Jill Markham?"

"Well, what do you mean by having an affair? I mean..."

"Oh, come on, Clay! You ought to have more respect for the truth than this. I'm asking you. Are you having an affair? Is that question too complicated for you?"

Seeing unfiltered rage in the eyes of the most beautiful woman in the world focused squarely on him, Clay took on the movement of a bowling pin grazed in a gallant attempt to score a spare on a seven-nine split, wobbling on its base as it fights to overcome the forces acting upon it. He fidgeted and shifted his weight from leg to leg in sync with eyes that darted back and forth between the picture on the table and Carly's eyes as she pressed her case. The cockiness that was his mien when he arrived home was now being undressed by Carly, leaving him in a clown suit as he fumbled for some way out of her withering impeachment. The time of reckoning had come. No point in lying; no changing the subject.

"Yes," he said, averting her eyes as the forced confession left his lips.

Clay picked up the tabloid, folded it in half, and flung it in the direction of the trash can. "Listen, Carly. Before you get all righteous, maybe you ought to consider the nature of my work, and that sometimes intimate scenes take on a life of their own. Think of the lifestyle you enjoy! Look at this house compared to that tiny apartment we lived in for three years. You should understand it's not something we seek. It's just part of the culture—part of what happens in this business."

"I should understand? So marriage vows are just a convenience? Incidentals that bend to the will of some distorted culture? Is that what you are telling me?"

"No, I'm not saying that. I'm saying you ought to be willing to make certain allowances for the lifestyle that my work makes possible for you. You ought to know that a certain amount of 'speculative news' about someone like me is good for my career. It keeps me in the public eye—more relevant."

"Really!? You want me to buy the notion that you're screwing some bimbo is for my benefit and for the kids' benefit too? You're talking like a rudderless fool! Maybe *you* ought to remember that when you were doing two-bit parts and parking cars, I was slugging through twelve-hour shifts at the hospital and resisting the daily overtures from wayward doctors and young interns! And that was enough for me. But not for you! I guess you have to have it all now to go with that inflated ego of yours. So, here's the deal. Apparently, you have some oughts and I have some oughts—they are at war with one another. And what is it they say? When one party resolves to demand what another party refuses to allow, and there is no common superior, then there is no arbiter but the sword!"

That quote, from where she couldn't recall, was delivered with a fury boiling in her that provided the exclamation point that ended their conversation. Brushing him aside, she stormed out the side door toward the family van, already packed with clothes for her and the kids.

"Carly, come back here! We need to talk about this," commanded Clay as he started after her. Carly ignored him, having already invoked the remote start. She slammed the driver's door, floored the gas pedal, and headed to her friend Brenda's house where she had taken the kids earlier in the day. From there she would continue to her parents' house about 150 miles due north.

Clay walked over to where the tabloid landed, picked it up, and read the article about him and Jill. He was not unaccustomed to reading articles about himself, but as he did, thinking of how Carly must have felt when she read it, he felt nauseous and angry. Slamming it back down on the table, he began to pace, the soles of his shoes slapping the floor and lacking in any pattern or destination—kitchen to foyer, through the hallway to the formal dining room, back to the foyer through the study, each room casting light on or shrouding in darkness the floor beneath him, adding a sort of incoherence to his thoughts.

The sounds he imagined a mere thirty minutes ago, laughter coming from the rec room or Carly rustling in the kitchen preparing the evening meal, were being replaced with the repetitive sound of his footsteps, now more of a shuffle than a march. And when he stopped, the silence was broken only by the tick-tock of an old grandfather clock passed down from his grandfather, a Kansas farmer of modest means and temperament, but clearly a breach of décor in this multi-million-dollar house.

Resuming his march to nowhere, he bumped into a table and managed to catch the expensive vase that was on it just before it fell.

He almost laughed at the thought that though it was special to him a mere twenty minutes ago, the only emotion it evoked now was relief he didn't have to clean up the mess if he had not caught it. He paused by the sunroom, the designated transition space between the formal rooms and the raucous, fun-filled, and messy environment of the pool. His eyes fell upon the polished surface shimmering in the light of the sun's slow descent into the western horizon. Those eyes should have beheld a placid scene, calmed by the sun's glancing rays on the glassy surface, but instead they fixated on an image that took on the look of steel: cold, hard, rigid steel. That was the look in Carly's eyes—a look projecting fire and intensity, as it was delivered with an icy glare he had never seen before and conveying the unmistakable message she was furious. He knew this raw fury would fuel the fierce determination she possessed. He knew judgment was at hand and he was suddenly unmoored by that thought.

The words of the article and the image of Carly's icy glare pounded his brain like the crashing waves of an angry sea, relentless as they pummel the shore, then retreat only to batter it again in a rhythmic assault. Each wave washed over the illusory quagmire that had obscured the plain truth of his kinship with temptation, cleansing it and revealing a fresh and unvarnished perspective on a heretofore benign fact pattern. This was joined with the stark realization the ticket price for the pleasure ride he had been on would now be presented to him for payment. And he wondered if there were enough funds in the account to cover the charges.

Over and over, their conversation echoed in his mind. What was it Carly meant by her reference to the sword? How long has she known? What will she do? Their relationship had always been solid, from their earliest days in college where they met. He, a kid from the Midwest where his upbringing reflected the more conservative values of that place and time; and she, a California girl with a strong work

ethic and fierce determination. His success had given her the opportunity to be a full-time mother and to participate, even if somewhat uncomfortably, in the Hollywood social scene. But she was no shrinking violet; there was no doubt about that.

As an actor, Clay Black respected how themes are advanced by words carefully crafted into lines and how nuanced or blunt they can be depending on how they are delivered. Remembering their conversation, if it could be described as such, one word kept churning over and over in his mind. How many times had he spoken it? How many times had he heard it? *Ought*. What did she mean when she referred to him as rudderless or by her reference to a common superior? These questions consumed Clay's mind, floating in and out, changing places, probing, stabbing, teasing, confusing—stalking any potential intruder that might usher in a momentary respite and slaying it with deadly precision.

He headed to the kitchen, stopping along the way to grab a bottle of liquor of what brand and type he paid no mind, and poured himself a drink, as was his custom, though usually much later every evening. The illusion of the mind clearing benefits of alcohol provided the rationale to have another, and another, until lucidity had begged its leave, consigning his mind to a state of foggy incoherence. Finding his way to the bedroom, he fell onto the bed and into a deep sleep.

CHAPTER 13

Having written Anna a short note that he would be gone for a few days, Clay finished packing and headed for Scottsdale, hoping to get there by early evening. He had decided to leave a couple of hours earlier than he had originally planned. Interstate 10 would be a straight shot, but seeing the possibility of traveling through Indian Reservation territory, he decided to take the northern route via State Route 62.

* * *

After their day at the capital, Carly decided they should start for home to break up the long drive. With 150 miles behind them, they got on the road early Tuesday morning hoping to get home by early evening.

Glad to be home, the kids piled out of the car and into the house. Carly paused by the bar area and noticed the depleted shelves. "Poor fool," she muttered. "Must have drunk himself silly after I left and stayed that way."

As she made her way through the house, she noticed it was as clean, maybe cleaner than when she left. No piles of dirty dishes or clothes. Beds made. The questions began to pile up in her mind. *Did he really stay here? And what about the reports from the detective? He indicated he was here every night, alone. But then, he knew he was being watched after my text to him last Tuesday when he was with Jill, so is this his escape plan? And what about the report from the detective about a lady coming to the house on Saturday? He said the plates on the car identified it as belonging to Anna, the housekeeper. Saturday was not her day to clean. Has Clay started something with her, or* is *this the continuation of one*?

She began to think of Anna, not as their housekeeper but as a young female whose attractive features would not go unnoticed by

men. She was of Hispanic descent, petite, very pretty—fair skinned, dark eyes and long dark hair with a gentle, submissive nature. She thought, *Is he really going to Scottsdale, and is he going alone? I will see if she shows up tomorrow, but I better have my agent check on Jill Markham's whereabouts for a day or two. But then, there was this street talk he shared with me about an interview Jill gave to a tabloid that was hostile to Clay*.

As these questions gnawed at her, she made her way to the laundry room with their dirty clothes. Seeing an envelope on the washer with Anna's name on it, she picked it up and carefully opened the note that was inside. It was signed by Clay and accompanied by a $100 bill.

> *"Thanks for coming by Saturday and giving me a lesson on operating the washer and dryer. I will be out of town on Wednesday when you come, but you have my phone number if you need to discuss anything with me. I've left a little something for your efforts in addition to the check for your services. Use it to enjoy an evening with your husband."*

Thinking maybe she had let her imagination get the better of her, she headed to the master bedroom and passing by the guest bedroom she noticed Clay had taken up residence there. She knew she had said nothing to Anna other than to make sure it was clean and wondered if this was his choice. As she made her way into the master suite, she noticed a card on her dresser. It was from Clay. She sat down on the bed, opened it, and read it slowly. A tear came to her eye, followed by a voice affirming her resolve. "But then, he said such things to me when he was with Jill. He's good at this sort of stuff. I'm not buying it. No, not for a moment."

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