



CALL TO
Love

MARY A.
FELKINS

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Dedication

I can stare at a blank screen to begin an entire manuscript with far less struggle than a simple dedication. But, basically, apart from the limitless Creator, God, none of this story was possible.

To Him to be glory!

This book is for my husband, Bruce, who has continued to champion my dream ever since the day I announced, "I'm going to write a book."

To the treasures I'm privileged to call my children, Anthony, Alexandra, Jonathan and Caroline—

Thank you for cheering me on to the happily ever after. May your own dreams be bold and may your faith take you there. I owe each of you some focused, quality time...without daydreaming about my next novel.

Acknowledgements

To my daughter Alexandra, a horse enthusiast and former equestrian. Her knowledge and experience helped me create the scenes at Phillip Emmett's place. She's why I appreciate what an animal's unconditional love does for a girl's heart. I love you!

To my Jesus-loving, rock star Pastor, Paul Cummings, and his wife—and my friend—Danielle. In tandem with those days when I questioned the madness of spending hours with imaginary people, God would prompt him to send an affirming text like, 'You are Jesus' pen. Keep doing what you're doing.' And I'd carry on. Love and appreciate you both!

To the women's prayer group at Corinth Reformed Church, Hickory, North Carolina. Each week, these intercessory prayer warriors break through the gravitational pull of the atmosphere into God's orbit with their petitions. Thank you for lifting this manuscript up to the care of the Lord. I'm honored to join the prayer circle with you.

Writing support~

To Rachel Hauck and Susan May Warren, My Book Therapy online coaches and Deep Thinker's Retreat (DTR) hosts. They form an amazing author power team with scads of awards to prove it. This debut has their fingerprints of plot/scene genius throughout. And to author Beth Vogt who listened intently to my initial story idea at DTR, 2014, and prayed for me. You brought calm to the storm of fear.

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Law enforcement~

The men and women of law enforcement encounter the one percent of the population I won't likely ever see or know about unless it hits the media. While the awards night in *Call to Love* is fictional, it shouldn't be. Although your many acts of service and heroism go unrecognized, be assured, God sees and knows each of them. Holding fast to a promise I made during a twelve-week Citizen Police Academy (CPA) training at Hickory Police Department (HPD), I offer up a prayer at every siren wail. Because it could be someone's last shift.

Throughout the writing of this book, several officers fielded my questions, no matter how random and varied.

In no particular order, thanks go to...

Officer Joanna Smith Moore who first recommended *I Love a Cop*, an incredible resource for law enforcement families. She added a valuable perspective on the realities of police work. Along with her husband, HPD K9 Officer

Jeremy Moore, she juggles a passel of four young children, none of whom stand a chance of getting into trouble with the law. Can I get an amen?

Sergeant Keith Yoder. Like my hero, some are born to serve, protect, and tote a firearm. In or out of uniform, Keith is never off duty. He's one of the reasons CPA was richly informative. And to his wife, Joann, who agreed to let me interview her and, as a result, has become a very dear and supportive friend.

Master Police Officer, Shanna Hudson. After responding to a call for service in reference to a noise disturbance complaint during my son's backyard birthday party, I took advantage of having a cop at my front door and began to ask questions. Seriously. I. Did. She didn't hesitate to share her contact information and welcomed me to join her for the duration of two Saturday night CPA ride-a-longs. No matter how trivial, she's continued to respond to my law enforcement texts.

Lieutenant Scott Hildebrand. After first contact with HPD for research purposes, he invited me and my husband over to headquarters for a tour and sat with us as I fired off questions. No pun intended. Nor were any real shots fired. Months following, he continued to respond quickly and thoroughly to multiple questions ranging from, "Do you wear your uniform to work or dress at headquarters?" to "Tell me about schedule II narcotics and special ops team."

Anthony Walker, recently retired HPD Master Police School Resource Officer. When I first met him, he was a road guy working night shift. During my third and final CPA ride-a-long, he explained policies and procedures, issued tickets where earned, kept a vigilant eye on our surroundings, and demonstrated how quickly a cruiser can respond to an urgent Code 3 call for service referencing a potential crime scene. The integrity he demonstrated to the citizens and students he served is why I considered him a ten-foot cop.

Sergeant Randy Isenhour, HPD Special Ops

Commander. There's nothing finer than to have a well-trained sniper volunteer his time at the outset of a Friday evening shift to demonstrate gun safety on my front porch. When my daughter returned home with her date, both wild eyed adolescents were greatly relieved to know mom was merely gathering research. Despite being a busy cop, husband, and father, he took time to review a shooting scene, boldly asserting the mantra, "We fight to win." Good to know!

Retired HPD Police Chief, Tom Adkins. I never met a 'Tom' I didn't like. He's no exception. And to current Chief of Police, Thurman Whisnant. Thank you both for years of faithful service, an unashamed love of God, and for answering the call to police work.

Medical~

Dr. David Lowry, Chief Medical Officer, Caldwell UNC Health Care. Given a blessed mix of medical expertise and vivid imagination, I asked him to contribute ideas to create the near-fatal shooting scene, emergency intervention, and post-op recovery. Readers are sure to be breathless in wonder, "Will Tom survive?"

Barbara Van Wart, R.N. With an impressive thirty years of emergency nursing experience, her thorough scene review, noting proper emergency procedure and suggesting realistic and relevant dialogue, added critical elements to the story. She also doubles as an amazing big sister whose wise counsel spared me from marrying the wrong guy so that when the real prince charming came along, I had eyes to recognize him.

Becky Charpentier, R.N. Obstetrics Nurse. She graciously assisted with pregnancy time line and possible outcomes for a patient with placenta previa. When I told her I needed my heroine to be awake during an emergency C-section, her suggestions were invaluable.

Realty~

Linda Meares, Realtor/Broker, shared her knowledge regarding the sale of a house. Judging by how quickly she

initiated paper work for the sale of our own house, along with her investigative skills, attention to detail, and heart for service, she'd make a great cop.

Last, but never least, Jake Dye. This proud son of an equally proud Marine is the inspiration for "The Humility Score." On several occasions, he needed Mrs. Felkins to take him down a peg or two. Each year on his birthday he's awarded God's grace of a perfect ten. I'm thankful he still plays along. Because I'm still watching...

I saw heaven standing open and there before me was a white horse whose rider is called Faithful and True." Revelation 19:11

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Tracy Cassidy's life plan read like a doctor's script: wear lead apron over heart and manage affairs on own. If Plan A fails and pain persists, then, and only then, a shout-out to God would be considered. After all, life was a vapor.

Hungry as Tracy was following a twelve-hour shift in the emergency department, the area outside Joe's Hot Dog Shack needed to clear out *stat*. The command rose in her throat, but she reasoned that having to wait in line when hungry didn't justify an irritable disposition. Mom said it marred the beauty of biblical femininity.

The hot dog stand, the likes of a tiny, roofed house, sat square in the parking lot of a small shopping strip. Cars whizzed along Highway 127, the four-lane, divided road beside it. Burning tobacco wafted from the customer ahead and tinged the air like at those Atlantic league baseball games with her father. She pivoted toward a distant siren wail. Could be her brother Jack on patrol. Faithful to a family ritual, Tracy prayed, *Keep him safe. Always safe.*

Beneath summer's sun, Tracy's feet marinated

inside her neon pink tennis shoes. She slung her stethoscope behind her neck and inhaled the calming scent of Appalachian handcrafted rose and jasmine shea butter soap on her skin. A just-because gift from Mom, likely meant to dissuade Tracy's consideration of leaving her hometown of Laurelton.

An older couple sat at one of two pine picnic tables beside the food stand. A cheery yellow umbrella shaded them from the gauze of August heat.

Tracy peered at them over her shoulder. Their shoulders touched, eyes brightening like jewels.

The gentleman tucked strands of graying hair behind her ears. He reached a napkin to her mouth. "Marilyn, whadya say we get married?"

The woman angled her face away then returned his smile. "Oh, Wilburn. You've been proposing since our wedding day sixty years ago."

He cupped her cheek and kissed her lips. Trumpets sounded in Tracy's head and drew her thoughts to the unquenchable power of her parents' love. Their story could have looked the same. If it hadn't been for Dad's badge.

Tracy gazed across the sloping Catawba Valley foothills that rose into indigo waves of sculpted Appalachian Mountains. Artistic brushstrokes of white cloud streaked an azure blue, mid-afternoon sky. Summer would soon give way to the glory of fall with sugar maple leaves, a sheer radiance of golden yellow, amber, and ruby red. A metal street sign colored in patriotic shades and anchored in the fertile road verge along the main road boasted Laurelton as an All-America City winner.

Yanking her thoughts back to business, Tracy considered her options. "So, if Cheryl tells me I got the

promotion, I'm meant to stay in Laurelton and support Mom with Safe Shores Women's Rescue Mission. But if not, I've got that dream job opportunity as assistant manager at Duke Regional Medical Center in Durham." Sure tasted sweet. And she could forever darken the images of her fallen father that mocked her pain at every corner.

Her cell phone vibrated inside the pocket of her purple scrubs and disrupted the review of her carefully planned agenda. Another text from Robbie, Tracy's former high-school sweetheart turned gorgeous-and buff-pharmaceutical rep. They'd been dating for over eight months since he'd first called on Dr. Rainer at the hospital.

Where are you?

"Persistent man," she muttered.

Joe cupped a hand behind his ear. "Excuse me?"

Slipping the cell back into her pocket, Tracy advanced to the open, sliding glass window only to draw back at the pungent smell of chopped onion. She flapped her hand. "It's nothing."

Now, review agenda: quell hunger, return home by close of business day, and contact Joanna Graves in Human Resources at Duke Regional Medical Center. Then she'd figure a way to wrap her mind around trading the beauty of the mountains for a flat, granite landscape. Which was so not the picture of an All-America City. No matter. She'd make life work.

"What'll it be? Same?"

Hunger gripped her insides. "Actually, no. Could I have three hot dogs? Plain. And a large cup of ice water."

Joe, a burly, bearded man with a pencil propped behind one ear, thrust his head through the open

window. He pressed his palms against the metal counter, his eyes rounding. "Sheesh, three? And don't you mean a diet soda? Your usual?"

"Yes, three." She wagged a finger. "No soda. But thanks."

Turning to the grill, he pinched the hot dogs with metal tongs, stuffed them into buns, and wrapped them in foil. He plucked a plastic cup from the dispenser and filled it with the clink of ice. Water gurgled.

Tracy extended a five-dollar bill. "Keep the change."

Joe eyed it. "Change? You owe another buck, sweetie." He rolled his eyes to the green and red menu board. "I've increased my prices."

A weighty breath drifted from her lips, sending rebel strands of hair from her face. She set a guard over her mouth as she yanked a dollar from her wallet and forced a proper grin. Mom's wisdom again, minus the sugar-sweet 'thank you, kind sir.'

OK, so leaving Laurelton. Tracy ticked off a mental to-do list. The move meant selling her three-bedroom house, giving notice at the hospital, enduring a bittersweet parting from family and friends. And there was Cruiser, the white gelding, a treasured tenth birthday gift from Dad, sold to Phillip Emmet five years later. True, she'd long since buried her desire to ride after Dad's death. Along with her trust in God. But following a recent clandestine drive-by past Phillip's property, Tracy experienced a stirring in her soul. A beckoning.

Her phone vibrated again. She fished it from her pocket. Robbie, still persisting.

Call me. I love you.

No time to respond to his sappy pleading. She gathered her hot dogs and plopped onto the bench at an unoccupied picnic table. The printed lettering across the pale blue umbrella was barely visible. Rotating her ankles relieved the ache of swelling. She tucked a thumb inside her waistband and tugged it away from her abdomen. Moisture sluiced down her back. She sipped the soothing ice water then peeled the wrap from a hot dog and bit off the end. Taking out her phone, she set it on the warped oak plank and eyed it. *C'mon, Cheryl. Call. I need to plan my life here.*

At the Sherwood Forest ring tone, she fumbled with her phone and tapped the screen. "Hello?"

"You're alive. My next call was going to be the police. Why aren't you answering?"

"Robbie. Yeah, it's just that I'm waiting to hear from Cheryl."

"So how was your interview with her?"

"It went well. But listen, we'll talk...later, all right?"

"Sure. Love you, babe."

The L-word. "You, too."

Her phone rang again. She answered.

"Tracy? It's Cheryl. How are you?"

"Fine." No, not fine. *Stay, go, stay, go.* Anticipation pinged options back and forth inside her brain.

"Well, you know why I'm calling, so I'll get right to it. I've told you for several years your professionalism is above board, patient care outstanding, your compassion and quick-thinking skills are a huge asset to our trauma team."

"Thank you."

Oh, that annoying fake-cough when Cheryl struggled to state truth.

"Unfortunately, we won't be offering you the promotion at this time."

Tracy pressed her hand to her forehead, placed her elbow on the table, and exhaled. Calm thyself, Nightingale. Plan B, remember? "Who got it?"

"Sawyer—" Fake-cough again. "Davenport."

"Sawyer?" The insult nearly choked her speechless. "But I have far more experience than he does."

"It wasn't in my power to overrule. I fought for you. Honestly, I did."

Tugging at her waistband again, she considered the cost. "Even the hot dog man raised his prices," she muttered.

"The who?"

"Never mind." She slapped a hand on the table. "I'll manage."

"I know you will. You always do."

Growing cloud cover hid the sun, mirroring her confusion. Dumping Plan A, she considered the reality of Plan B. It held the promise of freedom. A flicker of hope, the thrill of a new start, steering the distance away from her hometown. Although sweetly saturated with Cassidy family memories, Laurelton remained Dad's law enforcement playground. Surely, Mom, a cop's widow, would understand that.

Tracy tapped a finger to her temple. Though still in the courting phase, that dream job in Durham awaited, the excuse—c'mon, now—the *reason* she needed.

An unexpected shadow hovered behind her. She jolted, nearly coughing up a bite of lukewarm hot dog. As a possessive arm snaked around her shoulders, a warm breath feathered her ear. "Hey, babe."

She twisted at the waist to see Robbie and cupped a hand to her mouth, swallowing indelicately. "You scared me," she reprimanded, catching his gaze.

Straddling the bench beside her, a cocky grin rose on Robbie's clean-shaven face. "Sorry, babe. I was headed to the medical center, saw your red sedan parked out here, and...Hey, where's my 'Hello, handsome' greeting?"

Who cared about those dreamy, amber eyes? Or that he was beyond dashing in his pressed khakis, blue button-down shirt, silk tie, and Italian leather shoes? OK, she did. And the captivating mint, vanilla, and cedar scent of his cologne. Did he have to smell so nice? *Stop it!*

Tracy patted her lips with a wadded napkin and returned a smile.

"Hear back from your boss yet?" Robbie asked.

With effort, she shrugged nonchalance. "It went to Sawyer."

He arched a brow. "Serious? Man, did they choose poorly."

Tracy nodded.

Robbie regarded her, circling her face with his gaze. He traced her cheek with a finger. "So, eating alone?"

Alone. She shot him a glance. "Actually," she said, rising from the bench, untangling herself from the conversation, "I'm running a little bit—"

When Robbie's hand caught her arm, she sat back down. "You've become distant. Tell me why."

Averting his gaze was no easy task. "It's complicated. Life isn't easy for me right now. I've got some decisions to make." Big ones.

Robbie slipped his arm around her waist. "You're

not ticked about having to end that, you know..." He pressed closer and whispered near her ear, "Pregnancy?"

She shook her head. "No, no. In fact, I've been meaning to tell you." The truth landed on her tongue and burned a bit. "I kept it."

~*~

Tom DeLaney slipped into his idling cruiser in the shopping center parking lot and peered at his mobile laptop. Stephen's text urged him to bring his afternoon shift to a rapid end. *When u comin home? Game at 6.*

A tight-lipped grin stretched across Tom's face. Nothing was going to stand in the way of attending his son's football scrimmage. They'd relocated from the Lone Star State seeking a manageable pace of life in a smaller community, quality time as father and son. He'd just have to pursue advance in rank without sacrificing super hero dad status.

Soon. Let Sig out. Keep door locked.

Stephen responded. *10-4 Pops*

Tom turned his attention toward raised voices belting through his open car window. A man and woman, maybe late twenties, early thirties, stood beside the hot dog stand near the main road. He scrubbed his hand down his face. "Almost wrapped it up without incident," he groaned. If Tom had shoved his vigilance aside, he'd have enjoyed an end to a grueling shift. But proactive cops earn the respect of peers and rise more quickly in rank. He redirected his cruiser and assessed the couple through squinted eyes.

The sleek, silver sports car parked beside a red sedan likely belonged to the suited professional with

resolute stance who maintained his grip on the woman's arm. A disturbing image of the guy Tom's mom once hooked up with surfaced in his head. And despite Tom's efforts to shoo her from an abusive mess, Mom's stubborn will had her returning to it like a fly to a summer watermelon.

A knot tightened in his gut. Tom climbed out, hiked his gun belt, and adjusted his shades over his eyes as he trekked toward them.

The man tugged at his tie, stared across the parking lot, his eyes contemplating. He leaned back on one foot, anchoring splayed hands across his hips, opening the front of his gray coat. He shifted to face her. "So then, marry me. I mean, you know I love you. Ever since I laid eyes on you in high school, strutting down the hall past my locker, a dimpled, blue-eyed blonde bombshell."

Ah. Tom had stumbled upon a proposal, albeit it, a substandard one.

The woman shimmied her shoulders, as though he'd asked her to take a sip of turpentine. A troubled countenance emerged through a crimson flush. "That's not necessary, really. I've got this."

"Are you seriously refusing my proposal?" the man barked, angling his stare.

Silence thickened the space between them.

The man widened his arms. "Let me in, for crying out loud, babe. I'm offering my hand in marriage here." He pressed a hand to his chest. "You can't do life alone."

Babe jutted her chin with a challenging gaze and speared a finger. "Watch me!"

Empathy for the jilted professional billowed within Tom. He stepped near and switched his gaze

between them. "Is everything all right?"

The woman whirled and faced Tom, her blonde ponytail smacking her cheek. *Begin profiling.* The damsel in distress was insanely beautiful...despite the distaste Tom had for scrubs. Or anything associated with a hospital.

Suit and Tie turned to Tom, his smile empty. "There's no problem, Officer. Unless stubbornness is illegal. In which case, I strongly suggest you arrest this woman. She's as guilty as they come." His sardonic tone suggested he'd had enough of her resistance.

The woman's expression darkened, ushering stage left any trace of compassion.

The guy jangled his keys, stomped toward his car, and exited the parking lot.

Tom turned to address her. "You OK?"

She nodded then coughed. "I'm good. Thanks."

Her voice came out clinical. She smelled of antiseptic softened with...gardenia? "You work at a hospital, a clinic?"

"ER nurse. Laurelton Regional."

Tom thumbed over his shoulder. "The one down the road a few miles?"

The woman tilted her head. "You're new to LPD."

He squirmed at her directness. "Hired three months ago."

She regarded him, nodding stiffly. "Well then, congratulations. Ten percent of candidates don't survive training."

Uneasy with the interrogation shift, Tom furrowed his brow. "How is it you know the PD?"

She turned an aimless gaze toward the busy street. "My dad, brother. Cops. Both of them."

At her clipped response, Tom stepped closer. He

interlaced his arms above his gun belt, widened his stance. "Who's your dad?"

Pain crept across her countenance, her blue eyes now dull. "He was shot in the line of duty. Thirteen years ago."

Tom's heart ached at the loss of a fellow officer, the hardness of the profession he loved so much.

She glanced at her phone and then back at him. "Look, I've got a call to make."

Tom studied her face. "You sure you're all right?"

"I'm good."

Not buying it. Resentment squeezed Tom's chest. Here stood another woman who refused help. Let her sleep in the bed she makes. *I'm done.* "Have a good day, then," he said, shaking his head to dislodge her image as he turned back to his cruiser. He slipped his phone from the shirt pocket opposite his badge. Stephen had texted again, this time a brief narrative.

When r u coming home? No food in the fridge, I'm starved. Like hurry home Dad. U promised

Tom responded. *On my way*

When Tom returned to their two-bedroom apartment, he removed his gear and collapsed on the bed. Delirium pulled his eyes into his head, draped them behind heavy lids.

Stephen hammered steps down the hallway. "Dad. What gives? We've got to go in an hour."

Tom opened his eyes to slits. "Gimme thirty, son."

"If you have what it takes to perform the Heimlich on a guy choking on a chicken nugget, you can handle a little sleep deprivation."

The corners of his mouth inched to a grin. "How'd you get so tough?"

"My dad's a cop."

Stephen spun on his heels and gave the door a forced shut.

However brief, the restorative sleep prepped Tom to engage with his rascally fourteen-year-old, to focus, to be all there. He edged off the bed, ambled down the hall, and sank into the sofa beside Stephen in the family room. The light of the TV flickered across Stephen's face, drawing him into a catatonic state.

"Your favorite animated race car show again, huh?"

"You tell the guys at school, and I'll never speak to you again," he growled without flinching. "It's hard enough being the new kid with a dad who's a cop, living in a culture that hates authority."

Tom raised a three-finger salute. "And you won't tell Officer Cassidy I'm watching it with you."

He leaned in and clapped Tom's hand in a high five. "Secret's safe."

"Good. Because I've got my eye on special ops team, and I don't want anything standing in the way."

"It's about time."

"I couldn't before now."

Stephen wagged a finger. "Correction. You wouldn't before now since she threatened to leave if you did."

Tom's stomach churned at the thought of opportunities he'd sacrificed to save his marriage to Deborah. And for what? But the move from Texas offered freedom. He'd no longer handcuff himself to a woman who'd only make a fool of him. That was, if he'd even consider love again. Some calls came with too great a cost.

Leaning toward the coffee table, Stephen reached for his water bottle. "Know what I like about this

show?" The lilt in his tone hinted at an incoming lecture.

"Uh uh."

"It's the second place driver. He's really the better racer, but he sacrifices winning to protect the lead guy from other drivers who might harm him. That's why the lead guy wins."

The truth seeped into a tiny crack in Tom's heart. He shifted his gaze toward Stephen, gently shouldered him, and tousled his hair. "You amaze me."

"I amaze me, too."

"I'd give my life for you."

He turned his gaze back to the screen. "Yeah, well, don't go getting any heroic ideas. I kinda like having you around."

Tom laughed.

"Although..."

Wait for it...

A saucy grin flickered across Stephen's face. "A mom would be great, you know." Stephen shrugged. "Just sayin'." He jumped from the sofa as if to avoid a swat. "I've got to get ready. Fast food on the way?"

Tom shot a weary thumbs-up. "Anything but chicken nuggets."

"Deal," he answered with a grin, padded down the carpeted hallway, clicked his door shut, and cranked the volume on his music. A mom? The thought clenched Tom's brain. He longed to offer his active, six-foot athlete something more to eat than instant noodles and corn flakes. But a mom?

The August sun slit through the blinds, highlighting swirls of dust. Tom stretched his long arms toward the ceiling, fighting the lure of deep cushions. He stepped to the window and gazed at his