

FRANK E. PERETTI

Pilly

THE NOVEL

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Tilly

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Foreword

Tilly is an extraordinary and unforgettable story that has touched the lives of so many—in a deep and lasting way.

Tilly is a beautifully written and remarkable story with a heart of truth that is undeniable. It tells the story of a young mother who made a regrettable decision earlier in her life—something that later came to haunt her deeply. But it tells the story especially of how she came to know the reality of God’s forgiveness, and the recovery of joy and hope.

We are delighted to recommend *Tilly* to you—as a book that could change your life forever, as a story of hope for those in need of its message, and as a story to change the heart of America.

—Michael W. & Debbie Smith

One





It was a day in April. Spring had come again, just like always, laughing and teasing, full of comfort, the same old spring; it hadn't changed a bit. Light breezes, cool air left over from the stubbornly fading winter, played across the rolling turf of the old cemetery, carrying the scent of fruit blossoms, lilacs, and freshly mown grass. From somewhere beyond the orderly rows of gray and purple gravestones, birds chattered and sang with abandon.

April. Here it is again, Kathy thought. It surrounds this place. The world is filled with it. I should feel so warm right now.

But she felt cold, and fidgeted just a little as she stood there, her hand on Dan's arm, listening to Pastor Taylor's closing words.

“ . . . inasmuch as God Almighty has taken unto Himself the soul of our departed brother, we commit the earthly house of his habitation back to the ground



from which it came; earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust . . .”

Pastor Taylor was reading his words from a small book, but he was reading them slowly, digesting their meaning for himself before sharing them audibly.

“ . . . in the assurance that if the earthly house of our tabernacle be dissolved, we have a building of God, an house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens . . .”

It’s so lonely out here, Kathy thought.

There were only three of them standing around that plain gray casket adorned with one simple flowered wreath. Their little graveside service was hardly noticeable, and Pastor Taylor’s voice did not carry far.

“Let us pray,” said Pastor Taylor.

They prayed the Lord’s Prayer, just the three of them.

Pastor Taylor closed his little book and looked up. “That will end our interment service.” Then he smiled, took a breath, and relaxed a little. “I want to thank you two for coming.”

“Any time, Pastor Taylor,” Dan replied.

“Glad to do it,” said Kathy.

The minister looked down at the casket again. “Did you even know Frank Smith?”

Dan shook his head. “No, Pastor, not really. I used to buy the paper from him, and that’s about it.”



Pastor Taylor looked at them, and then scanned the surrounding cemetery. Dan and Kathy could feel it too, the great open distance that stretched so far on every side.

The minister said, “It really means a lot that you were here. Regardless of how well or how little we may have known him, it would have been a shame for Frank to pass away unmourned and unremembered.”

“Well,” said Kathy, “someone has to care, even if it’s a stranger.”

The pastor nodded and smiled. “Thank you for caring.”

He meant it. Kathy felt warm for the first time.

“Thank you for a beautiful service,” she said.

The cemetery’s old caretaker stood by his truck some distance away. Pastor Taylor went to settle final arrangements with him, and Dan and Kathy started back across the cemetery toward their car.

“Yeah,” Dan said quietly, “good old Frank Smith. Third and Amber won’t be quite the same without him and that old newsstand.”

“It was sad,” said Kathy. “It was the smallest funeral I’ve ever been to.”

“Well, that’s just the way it goes. People get busy, they didn’t know him, they have other things to do . . .”

“I wonder if they’ll even miss him.”



“I think they will. For a while anyway.” They walked for a short distance more before Dan spoke his next thought. “He died alone, that’s for sure. Guess they finally found him in his little hotel room . . .”

“No . . . That’s enough.”

Dan dropped the topic. He gave her a compliment. “I’m glad we came. It was a good idea.”

She smiled and received his words, but had to say again, “It was sad.”

“Yeah,” he agreed. “It was.” He groped for his car keys. “Tell you what. I could just bring the car around and pick you up over by the . . .”

Kathy squeezed his arm. She was looking across the cemetery. Dan quickly hushed.

Now he could see the woman too, young, dark, and very lovely, just beyond a row of aging monuments. She was kneeling in the grass, flowers in her hands, her head bowed in prayer. She was motionless, and the colors of her hair, the flowers, the grass were all so perfect. The picture brought them to a stop.

Kathy was awestruck. “Beautiful,” she whispered.

Dan nodded.

They watched. The woman stirred only enough to gently set the flowers on the grave.

“It makes you wonder what kind of story’s behind it,” Kathy said. “A husband gone before his time, or a



son, or a brother lost in a war . . .” She smiled. “She’s remembering.”

Dan was a little shocked to feel Kathy moving in that direction. He held her back. “Hey . . . hey now . . .”

Kathy pulled from him. “Don’t. I’m not going to do anything.”

“Kathy, I’m sure this lady doesn’t want any visitors right now.”

Kathy was offended. “She won’t have any. I just want to see the gravestone, that’s all.”

She pulled loose, and Dan didn’t follow her. All he could do was watch and hope something terrible wouldn’t happen.

Kathy stepped very lightly. She could hear the woman’s muffled prayer, a soft, pleading supplication, mostly whispered, but sometimes sweetened by the clear, even tones of her voice. She seemed so lost in her prayer, so oblivious to her surroundings, that Kathy almost turned back, not wanting to shatter the moment. She decided just to be more careful.

She could just catch the corner of the stone over the woman’s shoulder, but the glare of the sun washed out the inscription. Closer. Quiet. Just a little to one side. That’s it.

Now she could see the name.

“Tilly.”



It slipped out. The name struck her, touched her heart, and went to her lips before she could stop it. She didn't think anyone would hear such a faint whisper.

But the woman heard it. She gasped in surprise and looked up at Kathy, her dark eyes filled with dismay.

Kathy felt stabbed through with shame. "Oh . . . excuse me . . . please . . . I didn't mean to . . ."

But then the eyes widened. The woman turned away and looked only at the grave. She began to tremble.

"No . . ." Kathy fumbled, backing away. "No, don't . . . It's all right."

Oh! Kathy backed into Dan.

"Pardon us," he said with irritation in his voice. "We were just leaving."

The woman would not look at them. Now she had her hand to her face.

Kathy tried to be a friend. "Who . . . who was Tilly?"

The woman bolted like a frightened animal, scattering the flowers; she escaped, she ran desperately away, as if to save her life.

"No, wait!" Kathy cried. "We didn't mean any harm! Don't run!"

Dan's grip on Kathy's arm was almost painful. "Oh brother, I don't believe this!"



Kathy just couldn't seem to right this terrible wrong. "We're leaving, right now!" she called.

Dan spoke in a hushed voice, hoping she would take the hint. "Kathy, forget it. That's enough."

Kathy gave it up. The woman was gone. The day was ruined.

"I feel sick."

Dan had to force himself to be compassionate. "Well . . . Kathy, I was hoping you'd realize that this was one of those very private moments for her."

"I scared her, Dan. I scared her, and I didn't mean to."

"Oh . . ." Dan struggled to think of a reply that would soothe her. "It's . . . uh . . . emotions, you know. There are a lot of emotions at work in a place like this."

"Did you see the look on her face when she saw me?"

"Well . . . who knows what she was thinking? It's all emotions . . ."

Kathy looked at the little gravestone again. Now she could see it clearly. It bore just that one name: Tilly.

Tilly. She couldn't take her eyes away. She didn't want to. Somewhere else in the world, Dan was still talking, saying something about lunch, the car, the rest of the afternoon. But Kathy was looking at that stone.

Tilly. What date?



Kathy stooped down to look. Only one date. Only one. Nine years ago.

“Kathy . . .” came Dan’s voice. Now she heard him. “What are you doing?”

Kathy didn’t have an explanation, and she couldn’t come up with one. “Tilly. I mean, that’s all it says.”

Dan could only say, “Hmm.”

“And only one date. See here?”

Dan sighed and remained quiet for a moment. “I guess, like you were saying, there must be quite a story behind it. Is that what you’re thinking?”

It was. “Oh . . . oh no, not really.” She looked at the stone again. “It’s just . . . It’s . . . I don’t know.”

She could hear the jingle of his car keys.

“I’ll go get the car. You can meet me out there by the—”

“I think I’ll be here.” Dan was quiet for an awkwardly long moment after that. She prodded him. “Just go ahead. I’ll be here.”

He didn’t say another word. She could only hear his footsteps fading away.

Tua





Dan rolled over and looked at the digital clock by the bed. One-thirty in the morning, and where was Kathy now? He didn't notice when she'd gotten up, but she was gone again, like so many nights before. He flopped onto his back and stared at the ceiling, his wrist on his brow. Should I get up and look for her? What if she snaps at me again? What if we get on each other's case again? Man, that just wouldn't be worth the trouble. Maybe I should just let it slide, let it pass, just try to keep the peace around here.

"Lord," he half-muttered and half-prayed, "we've got a real problem here, and I just don't know what to do."

He lay there thinking about it only for a short moment before he threw back the covers, swung his feet down to the floor and his waiting slippers, and grabbed his robe off a nearby chair.

The hallway outside the bedroom was dark, but



he could see a faint slit of light coming from under the door to his office. That had to be her.

He pushed the door open very slowly. Yes, there she was huddled on the small sofa in the light of the desk lamp, a large book cradled in her lap and fresh tears on her cheeks. She hadn't noticed him.

"Kathy?"

He startled her. She turned her head quickly away from him, frantically smearing the tears off her face.

"Are you all right?"

She seemed quite annoyed at the question. "Of course I'm all right."

Dan hesitated in the doorway. He kept thinking it might be better to just back out of this. "May I come in?"

She didn't answer. He finally took a chance and went in anyway, sitting very quietly, very carefully in his desk chair, not far from the sofa. Now he was facing her, and she couldn't turn away from him.

She wiped her face on the sleeve of her robe. "I wasn't crying."

Dan skipped that topic. He just looked at her for a very difficult, wordless moment. He noticed his fingers were drumming together. He held them still.

"Is there anything I can do?"

That was a safe thing to say. Kathy relaxed a lit-



tle, and even wiped away another tear without hiding it.

“I don’t know,” was all she could say at first. Dan was afraid the conversation was over until she finally blurted, “I’m sorry, Dan, I really don’t want to be this way.”

“I know.”

“You and the kids must think I’m terrible . . .”

“No, no, Kathy, we don’t. But we *are* very concerned. It’s been a week now.”

Kathy rubbed her eyes and face in exhaustion. “I’ll get over it. I just need some time, that’s all.”

“I think what you need is some sleep.”

“Dan, I can’t sleep.”

“Oh, I know that. But that has me worried too. You should see yourself. You look like—”

“Please don’t tell me how I look!”

Dan retreated. He even raised his hand a little as if to fend her off—then noticed, and dropped his hand immediately.

No. He couldn’t lose her again; he couldn’t let her retreat into her private pit, shutting him out. He felt like he was about to cry himself.

“Kathy . . .” he said quietly, desperately, “I really love you. I want you to know that.”

She looked at him, maybe for the first time. “Do you really?”



Dan rose from his chair and sat on the sofa beside her, putting his arm around her and drawing her in. She welcomed his affection; she drank it in as she rested against him.

“I do love you,” said Dan. “Really.”

“Do you think I’m a good person?”

“You’re the best.”

Her lip began to quiver, and her head dropped.

“Hey, come on now,” said Dan.

She quaked with her first sob. “I’ve always wanted to be good. I’ve always tried.”

He touched her face. “You’re a wonderful person. I wouldn’t change a thing.”

She just clung to him without a word. That was fine. He knew how to love her, and felt very comfortable doing that. They didn’t need any more words, just time with each other. They took that time, and she seemed to rest a little easier.

He noticed the large book still in her lap. “What do you have here?”

She gave the album just a sideways glance. “Photo album.”

He reached down and flipped it open. He had to smile. “Oh boy, here’s some real history for you.”

Kathy gave the album a little more attention.

They’d both seen these old photographs so many times before, but tonight it brought healing just to look



at those cute little faces again, smiling, drooling, laughing. As always, it just didn't seem that long ago.

Little blonde Amy and her new wagon. Roughhouse Bruce with his sixth-grade soccer trophy. Tommy holding up his newly lost tooth.

A few pages back, they came across an old Christmas photo, and the kids were even smaller.

"How old were they when we took this?" asked Dan.

"That was in our old house in Hoodspont. Bruce had to be three, so Amy was only two."

"And Tommy . . . ?"

"I think I was still carrying him."

Dan turned the page.

Kathy chuckled at a very unflattering snapshot. "Boy, I sure was!"

Dan chuckled too. "You sure were." Then he shook his head. "Will you look at these little kids! Now Bruce is in college, Amy's a varsity cheerleader, Tommy's a . . ."

"A fifteen-year-old!"

"Yeah, right." They both laughed, and it was a welcome release. "Enough said."

They sat together on the sofa for a while, just enjoying each other's company, the quiet, and the peacefully passing time.

"Been thinking a lot about the kids lately?"



“Oh, I’m always thinking about the kids.”

“Well, yeah, but . . .”

“But what?”

“Well, tonight it’s the photo album, and last night you dug out all their old toys, and Tuesday night, didn’t you sit up all night in the sewing room?”

“It was quiet in there.”

Dan could feel the risk rising even as he said it.

“Well, that used to be the nursery, remember?”

Kathy remained quiet. Now Dan felt awkward. Maybe he’d said too much.

“I was just . . . you know . . .” he fumbled.

“Was I a good mother?”

Dan spoke directly to her, sincerely. “Honey, you were great. You’re still great. The kids have all turned out really well.”

“Did I do all right?”

So the pain was still there. So now they’d have to keep talking about it.

“Sweetheart, really, when all is said and done, you don’t have anything to regret. You don’t have to go back and do anything over again.”

Only a short moment later Kathy clapped the album shut. “I think I’ll go to bed now.”

The conversation was over. Dan felt relieved.

Kathy rose from the sofa and Dan stayed close by her. They went as a couple back to the bedroom.



“Thank you for loving me,” she said.

“Don’t ever worry about that,” he answered.

Sometime in the early morning, Kathy finally lapsed into a fitful sleep. If Dan slept at all, he couldn’t remember.