

"Heirlooms is the kind of novel that connects and weaves change and hope into your heart."

— ANNIE F. DOWNS —

New York Times bestselling author of *That Sounds Fun*

HEIRLOOMS

a novel

Sandra Byrd

Praise for Sandra Byrd

“Sandra Byrd’s novels draw me in, hold me tight, and before I even realize it, I am changed in my own story because of the story she has written. *Heirlooms* is the kind of novel that connects and weaves change and hope into your heart.”

ANNIE F. DOWNS, *New York Times* bestselling author of *That Sounds Fun*

“With the enchanting Puget Sound as a backdrop, Sandra Byrd deftly explores the meaning of family, the great power of love, and the intrinsic worth of each one of us. Here is a compelling story that underscores why we treasure the past and value its echoes. I loved it!”

SUSAN MEISSNER, bestselling author of *The Nature of Fragile Things*

“Byrd’s riveting intergenerational story of mystery, culture, romance, and hope demonstrates God’s hand in families and his expert care for each aspect of their lives. As a Korean American, I connected to the Korean cultural details and characters.”

TINA CHO, author of *The Ocean Calls: A Haenyeo Mermaid Story*

“*Heirlooms* is one of those beautifully written novels that you’ll want to savor with a mug of hot tea, relishing the gardens on Whidbey Island and every morsel of wisdom passed down through the generations. Sandra Byrd’s past and present-day characters are full of heart and courage as secrets slowly unfold and friendships are restored. Like the sweetness of *son-mat* in her story, *Heirlooms* was crafted with great care and creativity in Sandra’s hands. An absolute delight to read!”

MELANIE DOBSON, award-winning author of *The Winter Rose* and *Catching the Wind*

“A poignant exploration of the ties that bind us through family and friendship, *Heirlooms* has it all—secrets, romance, mystery, recipes, a lovely island setting, and far more. At its heart, this unique, well-researched novel is about the legacy we leave moment by moment, day by day, heirlooms that are both timeless and beautiful, if we are willing to embrace the best of the life we’ve been given and gift others along the way.”

LAURA FRANTZ, Christy Award–winning author of *A Heart Adrift*

“*Heirlooms* is the kind of story that begs readers to linger. I loved the attention to detail in the historical story line and felt fully transported to Helen and Eunhee’s world, and the modern-day story was equal parts intrigue and charm. From secrets uncovered to relationships gently explored, the richness and depth in this story is meant to be savored. Sandra Byrd delivers a poignant, beautiful read!”

MELISSA TAGG, *USA Today* bestselling, Christy Award–winning author

“Thoughtful, poignant, and so sharply written you can smell the sun-warmed strawberries, *Heirlooms* honors friendships that transcend culture and family bonds that transcend time. Sandra Byrd’s memorable characters remind us that we are forged by the lives of generations past and called to plant seeds of hope for the future.”

STEPHANIE LANDSEM, author of *In a Far-Off Land*

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CHAPTER ONE

March 1958

Helen Devries carefully removed her nurse's cap, fluffing her platinum back-combed bouffant, crackling the Aqua Net lacquering it in place. On the television in the back of the living room, Elvis offered a flirty smile and almost wink as he was measured for his uniform.

"You're in the Army now, young man. Good for you. I hope serving your country won't take your life." She turned up the volume against the evening's emptiness just before the phone startled awake, eclipsing the low hum of the TV.

She was rarely invited to the party line.

Two short rings and one long requested Johanna Jansen, the Dutch woman on the farm behind hers. Four short bursts

summoned the old man with the chickens whose cackles sounded like giggles or moans. Three short, one long reached out to her supervisor, Captain Adams, and his icy wife.

Two long rings, three short.

Helen hesitantly moved toward the phone. It sat upon a small table next to the window overlooking the unused canning shed, set in a field sleepy with wet weeds splayed against the ground like closed eyelashes. Licorice rope phone lines stretched toward the farmhouse. Four birds convened on the line, silhouetted by the outdoor lights she'd had installed for safety.

Two long rings, three short.

One bird cocked his head and looked directly at her. *Are you going to answer?*

Helen reached for the receiver. "Hello?"

"Hello. Is this Mrs. Helen Devries?" a lady's voice queried, her tone undergirded by strain and slightly nasal, as if spoken by someone who'd been crying. "The wife of Lieutenant Bob Devries?"

"Yes, this is Mrs. Helen Devries."

"I am sorry to bother you at this hour. I am Choi Eunhee. Wife of Chief James Roy."

Helen shuffled through her memories. "Hello, Mrs. Roy. Am I right to think that your husband served with my husband?"

"Yes. In South Korea, where I am from and where we married. My husband told me that he served many years

with your husband and that if I were ever in trouble, I should contact him, as he would help me.”

Helen’s fatigue lifted and the sound of the news in the background faded. “Are you in trouble?”

“Yes.”

Helen steadied herself. “I’m honored that Chief Roy thinks so highly of my husband. But my husband can’t help you. He was killed two years ago.”

“My husband is also dead.” Silence bled into the white space of the moment, and then she continued, “They whisper that I helped kill him. That I might help kill them, too.”

A gasp wheezed across the party line. Helen lit a cigarette to calm herself. After inhaling and then resting it on a hammered silver ashtray, she said, “Our phones out here are all on party lines. There is the possibility that others are listening.”

“Ah. I see.” Distress colored Mrs. Roy’s voice.

A moment elapsed before Helen spoke again. “How can I help?” Bob would want her to help the wife of his old friend and comrade.

“Could we speak in private?”

Helen nudged the cigarette and a long pencil of ash fell freely into the tray before she put the hotter, shortened smoke to her lips. She could certainly offer advice, comfort, and occasional companionship as the widow made her way through the system. Maybe Helen would invite her for coffee and to chat once in a while until Mrs. Roy left the base for good, as most widows did.

Unless Choi Eunhee was detained, of course, for involvement in her husband's death.

"Yes, we can do that. I'll help however I can." Even as she said it, Helen sensed she'd committed to something far deeper than coffee and companionship.

Mrs. Roy told her where she was currently living—on base, in a tiny compound with other enlisted personnel and their wives with little privacy and no car—so they agreed Helen would pick her up the next day and bring her to her home.

After Mrs. Roy hung up, Helen stayed on the line for a moment, listening. A baby cried. A rough male voice barked, "Foreigners!" followed by an abrupt click. A third line was set down gently, as if to deceive.

As Helen set the heavy receiver atop the black rotary dial and looked out the window, the last bird lifted from the licorice line and flew into the night.

* * *

The morning kettle sang, and when Helen added water to the Folger's in her mug, the crystals dissolved into the magic black water that would power her through her shift.

Locking up, she headed for Bob's car.

It's not Bob's car, she reminded herself. It's your car now. Your house. Your land.

On the way to work, she passed the complaining chickens and the old man tending to them with a bucket of food scraps. He looked up but didn't wave.

Twenty minutes later, Helen was in Oak Harbor, pulling through security and parking just outside the hospital that served the Navy. Truly, except for small maternity “hospitals” run by owner-nurses and midwives, there was little medical care on the entire island, and she knew she was lucky to have her job. She couldn’t bring herself to work at the maternity hospitals, nurturing women about to have the beautiful babies Helen longed for. *Empty womb, yearning heart.*

Once parked, Helen grabbed her purse and made sure her nurse’s cap and pin were straight. As she headed toward the building, someone got out of a parked car near her. “Mrs. Devries?”

Helen turned. Oh, dear, it was the boss’s wife. “Hello, Mrs. Adams. I’m surprised to see you here. Visiting the captain?” Even as she asked, Helen knew it was not very likely. Mrs. Adams only showed up to meddle.

“Oh, you know. I like to make sure things stay straight and true.” Mrs. Adams’s dark hair was fashionably styled to look like Elizabeth Taylor’s, but her eyes were brown, not violet blue, and rimmed with dull shadows. “Keeping busy?”

Helen resisted the urge to look at her wristwatch. She was going to be late. “Yes, of course. The hospital takes much of my time.”

“I’m sure.” Mrs. Adams smiled tightly. “You must have friends over for coffee or luncheons as well. Or after work.”

Was she fishing for an invitation?

Helen shook her head. “Not often.”

Mrs. Adams’s face grew firm, and her pancake makeup

creased but did not relax when her smile fled. “This is a Navy town—and a Navy hospital—and we must remain within naval protocol. Officers’ wives don’t fraternize.”

Three short, one long was the Adams’s ring code, not two long, three short. But etiquette was apparently for those beneath her, and eavesdropping was okay. Mrs. Adams had heard Helen invite Chief Roy’s wife—an enlisted man’s wife—to her home.

As Helen nodded curtly, Mrs. Adams reached into her patent handbag, withdrew a poodle key chain, and then drove away. Apparently the only purpose of this trip had been to ambush Helen.

Helen bustled in the hospital corridors as the lone civilian nurse at Naval Air Station Whidbey Island, caring for Naval personnel and their dependents in a way no one had been able to do for her husband as he met his icy death. Broken bones and bandages. Between Helen, the physicians she helped, the Navy nurse, and the corpsmen who worked with them, there were busy days but filled with care, camaraderie, and mutual respect.

After her shift, Helen started the lido-green Buick Skylark, its top as smooth and white as a bald eagle, and drove to pick up Mrs. Roy. Sure enough, she stood outside in the rain, the only Asian lady in sight. Her face looked drawn and tired, confused, as Helen’s had been in the months after Bob’s death.

“Mrs. Roy?” She rolled down the window. “I’m Mrs. Devries.” She reached across the bench and opened the door from the inside. “Please call me Helen.”

The woman settled herself on the bench, and Helen started the car.

“Please call me Eunhee,” the woman said.

“Not Choi Eunhee?”

“Choi is my surname, and Eunhee is my first name. In Korea women do not, traditionally, take their husbands’ surnames. When Korean women marry American men, they follow the American custom. So here I will be known as Mrs. Roy, though I feel like Choi Eunhee still.”

“Eunhee it is. We’ll be at my home in a few minutes. You can tell me your story, and we can find a way to help you.”

They remained awkwardly silent for the remaining ten minutes’ drive. When they pulled up, Eunhee said, “What a nice house! And a nice garden—well . . .” She glanced at the bramble and bush and tumble and weeds. The roses on the arbor struggled to emerge from clouds of dead foliage hanging on from years past. “Could be someday, anyway.”

Helen laughed out loud. “Yes, it needs some work. I don’t know how to garden. I’d planned to learn with Bob—Lieutenant Devries—but then . . .”

Eunhee patted the back of Helen’s hand. “I understand. I understand, like most people do not.”

In that instant, they became friends.

They walked through the kitchen and into the living room. “Please,” Helen encouraged. “Make yourself comfortable in any chair and then tell me what happened.”

“We have been here for about eight months,” Eunhee said. “Coming from the base in Korea. My husband shared

many stories of your husband and what a good man he is. Was. And said if I needed help, I should ask him. I did know that your husband—I am very sorry—died in a training accident.” She looked at Helen with compassion through tired eyes. “But when trouble arrived, I had no one else to call.”

Helen leaned forward reassuringly. “What trouble?”

“My husband, Chief James Roy, died.”

Helen nodded and let her continue.

“He died of the flu in the field hospital on base,” she continued. “I buried him at Sunnyside Cemetery three days later.”

There had been a huge, but waning, outbreak of the Asian flu on base. The sick were isolated in field hospitals three stories high because of their sheer number and to protect them from transmitting the virus to others, though it had quickly spread, and several men had died. “I’m terribly sorry to hear of this loss, but how can people blame you . . . say you helped to kill him?”

Eunhee shrugged. “I am Korean. This flu is called the Asian flu. So when people get sick, they blame Asian persons. I am not sick. I have not been to Korea for eight months. But still, they whisper and point and speak rudely, accusing me.”

Helen reached out and cupped Eunhee’s hand. “I am very sorry. You have lost your husband, and now you are told you are to blame by awful, ill-informed people.”

She nodded. “I am supposed to have thirty days more to move off of base after my husband’s death, but the people

at my housing want me to leave now so they do not catch it from me. I have looked for apartments to stay in until I can return to my home—Korea—but there is nothing. This is why I have called you. Can you help me find an apartment until I can return to my parents in a month or two?”

“Have you called any apartments in Oak Harbor?”

“Yes, as many as I can. I do not have a car and cannot drive anyway, so I took the bus and then walked. I thought maybe you might know someone who could help.”

“Have you asked the chaplain?”

“He says he cannot help me.”

He says. Eunhee was too polite to say it aloud, but she clearly did not believe that he was willing to help.

“May I use your bathroom?” Eunhee smiled through her fatigue.

“Oh yes!” Helen showed her the way and then returned to the living room. How could she help? Did she know anyone to contact? Not really. She’d been out of touch with the military while finishing up nursing school, and it was, after all, only Bob’s hero’s death status and his passing friendship with Captain Adams that had allowed Helen to get her job on base.

She suddenly realized that nearly ten minutes had gone by, but Eunhee had not returned. She got up and headed toward the bathroom but found her, instead, admiring the sewing machine in the teal bedroom.

“You sew?” Eunhee asked.

Helen laughed. “No, my mother wanted me to, but I was

never very good. I can sew up a wound if required, though. Do you sew?"

"Oh yes," Eunhee said. She swayed a little, and her face looked pale.

Feverish . . . flu? Helen could hardly touch her forehead to check. "Here, sit down on the bed," she said, nurse kicking in. She, of anyone, knew the strain a new widow felt, and she had not been accused of contributing to Bob's death. "Let me make a sandwich for you, and I'll bring it in." A few minutes later, she brought a tuna sandwich into the room. Eunhee stood but once again swayed a bit.

"No need to stand up. Just eat it right here." Helen patted the bed. "My husband spoke fondly of your husband. He admired him and counted him as a friend. He told me Chief always had a song for the day, and the entire crew would sing it on the plane during the long hours of surveillance."

At that, Eunhee smiled. "He was always singing. Even Elvis. I noticed you have his records in the living room."

"I do." Helen smiled back.

"He sang a song at our wedding. We met at a Christian mixer in Korea—I was working on base as a translator. We both loved music, and he was so funny and not afraid to show his emotions or tell me that he loved me. He told me I was smarter than he was, and I could do anything. So I tried to! And then—well, 'Que Será, Será,'" she said. "That was the year Doris Day sang it." She looked sad again. "'The future's not ours to see'—just God's. Between duty and illness, we did not have much time together before James died."

Hmm. If God saw the future, it seemed problematic that he didn't head off some of the troubles at the pass. Helen tried to focus on something more positive. "I admire that you are fluent in two languages."

"Three. Japanese as well, and I have a degree from the Ewha Womans University." Eunhee smoothly changed the topic. "How did you meet the lieutenant?"

"We met at a mixer when he was stationed in Virginia and I was in nursing school. When I told them I planned to leave school before finishing, to marry him and follow him to his duty stations, my parents grew furious." *My father tried to hit me again, but I left before he could*, she thought but didn't say. "They told me to leave their home, and so we eloped immediately. Years later, when he died, they told me I'd made my bed," Helen said, smoothing the covers on the bed between them, "and now I'd need to lie in it." She smoothed the bed once more, comforted by the feeling of the fabric under her fingers, though the coverlet was already completely flat. "So now I make my own beds in my own home, and no one can tell me to leave."

"I see. They were angry you left your schooling?"

"Partly. Mostly Mother was angry that I wasn't going to be around any longer to help her around the house while she spent time with her girlfriends, her charity events, or her evenings out. She'd always relied on me to help—and I always did." *And to be the receptacle for my father's temper so she wouldn't have to.*

"After we were posted to Whidbey, I fell in love a second

time, with this homey farmhouse and its neglected victory garden. Bob said yes to buying it because we planned to return to Whidbey Island after his final years in the Navy.” Helen caught sight of his picture on the mantel and looked into eyes that could no longer look back at her. “We didn’t know his final year was already close at hand.”

Helen saw that her new friend’s face looked heavy and tired. Maybe she’d just ask her to spend the night. And then Helen thought . . . why not? Maybe she’d just like to stay here.

Mrs. Adams’s sharp warning against fraternization buzzed across Helen’s mind.

Helen wasn’t married to an active-duty officer anymore, but she worked at a Naval hospital at the goodwill and pleasure of Mrs. Adams’s husband, the hospital CO, a Navy regs man through and through. In the short time until Eunhee, an enlisted man’s wife, could get back home to Korea, no one needed to be made aware of this “fraternization” between the ranks.

Looking at Eunhee’s wan face, Helen realized another risk—bringing the flu into the hospital. Was Eunhee sick? If so, Helen could catch it and share it with her patients. A wave of fear came over her but she let it roll through her and then out. There was no indication Eunhee was ill, and she was not going to fall into the trap of the woman’s other accusers. “Would you like to stay with me?” Helen asked.

“Oh, I did not bring a travel case or toothbrush. Although that is very kind.”

“I don’t just mean tonight. I mean until you can complete your arrangements to return to Korea in a month or two.”

Eunhee stood up. “Oh. I see. That was not my intention when I asked you for help. I’m very sorry if you thought so.”

Helen patted the bed next to her. “I know that wasn’t your intention. You’ll be safe here. And it’s as much for me as for you. I’m lonely. Besides, someone has to use that sewing machine.”

Eunhee closed her eyes for a moment. Was she sleeping? Praying? If she was praying, it would be helpful to pray that neither she nor Helen caught the flu and that Mrs. Adams minded her own business.

“Yes,” Eunhee said. “I would be very thankful to stay with you for a short while. And I can teach you how to garden.”