

The background of the cover is a painting of a bayou. The scene is misty and atmospheric, with a large, dark tree stump in the foreground. The water is calm, reflecting the surrounding trees and the overcast sky. The overall color palette is muted, with greys, blues, and greens, creating a somber and mysterious mood.

Beyond The Dark Bayou

*A True Story of Survival
through Spiritual Inspiration*

ALICE BALL

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PROLOGUE

Through a Blinding Snow

The wind bullied me from behind, relentlessly shoving and howling until I made it into the Dallas-Fort Worth International Airport lobby. Nothing mattered to me at that point: not the snow, the wind, or the relentless grief that threatened to steal my sanity. Nothing mattered except to get home.

I'd never seen an airport this deserted before, but that wouldn't stop me from finding a flight. There had to be an airline braving these icy conditions—I did remember hearing a few planes take off on my way into the terminal. And besides, didn't they have some sort of de-icing program at these larger airports?

I walked briskly to the ticket counter, shaking off the cold as I went.

"I need the first available flight to Monroe, Louisiana. I don't care how much it cost."

"I'm sorry ma'am," the woman said, "but all our flights have been cancelled due to inclement weather."

"Cancelled? What about Jackson? Anything going to Jackson, Mississippi?"

"No ma'am, all our flights have been cancelled until further notice."

"But you don't understand—I've gotta get home now! It's ... it's very important."

“All I can suggest is to try another airline,” she said, pointing to the left.

I hurried to the next ticket counter, but received the same somber news: all flights were cancelled.

Oh God, I prayed, please help me find a way home.

I checked with two other airlines. They were still flying, but not where I needed to go. I stood at a large window, staring out at a taxicab braving the ice and snow. It was a wonder I even made it to the airport at all.

No—I can’t give up! I turned and marched up to another ticket counter. I had to find a flight to my hometown of Monroe. Too much had happened, too many horrible things. I had to get home, and I had to get home soon.

I tried nearly every airline servicing the Dallas airport and found Delta Airlines would take me to Jackson. Not my hometown, but close enough.

It took longer than normal for the plane to be cleared to take off, but the Boeing 737 finally lifted off the runway. Two hours into the flight, the captain spoke over the intercom and advised his passengers that he couldn’t land in Jackson because the winds there were too fierce.

Oh God, this storm really is bad.

After 40 minutes of circling the city, we headed north-east to Atlanta.

What am I doing in Atlanta? I don’t have time for this. Please, Lord, help me get home to my children. After this latest tragedy, what will I say to them?

I quickly discovered that the only flight going anywhere was headed back to Dallas. But I just came from Dallas. All I want is to get home.

Exhausted and feeling helpless, I decided to take the trip back to Dallas—after all, I did have friends there.

As I sat on the plane for over an hour hoping it would be cleared to take off, the emotions finally began to tear at me, and I began to weep. It was a bumpy flight but we finally landed safely.

The Dallas terminal was desolate—even the taxis had stopped running, as the snowstorm had paralyzed the entire South. Just when I began to panic, I saw four men standing at the top of an escalator, talking among themselves. One of them was wearing a Stuckey's tie, and it encouraged me to strike up a conversation.

“Where are you going?” I asked timidly.

One man replied, “To Dallas to get a room.”

“Can you take me to the Marriott? I have friends there.” As I stood on the top of the stairs holding only a makeup bag, the men looked at me as if I were a prostitute. It was only after I gave a brief explanation of my plight that they agreed to take me.

A fear of these men overwhelmed me as I climbed into their car, but I had no choice—I had to see if my friend at the Marriott could find me a way back to my children. I found comfort from my anxiety, brought on from thoughts of bodily harm these men could do, by silently reciting a verse in scripture I had learned long ago: “God has not given me a spirit of fear, but of a sound mind.” (2 Timothy 1:7)

Alice Ball

As we ventured at a snail's pace away from the airport, I closed my eyes and allowed my mind to take me back to the beginning; to the time and place where my journey began.

CHAPTER ONE

A Promising New Life

A kind of luxurious aura permeates the humid lands and lazy waterways of Louisiana. There's mystery in the dark shimmering of the bayous and in the stories that they must overhear as they wind their way past the homes of the people who dwell along them. And there was a beauty to the town of Monroe, where I first met my husband-to-be, and all the friends who were of a warmth that seemed to spring from the aura of the lands and waterways surrounding them. These were the very friends upon whom we would come to lean, who would help us in our ultimate test of faith, as the mystery of our own dark story unfolded before us.

* * *

John Ball was a handsome man, tall, with neatly trimmed dark hair, soft caring eyes, and a contagious grin. Though very disciplined and cunning, he never allowed his intellectual prowess to interfere with his personal life, and maintained a fluid, gregarious disposition. Despite a vocabulary as thick as a Webster's Dictionary, John was never condescending, owing his humble attitude to being a devout Christian. It was all these things that attracted me to him.

We met in the twin cities—Monroe and West Monroe, two cities split by the Ouachita River in the northeastern part of Louisiana. I had been working as a secretary at the registrar's office in Northeast Louisiana University when a coworker told me she was having trouble finding a transcript for a Mr. John Edwin Ball. At the time, John was working on his Masters in Industrial Arts.

It took me about five minutes to find the transcript. When I returned to the front desk, document in hand, I was surprised when a nice looking man in the waiting area announced that he was John Ball, and he appreciated my effort in finding his transcript.

Many of my friends have said that it was stunning good looks that attracted John to me, but my modesty never allowed me to admit that. We just hit it off immediately. He asked me on a date, which turned into another, then another, until we were a couple. Then, in March of 1966 in Monroe, Alice Gilley from the small town of Delhi, Louisiana, became Mrs. Alice Ball.

We had a wonderful life ahead of us, two young adults basking in the excitement of beginning their dreams. I reveled in the idea of starting a family as well as finishing my degree. John planned to finish grad school, and to start working on his doctorate.

By that time, John had already built up an impressive résumé: He had started as a carpenter's apprentice at the age of 15, headed industrial arts clubs in high school, which won him several awards, then later received awards in college at the undergraduate level. He was an outstand-

ing member of Phi Beta Kappa and an active participant and attendee of the North Monroe Baptist Church.

Once married, our lives moved into 5th gear. While finishing his master's degree, John began teaching industrial arts at Wossman High School. Within two years he was awarded Outstanding Industrial Arts Teacher in Louisiana, and the Kiwanis Club Outstanding Teacher Award. He served as president of the Ouachita Valley Industrial Arts Association, secretary-treasurer of the Louisiana Industrial Arts Association, and was a member of an advisory council to the Louisiana Industrial Arts clubs.

Then in 1967, I was blessed to become pregnant with my first child. Later that same year, my husband received his Master of Science in Industrial Arts from Northwestern State University. Needless to say, our lives had been wonderfully successful and our future looked bright.

In 1968, the joyous day of February 29—leap year day—brought a new member to the Ball family. Our daughter, Tara, was born a healthy eight pounds early that morning. She was absolutely beautiful. Both my mother and father drove from Delhi the next day to be with us. John's parents, Ann and Clarence, arrived later that week from Ruston to share in the joy of our firstborn.

The months flew by. Parenting became familiar, though still challenging. John won a few more awards, turned down four job offers boasting attractive salaries to leave teaching, and joined two more industrial arts clubs. But that wasn't enough—John was always striving to be better.

After an evening of discussion and support, I fully embraced my husband's decision to start working on his doctorate in industrial education. The program would start September of 1969, which meant moving to North Texas State University in Denton, Texas. Sure, we were both apprehensive about the move, but at the same time we were excited about meeting new friends, living in a new place, and securing our financial future by furthering John's already impressive education and experience.

The decision to move would turn out to be beneficial to my husband's career. Our first six months in Texas would later prove to be a bonding period for the three of us, and it was in Texas that we would begin a fascinating journey through the end of a turbulent decade.

It would also see the inception of a horrific life of agony for our family.

* * *

Richard Nixon was president; man landed for the first time on the Moon in July, with another landing scheduled for November; *Back in the U.S.S.R.* and *Get Back* by the Beatles flooded the airways, along with music by The Doors, Janice Joplin, Jimmy Hendrix, and The Rolling Stones. The war in Vietnam and racial violence sparked a wave of protest unprecedented in the nation's history. The words *Woodstock* and *hippies* were as common as the words *car* and *airplane*.

We were aware of what was happening around us, yet too busy with our academic and parental lives to realize the full impact of what the 60s would bring. We certainly weren't caught up in the hullabaloo per se, but I do remember a few incidents that became rather threatening, forcing us both to realize that there was more going on in the world than academia.

Situated on the south side of the North Texas State campus were the dorms—Clark Hall, Maple Hall, Kerr Hall. Crumley Hall, an all-boys' dorm, sat just north of those buildings on the corner of Highland and Avenue C. John, with his gregarious, must-do-everything mindset, became dorm director of Crumley Hall to earn extra money. After all, we had a child to feed and a doctorate program to finance.

Balancing studies and parenting made managing an all-boys' dorm difficult, and the runaway racial and political unrest made it especially trying. To make matters worse, drugs were rampant. It seemed as though almost everyone we met lived for only one thing: to get high on marijuana, LSD, or alcohol.

One particular night, a scruffy looking man barged into the dorm yelling and screaming obscenities. The Resident Assistant immediately reported this to my husband. Naturally, John went to investigate. But as John cautiously moved down the hall, the disgruntled man turned and pointed a large caliber handgun directly at him! There were no doors to jump behind, no corridors near enough to disappear into. John couldn't turn and run

the way he had come for fear of being shot as he ran, so he turned to the only weapon he had at the time; his brain.

“Gotta git these frick’n narcs out’a here!” the man yelled aloud. “Gotta kill ‘em all.”

It was obvious to John that this man was under the influence of a mind-altering substance, which made the situation even more volatile. The intruder’s wild-eyed alertness and disheveled hair made him appear even more intimidating.

“Calm down,” John spoke confidently, “I’ll help you get the narcs.”

“You a narc?” the man demanded, waving the gun in the air. He shook his head sharply then stood very still, trying to focus his eyes on my husband. “There are narcotic agents living in this dorm! They’re everywhere! We’ve gotta exterminate them now!”

With the gun still pointing at John, the derelict seemed to be getting more agitated as time went by, his finger loosely handling the trigger. The man moved closer to my husband.

“You’re a narc, aren’t you?”

“No. I’m gonna help you find these narcotic agents.” John was close enough to see the bullets poised in the cylinder, ready to be fired. That gun was actually loaded!

“Why don’t you go that way,” John said calmly, pointing down the hall behind the man, “and I’ll go this way.” He pointed to a short hall to his right. “We’ll find them all.”

“You hear that?” the man screamed at the top of his

lungs, waving the gun emphatically in the air. “We’re coming to get you! You narcotic agents are history!”

“You should put the gun away first. You don’t want them to see you coming. They might hide.”

“No! We’ve gotta show ‘em who’s boss! We’ve gotta kill ‘em all!”

“Okay ... Okay. Calm down. You go that way, and I’ll go this...”

“We stick together.”

“But...”

“We stick together!” The man became louder; his speech began to slur even worse. Then he pointed the gun directly at John and demanded, “We find ‘em together!”

“All right! Let’s get those guys. But first, I need to go to the bathroom. Wait here so I can help you get those narcs!”

“Get ‘em now!” The man stumbled and almost fell over, but managed to regain composure.

“Don’t you get them without me!” John said. “I wanna help too! I promise I’ll be fast in the bathroom. You’re gonna stay here until I get back, aren’t you?”

The man stared at John in a moment of puzzlement. The hall remained deathly quiet as the man with the gun contemplated what was happening. “No.”

“I’m just going to the bathroom. C’mon, I’ll be right back. It’ll take just two seconds.”

“I don’t trust you.”

“C’mon ... I’ve gotta go bad. All that beer. We can’t let those narcotic agents tell me I can’t drink anymore beer! So I need to go to the bathroom first—okay?”

The anger melted away for a second. “Okay ... go bathroom. Come right back.”

“Right back—two seconds.”

Those 20 seconds it took to walk timidly down the hall and away from the gun-toting drug addict were the most frightening of all. The silence from his backside as he made his escape wore heavily on John’s mind, for he didn’t know if he would be executed. His heart racing faster than the Indianapolis Speedway time trials, he quickened his pace and escaped into a stairwell at the end of the hall.

The campus police were notified immediately, the man was arrested without a shot being fired, and John took the day off to recover from the traumatic ordeal.

Though that event was unequivocally the most daunting we experienced of dorm life, other events occurred that were stressful in their own right. Other drug-related brawls took place in the mod, a sitting area for the residents. Once, the Black Panthers came to the campus and held a demonstration. Since John was a dorm director, his assistance in handling the situation was called upon.

Events like these were what prompted John to apply for life insurance later in the school year. My husband took a routine physical, required to obtain the insurance, and waited for the results. About three days later a nurse from the doctor’s office called the dorm.

“Hello, John Ball?”

“Speaking.”

“We may have some serious problems.”