

Evangeline,

A Woman of Faith

Chapter One: Summer's End.

Some days seemed destined for disaster. The alarm doesn't go off. The bus comes late. You forget your lunch.

But other days give no hint of the tragedy to come.

Tuesday, August 5, 1952 dawned without portent. As the sun rose, the sky along the Oregon coast took on a clear, brilliant blue. By the time breakfast ended, those at Cannon Beach Bible Conference already felt uncomfortably warm.

According to the radio, by day's end, temperatures in Portland would reach 105 degrees. The weather forecast did not dampen the enthusiasm of conference guests; they expected ocean breezes to moderate temperatures along the coast. Even as they left the dining hall, guests anticipated a day of outside activities in extraordinarily perfect weather.

As Evangeline Duff McNeill watched her guests leave the dining hall, she felt satisfied. So far, the week had gone well. While those around her enjoyed the last of breakfast conversation, she found herself thinking about the conference center's progress. In only seven years, it had grown and matured beyond her expectations. Guests no longer brought their ration books with them on vacation. The specter of war did not hover over their conferences. Though it was still only a fledgling operation, Evangeline and her husband Archie held so much hope for the future. They had plans for the place. Big plans.

Before they bought the place, Archie believed that people from all over the northwest would want to come to the Oregon coast to enjoy the best of the nation's Bible teachers. The restful, recreational setting would allow them to relax and focus on the messages. As she sipped her tea, Evangeline shook her head and smiled.

Archie's prediction proved absolutely correct. Not only had guests chosen to come to the beach, God's abundant blessing seemed to cover the Bible Conference. Over and over, God miraculously provided for the needs of the conference center. Watching Him work gave Evangeline great joy.

The conference center belonged to God. It was His project. By virtue of their mutual calling it became an obsession for Archie and Evangeline. In prayer and in hard work, they had given birth to it, and guided it toward maturity.

Evangeline watched Archie as he visited with guests. Even after sixteen years, her love for him surprised her. People called him a real “platform man.” But he was gifted in many ways. Even hosting breakfast is an art form to him, she mused. A giant of a man, six feet four inches, weighing nearly 260 pounds, his rich Scottish brogue, and warm friendly manner enabled conference center guests to become part of a much larger family. Though they arrived as strangers, they left as friends.

Each week Archie and Evangeline watched rich and lasting relationships develop between guests. Believing in the importance and significance of each guest, they worked together to make all feel welcome – Archie from the platform, and Evangeline in her own personal, almost motherly way.

On this clear, warm morning, with breakfast over, and the guests dismissed, Archie moved quickly toward the table where Evangeline sat with her brother Walter Duff, and his wife, Edith. “I’m headed into Portland now,” he said, patting her hand.

“Don’t you want me to come along?”

“No, you stay here. It’s too hot for you to sit in the car waiting for me.”

As she walked him toward the car she asked again. “Are you sure Archie? I always come along.” With a hug and kiss, he insisted she stay behind.

A small village on the North Oregon coast, Cannon Beach offered little in the way of groceries and restaurant supplies. During the summer, Archie made the weekly trip to Portland himself. As Evangeline watched his car head on to the street, she felt uneasy about not going along. She shook the thought away, and returned to the lodge.

As Evangeline went about her daily tasks, she found herself remembering other trips to Portland. She thought fondly of silent hours in the car holding hands. Were other couples able to spend hours enveloped in the same quiet world of love and understanding? Archie had always wanted her with him, always enjoyed her company.

Even when he was away for a speaking engagement, invariably Archie called late in the evening saying, “I just arrived in Portland. I’ll be home as soon as I can.” No matter how late, or how Evangeline begged for him to spend the night in the city, he would head directly for the coast.

He hated to stay away when he was so close to home.

In those days, the Sunset Highway, which led from Portland to the coast, was carved into the rugged coastal mountains. It was a tortuous drive, even for well-rested drivers in daylight hours. Over the years, she had spent many sleepless hours praying as she waited to hear his car turn on to the gravel driveway of the conference center.

Later that morning, Isabelle, fourteen asked to take little Helen Jean for a walk to the beach. Evangeline gave her permission, glad to have the children

occupied. Isabelle loved caring for Helen Jean. Though they were 10 years apart, they enjoyed one another's company.

Evangeline busied herself again with her guests and conference responsibilities, trying to shake the uneasy feelings that surrounded her thoughts.

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When Bob and Sally McGrath arrived at the conference center they were tired and hungry. They had barely survived the long drive from Seattle to Cannon Beach Oregon with two children. Not knowing anything about the center's work, Bob had agreed to lead the worship in exchange for room and board. Though it might not be much of a vacation, it was free.

By the time they climbed the stairs of the old log hotel, Bob knew Sally was disappointed in the arrangement. The upper floor was dark and unheated, and the walls between the rooms were made of boards riddled with open knotholes. Clouds of smoke filled the upstairs hallway—the only evidence of the working stove downstairs. The vacation might be free, he thought watching Sally's face, but the cost was too high. In spite of his disappointment in the facilities, Bob put his all into the services. As the week progressed, he and Sally found themselves irresistibly drawn to the spirit of the place and the graciousness of their host and hostess.

The smoke in the upstairs hallway had not disappeared, yet somehow, it didn't matter as much.

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The unusual heat of Tuesday, August 5, filled the fire station with the smell of perspiration and the sounds of irritability. Pete, the station commander, realized that his crew wished they were somewhere else. Everyone seemed to feel sleepy, moving in slow motion. However, Pete's sluggishness evaporated when he heard the radio calling his fire team to an accident on the Sunset highway.

No matter often he saw them; Pete never viewed the tragedy of a collision lightly. And the accident came into view, a sick, heavy feeling settled in his stomach. A large dump truck lay on its side in the ditch. A late model maroon sedan had come to rest across the highway—its front end nearly nonexistent. Broken glass was everywhere. Pete saw the driver of the car, slumped over the steering wheel. Eggs and flour were strewn all over the hillside.

Pete's crew split up immediately, some to help the driver of the truck, who seemed only slightly injured. Some went immediately to the car. Gently, they lifted the large middle-aged man onto the roadway where the medical team took over. Though the injured man was conscious, Pete's experienced eyes could see that he was badly hurt. Where was the ambulance?

Already, onlookers had gathered. "Like vultures," Pete muttered. Turning his attention to the growing traffic problem, he tried to find a way to move cars around the scene. The truck driver, with only scratches, gave the State Patrol his statement.

The injured man raised his head from the pavement and called loudly, "Does anyone here know how to pray?" Pete felt his queasiness return, and he quickly made his way back to the injured man. As he approached, he heard the man say, "Then I'll pray 'meeself'."

Though Pete believed he'd seen it all, he felt his eyes fill with tears as he listened to this man pray. The tenderness of the words were so unlike the cursing that frequented the fire station. As he listened, Pete felt the prayer evoke some new and strange emotion. Pete's sadness deepened as he watched the man's life slip away.

Having finished her accounting at the Cannon Beach Bible Conference, Mrs. Winifred Rupel made her way to village bus stop. Perspiring heavily, she tucked a stray piece of white hair into her chignon, wishing she had not made this commitment.

Winifred had a meeting in Portland, and she settled her grandmotherly bulk onto a bench to wait for the bus. Sitting there in the hot sun, she was sorry to leave the comfortable breezes of the coast. Surely, she thought, the same sun would make the city heat oppressive. Still, she hoisted herself up the bus steps and settled in for the now familiar ride up the Sunset Highway.

Facing a long, slow trip with many stops along the way, Winifred studied the magazine she brought along. Not far up the highway, the bus ground to a stop. From the long line of cars ahead, Winifred felt certain they must have come upon an accident. Checking her watch, she recalculated the time it would take to reach Portland. She didn't want to see an accident; she hoped they would pass the scene quickly.

Minutes crept by as they made slow progress. Cars filed by the bus in long slow chains. The bus inched forward as they took turns using one lane around the accident. The temperature in the bus climbed. Passengers grew impatient, stirring in their seats and muttering about the delay. As they neared the scene, Winifred glanced up from her magazine, and was surprised to see a familiar car. Surely it wasn't Archie's crimson Kaiser!

Then as the bus drew nearer still, her surprise turned to horror as she saw a body lying still on the highway. Partially covered, with people standing all around it, she couldn't be absolutely certain.

"Wait," she called out, moving quickly up the aisle, "You must stop – please –" she implored. "I know that man – please – you must let me off here."

The driver would not stop. Anxious and tearful, Winifred got off the bus at the next village on the bus route. In desperation and fear, she called the coast.

Evangeline's brothers rarely managed to stay at the conference center at the same time. It was even more unusual to have her sister from Missouri join them.

As children of immigrant parents, they had always been very close. Walter Duff, Jr., the oldest boy, directed Village Missions from Dallas, Oregon. Haldane Duff, the youngest, pastored a church in Seattle, Washington. Helen, the oldest of the Duff children, directed Christian Women's Clubs and Councils.

Their many speaking engagements and the demands of their work kept them from coming to the coast to visit. But, this summer was different. By some delightful miracle, they all came to visit during the same week. Only their youngest sister Olive, who lived with her husband and family in California, had not joined them. Evangeline had been thrilled to have her family join her.

So, when the conference receptionist brought a phone message to Walter, he was very surprised. *Who would know to contact me here?* Excusing himself, he went to the phone booth in the lobby of the old log house to return the call. When he rejoined Edith, his wife, and his brother Haldane, he reported what little news he had.

As yet, they were not even sure that it was Archie's little car on the highway. Together they agreed to distract Evangeline while Walter made the necessary calls for more information. While Edith and Haldane blocked her view of the phone booth, Walter called hospitals, county and state police. No one had any information. Disappointed, he waited for a patrol officer's return call.

When the call finally came, the officer confirmed that Archie had indeed been a terrible accident. He went on and on about the details of the accident. Impatient, Walter interrupted him, "But, what about Archie?"

"Oh, he returned flatly, "He's dead."

Evangeline was surprised that Archie had not returned by dinnertime. Mentally she went over his errand list, carefully calculating how much time each would require. Checking her watch again, she decided she would take his place at the evening prayer meeting. Whatever other prayer requests were made that evening, Evangeline had only one. "Bring Archie home safely Lord," she prayed. Was it her imagination or had that prayer bounced like echoes from the ceiling of the meeting room?

After prayer, Evangeline greeted the guests who had joined her. Then she walked outside to discover her entire family, in-laws and all gathered near the phone booth of the old log house. Before she could ask, Walter came toward her with anguish twisting the features of his face.

"Evangeline dear, I want to talk to you," he said. Putting an arm around her, he led her to the little cabin she shared with Archie. As she sat down on their bed, he told her as gently as he could of the accident.

"You mean he's gone? – He's dead?" She struggled to understand. Wanting not to believe, and yet seeing the truth in her brother's eyes, she felt the tears begin to flow down her cheeks. At last the realization came. She had lost her best friend, her lover, and her sweetheart.

Archie had been her pastor, her partner, and her favorite preacher. With his beautiful baritone voice, they had performed together, held meetings together, and prayed together. Together they had given birth to two children. They had laughed together. They had grieved together.

Evangeline meant to share life only with him. How could he leave her? Her sense of life purpose was wrapped up in him. In those first few moments of grief, all she felt was emptiness – the deepest most painful and lonely emptiness she had ever felt. In him was everything she had ever wanted or needed. She was lost. How could she ever go on without him?