

"Itching for adventure as the war reaches into her provincial world, twenty-year-old Clara Wilson runs away to enlist as an Army nurse. After arriving in battle-torn France, patching up soldier after soldier, she soon regrets her impulsive decision. But as Clara tends a dying preacher-turned-soldier, she makes a promise that will change her life far more dramatically than war. Emily T. Wierenga's *A Promise in Pieces* is not to be missed—a poignant, beautifully crafted story that will leave you wanting more from this talented debut novelist."

—Suzanne Woods Fisher, award-winning, best-selling author of the *Stoney Ridge Seasons* series

"Wierenga is a stunning new writer. I became so engrossed in this riveting story, I grieved to see it end."

—Serena B. Miller, award-winning author of *The Measure of Katie Calloway* and *A Promise to Love*

"Beautifully rendered with depth and compassion, *A Promise in Pieces* is a celebration of joy in a special quilt that commemorates the miracle of new life and offers healing to the brokenhearted. With a bright new voice in Christian fiction, Emily Wierenga's debut novel is one to be cherished. Tender and heartfelt from the first page to the last and a worthy addition to the *Quilts of Love* series."

—Carla Stewart, award-winning author of *Chasing Lilacs* and *Sweet Dreams*

"Emily T Wierenga's debut novel, *A Promise in Pieces*, grabbed hold of my heart and didn't let go until I read the end, and even then, the characters have lingered in my mind. Well-written, this touching story will leave you wanting more from this talented new author. Novel Rocket and I give it our highest recommendation. It's a 5-star *must* read."

—Ane Mulligan, president of NovelRocket, author of *Chapel Springs Revival*

"Let your heart be inspired by this beautiful new voice in Christian fiction!"

—Anita Higman, author of *A Marriage in Middlebury*

"*A Promise in Pieces* is an endearing story of love and sacrifice, masterfully told by Emily Wierenga. This lovely book, part of the *Quilts of Love* series, is itself like a quilt. It is stitched together with lyrical prose and likable characters, and readers will find themselves wanting to wrap themselves in the warmth of the story."

—Jennifer Dukes Lee, author of *Love Idol: Letting Go of Your Need for Approval—and Seeing Yourself Through God's Eyes*

“Drawing readers into a beautifully woven tale, Wierenga seamlessly stitches together the stories of rich characters in this inspiring tale of family and faith, love and war. You won’t want to put it down at night!”

—Margot Starbuck, author of *The Girl in the Orange Dress*

“Both heart wrenching and heartwarming, *A Promise in Pieces* is a wonderful read that reveals just how lives torn apart can be stitched back together again—beautifully and with a fair portion of grace. Compellingly told in a voice that is both direct and lyrical, seamlessly woven so that the world of today reverberates with the reality of the past, this book will leave you reflecting on the importance of family, believing that chance encounters can yield friendships to last a lifetime, and yearning for another novel from Emily Wierenga.”

—Karen Schreck, author of *Sing for Me* and *While He Was Away*

“*A Promise in Pieces* is stunningly written. I couldn’t put this captivating book down!”

—Kate Lloyd, author of CBA best-selling novels *Leaving Lancaster* and *Pennsylvania Patchwork*

“This sweet story reminds us of the power of a promise and, more importantly, the unfailing love of our God . . . who keeps every promise ever made to us. Emily’s voice is a lovely match for this beautiful novel.”

—Deidra Riggs, founder of JumpingTandem, managing editor of *The High Calling*

“Like a beautifully embroidered patchwork quilt, *A Promise in Pieces* expertly weaves the universal themes of love, loyalty, grief, family, and friendship into a richly compelling and moving story. Penned with the gentle lyricism and breathtaking poignancy typical of Wierenga’s writing, this page-turning story will breathe hope and light into your heart from the first page to the last.”

—Michelle DeRusha, author of *Spiritual Misfit*

# A PROMISE IN PIECES

Quilts of Love Series

Emily T. Wierenga

 Abingdon fiction™  
*a novel approach to faith*

*A Promise in Pieces*

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*Dedicated to my grandmother, Winifred Dow,  
who lost her friend and brother, Bill,  
to the Second World War.*

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# PART 1

# WAR

*Nothing except a battle lost can be half so  
melancholy as a battle won.*

*—Arthur Wellesley, First Duke of Wellington, 1815*



# 1

2000

Noah looked like his father, and she hadn't noticed it before. But here in the backseat of a Dodge Caravan, strewn with skateboarding magazines and CDs, there was time enough to see it in the young man whose long legs stretched from the seat beside her. To see the freckles dusting her grandson's cheeks, the way his hair poked up like a hayfield, and how his eyes grabbed at everything.

Up front, Oliver asked Shane to adjust the radio, the static reminding Clara of the white noise she used to make with a vacuum or a fan to calm her newborns. The first one being Shane, her eldest, the one in the passenger seat turning now to laugh at his father, who wrinkled his long nose as Shane tried to find a classical station.

Then, Vivaldi's *Four Seasons*, and Clara could see Oliver smiling, pleased, and she remembered the way he'd looked over at her in church so long ago with the same expression: as though he'd finally found what he'd been looking for.

Noah was playing a game on one of those Nintendo machines. He noticed her watching him and said, "Do you want to give it a try, Grandma?" He looked so eager.

Gone were the days of Hardy Boys and marbles. “Sure!” Clara said, mustering enthusiasm as she took the tiny gadget. Then she saw what he was playing. Some kind of shooting game with uniformed men and guns and she nearly dropped it.

“I’m sorry, it’s too complicated for an old woman like me,” she said, handing it back and turning to stare out the window, at Maryland passing by, wondering what a kid in high school could know about war.

They were taking the George Washington Memorial Parkway, one of Clara’s favorite drives, which would carry them from her home state to Mount Vernon, Virginia. They were passing through Glen Echo, north of Washington, DC. And Clara remembered the story her daddy had told her, on one of their summer holidays, about her namesake, Clara Barton, who’d spent the last fifteen years of her life here. The founder of the American Red Cross, Ms. Barton had tirelessly provided aid to wounded troops during the Civil War. She had dedicated her life to serving those in need, Daddy said.

On that holiday, Clara—only eight years old at the time—had decided she would do the same. After all, she had been named after Ms. Barton.

“Something wrong, Grandma?” Noah said.

Shane turned in the front seat. His green eyes met hers, and it seemed only yesterday she had brought him home wrapped in the quilt—the one cleaned, pressed, and folded, lying in the back of their van.

Shane’s eyebrows rose and Clara shrugged, feeling cold in her white cardigan even though it was late June. It had been more than fifty years.

“Fifty years,” she said, more to herself than anything, and the van was quiet. She’d had these moments before, many of them. Moments landing her in the past, amongst broken and dead bodies, for there hadn’t been enough beds in Normandy.

Oliver peered at her now in the rearview, through his glasses, and she should give his hair a trim, she thought. It sprouted silver around his ears, and when had her soldier-husband aged? At what point between them marrying and adopting Shane and giving birth to two others had his hair turned gray?

Noah was tucking the game away now, saying, “I don’t need to play this right now. What are you thinking about, Grandma?”

And she wiped at her eyes, moist, and cleared her throat and told herself to smarten up.

It was sixteen and a half hours to New Orleans, where they were heading for a family vacation, and she should make the most of the time she had with this boy who knew nothing of the miracle of the quilt in the back. Who knew nothing of loss, and this was good. But there is a need for history to plant itself in the hearts of its children.

“Do you know about Clara Barton?” she said. Noah shook his head.

“She was a woman of great character. The founder of the American Red Cross. This whole area is a National Historic Site in her name, and she didn’t want it. All she wanted was to help people. In 1891, two men, Edwin and Edward Baltzley, offered Clara land for a house in an effort to draw people to this area. They offered her land, as well as free labor for building the house, believing people would come in flocks to see the home of the woman who founded the Red Cross.

“Clara was clever. As all women of the same name are,” and here, she winked at Noah who laughed. “She had been looking for a new place to serve as headquarters for the Red Cross, so she took them up on it. She used the home originally as a warehouse for disaster-relief supplies, then reworked it and moved in six years later.

“A newly built electric trolley that ran into Washington brought in crowds of people to a nearby amusement park. When a new manager took over the park in 1906, he offered to buy Clara’s home and turn it into a hotel. She refused, so he then tried to drive her out. Apparently, he built a slow-moving scenic railway right by her house, with a station by her front door. When it failed to work, he erected a Ferris wheel in front of her house. Can you imagine? It is said Clara loved the lights from the wheel. She served as president of the Red Cross until 1904 and kept living in the house until her death, eight years later, at age ninety. She said the moon used to always shine at Glen Echo.”

Noah’s eyes were fixed on her. “What a woman,” he said.

Clara nodded. “I know. She’s the reason I became a nurse. And went off to war when Daddy told me not to.”

It was quiet in the car and then Shane said, “You can’t stop there, Mom! Tell him the story!”

Oliver’s eyes shining in the mirror, Vivaldi on the radio, and Maryland’s fields of corn and hay waving graceful good-byes.

“You sure?” she said to Noah.

He folded his hands in his lap. “I’m all yours, Grandma.”

And so, she began.

## 2

1943

It was the first day of summer. I was twenty-one years old, single, and just graduated nursing school—Eva, too. She was my best friend, ever since grade school. Oh, how her long hair flew like yellow birds as we skipped down Main Street in our little town of Smithers. She was always the pretty one, and I was the smart one, but at the time we were just two girls celebrating.

And then we saw the United Service Organization Club, or the USO.

War was happening on the radio and in our pantries. We all had ration stamps by then and Mama kept saving tin because “we all have to do our part,” she told us, in the faded pink apron she always wore.

Daddy kept preaching the same sermon to a congregation of about ten or fifteen women, babies on their knees, and the elderly all huddled together, muttering prayers. He talked to them of peace and turning the other cheek, but no one was listening anymore. Peace just seemed like a cruel kind of joke, and everyone just wanted their men home.

It made me kind of mad the way Daddy would stand there in his preacher's collar at the pulpit in Smithers First Christian Church, singing "Peace Like a River," when all of those babies had no daddies. But I was pretty young so I just slipped out the back as soon as the sermon was done, and Eva and I, we'd go swimming in the river and forget the whole thing. Until we went home and all we had for supper was horse meat or fried Spam because we'd run out of rations since Mama was always giving ours away. Like we weren't suffering, too.

Anyway, Eva was like my sister because I was an only child and she lived a couple of blocks from us, in a fancy house with white siding and pillars. Her daddy was the mayor.

We lived above the Main Street Diner, which closed down when people stopped having money to do anything. Pretty much all of Main Street had shut down in Smithers, and all we had was the USO, which opened up after Pearl Harbor happened.

I'll always remember taking the bus home from my first semester at Johns Hopkins two-year nursing program, December 7, 1941, the world all white and celestial outside, and seeing Mama staring out the window with an empty mug in her hand and Daddy behind her, his hand on her shoulder, and hearing President Roosevelt on the kitchen radio saying the Japanese had bombed Pearl Harbor. "This is no joke," he said over the airwaves. "This is war."

The United States and Britain attacked Japan, and four days later, Hitler declared war on the United States, and Mama rocked a lot in her wooden chair while Daddy preached about peace, and I studied hard at nursing school to become like Clara Barton.

The USO was the first in Maryland they said, and for a while it was one of those places you just kind of look at like it's a candy store and you're a hungry kid. It was all bright and

sparkly, full of men in uniform with pretty girls on their arms. Eva and I would climb a tree across from the club and pretend we were those ladies with their curled hair and their laughs.

But then the soldiers shipped out and the place became like an empty bottle of wine, attracting flies and smelling slightly sour. From time to time a woman would emerge, looking tired as all women did those days, and sometimes there were newly drafted boys with shine still on their shoes. But the building mostly sat waiting. As we all did.

Eva and I had never actually seen inside, so the day we were skipping up and down Main Street, celebrating our freedom, we decided to try it. We decided to put on lipstick and nice dresses and wait for servicemen to treat us to a night on the town. So we pulled out our fanciest, least-faded prints and ironed them because it had been years since we'd had any material to sew from, and we took cranberries and crushed them and tried to make our lips red but then we just sneaked into Eva's mom's bedroom and used her lipstick, because she was a fine lady. She always wore pearls and smelled like lilacs. Mama smelled like flour and lotion.

We fluffed our hair and smoothed our dresses and walked with our heads held high all the way down Main Street to the USO.

The woman inside who greeted us hardly looked at us, just kind of nodded wearily to the back of the room where there was a bar and a Ping-Pong table and some old men staring at their drinks. The air was kind of fuzzy, and the jukebox played Bing Crosby like it was trying too hard.

We hadn't known it would be so easy, and our heads weren't near so high as we stepped in our mamas' high heels to the back of the room and sat on stools and ordered Shirley Temples.

"Let's get out of here," Eva said in a whisper, her blonde hair hiding her face from the bartender who seemed just shy of

death. I was about to respond when the old man at the other end of the bar asked us if we'd seen his son.

"He looks like his mother, God rest her soul," the guy said, and I still remember him like it was yesterday. He had the longest white beard, his eyes were gray puddles, and his fingers trembled around a glass of what must have been Scotch, although I wouldn't have known it then. All I knew was Daddy's communion wine, which was actually Concord grape juice.

"They drafted him two years ago, and he used to send these letters," he said in a voice so muffled we had to sit very still. "He'd tell me all about the war like it was all exciting and mysterious, but then the letters stopped coming."

His fingers trembled, his wet eyes hid behind his lids, and he swallowed, his beard moving up and down. We looked down at our Shirley Temples.

Here we were, all dressed up and playing games when real people were dying.

So we moved closer to this man who said his name was Roger, and we asked him more about his son, and his eyes just kind of popped open. And he told us stories. He told how his son, Sam, used to pick flowers for everyone he met, and he said, "I would always make fun of him, like he wasn't supposed to do that because he was a boy," said Roger, "but now I'd let him pick as many flowers as he wanted to. I'd say go and pick as many flowers as you want to, but I can't," and we patted his shaky hands and nodded because it was all we could do.

But later, when we left, the sky turning all purple and red the way it does before the sun goes down—like the skin of heaven is bruising or something—we didn't even say good night to each other. We just went each to our own homes, and I scrubbed off my lipstick and took off my dress and wore my

oldest, scratchiest pajamas to bed and prayed for forgiveness all night and into dawn.

I barely slept that night. Come morning, a pebble struck my window, and I opened it. Eva stood there. “Come on, we need to go,” she said.

“Where?” I asked, and she said down to the Red Cross recruiting center to sign up with the Army Nurse Corps.

So I shimmied out of my window and down the old oak tree the way I’d always done, and we went off to the military recruiting office to enlist.



It was a bit humiliating, stripping down so they could make sure we were fit for the army and I stared at a nail in the wall and Eva looked the other way and later we admitted we were both thinking about the tree branch in Eva’s backyard where we sat every sunny afternoon when we were young, reading comics and braiding each other’s hair and laughing about boys. Because the tree was our safe place.

Then the doctor did my physical exam and found a heart murmur and said normally they wouldn’t let someone in this condition go, but they were desperate. So he took the sheet of paper stating I had a heart murmur and tore it in two, right in front of me, and signed another one saying I was fine.

My good conservative upbringing told me it was wrong, but I was ready for wrong. I’d been good and right my whole life, and all it had amounted to was a Bible by my bed and a picture of Jesus as a shepherd on my wall, while other girls my age had posters of Jimmy Stewart. And Jimmy had put his career on hold to enlist, so I decided I would, too, as I signed the forms saying I now belonged to the Army Nurse Corps. “Free a man to fight,” the posters said. The roles were

all scattered and reversed, and women were raising families and fixing machinery and delivering mail and driving trucks and forecasting weather, and no one was sleeping. The whole country was just kind of stumbling around in a mad state of insomnia. Roosevelt was on the radio, saying, “I regret to tell you that many American lives have been lost,” and it was enough to keep us awake and fighting in our own humble ways. Even if it meant just fighting at home so the men could go abroad, but Eva and I would join the ranks of women who’d already signed up to care for the wounded, the ranks led so many years ago by Clara Barton.

A nurse had to be between twenty-one and forty years old. We entered the corps as officers, usually as second lieutenants, but our rank was not equal to that of men. We weren’t that advanced. It wouldn’t be until after the war that we’d earn the same privileges as the men. Nevertheless, there were more than twelve thousand nurses in the corps, and we weren’t told where we were going. We were just shipped off blindly, like we were cattle; some were sent to Alaska, others to Australia, still others to North Africa and Europe, and some to places we’d never even heard of.

Our parents didn’t know. We would be leaving on the train for military training in Virginia in one week, and it was such a long week. Mama kept looking at me strangely, and Daddy was even quieter than usual. Then one night over canned beans and dry toast, because we had no butter, I couldn’t stand the silence anymore.

“Eva and I are thinking of signing up with the army,” I kind of blurted out, and Daddy pushed back his plate and his chair and crossed his arms and breathed deeply, like he was in labor. Mama just sat holding a spoon midway to her mouth while the clock ticked brashly.

I wanted to break the clock.

Daddy pulled out a red-and-white handkerchief and wiped his forehead and Mama set her spoon down and I braced myself. I was small for my age, but I had a big temper, and they knew this. The floor was thick with eggshells.

“Clara Anne,” Daddy said, and I shuddered at the sound of my full name. “Why would you go and do that? You know where this family stands on the issue of war,” and Mama hung her head because she still collected tin cans and saved cooking grease and took lunch down to the women who worked long hours in the factories.

“You know we believe what Jesus said about turning the other cheek. How do you plan to save souls while you’re killing them?”

I began to shake but clenched my teeth and tried to pray because I didn’t want to blow up. I knew it wouldn’t help. It never had. “Daddy, I’m not going to be killing anybody. I am going to help the soldiers who are wounded.”

Daddy shook his head and wiped at the corner of his mouth with a napkin. “In my opinion, if you’re helping the soldiers who are killing people, then you’re basically killing people.”

Mama pushed back her chair and stood, filled up the kettle, and began piling dishes in the sink. “Anyone want a cup of tea?” she asked, her back to us, shoulders hunched, and I knew she was trying not to say anything. Mama and Daddy hadn’t agreed on things in years, but she never spoke poorly of him. Instead, she made tea.

“Really, Marie, at a time like this?” Daddy was standing now and beginning to pace. I realized suppertime was over and began to excuse myself when he told me point-blank I wasn’t going anywhere.

Mama and I both sat down in our chairs, and Daddy took on his preaching voice. “The people in this town are looking to me for guidance. What will they think when my own daughter

goes off to serve in a war I don't believe in? If I don't have any control over my own household, how can I run a church?"

I bristled. Mama looked down at her lap, and the clock ticked.

Then I looked at Daddy's steamed-up face, like a Christmas ham, and his eyes all tiny and narrow, and I knew this was a lost cause. I knew he wouldn't let it go until I did because we were both stubborn that way, so I just nodded and said I understood, I wouldn't sign up, and I was sorry for upsetting him, and could I please have some tea now, Mama?

Daddy adjusted his belt and blew his nose on his handkerchief. He sat down in his chair and smiled to himself and said, "Yes, a cup of tea sounds lovely, Marie. Thank you."

And Mama obediently rose.

That night, as Daddy snored and the wind blew at my gingham curtains, another pebble flew against my window, and I climbed out of the house with my bag.

At the bottom of the diner I whispered good-bye, in my mind, to Mama, and "Sorry, Mama, and I'll miss you, Mama."

Then Eva and I stepped into the darkness, toward the station.

### 3

*July 1943*

We knew we were supposed to feel somber or something because this was war, but we were too young and the gunshots too far away, so we laughed a lot on the train ride as night sped by in a blur of trees and sky and fields.

We had each raided our pantries before we left, and all I'd found were some stale peanuts and a small package of sugar I knew Mama was saving for someone who needed it, but I figured I was that person. So we licked our fingers and tasted the sugar the whole four hours to Camp Lee, Virginia, and by the time we got there, we were so giddy we were stumbling around like it had been gin.

When the conductor called our stop we smoothed our hair and our dresses and gathered our bags and stepped out onto a platform as morning lit up the world. The sun looked like a fireball, striking the trees and bushes, and I thought of the story of Moses and the burning bush and wondered if God was trying to speak to me.

And for a moment I felt guilty, thinking about God and picturing Daddy snoring on his pillow and Mama bringing me toast and tea in bed and finding me gone. She'd be shaking

Daddy awake, and he'd be shoving on his glasses and pacing the room and calling the police and preaching at the walls, but, no, I couldn't think this way. I might cave if I did.

I shook my head and forced myself to step out of the train station into the morning light and the more I walked, the less concerned I became with Eva beside me and blue sky above us and hayfields spinning gold all around.



Our bags were threadbare and our shoes worn, but we were two girls on a mission and nothing could stop us. Nothing, except getting lost, and eventually we had to stop because we were. Desperately lost.

We turned around and all we saw were fields. At the train station it had said, "Camp Lee, 30 miles," but it's a lot of miles for two girls running on a single packet of sugar and no sleep, so we sat on our bags by the side of the road where cows lumbered by and we waited for some kind of help.

And we sang while we waited, songs like "Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy" by the Andrews Sisters, and eventually an army jeep rolled up and a woman in uniform stepped out and said her name was Lieutenant Barbara John. She had a firm jaw and a deep voice, and she asked why we'd begun walking when she was supposed to pick us up?

We piled into the jeep feeling chastised and worn, and she asked us clipped questions as we drove to the base, like "Why do you want to serve our country?" and "Are you ready to watch men your age die?"

It was all very sobering and the sun was very hot, and by the time we'd reached the iron gates of the camp, all I wanted was to crawl into bed and fall asleep.

But there was no time for sleep at Camp Lee.

There was marching. We may not have had the same privileges as the men, but we got the same treatment. Dressed in helmets and boots, we went for long hikes carrying full field packs. And we practiced using our gas masks.

We shared bunks with ten other women, and we wore uniforms they gave us: a khaki greatcoat, baratheia skirt and hip-length jacket, peak cap with a high crown, and a cap badge. Every morning we stepped into the darkness and marched, even as the sun rose.

I had never truly appreciated walking or even standing still, but now I did, as my knees ached and my head pounded and I couldn't complain about it to Eva who marched beside me, and I wondered, why do nurses need to know how to do this?

The corporal said something about discipline and valor, but all I could think about was rest and roast beef and how it seemed years since I'd had any of either.

Supper was always a fast affair in the dining hall with metal plates and piles of gelatinous stew or Spam on a bun and a square of chocolate wafer that was hard as a rock and tasted like bitter coffee. It was all supposed to prepare us for the army, but all I felt ready for was bed.

But bedtime didn't come.

Eight o'clock and the sirens and a voice over the loud speaker telling us to line up outside and march for another hour.

When it was finally over, I'm not sure I didn't fall asleep before I fell into bed; and then it was morning again.

More marching and then we were given cold slops of porridge and some very strong coffee, and we stood at attention as Commanding Officer Norma Crowe entered the room and saluted us.

"She's the head honcho," Eva said in a low voice, and Norma frowned at us and we didn't talk anymore.

“Welcome, ladies,” she began. She had shiny hair pulled straight back into a bun, and it seemed to stretch her whole face tight. “The Army Nurse Corps is one of the most esteemed organizations. It requires diligence, determination, and compassion. You will be called upon at any moment to serve the most severe and complicated of injuries, and you will be forced to do battle on behalf of the soldiers who are risking their lives for us. Are you prepared to give of yourself in this manner? Do you have the Courage to Care? The Courage to Connect? The Courage to Change?”

I felt my blood rushing, and I yelled with all of the gusto my small form could give, “Yes, Ma’am,” along with the rest of the girls and there was a passion in me I didn’t know I had except, of course, for Jimmy Stewart and Humphrey Bogart. But this was a different matter entirely.

In the afternoon we learned the Nurse’s Creed, and it’s something etched across my heart to this day and it goes like this:

I am a member of the Army Nursing Team.  
My patients depend on me and trust me to provide compassionate and proficient care always.  
I nurture the most helpless and vulnerable and offer courage and hope to those in despair.  
I protect the dignity of every individual put in my charge.  
I tend to the physical and psychological wounds of our Warriors and support the health, safety, and welfare of every retired Veteran.  
I am an advocate for family members who support and sustain their Soldier during times of War.  
It is a privilege to care for each of these individuals and I will always strive to be attentive

and respectful of their needs and honor their uniquely divine human spirit.

We are the Army Nursing Team.

We honor our professional practice standards and live the Soldier values.

We believe strength and resiliency in difficult times is the cornerstone of Army Nursing.

We embrace the diversity of our team and implicitly understand that we must maintain a unified, authentically positive culture and support each other's physical, social, and environmental well-being.

We have a collective responsibility to mentor and foster the professional growth of our newest Team members so they may mentor those who follow.

We remember those nursing professionals who came before us and honor their legacy, determination, and sacrifice.

We are fundamentally committed to provide exceptional care to past, present, and future generations who bravely defend and protect our Nation.

The Army Nursing Team: Courage to Care, Courage to Connect, Courage to Change.

That night we went to the officers' club. It was a square box of a building down the gravel road from camp, but it seemed like a castle compared to the warehouse we were in. I wore a dress Mama had made me for my seventeenth birthday with material from our living-room curtains. It had red roses on the fabric. I pinned up my hair and bit my lips and pinched my cheeks, and Eva and I giggled as we ran down the gravel road to the building all lit up like a kerosene lantern.

I had to forget I was a preacher's daughter. The place was wall to wall with couples and music and drinks, but the more we danced the easier it was to believe I was someone else.

The men were not so much gentlemen as guys our age, waiting to be called back to duty, so we all just kind of lingered together, dancing and listening to Ella Fitzgerald. "This is the life," Eva said, as the men escorted us back to our gate before curfew.

And suddenly, I looked down at my dress and pictured Mama standing at the kitchen window with an empty mug in her hand, and I couldn't breathe for a moment, wondering what on earth I'd done.

Then Johnny, the guy whose arm I was on, kissed me. And I didn't mind much what Mama was thinking anymore.



Nights, though, were hard. Under my thin green blanket in the dark of the barracks with women snoring around me, I cried into my flat pillow and wondered if God would ever forgive me. The Bible talks about honoring your parents, but how can you honor them when they're wrong? And I knew my Bible inside and out because it was the only book I'd ever been allowed to read in my house.

I could still hear them, the girls and boys skipping to school with their school bags, all linking arms, while I sat at our round kitchen table and Daddy preached at me, taught me about creation and the Tower of Babel and used those stories for science and English lessons. I had no friends, because we were meant to be *in* the world, not of it; so I sat in my room and played with my teddy bear and dreamt of having a girl to talk to.

Then there was the day when my bedroom window was wide open and the air smelled of honeysuckle, and there was someone singing to herself on the sidewalk below, and I climbed out my window and down the tree and landed right in front of her. Standing there in my frizzy red curls and my checkered pinafore, I stuck out my hand as I'd seen Daddy do at church and said, "Hi, I'm Clara. How do you do?"

This girl just looked at me with her wide green eyes and then swung her blonde hair back and laughed, and it was the prettiest laugh I'd ever heard. Kind of like a river trickling. And she shook my hand. "Nice to meet you, Clara. I'm Eva."

"Pleased to make your acquaintance," I said.

She laughed again, shook her head. "You're sure different. But it's all right. Come on, let's go play hopscotch."

I was nine years old when I met Eva, and she was my first friend, and Daddy didn't find out till I was eleven. It helped he was never home, always visiting this church person or another or trying to make new converts, and come schooltime every morning, precisely at nine o'clock, I made sure I was sitting at the kitchen table with my Bible, waiting, so he wouldn't wonder.

But Mama knew. She never said a word. Just smiled a little when she caught me climbing through my window and said, "Why don't you use the front door?"

Here I was, now, in a cold bunk room with ten other girls and Eva in the bed above me, and I knew her better than anyone else in the whole world. So why was I missing our tiny little kitchen with its flickering bulb and Daddy's tall broad shoulders? Why was I missing the humming refrigerator and Mama's toast and tea and the birds singing outside my bedroom window?

Daddy hadn't said much when he'd found Eva and me stargazing one night in the backyard after he thought I'd gone to

bed, and suddenly there he was towering over us, smelling like toothpaste. I guess he'd gone in to kiss me good night and found me missing. He just kind of picked me up like I was little and slung me over his shoulder and turned around and went back inside, tossed me on my bed, and said not to leave again or I'd be sorry.

The next morning, he acted like nothing was wrong, which wasn't like him, only I think Mama might have stuck up for me in one of her rare moments of courage. And Eva and I, we just kind of kept hanging out.

Eva introduced me to the library, on Raymond Street, which was tucked right behind Daddy's church on Main, but I'd never seen it before. We spent hours in there, reading everything from *Pippi Longstocking* to *Anne of Green Gables* to *Nancy Drew*, and they were better than any Bible story. She took me to her house with its white pillars, at the far end of town near the wide open fields. Her daddy was the mayor, and her mama never had to cook or clean, she just had to throw parties and read magazines while sitting in wide sun hats and drinking lemonade. Their maid gave us strawberry milk shakes, and we sat on the back porch and listened to big band music on the radio.

I always went home for supper, and Mama would look at me sadly sometimes because she could tell I'd been having so much fun. I was flushed and shiny and never looked that way at home. I knew she wished she could be the kind of mother who could make me look that way. But I just wanted her to be her.

I would squeeze her hand and say, "Hello, Mama," and she'd squeeze mine back and say, "Hello, Clara," and we understood each other this way. The way that says, *You are perfect to me*.

Eva didn't go to church. She went to mass. Her daddy often traveled on the weekends, so she and her mother lit candles

and spoke in liturgies and then went home for fried chicken and potatoes. We both spent the Sabbath on hard pews. I tried to get her to come to church with me, but she said Catholics and non-Catholics don't mix and I didn't understand this, because I thought we mixed quite well, except on Sundays.

So on the train ride to Virginia, we decided we wouldn't do church or mass anymore; we'd focus on loving people instead, and we weren't even sure God existed, because if God is good, then why would he allow Pearl Harbor and Hitler and our men to be shot in war?

We didn't know much about the Holocaust at the time, about the trainloads of Jews being deported from their homes and about the old and the sick being stuck in ovens while children starved and parents were enslaved. We didn't know. We knew about Hitler and his voice screaming through the radio and his funny moustache and his mass following. And I wonder now if I would have cared so much about the injustice of our men being killed in light of the greater injustice, of a nation of God's people being slaughtered. I'm pretty sure my heart would have changed.

But it wouldn't be until after the war that I'd learn the full extent of the atrocity, when a woman named Corrie ten Boom came and spoke to our church years later. It was then that I got it: the genocide, marked in the grooves of her face, and the way it had wiped out her family, and the extraordinary power of God's forgiveness shining through her.

But all I knew at the time, at the age of twenty, was my own little world. And as I lay shivering in my bunk under my green army blanket, the room full of drafts, I talked to God while women snored around me, and I begged his forgiveness because I knew in spite of the war he did exist. How else could I explain the warm, sacred place inside my heart, the place that told me that while angry fathers and sad mothers

and hard pews were real, love was, too? And would one day prevail?



The day was July 19, 1943. The day the Allies bombed Rome for the first time. The day we were told we were being shipped out. The day I received a telegram from home stating: “Return now or be disowned.”

I wrote back, “Take care of Mama.”

We were taken by train to Fort Dix, New Jersey, where we waited for the ship to take us somewhere overseas, somewhere far from a family I no longer had.

And as we waited, Eva and I just sort of clung to each other and I knew this was it. I was on my own. And for the first time in my life, I felt free.

Terrified.

But free.