

In Memory of My Brother
Donald J. Roberts
1948–2001
And for all the other veterans
Who gave their lives
So that we could live ours.
No thanks could adequately express our gratitude.

Chapter One
Tuesday, October 23, 2001

In every woman's mind, she hides a photograph album of sorts. Deep in some secret place, she stores the indelible memories of ordinary moments--which by some unexpected turn of events become extraordinary.

On this particular morning, without knowing quite why, Beth Cheng took a mental photograph of her husband, Allen, as he reached for the ringing wall phone with his left hand and shifted their wiggling baby higher onto his right hip.

"Chengs'," he said. Tucking the phone under his chin, he used the baby's bib to catch a rivulet of drool rolling down Noah's face and threatening his own dress shirt. "Oh, yeah, John," Beth heard the subtle change in Allen's voice. "Yeah, she's here." Allen pressed the receiver against his chest. "It's John." His eyebrows drew together, and a frown flitted across his features. "Again."

Beth put down her butter knife, wiped her hands on a towel, and moved toward the phone.

"Don't forget I have a board meeting this afternoon," Allen whispered as he held the phone out for her. "I can't cover for you today."

As she accepted the handset, Beth paused to run the palm of her hand along her husband's cheek. Mouthing a tiny kiss, she brought the receiver to her ear. She took a deep breath before speaking, taking in the familiar scent of Polo cologne lingering on the receiver. "Morning, John," she said with a tone of resignation.

Allen turned away, depositing the youngest of the three Cheng children into a high chair. Bending over, Allen spoke to the squirming child as he pushed the tray toward him. "Now," he said, handing Noah a spoon, "Please be patient while Daddy finds the cereal." Before Allen even reached the cupboard, the pounding of handle against tray rivaled the sound of a performing drum band during the Seafair parade.

"Today?" Beth asked, using one hand to cover her free ear. "John, you said we wouldn't be able to fly again for another couple of weeks. I have so many things to do here today." Frustrated by the banging spoon, she turned to face the corner between the kitchen wall and the upper cabinets in a vain attempt to create her own office. At any time of the day, noise characterized the

busy Cheng household, but today the thumping spoon, the nearby television, and the sound of her husband digging through cupboards made telephone conversation even more difficult.

“Oh, all right. If it’s our last chance, I guess I’ll have to be there,” she sighed. “Right. I’ll meet Bill there. Noon at Thun Field.” Then with unmistakable sarcasm she added, “Thanks a lot, John.”

“What was that about?” Allen placed a bowl of Cheerios in front of Noah and sat down facing the high chair. Just as Noah threw the first handful of cereal, Allen snatched the bowl away and placed it on the kitchen table, safely out of reach. Wrapping the legs of the high chair with his own, he brought a sippy cup to the child’s mouth, offering juice. The baby accepted readily, dropping the spoon to grasp the cup with eager dimpled hands. He drank, though a steady stream of orange fluid dripped off his chin, down his bib, and onto the tray before him.

“John has a plane and a pilot for us this afternoon,” Beth said as she returned to spread mayonnaise on slices of white bread. Then, thinking of the time, she faced the door to the living room and raised her voice. “Bekka! Abbey! Turn off that TV. If you don’t finish getting dressed, you’ll be late for first bell.” She stood listening intently, her head tipped and her hands on her hips. Satisfied, she returned to the lunches. “Anyway,” she continued, “there’s a small weather window today, before storm systems move in tomorrow. I have to finish the fall section of my report by next week. Bill, our hydrologist, is going up for more photographs, and since they’ve already contracted the plane and pilot, John thought we could save some money by sending me along. If I can get one last count of mountain goats, that part of my field report will be finished.”

“But you do the goat counts so late in the day.”

She nodded. “Twilight is the best, actually, but we’ll probably start earlier today. Bill will take his hydrology photos first.”

“Who will watch the kids?”

“I’ll call my mom.” Expertly, Beth slapped ham slices on the three sandwiches. She picked up a stack of sliced cheese and capped each piece of ham. “She can start dinner, and I should be home by the time you get the dishes done. After all, I can’t count anything after dark.”

“I hate that you have to work.” Allen shook his head as he offered cereal to the baby. Ignoring his father, Noah slapped his hand in the puddle of juice and giggled.

Beth sighed. “We’ve been through this before,” she said without looking up. “I have a degree. I can help. Why shouldn’t I? Besides, we agreed that if you accepted this pastorate, I would have to work. We’re supposed to be here,” Beth explained in an even, logical tone. “So, I work.”

“Just because we agreed on it doesn’t mean I have to like it.” Allen picked up a yellow washcloth. Shaking his head, he continued, “But things at church are turning around. We’re growing. And the board promised to reconsider the salary after our second year.”

“I know, honey. But I like it,” she said as she snapped open a paper lunch bag. “Working, I mean. I only take the jobs I want. I work from home ...”

“Except when you’re up flying around that stupid mountain.”

“Yes, except when I’m doing aerial photography or species surveys,” she agreed, nodding. Turning toward him, she leaned against the counter, crossing her arms. “Sweetheart, doing environmental consulting has helped us financially. You know that. And with Mom so close and you able to work at home some days, the kids are always with family. I mean, how many other jobs are there for a wildlife biologist in the middle of the city?”

“I can think of one really important one,” he said, tugging at the sticky fingers of his son’s hand with the washcloth. The baby pursed his lips and pulled his hand away, clearly resisting Allen’s efforts.

“What?”

“Feeding Noah. I’m late for my Bible study group.” Allen removed the hand towel tucked into his belt and threw it onto the table as he stood. At the sink, he rinsed a clean rag in hot water. “I think we ought to talk about your work again, honey. I just don’t like it. Maybe we can think of some other way.” He dabbed a rag across the front of his shirt. “Speaking of environmental impact,” he continued, “if the city of Bellevue had any clue as to how much damage one eleven month old boy can cause just by eating breakfast, we’d have to get a permit to feed him.”

Allen gave up, throwing the rag in the sink. He picked up the soap and began washing his hands. From

behind, Beth reached around his waist to give him a warm hug. "I'll feed the baby," she said, leaning her cheek against his back. "But it'll cost you. Big time."

He dried his hands on a paper towel and turned to pull her into his arms. "Whatever it takes," he smiled. "I guess it's the cost of doing business."

*Mount Rainier
Ten miles NE of the unincorporated town of Clearwater
Tuesday, October 23, 2001*

From his position on a tree stump at the edge of deep woods, Dennis Doyle saw blue smoke rise in a transparent tower from the chimney of the small home. From a distance of fifty yards, Doyle saw the house in clear detail. Brown siding, white trim, long narrow driveway, neat lawn. Though completely isolated, surrounded only by rugged mountains, and miles from Clearwater, the house reflected simple country living at its best.

Doyle noticed lights glowing toward the back of the home, the area he guessed to be the kitchen. And as he watched, the door to the back porch opened and a man exited, crossing the yard to open the driver's door of a car parked in the driveway. Doyle saw the exhaust rising behind the car as the man started the engine. Doyle saw him climb out and begin scraping heavy frost from the car windows with a long handled scraper.

Doyle shivered as he watched, aware that winter pressed eagerly upon the heels of fall. He turned up his collar and deliberately moved his gaze away. His half shepherd, half mutt dog had managed to invite himself into a nearby pasture, evidently hoping to torment a horse grazing peacefully on the last bits of a hay bale. So far the horse paid no attention to the dog.

Still, Doyle worried that barking might draw the attention of the man scraping his car windows in the distance. Doyle felt the familiar squeeze of fear in his chest, and he wondered for a desperate moment how he might call the dog without distracting the man.

Dennis Doyle had chosen this stump carefully, confident that he could watch from here without being observed. But one bark would change all that. Doyle's breath came faster, and little puffs of a warm cloud seemed to hang in the air around his face.

He had no desire to be seen.

Just then the door of the house opened again, and a blond woman clad in a pale blue bathrobe stepped out the back door. Holding the robe closed with one hand, she descended the steps to the yard. With bare feet, she danced across the cold ground toward the car. In her other hand she carried a mug full of steaming liquid. Doyle saw the morning sun glint off the sides of the container and watched intently as she crossed the driveway and handed the cup to the man, who wrapped one arm around her shoulder and squeezed lightly. Then she turned her face to him and they kissed a gentle kiss that seemed to hang for a long time in the silent, cold air. Doyle turned away.

Where had that stupid dog gone now?

He spotted him lying peacefully beneath the grazing horse, his soft brown snout resting on his front paws as if every dog in the world preferred to nap beneath a quarter horse. Doyle stifled an urge to whistle.

Grunting, he turned his attention to the edge of the pavement. Only fifty feet from this stump, civilization began.

Asphalt. Roads. People. He let his gaze trace the edge of the road where blacktop met gravel. How long had it been since he had allowed his own feet to touch pavement? He did not know. Could not guess. Long years ago, Doyle had stopped keeping track of time. Why would he care about time? He wanted only to live out his own life.

Lately, Doyle's allotment of years felt like they were lasting far too long.

Movement in the driveway caught Doyle's attention. The small car crept backward, pulled into the street, changed direction, and started down the road. As the woman waved, the white Import accelerated. She would be alone now, he knew.

Doyle watched her return to the house and waited until she closed the back door. Then he whistled. Immediately, the dog's ears pricked up and his head rose. Without hesitation, the dog trotted away from the horse, back under the fence, and across the edge of the pavement to Doyle's side. Sitting attentively beside him, the dog slid his snout onto Doyle's leg, and with clear determination, eased his nose under the palm of Doyle's hand. Content, the dog waited, watching his master with a longing expression and attentive, deep brown eyes.

Doyle's hand did not move. He did not pet the dog, nor did he caress the soft black fur dotted with blotches of tan. Instead, keeping his eyes on the roadway, he allowed himself only the fleeting pleasure of motionless touch.

The sound of an approaching vehicle caught Doyle's attention, and he stiffened involuntarily. He did not move until the vehicle came into view, and he recognized the gray green Jeep Cherokee. Without slowing, the Jeep turned a tight circle along the edge of the pavement and stopped, facing away from Doyle. In reverse, the vehicle backed up until the rear cargo door hung just over the edge of the road. The driver's door opened, and a lean gray haired man climbed out. He walked deliberately toward the edge of the road and stood waiting, his hands on his hips.

Doyle sighed, took a deep breath, and rose from the stump.

"You here?" the visitor called, gazing directly at Doyle yet not seeing him.

"I'm here." Doyle moved out from under the cover of a giant cedar. His right knee ached from sitting so long in the cold morning air. As always, it took a few steps before the painful limping subsided.

The man smiled and walked through the grass toward him. "Got anything?"

"Just one."

He stepped closer. "A box?"

"Yep." Doyle dropped his green canvas rucksack onto the grass covered ground and opened it. Without taking his eyes from the man before him, he bent down and brought out the box. Before it had fully emerged, the tall man had both hands out, eager to receive the treasure.

"It's beautiful," he said, running his index finger along one corner.

Tiny dovetails, no larger than the smallest fingernail on a woman's hand, lined up perfectly along the smooth edge. The man held the box up, examining the lower surface. Four matching feet had been carved in one piece with the bottom. He brought it down and removed the fitted top. The inside of the box, like the outside, displayed the same attention to detail. "You've outdone yourself, Doyle," he said, his voice awestruck. "It's one of your best."

Doyle shrugged. "How much?"

"Forty?"

Doyle nodded his agreement. Suddenly uncomfortable, he glanced once around the edge of the woods, then across the pasture to the couple's house. He had been down too long. He needed to get away. Back into the mountains. Alone.

Reading his glance, the lean man asked, "Supplies?"

Doyle nodded and reached into his pants pocket. Removing a battered sheet of paper, he handed it to the driver. Tiny frayed holes ran along the edge where he had torn it from his spiral notebook.

"I've got the other stuff." The man pointed to the Jeep with his thumb.

"Good."

The two men walked together toward the vehicle, Doyle stopping several steps away from the door. The tall man held the box against his side as he unlocked the rear cargo door. Carefully, he wrapped the box in newspaper and tucked it into a side compartment. "I think I brought everything you asked for. All the usual supplies. I put the extra money in an envelope on top." He picked up a cardboard liquor box and held it out to Doyle. "I cashed your check and put that inside too."

Doyle snatched the envelope and placed it on the rear bumper of the SUV. "You keep the money. I got no use for money," he said, nodding toward the mountain. He took the box with both arms. "Thanks."

“I shouldn’t keep your money,” the man began. He bent down to pick up the envelope and turned around with his hand extended, “You might ...”

But both Doyle and the dog had disappeared.

Just as Beth packed the last of her working tools in the car, the chime of the front doorbell announced that her mother had arrived. She stepped into the kitchen from the attached garage, calling, “Come on in, Mom.”

Standing at the counter, Beth opened the back of her camera and slid a new roll of film into place. “I’m in the kitchen,” she said. “Just a few things to finish.” As she pulled out the loose film end, Beth heard her mother’s scuffed footsteps and smiled to herself. Though born and raised in the United States, her mother’s Japanese heritage still showed itself in hundreds of little ways. Nearly sixty years old, Harumi Harding always removed her outside shoes and slipped into ostrich feather scuffs whenever she entered Beth’s home. Sometimes Beth wondered what her mother’s life might have been like if she hadn’t married outside of her Japanese traditions.

“Hey, Lizzie,” Harumi cooed, dropping her purse on the counter and reaching for her daughter. Beth felt her mother’s arms surround her, giving her a warm hug.

“Thanks for coming, Mom,” Beth answered, returning the embrace. “I’m sorry about the short notice. I didn’t think I’d have to work this week, but John has a plane chartered, so off we go.”

“Anything special for the kids this afternoon?”

“Yes, unfortunately,” Beth said as she zipped the camera back into its case. “Piano lessons today.”

“Don’t you do those on Mondays?”

“The teacher had to reschedule. I’m sorry; is that too much to ask?”

“No problem. What about dinner?” With the refrigerator door open, Harumi scanned the shelves. “Should I cook?”

“No, Mom,” Beth smiled. “I have dinner thawing on the counter.” She pointed at an aluminum pan of frozen lasagna and slung the strap of her camera case over her shoulder. Feeling in her pants pockets for the car keys, she pulled out her key ring.

“Lizzie, I taught you to cook ...” her mother began.

“Don’t start, Mom,” Beth cautioned, holding up one hand. “I can’t do everything. Today, frozen will do.” She shook her head. “It’s fine. Really.” She bent down to kiss her mother’s cheek. “I’m going to be late. Thanks again, Mom.” She started toward the door to the garage, and before she took three full steps, she stopped. “Oh, no,” she said, slapping her palm to her forehead. “I meant to stop by the drugstore. Oh well, I’ll do it after I get home tonight.” She opened the back door. “Allen will be a little late. He has a meeting. Noah went down for his nap about half an hour ago, and the girls will be home around three.”

“We’ll manage. Don’t worry.”

“I never do.” Glancing at her watch, Beth realized that she needed to hurry in order to catch the plane. She blew her mother a kiss and, slipping over the threshold, punched the button that opened the garage door.

Forty minutes later, Beth pulled into the parking lot at the county airport south of Puyallup. Though she’d been here dozens of times over the course of her work with the agency, she always loved the breathtaking view of the mountain from the airport. Mount Rainier seemed so enormous from here, so close. Though she had taken dozens of pictures from the runway, none ever seemed to convey the impact of the real thing. She gazed at the snow covered peak again, completely enchanted. “It’s beautiful, Lord,” she said, smiling. “You’ve outdone yourself today.”

From the parking lot, she couldn’t see anyone from Davis and Graham. She checked her watch, opened the car door, and slid out. Stepping to the passenger side, she pulled her working tub off the backseat. Taking a quick inventory, she checked to be certain she had everything she needed—clipboard, notebooks, camera bag, binoculars, and her topographical map.

She reached into the middle of the seat and grabbed the wallet on a string that she’d started carrying after having children. Dropping it into the tub, a question came to mind. What would she do while the hydrologist worked? They would not start the goat count until late afternoon. How would she use her time until then?

She glanced around the car and spied the travel Bible Allen had bought for her diaper bag. She'd left it in the car after Bekka's soccer practice last week. Snatching it off the seat, she dropped it into the tub with the rest of her supplies.

She could catch up on her devotions in this morning's craziness, she'd managed to forget her quiet time. It wouldn't be the same in the plane, but it had to be better than nothing. But something felt wrong missing. She looked down at the tub. Suddenly it occurred to her that she'd managed to leave home without a jacket.

"Phooey," she said aloud. How could she keep warm in that drafty old plane without a coat? She stepped back into the car. Nothing on the backseat. Nothing under the seats. "I'll freeze to death in that plane without something warm," she muttered. Perhaps Allen had stashed a coat in the back.

In the cargo compartment of the Outback, Beth had to dig through the accumulated possessions normal to all families with young children. Nothing under the emergency kit. She reached down and lifted the stroller. There. A yellow down jacket that her husband kept for changing tires. Though the coat was too big to wear, she could drape it over her knees to keep her legs warm. She rolled it into a ball and dropped it on top of her other supplies. At least she'd chosen a wool sweater, polar fleece vest, and heavy jeans. And she'd remembered to wear wool socks under her hiking boots. With any luck at all, she might keep from getting hypothermia. Why can't little planes have heaters that work, she wondered. After locking the car, she headed for the terminal where John had instructed her to meet the pilot.