

Forcing the Hand of God



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Book Publishers Network
P.O. Box 2256
Bothell • WA • 98041
PH • 425-483-3040

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10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Printed in the United States of America

LCCN
ISBN10
ISBN13

Cover: Laura Zugzda
Typographer: Stephanie Martindale

DEDICATION

I haven't always had a computer to facilitate the mechanical aspects of writing; however, I have had people in my life that made writing worthwhile by their love and support for my endeavors.

Particularly for the flying aspects of this book, I would like to thank my mentors and flight instructors, Col. Jack Hayes and Larry Vogel, as well as all of the aviators from Queen City Aviation. Jack Hayes read the very first drafts and consulted on the accuracy of the flight maneuvers, as well as executing the aerial maneuvers during our flying lessons.

I would like to thank Bob Jarvis, the trainer at Hillman City Boxing Gym, for allowing me to interview boxers and putting me in the ring to spar, do the warm-ups and actually get the movements down accurately for the Golden Gloves' scenes. This was in 1982, before 'girls' were allowed in the ring, and I appreciated just getting in the door of the Hillman Gym, let alone the time and effort all of the guys put forth on my behalf.

And there are those whom I cannot fully express the heartfelt gratitude that I have for the unswerving faith in me that I did not always have in myself: Debbie, Stephanie, Patti, Stephany, my brother Stan and my husband Norm, daughter Brandy, my mother and JoAnn Woodward-Mercer.

Thank you.

CHAPTER

11

Fate, thought Rodger, has a justice all her own. The last air raid had damaged their quarters and makeshift hangar. He would tell Mary Elizabeth all about it, sparing none of the details, and she would have to understand; she should be glad he got her out of there.

Rodger walked unannounced into the convent. He approached Sister Grace, her back to him, furiously sweeping the hallway. Before he could speak, she turned and shrieked.

Rodger met her uncompromising glare with a shrug. "I didn't mean to scare you. I came to see Mary Elizabeth."

"Come with me, honorable Major," Sister Grace flicked the broom as if to whisk him away. "I will show you to LinChing and Father McBride."

The other nun, Sister Pearl, stood by the kitchen door, facing the garden. Rodger nodded to her, making a sober face behind Sister Grace's back. Sister Pearl suppressed a sad, little smile.

Father McBride and LinChing were seated in chairs under the litchi tree in the garden. As Rodger approached, a silence, like a shroud, enveloped them. Even the birds and insects were quiet. Leaves, overturned by the breeze, moved soundlessly, and

the roving clouds blocked the sultry sun's ray, casting a darkened shadow over the small group. The nuns excused themselves and with rustling habits, disappeared inside the mission.

Rodger sensed chaos beneath the calm appearances. He eyed LinChing, then Father McBride, who waved to an empty chair.

"We have a very serious problem, Major. Mary Elizabeth refuses food and water. Sister Pearl has forced some mush down her throat, but all our efforts are futile. She won't speak to anyone—just sits staring or rocking back and forth."

Father McBride, aged and beaten by circumstances, shook his head. "LinChing feels he must stay with her."

Rodger remained standing. "No." He looked directly at LinChing, bolt upright, his breath audible, sitting with his hands clasped in his lap. "I've got to have you back to repair our planes." Rodger wiped away sweat beading along his forehead. He stepped closer to LinChing, maintaining eye contact. "I've got paperwork in the mill now to get you and Mary Elizabeth to the states, but it won't be for a couple of months. We're without a decent mechanic at Bose, and I can't let you stay here."

LinChing blinked but did not say anything. Frustrated, Rodger paced.

"Look, we're only forty-five minutes from here now. You can come back every night if it'll help. Anyway," Rodger swiveled in the direction of Mary Elizabeth's room, "let me talk to her."

LinChing would not reply. With a sigh of resignation, Father McBride gave his tacit approval with a wave in the direction of Mary Elizabeth's room.

Rodger shoved the mission door open and strode down the hall to her room. At the door he paused, patting the pocket where he had put her present from Jimmy. He took off his hat and stepped softly inside. He stood rigid, shocked by her thinness and lifelessness. It seemed that he had been sucked into a void, into the vast and incomprehensible hell she had succumbed.

He watched her for a long time before he went over and knelt beside the cot, alarmed by her fragility. He placed his hat by her pillow where sunlight streamed down from the window, illuminating half of the bed. Mary Elizabeth huddled in the dark corner. "Listen, we had to move the base because it got blown up." He swallowed hard, willing a steadiness in his voice. "Seven men died." He made himself reach out and touch her thin arm, took a deep breath and kept his voice low. "God, I'm so thankful you were here. We're up at Bose now, real close."

She did not move. He leaned over close to her ear. "I brought you something from Jimmy."

He took from his front pocket a travel-size comb, brush and mirror. "Here, Bright Eyes, look at yourself in this mirror. See how pretty you are?"

He angled the mirror and caught her reflection but she did not so much as blink. He wiggled the mirror shooting rainbows around them. He rattled the comb and brush in his other hand, but nothing he did caught her attention. He stopped his frantic motions, placing each item side by side at the end of the mattress near her feet. He walked to the opposite end of the room and leaned against the wall with his arms folded across his chest.

He considered what to do. With pounding steps, he went over and scooped her up, as best he could manage her awkward form. He thought of the night he held her as she grieved for the dead airman, Buck. She did not relax as he held her but remained in a tight, curled ball with jutting elbows.

He plopped down upon the mattress and his hat slid to the floor, as the mirror, comb and brush tattooed onto the floor. "Remember I told you about Ada? Well, the next transport out, you're going to the States. You and your father. To the same town I was born and raised in. Wilmington. You'll meet my sisters and have new dresses and lots of dolls. Ada will take good care of you, and I know you'll love her. Just like me. I love her. She'll know how

to take care of a little girl. Your father'll get a job so that you two can live like decent people and not like animals."

He tried to hold onto to her, hoping to bring her back to him. But though she did not move, barely it seemed breathed at all, she slipped away from him.

He heard his words getting louder, echoing with desperation. "The Japs wasted us, Bright Eyes. They cleaned us out. But you know what? Your doll didn't get a scratch on her. We still have her with us. You can come see us."

Gently, he eased her on the mattress. She began to rock back and forth. He grabbed her shoulders, but stopped himself from shaking her. This nonsense had to stop, now. He eased his grip, whispering harshly, "Hell, you think it's all fun and games? You don't think I care about you, your feelings? No! I only care about you living or dying. God damn it, Mary Elizabeth!"

He softened his voice. "I know how you feel. But I didn't desert you. In the long run, things'll work out for you and your father. Trust me."

He let go of her. She continued to rock back and forth. He snatched his hat off the floor on his way out of the room and smacked the door shut.

Sister Grace walked down the corridor towards him. He stopped her with a hand on her arm. "Do you bathe her? Will you feed her and take care of her like..." he faltered, "...like she is now?"

Sister Grace nodded. Rodger dropped his hand and she left him standing alone by the door. He stared a long time at the closed door before walking away. Once outside, sunlight blinded him, bleaching the trees, plants and walkway. He fumbled in his shirt pocket until he found his sunglasses. As he scanned the garden looking for LinChing, he recognized the rattling cries of pheasants and twittering of finches. He scattered a swarm of insects, batting a path to where LinChing knelt weeding.

LinChing stood and dusted the dirt from his hands and pantaloons. He faced Rodger squarely and met his gaze as Rodger

spoke. "Listen, there's no way for me to justify your being here. You have to earn your keep. The only way Mary Elizabeth can stay here, where she is safe, is for you to come back to the base and work. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Major." LinChing replied curtly.

"All right, then. We'll leave in a couple of hours." He turned back to the mission, re-entering the side door.

Rodger came to Father McBride's door and rapped softly.

"Enter."

Father McBride stood staring out the window, his hands clasped behind his back. Over the priest's shoulder, Rodger glimpsed the countryside and thought of simpler days, wishing he could mount a good, swift steed to race along paths going nowhere in particular. Just somewhere.

Father McBride turned to face Rodger, unwinding an arm to point at the chessboard. "Are you game?"

"Sure. I could use a good match."

Father McBride sat heavily into a chair. Rodger pulled another chair up to the table.

"I'm expecting news any day now from stateside about immigration papers for Mary Elizabeth and LinChing."

"I'm not sure you are doing the best thing for LinChing. You're forgetting how it must be for him to leave his homeland."

"Look, I've got troubles enough. I don't want LinChing to leave. He's the best mechanic within a thousand miles, and I need him, at least until his replacement gets here. I went through hell to get a new mechanic. And now, Washington's trying to break us up." Rodger let Father McBride take his knight. "You've no idea what it's like trying to play mother and God to a bunch of hot-headed pilots."

"Indeed." Father McBride laced his fingers together, peeking over the rim of his glasses. "Perhaps, Major, you ought to let God be God and man be man." He pushed his knight back to

the original square and contemplated his move some more. "After all, you can't force the hand of God."

"I sure as hell can try."

As Father McBride moved into checkmate, Rodger leaned back in the chair. The game was over in thirty-three moves. Father McBride slapped his thighs and stood, pushing his chair away. He went to the bookshelf and snagged a large, black, leather-bound book down from the second shelf. He splayed it open and handed it to Rodger, pointing to the middle paragraph on page 47. "Our first game. Played in London in 1851. Right here, 'The Immortal Game.'"

"Interesting." Rodger compressed a smile. "Good bedtime reading." He snapped the book shut and placed it on the desk. "Listen, doesn't LinChing have any relatives around here?"

Father McBride rubbed his chin. "Yes, I believe Mary Elizabeth's mother came here with her sister and brother-in-law. They, too, were missionaries somewhere across the mountains. I think I may even have met Tobias, once."

"All the people would have been evacuated from that side of the mountains by now. Probably to Tenchong or Binyang." Rodger ran a finger along the spine of the book. "Can you get in touch with them? Maybe some kind of connection to her past would bring her out of..." Rodger waved behind him, "...of that."

"I'll make inquiries, Major." Father McBride pulled out a cigar for himself and offered one to Rodger.

Rodger leaned forward, accepting the cigar. "I've got something for you. Besides extra provisions." He scooted the chair back, rose, and left with a nod to Father McBride. He returned cradling a bottle of scotch.

He presented Father McBride the bottle of Haig & Haig Five Star Blend. "Sometimes it works out that the loser takes all."

The older man gazed lovingly at the bottle. "Join me?" he asked, turning to reach inside a cabinet for glasses.

“No, I’m going to collect LinChing and head out.” He paused at the door. “I told him that I couldn’t justify Mary Elizabeth staying here if he didn’t return with us and work on the planes. Maybe if you told him you would try to find Mary Elizabeth’s aunt, it would be of some consolation.”

“Certainly, Major. I’ll speak to him right away.”

Rodger smoked and paced beside the jeep as he waited for LinChing. After nearly half an hour, LinChing emerged with his few belongings wrapped in a new Army blanket. Without a word to Rodger, he climbed into the passenger’s seat.

Neither man spoke to the other on the ride back to the base. When they came into the new barracks, Rodger pointed to the hangar.

“Better’n the last shack, huh?”

LinChing simply nodded, and as the jeep slowed to a stop, he hopped out. Along the far side of the hangar a dozen or more coolies squatted, smoking opium pipes. LinChing walked passed them without any acknowledgment and through the gaping door to examine the interior of the hangar. Rodger followed, going on to his office where he poured himself a cup of thick, day-old coffee. He sat down at a long table with maps and a flight slide rule. A few minutes later, Will sauntered through the door with Steve and the Canadian pilot Raftly trailing in with two other pilots.

“You guys, come here.” Rodger placed his index finger on a target zone on the map in front of him. “We’ll brief at 0530.”

Raftly grunted, stuffing his goggles inside his shirt pocket. Steve and Will nodded in the direction of the canteen, and the men left as a group.

When LinChing came in from the hangar, Rodger stopped him before he could slip into a bunk. “Are we airworthy?”

“Yes. All six.”

“Listen, tomorrow after we’re all in from the sortie, I’ll take you back to see Mary Elizabeth.”

LinChing nodded.

“The next transport that comes in will bring your replacement. You and Bright Eyes are going to the States.” Rodger slapped his chipped coffee mug down. “The land of milk and honey.”

“Not my home, Major.”

“I know. But right now, you’re a man without land or people, LinChing. It’s the best chance for the both of you to have some sort of life.”

“Will replacement parts come for the P-40?”

“Yeah, day after tomorrow.”

LinChing walked away. Rodger muttered under his breath, “Thank you, too.”

He and his men were eager to be airborne early the next morning. Rodger waved away the two ground men, then slid the canopy shut on roll-out.

The hum of his P-40 Warhawk and the other P-38 Tomahawk engines was a song he could harmonize with, letting his mind and body flow in rhythm. His company flew in syncopated camaraderie. Approaching the French-Indochina border, the flight swooped down. Rodger led as he and his men strafed the ground. Trucks, jeeps and machines scrambled for cover. Guns popped.

The ground lit up in bursts of fiery explosions, like candles on a huge cake. Another pass and in unison, they pulled away and headed for home base.

Then six Nates dropped on them.

Rodger and his wingman broke away. They had two strikes right away; Will and Steve pounced on a Zero and sent it flaming downward. Rodger caught the lead plane and pumped ammo until the plane exploded in midair. Debris flew across the sky, slicing into one of its own Nates like a huge razor, forcing the crippled plane to leave the flock.

Rodger regrouped in the air with his men. McGree’s voice broke the radio silence.

“All accounted for.”

They headed for home base. Near the airfield, the air churned with black smoke, streaked with colors of orange and violet. Swooping for a low overpass, Rodger watched in horrified fascination as the last fuel can burst into flaming pieces. The landing strip had been strafed.

“Take it easy, guys, it’s going to be a tough landing.” A chill zipped his spine at the sight of the devastation.

They all made it safely into the revetments. The prop still churned as Rodger bounded off the wing and sprinted for the smoldering hangar. He recoiled from the acrid smell of burning rubber but forced himself forward, yanking the doors open and picking his way over the scattered parts. Then he spotted the dark form of LinChing.

The mechanic lay limp and unconscious. Blood streamed in rivulets over his eyes, down his cheeks. Little drops of blood plopped onto the ground.

“Medic’s kit!” Rodger screamed. With one quick, unthinking motion, he plucked a piece of shrapnel lodged over the man’s eyebrow.

LinChing winced. The unlocked medic’s kit dropped beside him. Rodger jerked out a wad of gauze and stuffed it into the gash, yelling to Raftly.

“Bring that board. Get the jeep as close to the door as possible.”

Rodger and Raftly hefted the board sideways across the back of the jeep. McGree drove while Raftly and Rodger rode beside LinChing. Rodger pressed his body against the hardness of the wood to stay the jiggling. McGree cursed at dogs and people that moved or got in his way. The gauze grew warm and spongy beneath Rodger’s hand. It took three hours before they arrived at the hospital in Nanning. All three of them maneuvered the makeshift stretcher through the hospital doors and into the emergency room.

Rodger, McGree and Raftly sat silent in a waiting room where the stench of infected flesh and antiseptic wafted through the netting covering rows of wounded. Raftly, nicknamed Dragonman, sat hunched over, puffing on a cigarette, smoky billows pouring from his cheeks.

The head nurse beckoned Rodger. "Major! Your friend is going to live, but he lost a lot of blood. And most likely lost his sight. We've done all we can for him. Anyway," she paused, directed the orderlies, then turned to look at Rodger, "you'll have to find someplace where he can have complete rest until scar tissue forms."

"Does he ... know he's blind?"

"I expect he will when he regains consciousness. They usually do."

Rodger felt a wave of nausea. "How soon can he be moved?"

"Tonight."

"But he can't be in any shape to be moved tonight!" Rodger protested.

The nurse cut him short. "I don't run the war, mister. I just try to patch 'em up and send 'em out again."

"That's a helluva note, lady."

She started moving toward the door. "I have no more time for you, Major. Move your men out."

With a wave of his hand, he directed Raftly and McGree to the stretcher. "We'll take him to Father McBride."

They loaded the stretcher with LinChing into the jeep, careful to keep it steady. Rodger sat once again beside LinChing as Raftly edged into the front seat next to McGree.

McGree drove without a curse word, and the Dragonman stared listlessly ahead, only the slight flick of ash from a cigarette showing any movement. The closeness of the warm night air was comforting during the two hour drive back. The mission was dark and quiet. Rodger leaped from the jeep and pounded on the door.

Father McBride appeared, the door ajar. Behind him were the nuns with arms outstretched, holding lamps that covered their faces.

“Father, LinChing has been seriously wounded. The hospital had no room for him, so I had to bring him here.”

Father McBride turned and shoed the nuns away with orders in Chinese. He waved to Rodger. “Bring him! Bring him! Follow me.”

Rodger motioned to McGree and Raftly to bring the stretcher. Father McBride rustling in his loose Chinese pants, the nuns swishing about in their habits, and the padding of careful footsteps were the only sounds down the hallway. Rodger waited as the others went on. He pushed Mary Elizabeth’s door open and stepped inside her room. She lay on the mattress, pressed into herself and rocking, rocking.

“Now, goddamn it, you listen to me, Mary Elizabeth,” he whispered harshly, “your father is wounded, badly. He’s blind. Blind!” He squatted beside her, smoothed back her hair, and tried to reason with her. “He’s here, next door. He needs you. Do you hear me? You can be the eyes he doesn’t have!”

He reached out and pressed her shoulder, staying her incessant movement. “We’re just poor bastards trying to win a war that no one wants to fight. You’re not the only one hurt by it.”

With both hands he cupped her face, bringing her closer to him. “We’re all lost in our own way. It’s not just you. We all are.”

She did not open her eyes, but she lay still. Rodger listened to her breathing and the thrumming of his heart then kissed her forehead before he stood upright. “I’ll be back next week.”

He closed the door with a resounding bang and leaned against it, whispering, “Please, God, give us all a break.”

Father McBride hurried down the hall. “Major, LinChing is resting, and we’ll see that his wounds are dressed. We’ll do the best we can for LinChing.”

McGree and Raftly trailed behind the priest. Sister Grace eased out of the room, made the sign of the cross, and disappeared into another room.

“I’ll be back.” Rodger threw out his hand. “Thanks, Father.”

Father McBride gripped it and held it. “I’ve contacted the mission and expect to hear shortly about Mary Elizabeth’s aunt and uncle. I’ve sent word for them to come and visit us.”

“Does she know?” Rodger called out, gesturing at Mary Elizabeth’s direction as he and his men loaded into the jeep. He could see Father McBride in the dimly lit doorway, smiling faintly, nodding his head.

Back at their base in less than an hour and put down for the night, Rodger dropped into fitful sleep. Visions of grotesque, bloodied faces with gaping, toothless mouths made him bolt upright of out sleep. He got up from his bunk and went outside to smoke a cigarette.

He walked over to his plane and ran his hand along the wing. He had done what he could for LinChing; he just hoped that Mary Elizabeth would come around. She would, he repeated breathing deeply, she would. For the next few days, he would make himself forget them, trusting Father McBride, the nuns, and God would take care of Mary Elizabeth and her father.

Five days later, immigration papers for LinChing and Mary Elizabeth came in with the transport, hand-carried by the new, eager mechanic. So did the spare tire for his plane and a P-38 carburetor.

Maybe this would auger a lucky break for them. With the packet of official papers and passports, Rodger climbed into his jeep and set out for the mission, whistling as loud as he could.