

WINDOW
of
Peace

The Stained-Glass Legacy  Book Two

Regina Rudd Merrick



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To Kathy Cretsinger.

Her wild idea of our small local writing group hosting a retreat—and then a few more—was the impetus for creating a series like none of us had ever read, much less written. Thank you.

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All characters are fictional, and any resemblance to real people, either factual or historical, is purely coincidental.

Acknowledgments

A few years ago, three other terrific authors and I brainstormed a series as an assignment at a writing conference. Since the four books needed to cover 100+ years of time, Heather Greer, Amy Anguish, Erin Howard and I knew that two of us, in order to cover the time periods, would have to sneak from contemporary romance to historical romance. Heather and I took it on.

Window of Opportunity, by Heather Greer, gives us the Dunne family's origin story, taking place amidst the flappers and prohibition-era mobsters of the 1920s. This book is fifty years later, in the Vietnam War era of 1970. Amy Anguish's *Window of the Heart*, releasing in August 2023, is in the current time, and Erin Howard's *Window of Time*, releasing in December 2023, takes place in a dystopian future.

The unifying item? A stained-glass window, passed down from generation to generation, reminding each of the love of family and the hope of Christ's love for each of us.

So, all that to say thank you, thank you, thank you to Heather, Amy, and Erin for believing that we could do this, and to the members of the KenTen Writer's Group for providing support and the time and place to brainstorm an off-the-wall idea that eventually saw the light of day. The four of us have stayed in contact continually – especially when the family tree received corrections

Thank you, Linda Fulkerson, our publisher with Scrivenings Press, for your encouragement to push ourselves to create an unusual, continuing story that spans over 100 years.

Special thanks to fellow author Susan Lawrence for interviewing a friend of hers who, the day I asked a question about VA healthcare in the Vietnam-era, just happened to be planning a lunch with a Vietnam

veteran, and offered to interview him for me. That information was invaluable.

To our editors, Elena Hill and Linda Fulkerson, thank you for helping us make these the best they can be.

To my readers, thank you for your patience as I go off on a tangent! Let me know if you want more historical from me! 😊

To my family, thank you, also, for your patience. 2022 was a rough year for us, but we survived, and God will make us stronger for it. I have faith.

To my amazing God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – thank you for the lessons I’ve learned, and continue to learn. Thank you for peace in chaos, for my salvation, and for giving me examples of families that stand the test of time.



Chapter One

*February
Vietnam, 1970*

The occasional flash from too-close mortar rounds provided the only light in the dark jungle. Lieutenant Michael Connor “MC” Dunne’s eyes had long ago grown accustomed to seeing at night, making the flashes of light a detriment.

Gunnar stopped.

“What is it, boy?”

MC knelt next to his K9 scout. The dog had instincts that couldn’t be taught. Instincts he was born with.

Those instincts had never let the unit down.

“What do you see?”

MC crouched, gazing all around him, waiting for the intermittent light to reveal any Vietcong guerrillas hidden in the lush undergrowth. His unit had made it through the swamp, but suddenly, it was too quiet.

Too peaceful.

Frankie’s moan drifted toward MC. The soldier had to keep quiet, or he’d alert the enemy to their position. Gunshot wounds to both legs sustained while taking point during the last altercation would kill

Frankie if they didn't make it to the pickup spot. As it was, he'd soon receive his fourth Purple Heart, and most likely a ticket home.

Sal, the unit's medic, gave him a shot of something. MC didn't care what it was—at least it got him quiet. It took two men to carry the wounded man, and now he was even heavier—dead weight.

They made it to the outskirts of an area that had once been a temporary base. The tents that housed personnel had long been dismantled and moved to another site.

MC and his men reached a clearing. A church stood in the center, shining in the moonlight—a small chapel, rustic in nature, with a short white steeple. Left behind when the unit vacated the area. It reminded him of his Grandpa Brendan's chapel on Dunne Farm back in Tennessee.

He heard rustling, and Gunnar emitted a low growl from his throat. The small building would either become a great hiding place. Or a trap.

MC made the decision and used hand signals. Hiding place. They had to stop in order to deliver Frankie to the pickup zone alive.

Using stealth movements, as they'd learned when guerrilla warfare became the norm, they made their way to the building.

Gunnar remained quiet, but MC could feel the dog's raised hackles. He never let down his guard.

Maybe they could rest here tonight, but someone would have to stand guard duty. In the jungles of Vietnam, no one could be trusted.

The enemy could be an old lady in the marketplace, a child harvesting crops in a field, or even a nursing mother. Anyone could be a Vietcong plant.

As they settled into the small structure, MC whispered, "I'll take first watch." They'd been so quiet, his whisper sounded loud.

Pulling out of his pack a collapsible bowl, he poured water in it for Gunnar, who, even as he drank, kept his ears at attention.

Looking around in the dim light, MC took in his surroundings. The room was about the size of the chapel on the farm. In fact, on one end, where the pulpit would have stood, was a stained-glass window, much like the one that meant so much to Grandpa. The Dunne chapel's

window had survived the trip from Ireland to Chicago, then from Chicago to Tennessee. Home.

The window before him probably wouldn't survive this war, if it even made it through tonight.

Are you there, God? We're in trouble here.

He looked over his comrades, fitfully sleeping, a few snoring. Sleep was the last thing on his mind. He had to figure this out. Grandpa would say to wait, to trust in God's timing, but Grandpa wasn't here, in the thick of battle.

A blaze of light through the stained-glass window alerted him, but too late. As if in slow-motion, shards of glass flew toward them. Being awake, MC had time to shield his face with his arm. The glass bounced off of Gunnar's thick German shepherd coat.

His unit scrambled to safety, each man picking bits of glass from what little of the uniform they could stand to wear in this heat. Some of the bits stuck to their sweating bodies, driving the glass in just far enough that small rivulets of blood dripped down. These surface wounds wouldn't slow them down.

MC turned toward Frank Wallace.

Frankie.

He wasn't sure if the red he could see was blood, or a piece of glass the same color. Whatever it was, whatever color it was, it had hit its mark, deeply piercing his neck.

Frankie was dead. Not from gunshot wounds, but from being in the wrong place at the wrong time.

When MC reached him, he saw Sal, next to the body, eyes staring straight ahead, and a bullet hole in his forehead. He wanted to be sick, but there was no time to grieve.

Not now.

The enemy was close. Between them and the pickup zone.

MC drew his rifle out, still dazed at the sight of his dead friends. There weren't the first deaths he'd witnessed, but Frankie and Sal? They'd died on his watch. He turned when he heard a guttural male scream rushing toward him. The enemy.

He couldn't tell where the gunshot came from. Gunnar barked, and

tugged at him. He felt Gunnar knock him to the ground as he pulled his trigger. A heart-wrenching yelp came from his partner, followed by pain searing through his shoulder. After that, MC was in and out of consciousness, seeing only flashes of activity around him. The last thing he remembered was sunrise coming through what was left of the window, then the medivac lifting him out of the jungle. Without Gunnar.

Where was God, now?



March

Tokyo

DEAR MC,

We made a lot of promises to each other before you left for Vietnam. Promises that I can't keep.

I loved you so much ...

Loved? She didn't know the meaning ...

I met somebody. His name is Clint.

I can't begin to tell you how sorry I am. It's cliché, isn't it? The war hero and the flighty nursing student. I guess I'm a cliché.

The idea that I promised to wait for a soldier who, statistically, wouldn't come back, was too much for me. I need more assurance than that.

Please don't hate me. I hate myself enough for both of us ...

The nurse who had attended to him for the last few weeks interrupted his thoughts.

"Lucky you, heading home."

MC looked up, his emotions roaring.

"Lucky me."

She didn't deserve that. He closed his eyes and took a few deep breaths. "I'm sorry, Carol. I didn't mean to take out my problems on you."

Nurse Carol, Captain Dryden to those she outranked, like him, nodded, then placed a clean uniform on the bed. She didn't mention his verbal slip. "Nothing I haven't seen before." Tilting her head, she frowned. "I hope things go well for you at home."

He nodded, then looked down at the paper in his hands. His attention back on that, he folded up the tattered letter and shoved it into his duffel, feeling the anger well up inside him. The smart thing would be to throw it away. He couldn't. He'd read and re-read the fine script so many times, he had it memorized.

He'd received the letter six weeks after he arrived in Vietnam. After his first skirmish in-country.

His Commanding Officer had tasked one of the men in his platoon to pack up what little personal effects that belonged to him and had them sent to the hospital. Now, going through the bits and pieces of his recent life, he wished it had all been destroyed, especially Rebecca's letter.

Maybe when he got home, he'd burn it.

Home. He should be celebrating. Instead, he wished he'd died along with his platoonmates. And Gunner, who took the bullet meant for MC.

I ended up with a flesh wound, and Gunnar ended up dead.

Why would a God who loved him make him endure such loss without easing him into death, especially when he'd begged for it?

Glimpses of war, of jungles, of friends lost, of desperation—of horror—consumed him. Now, he'd have to navigate another land as foreign to him as the place he'd just left—home.