

## Chapter 1 The Crucible of Loss

“Damn you, God!” she screamed. In a moment of gut-wrenching grief, Debbie, my 19-year-old fiancée, had just heard the devastating news her parents and godparents had tragically died in a mid-air, airplane crash. Holding her tightly, I felt anguish physically reverberating through her body, and into mine, as she screamed a guttural shriek I hoped I would never have to hear again. She unleashed her fury at God. I buried mine to provide her comfort. The sudden loss of these beloved couples, whom I treasured as my own family, left us grappling with unimaginable loss. At that moment, I vowed to be strong for Debbie whenever she needed me, no matter the cost.

Why did God do this? Every fiber of my being wanted to scream in rage. The suddenness of their absence was an unbearable weight to lift, let alone carry. We knew immediately we would never be the same, this overwhelming storm of sorrow would never pass. In the depths of my soul boiled a cauldron of hatred toward God.

Pointed to the heavens, Debbie's voice trembled as she mustered, "I hate You."

Grief has a way of revealing the depths of our strength, even when completely shrouded in the density of mourning, and Debbie and I would somehow find the fortitude to carry on, endure, and begin our healing. Beneath the rubble of heartbreaking loss, we clung to one another and found comfort in the sorrow we shared. Together, we searched for glimpses of hope amid the depth of our despair, kindling sparks of resilience within. Each passing day, we learned incrementally to treasure the fragile beauty of life. But it was far from easy.

We were so young when this happened, just barely eking our way into independence from the homes of our youth. With the big, wide world ahead of us, we had never stopped to consider what if. And without warning, we found ourselves living possibly the worst what if of all.

Some of us get a chance to grow up slowly and naturally (whatever that means), but the loss of Debbie's parents forced Debbie and me to grow up overnight.

We were not ready and held ZERO semblance of who or what we wanted to BE. One thing I knew in that moment, we had to figure it out ... and fast.

Debbie attempted to forgive God's cruel ways (I was in no way ready for the same), while our love for Jack and Joan Johnstone, her parents, transformed into a shared purpose: honor their legacy. We discovered even amid profound grief, pockets of joy could spring, teaching us earlier than we would have liked the complex entwining of love and pain.

Just six weeks earlier, on May 1, 1969, and with great anticipation and anxiety, I had asked Debbie's dad for her hand in marriage. Respect preceded all interaction with Mr. Johnstone, a retired Carlson Raider Marine who fought in the Pacific and brought home his war bride whom he met in New Zealand while recovering from malaria. He began his post-war life using the GI Bill to complete an education at the University of Southern California. I not only intended to ask this American hero for his daughter but, perhaps even riskier, to transfer her two hours away from his Los Angeles Alma Mater to attend San Diego State. Unaware of this tragedy headed our way, I was pursuing my dream of becoming an airline pilot and had been accepted to a San Diego flight school. Was I crazy? This man was a dangerous Marine trained to fight in hand-to-hand combat.

However, Debbie's dad surprisingly & enthusiastically said, "Yes! You may marry (and move) my daughter."

And so against a breathtaking sunset on the picturesque coastline of Laguna Beach, CA, our lives beginning to take clear & blissful shape, I knelt to present Debbie Johnstone with a substantial & gleaming engagement ring straight off the pages of a storybook moment of perfection. A scene no less worthy of capturing the essence of our

journey before and since, symbolizing the love, dedication, and smooth ride we vowed to maintain and cherish forever.

How I wish that were true. Sure, I gave her a ring, and a real diamond at that. And maybe it dimly shined of lower quality and size than one would prefer for such an occasion, and, yes, from a knee inside the safety of her parents' carport in San Juan Capistrano, a scene more accurately worthy of an instructional, medical pamphlet than a fairytale storybook. But you get the idea.

I guess I'm not a "traditionally" romantic guy.

Either way and lucky for me, Debbie said, "Yes!"

But imagine if you can, how quickly & significantly everything changed from one of life's highest highs to its nearly unbearable lowest of lows.

The question before you now is, "What do you want to BE when you grow up?" Not DO, mind you, but BE. If you can locate life's BE, the DOs follow.

We will explore the BEing rather than the DOing of life. When everything you think you hold is ripped lifeless in a blink, you can only BE, DO rendered powerless in the sway.

So, with life's paramount and ultimate purpose on the flight deck of my lifetime, arm all doors and cross-check, you & I are cleared for takeoff!

## REFLECTIONS

1. Life is unpredictable and grief profound. Be present for others in crisis, even while dealing with your own struggles.
2. Put others' needs before your own, especially in their darkest moments.
3. It is normal to feel anger toward God when facing loss. Don't suppress these emotions, but bring them honestly before Him.