

COLUMBINE



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Chapter 53: *At The Broken Places*

It took eight and a half years to erect the permanent memorial. In 2006, the fund hit 70 percent of its reduced budget, permitting construction to begin. An event was planned for the groundbreaking in June—to honor the dead, and to publicize the \$300,000 outstanding. Bill Clinton flew in. Two thousand mourners turned out.

Dawn Anna read the thirteen names. “We’re here because we love them,” she said. “We’re here as a family and as a community that’s been through the darkest of days and is coming through to the light.”

Thunderheads rolled in and opened up on the crowd. Scattered umbrellas popped up, but most people were caught unaware. Nobody moved. They didn’t care.

This was Republican country; but Clinton’s introduction drew wild applause. These people were proud to host an American president.

“I am here today because millions of Americans were changed by Columbine,” he said. “It was one of the darkest days Hillary and I had in the White House. We wept, we prayed.”

Right before his appearance, she’d called from the Senate, he said—“Just to remind me of what we did that day. This was a momentous event in the history of the country. And every parent [was] left feeling helpless, even the president.”

He had watched the survivors evolve, Clinton said. He compared them to his colleague, Max Cleland, who’d left both legs and one arm in Vietnam. It was a struggle for Max to dress every morning. He could have resented the thousands who came back unscathed or who’d avoided the draft, like him, Clinton said. What a waste that would be. Cleland ran for the Senate and represented Georgia for six years. He was fond of quoting Ernest Hemingway, and Clinton recited his favorite passage: “The world breaks everyone and afterward many are strong at the broken places.”

“Every day, from now on, the world will break someone,” Clinton added. “These magnificent families, in memory of their children, and their teacher, can help them always to be strong.”

The memorial felt like the final step. One last controversy marred its completion. In the spring of 2007, as bulldozers carved out the site on the back slope of Rebel Hill, Brian Rohrbough went to battle with the memorial committee. An inner Ring of Remembrance honored the Thirteen in a special way. The larger Ring of Healing that surrounded it would bear quotes from students, teachers, friends, neighbors—everyone touched by the tragedy, whether or not a bullet actually pierced their skin. Each of the thirteen families was allocated a space on the inner ring for a large inscription in the brown marble to remember their child, father, or spouse. They were asked to keep it tasteful and respectful.

Twelve and a half families agreed. Sue Petrone and Brian Rohrbough submitted separate inscriptions for Danny, to be run side by side. Sue described her boy's blue eyes, engaging smile, and infectious laugh. Brian submitted an angry rant blaming Columbine on a godless school system in a nation that legalized abortion where authorities lied and covered up their crimes. He ended with a biblical quote, declaring, *There is no peace for the wicked.*

The committee asked Brian to tone it down. He refused. Both sides agreed to keep the wording confidential, but the gist of the dispute leaked. It caused yet another firestorm in Colorado. The public was split. A standoff ensued. Nobody wanted an angry tirade inside the Ring of Remembrance. The committee had the power to stop it. Brian dared them to do it.

It was no contest. Even after eight years, nothing trumped a grieving dad.

The Columbine memorial was dedicated on a sunny afternoon in September 2007. A few thousand visitors filed quietly past the inner wall. There was no ruckus over the angry inscription. It did not draw more onlookers than the other twelve, even out of curiosity. There was no discernible reaction. No one seemed to care.

Patrick Ireland spoke on behalf of the injured. "The shootings were an event that occurred," he said. "But it did not define me as a person. It did not set the tone for the rest of my life."

Thirteen doves were released. Seconds later, two hundred more fluttered free—an arbitrary number, to signify everyone else. They scattered up in all directions. For a moment, they seemed to fill the entire sky. Then they found one another and coalesced into a single flock, a massive white cloud weaving from left to right and back again, against the clear blue sky.