

Excerpt: Dashing Through the Snow

May, 1969

In the distance, Laura Colton saw the familiar truck that was used for rural delivery of the United States mail and urged her horse into a canter as they flew down the dusty, half-mile stretch from her father's ranch house to the main road. Hopefully, there would be a letter from Michael. It had been a little over two weeks since the last one and, with the military conflict in Vietnam worsening every day, she worried for her young soldier-husband.

Of course, nobody knew they had secretly married before he left for duty.

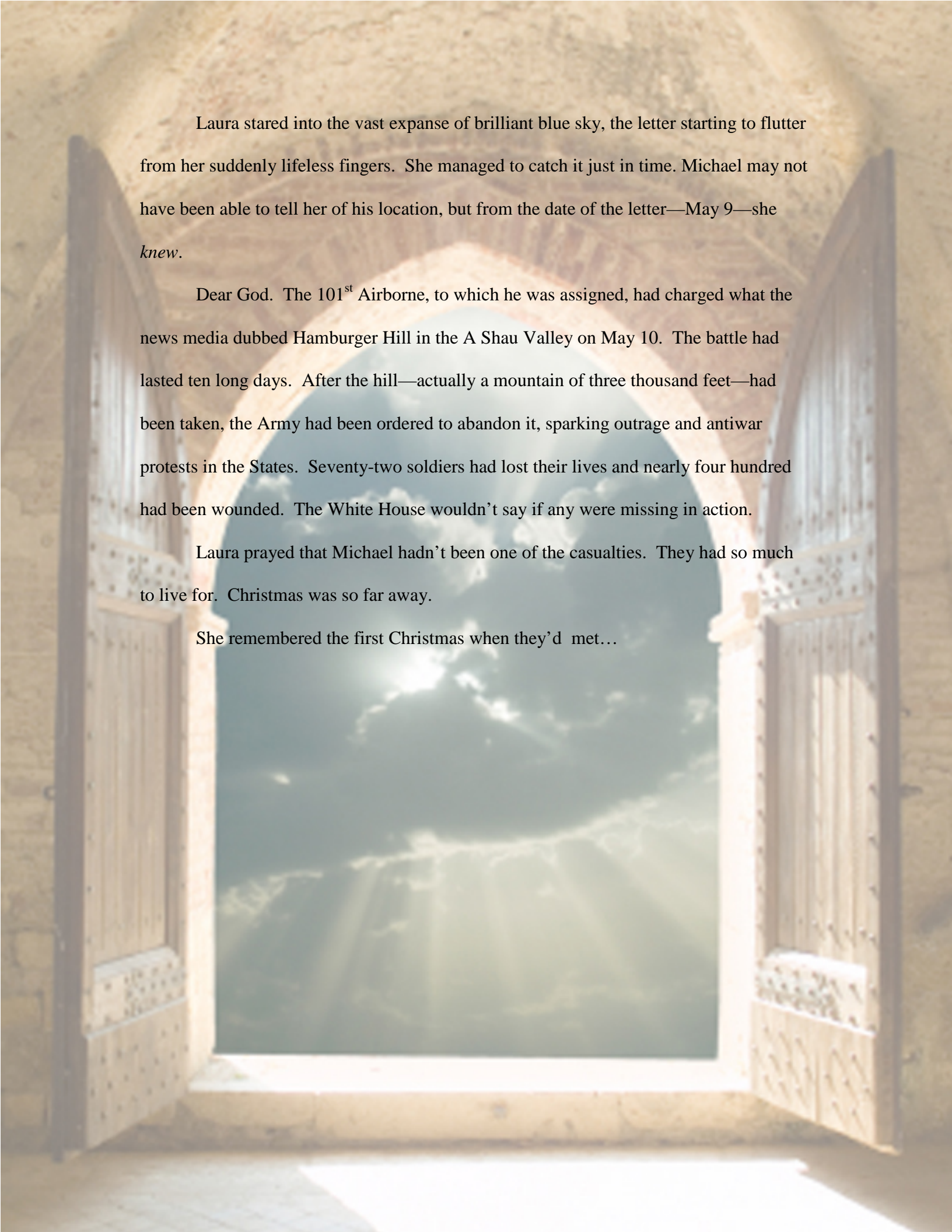
The mare stopped of her own accord in front of the mailbox, having made this daily run for several months now. Laura leaned over and pulled the small door open. *Yes!* She noted the familiar blue and red stripes along the edge of the air-mail envelope.

Finally!

She didn't bother to seek shade from the hot, North Texas sun, simply tearing open the envelope right there in the middle of the road. Her eyes quickly scanned the first paragraphs, filled with carefully worded phrases of affection in case her parents would happen on one of these missives. She would take time later, in the sanctuary of her room, to decipher the love-code she and Michael had devised. For right now, she just wanted the essence of the letter. Then her reading slowed as she read the last paragraph.

... We will be moving in on our target tomorrow. I can't tell you where we are, but the terrain is mountainous jungle and our colonel said to expect a prolonged engagement. I will write when the battle is over.

Meanwhile, stay strong for me. Just six more months over here. I'll be home for Christmas.



Laura stared into the vast expanse of brilliant blue sky, the letter starting to flutter from her suddenly lifeless fingers. She managed to catch it just in time. Michael may not have been able to tell her of his location, but from the date of the letter—May 9—she *knew*.

Dear God. The 101st Airborne, to which he was assigned, had charged what the news media dubbed Hamburger Hill in the A Shau Valley on May 10. The battle had lasted ten long days. After the hill—actually a mountain of three thousand feet—had been taken, the Army had been ordered to abandon it, sparking outrage and antiwar protests in the States. Seventy-two soldiers had lost their lives and nearly four hundred had been wounded. The White House wouldn't say if any were missing in action.

Laura prayed that Michael hadn't been one of the casualties. They had so much to live for. Christmas was so far away.

She remembered the first Christmas when they'd met...