

KAREN
KINGSBURY
THE
Christmas
RING



THOMAS NELSON
Since 1798

The Christmas Ring

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Donald, my Prince Charming, the man of my dreams. Thirty-seven years married to you is only the beginning, my love. Thank you for always cheering me on, always loving me, and always believing in God's miracles. I couldn't be me without you. I love you with all I am.

To my children and grandchildren, who prove to me daily—over and over again—that God's greatest gift really is love. I cherish the laughter in our moments together and your kindness and intentionality in every possible way. I'm proud of you beyond words, of your faith and passion and creativity. I love you and I love this life we share. I never imagined this would be my story. But God has blessed us and made it possible. What a life!

To my mom, who has been there through every stage of my writing journey, and who still loves my reader friends and the people getting adoption grants from our One Chance Foundation. I cherish the time, Mom. I love you.

To my sisters, who have also worked alongside me from the start. Isn't this the most fun any family ever had? I love you and I thank God for you.

And to God Almighty, who has—for now—blessed me with these.



Chapter 1

June 6, 1944, 12:45 a.m.

IN THE DARK OF night and against the sound of enemy fire, the moment he jumped, rushing wind hit Bill Bailey square in the face. He pulled his parachute cord but even as it opened, he could already tell. Something was wrong. The C-47 transport plane ahead of them—the one labeled “Stick 66”—was turning around trying to get back to base.

Bill winced. Anyone could see the plane wasn't going to make it. Long before his feet hit the ground, he watched through the clouds and fog as the plane plummeted into a French hillside. The explosion took Bill's breath. His platoon had known the details wouldn't play out perfectly like they'd rehearsed. But this?

One name after another raced through his mind. Guys he had laughed with and tossed a ball with and shared letters from home with. Some of them from his hometown of Columbus, Georgia. Fort Benning.

The loss happening right before him was more than Bill could comprehend. All that training in England had led to

this. And now nearly twenty of Easy Company's best and bravest were gone.

Don't think about them, Bill told himself. Don't look.

He set his face forward, the flames behind him. Bill's parachute sailed through the dark sky over Normandy. *Focus. Don't get distracted.* In the dim light the sky was peppered with other paratroopers, others from the elite army group. "Screaming Eagles," they called themselves. Bill tried to steer his parachute to an open field.

That's when it happened. Gunfire ripped through the air all around him, bullets grazing his arms and legs and the top of his helmet. So close he figured he must've been hit. His heart pounded and for a single moment all he could see were the faces of his mother and father. His two sisters. He could smell the roast his mom had made the night before he left.

"You'd better come home!" his oldest sister had told him. "Don't fall in love with a French girl."

He was never going to see them again, and he was only eighteen.

The barrage of bullets continued and it still felt like a million miles till touchdown. Another problem became clear. Bill was drifting. He wasn't so much making his way to the ground as he was flying sideways. Sideways far from the coastline and straight through enemy fire.

Time slowed and he wasn't parachuting into France in the middle of the night ahead of the Normandy invasion. It was yesterday again. He and the other Screaming Eagles were pouring out of a war movie and the lieutenant was directing them to tables with documents.

“Sign them,” he had shouted. “All of you. Sign them.”

Bill found a spot at one of the tables and saw what they were about to sign. Life insurance policies.

“Half of you won’t make it home.” The lieutenant’s voice had grown stern. “But never mind that. The mission ahead is the one you were born for. Do not worry about tomorrow.”

Do not worry about tomorrow. The same words Jesus had told His disciples. Words written often in the Bible. *Do not be anxious. Don’t be afraid. Do not worry. Be strong and courageous.*

The ground was finally rising up to meet him. *Do not be afraid,* he told himself. *God will see you through.*

But as the heels of his boots dug deep into the ground, Bill knew two things. First, he was nowhere near Utah Beach. And second, God had not seen many of them through after all. Because next to him two of his closest buddies lay in a heap beneath their ripped-up parachutes, dead before they’d hit the ground.

Nausea hit Bill like a kick to the gut. He reached out to help his friends. As if he could bring them back. But as he did, another spray of bullets flew over his head.

He had to get out of here.

He struggled to break free from the nylon and ropes.

Gunfire and German voices cried out all around. From deep inside his backpack, Bill found his knife. He hacked at the parachute cords until he was free. Then he shoved the nylon into a bush and ran. Ran as fast and as hard as he could until the next round of gunfire ripped across the night.

The bullets were not aimed at him this time. But the sound was deafening all the same.

Bill scrambled into a bush—and found five of the Screaming Eagles.

“Shh.” One of them grabbed his shoulder. His voice was little more than a whisper. “Don’t speak.”

Bill shook his head. Not a word.

His eyes adjusted a little more. He knew these guys. He’d shared a bunk room with three of them. More gunfire and then Bill realized what else he was hearing.

The sound of men being hit. Men dying.

Finnie sat across from him. Finnie Eastman. Bill looked at him and shrugged. With barely a sound he uttered, “Where are we?”

“Some village.” Finnie opened his backpack and pulled out a canteen. The others did the same. Water could mean the difference between life and death.

Not until the canteens were put away did Bill realize that every one of his guys was injured. The worst was Woodsy to his right. Bill grabbed a roll of bandage from his bag and cut off a long piece. He wrapped it over the gaping bullet hole in Woodsy’s leg. Then he nodded. Woodsy would be fine. He had to be fine.

Bill settled against the base of the bush and closed his eyes. How had this happened? Easy Company had flown in low from the west, a part of the 2nd Battalion of the 506th Parachute Infantry Regiment of the 101st Airborne Division. Georgia boys. American through and through. The army’s bravest. Easy Company’s Screaming Eagles.

Strapped with eighty-pound packs, Bill figured they would drop almost rocklike to the ground. No time to

be shot at. Instead, with the wind and weather, they had bounced around like barely weighted balloons.

The goal had been to land near the target: the Cotentin Peninsula just off Utah Beach. Commandeer it from the Nazis and prepare the way for the land invasion coming at daybreak. Instead, they were trapped in a bush somewhere in the French countryside with a battle raging all around them.

Bill still didn't know how they'd survived this long.

With morning still forever away, Bill did what the others were doing. He closed his eyes again and tried to find the peace he needed to survive the night. What was that speech the captain had read before they boarded the planes before dusk yesterday? Words from General Dwight D. Eisenhower. Bits and pieces darted through Bill's mind.

"You are about to embark on the Great Crusade, toward which we have striven these many months. The eyes of the world are upon you . . . Your task will not be an easy one. Your enemy is well trained . . . He will fight savagely . . . The tide has turned! The free men of this world are marching together to Victory! . . . Let us beseech the blessing of Almighty God upon this great and noble undertaking . . ."

Explosions popped off not far from them, and then the sound of more men being wounded, more men lost to the battle. Bill blinked. Lights from the falling bombs were visible through the branches of the bush where they were hiding. Reds and silvers and golds.

Like Christmastime.

Would he be home for Christmas this year? Would he make it out of this bush? *Home*. Ever since he'd landed in

England, it had become his favorite word. Bill let it fill his head and heart. *Home*. He held on to the feeling and images it brought to him.

Christmas hadn't been the same since Pearl Harbor, but it was still his favorite time of the year. As long as he was home.

Gunfire rang out, closer this time. Bill shifted. *I'll never be home again*. Not for Christmas. Not ever.

His backpack slid out from beneath him and he started to go with it. Without making a sound, Bill dug his fingers into the soft dirt and tried to straighten his bag. Tried to get it to cooperate. And that's when it happened.

The tips of his fingers on his right hand brushed against something buried in the ground, something cool and solid and metal. Bill turned and made more of an effort. When his gear was again straight against the base of the bush, he found the spot in the dirt. Whatever was there, it had been buried long ago. Another try and he pulled the item free and stared at it. Still encased in mud its shape was hard to make out, but it felt familiar. Like a ring.

He brushed it against his army pants, pushing away the encrusted soil and polishing the metal over and over. Finally in the dim light of the distant bombs he could see it. A deep gold band and a ruby-red stone. The jewel was ringed with a circle of glimmering diamonds.

Bill stared at it. Where had the piece come from and how had it wound up buried here beneath an overgrown shrub? He checked his buddies. They were half asleep, bleeding, and scared. One of them took another sip from his canteen. Bill stared at them. Who would still be alive in the morning?

He leaned against his backpack again and clutched the

bauble tight in his hand. Somehow the ring gave him hope. Like God hadn't forgotten him and the other guys from Easy Company. The red ruby was a sign.

Images filled his head, flashes of his future, maybe. He could see himself being rescued from France and helping the Allied forces win the war. And in time he would meet the sweetest girl and they would fall in love and get married. Then he'd take her home. Home to his parents and his sisters and their first Christmas together.

They would have a family and—

An explosion rocked the earth beneath him. Bill sheltered Woodsy. His leg wasn't bleeding out anymore, but it wouldn't be long. Would any of them live to see the morning? To be rescued?

Sleep finally won out. Bill had no idea how much time had passed, only that when he opened his eyes, the sun was shining and distant gunfire filled the air like a hailstorm back in Columbus. A few of the guys were awake, shivering, holding on to each other.

The land invasion had begun.

But where were they hiding, and what had happened to the peninsula? Bill peered through the bushes and there on the bluff was an old church. If they could make it across the field, they might find shelter until US troops came for them.

"Hey!" The voice was American. Hands tore the branches away and a face stared at the six of them. "Let's get out of here. We need to get you boys to the medic."

Bill noticed the flag on the man's uniform. It was the most beautiful sight he'd ever seen.

“Woodsy, wake up.” Bill helped the group grab their gear and crawl out of the bush. “Finnie, come on.”

The soldier led them to a truck and suddenly they were headed away from the war and straight to an Allied fortress where they could be treated and cared for.

They had survived. They were free.

Not till they were climbing out of the truck did Bill realize he was still holding the treasure he’d found in the dirt. He studied it for a long moment. This single object was proof God had been with him all along. He must’ve seen what Bill was going through and known what Bill was feeling. How badly he was missing home.

The piece of jewelry was proof.

Yes, one day he would marry that girl, whoever she might be, and they would raise a family and this ruby-red gem would always serve to remind him that God had spared Bill Bailey on D-Day for a reason. He would keep the ring in his family for generations to come. He could see it all playing out before him.

Bill smiled. He even knew what he would call it.

The Christmas ring.