



Timothy Ellenbroek surveyed the snow-covered fields as they moved past his train window. Cold. The whole world looked cold. The past months in France had chilled his soul, and now that he'd returned to the United States, winter held his native Midwest in its freezing grasp.

Would he, a war veteran, find the solace of warmth anywhere? On this January day, he expected to find Oswell City covered in snow and plunged into low temperatures. But his family was there. How would Mother be getting along? Had she stayed healthy, free from the return of pneumonia? Or would he find her coughing and weak?

He hadn't seen her for three years. Their last visit had occurred on his seminary's east coast campus when Mother and Dad had traveled to see him. He'd planned to come home for a month or so after his graduation, but America had entered the conflict in Europe, so he'd applied to be a chaplain in the military. After getting accepted, he was swept into the round of training and travel that hastened him to the front.

The train jerked and swayed. Tim glanced away from the desolate scene beyond the window and shifted his attention to the bag on the seat next to him. It carried his valuables,

including those that had belonged to his closest friend. His eyes misted, and his throat ached as he thought of the bittersweet meeting that awaited him.

From a side pocket, he pulled out a letter he'd received before Christmas. The correspondence had miraculously found him halfway across the world. Perhaps the senders had contacted the seminary looking for him and then been given his parents' address. Had Dad or Mother told this California contact how to reach him? Maybe his parents knew of the invitation this letter held.

He slid it from the envelope, unfolded it, and reread the words that had been his focus in prayer this past month.

Warren Greene, Elder

Christ's Church

California

Dear Chaplain Timothy Ellenbroek:

On behalf of the board of elders at Christ's Church, I write to offer you the pastorate. Our current minister has developed health issues, so we must replace him. Please pray and consider our offer. You come highly recommended by the seminary and by your superiors in the military. We are confident that you have much wisdom to share with our church body and look forward to your response. If you are interested, please reply to this letter by February 10.

*Sincerely,
Warren Greene*

Tim folded the letter. That group of elders knew quite a bit about him if they'd gained references from the seminary and from the military. Had they contacted other potential candidates besides him? February 10 was only a few weeks away. Maybe he should send them an inquiry to at least ask for a visit in person.

But whenever he tried to listen for God's leading on the matter, he grew distracted. There were so many questions still needing answers. How were Dad and Mother? Had Oswell City changed? Where did he best fit in the world now that his tour of duty had ended? Was California the place for him?

It would certainly feel milder on this January day than the frigid plains he crossed. Tim shivered as he allowed his gaze to roam over the coach. Travelers a few seats ahead of him carried on a conversation in low, serious voices. Girls across the aisle whispered and giggled as they cast occasional interested glances in his direction. Tim pretended not to hear them. Ever since Chicago, they'd been trying to get his attention. But the real attraction for them was probably his uniform. It definitely distinguished him in a crowd, and the farther west the train traveled, the fewer uniformed men there were to flirt with.

Several members of his division had left this train to board others for points north and south. A few more had gotten off in Davenport, and now, in addition to Tim, a sprinkling of servicemen rode the car waiting for their stops in Des Moines and Omaha.

They were going home. Tim's eyes misted again just thinking about it. Home to Oswell City, a place far removed—another world almost—from the fighting, the suffering, and the sorrow of the trenches. His small hometown on the Iowa prairie usually stayed insulated from the influences of the outside world. Not that it didn't change with the times, but rather it did so at a slower pace, and with caution. His war-weary soul ached for a place like it in which to rest, heal, and begin his life over again. If ever he needed Oswell City to stay the same as he'd always known it—unchanged, wholesome, and inviting—that time was now.

"Next stop, Oswell City," A porter walking the aisle boomed out.

Tim straightened and put on his hat, setting off another series of giggles from the young ladies across the aisle.

He did cut a rather dashing figure when dressed in full uniform. Lean and reaching a height of six feet, Tim didn't need much help in attracting attention. When he wore his uniform, most people, men and women alike, gave him a second look of respect and admiration.

The train slowed. Buildings on the outskirts of town whizzed past his window. Soon the station came into view. Clusters of people bundled in dark winter clothing stood on the platform. Tim leaned closer to the window. His family was there waiting for him. Mother, Dad, his sister Lorraine, and her husband Brandt. But no children. His sister had kept him up to date through letters about each addition to the family. Mitch was the only one he'd met, and he couldn't wait to see those nephews and his niece.

The view out the window came to a stop. With the other travelers, Tim left his seat and stood in the aisle. The girls took their turns waving and smiling at him. "So long, soldier," the one on the end said.

He nodded back to them and then followed the aisle to the door as his stomach did flips. He was here!

Glancing around at the people on the platform, he emerged into the cold dusk.

His family hurried toward him.

"Timothy! My boy!" Mother flung her arms around his neck. "You're home!" Tears clogged her voice as she hugged him close.

"Mother." His heart constricted as he enjoyed the feel of holding her in his arms. Mother was well, and she was here, happy to see him.

"How have you been?" Tim asked, pulling back a little way to look at her.

"Very well, thanks to Dr. Kaldenberg's expert care." A smile stretched across her face.

"I'm so glad." He held on to her, reluctant to let her go. But he must, in order to greet the rest of the family.

"Timothy." Dad claimed him in a large embrace.

“Good to see you, Dad. It’s been a long time.” Tim’s throat ached.

“Yes, it has, but we’ll make up for the time lost.” Dad released him into the arms of his sister.

“Welcome home, Tim. So good to have you back,” Lorraine said in a quiet voice.

“Tim, my man.” Brandt took his turn last. “Welcome back.”

“Thanks.” Tim thumped his brother-in-law on the shoulder.

“Let’s get you loaded up. Where is your luggage?” Dad looked around.

“Don’t have any. Just this.” Tim held up the Army bag he’d dropped at his feet.

“Give it to me.” Dad took the bag and led everyone to the car.

They piled in with Dad and Brandt in the front, and Mother and Lorraine in the back with Tim. They made him sit in the middle so that both of them could get as close to him as possible. Mother looped her arm in his and leaned on his shoulder. There would be no getting out of her sight for the rest of the day.

Dad pulled onto Main Street and drove through town. Hungry for glimpses of his hometown, Tim kept his focus on the windshield. The stores were closed by this time of day, so few shoppers were out. But the sidewalk still held a sprinkling of people hastening through the growing darkness to warm homes for a nice meal.

On the corner by Brandt’s law office, he noticed a man with his arm in a sling. Tim pointed him out. “Hey, Brandt. Isn’t that Micah?”

“Yeah. He got discharged to come home a month ago, after spending time at a hospital in England. They patched him up pretty good, but the arm is slow to heal. He doesn’t expect to have much use of it.” Brandt waved at Micah as they drove by.

Brandt’s words punched him. Micah had been sent to the front too. His division was assigned to a different location than

Tim's, but he'd known of Micah's service from the training camp they'd attended before they were separated and sent overseas. This was the first Tim had seen him since those hot summer days of strenuous military drills.

Tim glanced to the other side of the street as Dad drove through the next intersection. A poster encouraging returning war veterans to get jobs was plastered across the entire wall of the men's clothing store. This punched him too. Even in quiet Oswell City, signs of the war surrounded him. The world had changed. Menacing reminders of the horrors he'd witnessed infiltrated even the most unassuming and innocent corners. Did a place exist where he could go to truly escape the nightmare he'd lived for the past two years?

The poster pricked him for another reason. He must figure out what he should do about a job. Would that church in California really want him, a soul-weary soldier who just returned from overseas? Could he function as a strong, fit leader, shepherding a congregation and moving them forward? He'd poured too much of himself into ministering to the wounded and dying of the trenches to answer those questions. Maybe after a good meal at his mother's table and a full night's sleep in his own room, he'd have more clarity.

"We're here." Mother pressed his hand as pleasure shone in her eyes.

Dad turned the car into the Ellenbroek driveway and parked. Dad and Brandt got out and helped the others from the backseat. After crossing the front porch, they met a maid at the door.

"Kendra, this is our son, Tim." Mother made the introduction to the young blonde woman.

Her gaze traveled over his uniform. A look of awe settled on her face as she returned his smile.

"Come on in, son." Dad pushed past the gawking maid and opened the door wider. "Let me take your coat," he said to Mother.

Before any of them had the chance to unbuckle from gloves and scarves, two children came running down the hall.

“Mitch, Frances, meet your Uncle Tim.” Lorraine gestured between her children and him.

Tim squatted and welcomed them into his embrace. “Hey, there, Mitch. You were a baby the last time I saw you.”

“I’m big now.” He grinned.

“Yes, you are.” Tim studied the young boy who took after his mother with his dark hair and dark eyes.

“You’ve never seen me before, have you?” Frances tugged on his sleeve.

“This is the first time, and I’m very pleased to meet you.” Tim smiled at the little girl as he brushed a curl from her cheek.

She giggled and looked up at her parents.

“Come to the parlor, everyone.” Kendra held her hand out toward the elegant room that brought back so many memories. “Rose and I have some refreshments laid out for you to enjoy until dinner is ready.”

Tim followed the others and took a seat in a wing chair near the fire.

“What are your plans now that the Army has let you go?” Brandt settled into another chair.

“I’m not sure. All I knew was that I needed to come home first. It’s been so long.” Tim’s gaze wandered over the others in the room. Without a hat covering his head, the gray streaks running through Dad’s hair were exposed.

Shadows from the firelight deepened the lines on Mother’s face. He’d probably put a few of them there, going off to fight a war the way he did. But so had sickness and age.

His parents were growing older. It was a fact he hadn’t given any thought to before now. They were a part of the changes he’d planned to avoid by coming home.

But even here in Oswell City, the sorrow and the separations of war stretched their threatening fingers to grasp at everything he held as precious.

“Have you received any job offers?” Dad glanced over at him. Did Tim imagine it, or was there a skeptical gleam in Dad’s eyes?

Tim’s heart thumped. Dad must surely know of the position in California. He cleared his throat. “As a matter of fact, I have.”

His sister gasped. “Who was it from?”

“Someone by the name of Greene called here asking for you shortly before Christmas,” Mother said. “That was before we’d received word of your discharge date. I gave him the same address I use to send your letters.”

“Will you take it?” Dad asked with eagerness shading his voice.

Brandt leaned forward. “Who is this guy? What did he offer you?”

Tim took a deep breath. “His name is Warren Greene. He’s on the board of a church in California. They offered me their pastorate.”

Dad beamed. “Good for you, son. That’s the sort of position you’ve been preparing for.”

Tim stared into the fire. “That was before.” His throat ached as images of suffering played through his mind.

“Before what, my dear? What’s wrong?” Mother asked in a nervous voice.

He gulped. The courses in seminary, intended to equip him as a leader, had been child’s play. None of that insulated existence could compare to war. He’d studied and worked hard in school, but no one’s lives were at stake there. Shells of ammunition weren’t falling around his head as he researched the prophets or practiced the delivery of a sermon.

But in France, he’d lived the danger and seen the horrors of battle. The fine knowledge and skills he’d picked up from his academics did very little to alter anyone’s circumstances. Unless he performed a burial service, and there were plenty of those. In those moments, fellow soldiers could turn their thoughts and their hopes to peace. But as soon as the fallen comrade had been laid to rest, the conflict with its noise and terror resumed.

Tim frowned. “Nothing is wrong, Mother. I’m just ... remembering.”

Lorraine reached over and squeezed his shoulder. He met her gaze and read sympathy and love. He nodded and focused once again on the fire. Maybe he should accept the position in California. New work might help him forget. A different place would allow him to escape the sadness crowding his heart. But then again, maybe he should stay. Mother and Dad weren’t getting any younger. And Oswell City felt like home. It was comfortable and safe, even with the changes creeping in.

“Have you decided what to do?” Dad asked in a steady press of the issue.

Tim straightened and drew in a deep breath.

Kendra appeared in the doorway with some of the best news he’d heard in a long time. “Dinner is ready.”

The maid would never know how much her simple announcement saved him from the pain of answering that question.