

# Chapter 1

## Pink Moment

### 1914

Megan Elizabeth Baxter had a limited number of days to watch the sun set over the Ojai. And the Meggie in her intended to make the most of every one of them. Even at the young age of fourteen, she knew that life held no guarantees. The Nordhoff Cemetery held the graves of many young children, her infant sister Lilly among them. Life could be as short as it was sweet. You had to find the good in each moment, even the ordinary ones.

Still, Meggie wanted more from life than feeding chickens. As she threw out grain to the hungry hens, her mind played with possibilities. She loved words and books and adventure. Where would this trio take her? Much as she loved the Ojai—a valley named after the native Chumash Indian word for *The Nest*—her imagination soared far beyond it.

She stood barefoot in the soft warm dirt of the chicken yard, the empty feed bucket suspended, forgotten, in her hand as the sun dropped below the western mountains. She turned toward the sunset, her eyes and brain trying to absorb the raging orange and purple of the sky. It was a fine thing—this sunset. The Creator’s handiwork was lavished every evening on whoever stopped to look. Whoever had a heart to fill, a soul to lift.

As the colors began to fade, Meggie flung her blond braids back over her shoulders and turned a full 180 degrees to face the towering Topa Topa bluffs to the east. Right on cue, the mountains blushed pink, their striated layers awash in the final red fire of the setting sun. The pink tinge lasted only a few minutes and then the Topa Topas darkened to gray.

In later years, other souls would call it the “Pink Moment.” But for Meggie, it was her special time to reflect at the end of another day. She was but a small figure standing alone—on the circle of the earth, in the circle of the Ojai valley, in the circle of her family, in the circle of her own heart, in the circle of God’s love.

Meggie never tired of the vivid sunset or the rosy glow of the bluffs. As the sun colored the skies, she thanked God for her day. The good and the bad of it.

The treasures were easy to recall. In a few stolen moments after lunch, she’d sat cross-legged, safely hidden behind the big oak tree, writing in her tablet. Glorious words had poured out on the page. Words about the Pink Moment.

#### *Pink Moment*

*Gentle guardian of the east,  
the great Topa Topas  
spread ribbed angel wings  
against the sky  
soaring high  
above  
the Ojai.*

*At days end  
in silent tribute  
to the sinking sun  
for just a moment  
these towering cliffs  
blush pink.*

*The Topa Topas  
all aglow  
seem reluctant  
to let go  
of sun and sky  
and dreaming.*

*And so seeming  
to tarry the sunset  
written pink  
on her stone face,  
the mountain  
pauses to embrace  
the last lingering lift of light  
before letting go  
and giving flight  
to darkest night  
and the full moon  
rising.*

Meggie ran the words over in her mind—strong words—words struggling to capture the feelings in her heart. She felt a fierce kinship with these mountains and joy as she scribbled words on the page. Writing, in itself, was an act of thanksgiving.

As the glow of the Topa Topas faded, Meggie rethought the rest of her day. She stretched her back, stiff from a morning spent picking green beans. Well, she guessed she could thank God for green beans. Late morning, after chores, she'd taken her eight-year-old brother Taddy to the stream to catch pollywogs. His blond hair, cropped straight above his eyes, caught sunlight. An infectious grin lit his face as the muddy water of his Mason jar filled with wiggling black tadpoles. It was easy to thank God for tadpoles and Taddy and the enraptured look on his sweet face.

As for rest of the afternoon...Meggie couldn't quite bring herself to thank God for the hours spent canning those darned string beans. Neither could she work up any real thankfulness for Aunt Rose. Her shoulders sagged, remembering...

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“Megan Elizabeth Baxter!” Aunt Rose called in her strident voice. “Did you forget we’re canning today?”

Life would be so much better if only Papa's old-maid sister, Rose, hadn't moved in with them. Reluctantly, Meggie closed her tablet and made her way back to the house. She walked slowly up the front steps like a condemned man facing the gallows.

Aunt Rose sat in the shade of the porch with Mama, snapping string beans. "Lost in dreaming again, I see," Aunt Rose complained to Meggie, waggling a freshly-picked bean in her agitated hand. "There's work to be done. String beans don't can themselves, you know. We've just about got these beans ready for the water bath and..."

"She's here now, Rose," Mama interrupted. Mama stood up, spilling a pile of green beans from her lap onto the wooden porch. "Come help me in the kitchen, Meggie."

Meggie picked up the spilled beans, then ducked behind Mama's slim form, before following her mother inside.

The kitchen was already stifling with the steam from kettles of water boiling on the cook stove. Mama poured a bowl of cut string beans into the roiling water.

"Fetch those jars, Meggie." Mama smiled as she tucked a strand of curling blond hair back behind her ear.

Blond and blue eyed, Meggie was a miniature of her mother and glad for it. The two worked in a quiet rhythm, using special tongs to put the jars and glass lids in another kettle of water to sterilize them, stirring the beans until they softened.

"I didn't mean to sneak out of the canning, Mama," said Meggie.

"I know."

"I was writing a poem and...I just had to get the words down before I lost them."

Grappling with the tongs, Meggie lifted a steaming jar out of the boiling water. "Would you like to see it?"

"Why, yes. I would."

Meggie slipped her notebook out of her pocket.

Mama took a break from the demanding work to sit in the chair and read. Her eyes glistened.

"It's lovely, Meggie. Words are your gift." Mama gave Meggie a quick hug. "Someday you'll use them to bless others."

"You really think so, Mama?"

"You spoil that girl, Elizabeth," Aunt Rose interrupted, as she bustled importantly into the kitchen, carrying the rest of the string beans. "How will she ever become a proper home-maker with her head in the clouds and her nose in a book?"

Meggie tucked her notebook safely back in her pocket.

"Now Rose," Mama's soothing voice rose slightly. "Meggie helped us put up 50 quarts of cling peaches yesterday. She'll be a grown woman soon enough. There's time for dreaming."

"Work before pleasure, I always say." Rose clucked her tongue in the irritating manner she had before turning to inspect the row of jars. "Words won't fill an empty stomach come winter."

"Women feed hearts as well as stomachs." Mama placed her hands on her hips, daring Rose to comment.

Meggie's mouth ran dry.

Aunt Rose pursed her lips as if to speak, then thought better of it. An uneasy silence filled the humid kitchen.

With the back of her hand, Meggie mopped the beads of sweat clinging to her forehead. Why did they have to can in September—the hottest month of all?

Aunt Rose busied herself, running her fingertip across the top of each jar. “This jar has a chip,” she said. “It’ll never seal. Are you trying to poison us?”

“That’s why we always check them before the filling.” Mama ignored the insult. “Set the damaged jar aside. We won’t use it.”

“Huumph.” Rose grunted her disapproval. “Watch out for those beans now. Don’t let them get too soft.”

“I know how to can string beans, Rose.” Mama banged the large stirring spoon on the kettle.

Aunt Rose muttered something under her breath.

Meggie checked each jar rim once again, running her finger around the flat rim of glass. If a jar didn’t seal, Aunt Rose would surely place the blame on Meggie with her head lost in her books. Meggie tried extra hard to keep her mind on the task at hand. Spooning string beans into a jar, she arranged them to fit. Meggie added the juice from the bean kettle until it ran over the lip of the jars. She wiped the rims, then added the rubber seal and glass top. Pushing down, she fastened the lid in place with the wire handle.

“Be sure to get them on nice and tight,” advised Aunt Rose. She hefted the filled jars into a hot water bath in the canning kettle, fogging her wire rimmed glasses.

Meggie nudged the door open, hoping for a hint of a cooling breeze. Between the boiling kettles and the growing tension in the room, a girl had to be careful not to get burned.

“Some of my sweat is likely canned right along with these green beans,” she said in a feeble attempt to lighten the mood.

“Meggie! What an unlady-like remark,” grouched Aunt Rose. “Always remember, ladies do not sweat. They glow.”

“Yes, Aunt Rose.” The three of them were glowing plenty.

Meggie studied her aunt through the clouds of steam. A certain bitterness of spirit lingered in the pale gray eyes squinting behind her spectacles. Meggie watched the stern mouth puckered with concentration. A few beads of perspiration formed on the tight line of her top lip. Straggling brown strands of hair streaked with gray escaped the severe bun at the back of her neck. Aunt Rose wore her ever-present blue cameo pin fastened at the neck of her crisply ironed blouse. Her shirtsleeves were rolled up in deference to the cumbersome task at hand, revealing beefy white arms prone to freckles. A starched embroidered apron covered her ample bosom and the roll of her abdomen. Stocky legs ended in sensible black shoes planted firmly on the wood floor.

Aunt Rose never married. Maybe that’s why she focused her frustrations on Meggie and Mama. Meggie tried to please her, really she did. She tried to avoid her as well. A little of Aunt Rose’s special brand of criticism went a long way.

The finished jars of string bean bounty glistened green on the counter.

“Very nice,” said Mama, giving them a final wipe with the dishtowel.

“Waste not—want not, I always say. Though a creature of little strength, the ant wisely stores up his food in the summer.” Rose took off her glasses, cleaning them on her apron. “The ant, Missy, doesn’t waste time scribbling down foolishness behind the old oak tree.”

Meggie’s cheeks burned. Her spine straightened. Her stories and poems might be

unpolished, but they were not foolish. She had to write. It ranked right up there with breathing. Until she put pencil to paper, her thoughts would not let her be. Once the words were written down, then she could concentrate on chores.

She could never explain that to Aunt Rose. Her stern aunt thought in narrow terms. She was an industrious ant, putting away the summer bounty of apricots and peaches, beans and tomatoes, pickles and jams, against the barren winter months. The shelves in the root cellar were nearly filled with tidy rows of brightly-colored Mason jars.

In contrast, Meggie's mind and heart were crowded with row upon row of thoughts... growing, just waiting to be harvested in words and canned into prose. Jars of word pictures, poems and stories. Whole shelves of green and red and purple thoughts, glistening with inspiration. Meggie sighed. Right there in the hot, steam-laden kitchen, for better or worse, Meggie knew herself to be a writer.

"Let her be, Rose." Mama's voice had an edge to it—one seldom used. "You don't need to be stifling a gift. Let it be."

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Standing in the chicken yard as the Topa Topas faded to gray; Meggie shook her head and turned back to prayer. In a nod to good will, Meggie allowed that she could at least thank God that Aunt Rose had dropped the subject.

Her thoughts raced ahead. Tomorrow was the first day of school. She thanked God in advance for all the glorious new books in the classroom, and the lessons that lay ahead. School. The word alone was an answered prayer.

Her pink moment prayer was done. As the sunlight faded, Meggie closed her eyes and inhaled the heady sweetness of sage. Already the air was cooling. She could feel the soft earth beneath her toes releasing the heat of the summer day.

Something damp and warm nuzzled her hand. Wags. The dog looked up, waved his plume of a tail, then glanced toward the barn, reminding her of her evening chores still not done.

Meggie gave him a quick rub behind the ears. "Good dog, Wags. Such a good dog." Then she sprang into belated action on the rest of her chores.

"Shoo, girls. Shoo." She waved the edges of her cotton dress, herding the chickens into the coop, safe from coyotes.

She made fast work of throwing flakes of hay over the fence to Molly the mare, and her stable mate, old Cooper, a mule. She scooped a can of feed for Tilly, the brown and white pigmy goat who let out a bleat and head-butted the feed trough.

The moon was already rising when Meggie headed back toward the house.

The old wood-framed screen door creaked as she came into the farmhouse kitchen. Mama had the oil lamps lit and carried a heavy pot of stew to the table for supper. Meggie hurried to wash up and sat in her seat next to Taddy. He flashed his trademark smile.

Meggie's older brothers Dalton and Chase were already seated across from her, with Aunt Rose in the middle. Pa sat at one end of the table and Ma at the other.

Meggie glanced across the table. Aunt Rose wore her usual scowl. "You're late," she pronounced. "Daydreaming again are we, Missy?"

"Well, I..."

“Enough.” Pa gave Aunt Rose a quelling look and her acid tongue fell silent.

Meggie felt feet bump hers under the table. Chase pulled back his long legs. At fifteen, he’d yet to grow into his size 13 feet. His boots were a full size larger than Papa’s.

“Sorry, Meggie.” He smiled across the table at her, taking the sting out of Aunt Rose’s words.

She nodded. Chase didn’t have a mean bone in his body. He was just a mite awkward. Another growth spurt had caused his pant legs to ride up on his ankles. With school starting, he’d need new britches. One more thing to squeeze out of the tight family budget. Even though Meggie had a shiny new pair of shoes circled in the Sears Roebuck catalogue, she supposed her old high-topped shoes could last another year. They didn’t rub her toes too much. Of course, after a barefoot summer, any shoes would bind. She didn’t mind the sacrifice.

Meggie swallowed hard. When had she started thinking like a parent? Perhaps too much canning in the stifling heat of the kitchen had addled her brain.

She looked across at Chase. In coloring, he too, favored his mother, blond with even lighter blue eyes. He had the prominent Baxter nose and his father’s thoughtful way about him. And charm... why, Chase could charm the worm out of an apple.

“What’s for dinner, Ma?” asked Chase. “I could eat a mule... Well maybe not Cooper. Way too old.”

“Beef stew,” replied Mama. “With plenty of buttermilk biscuits.”

Papa bowed his head as they joined hands round the table. In his deep, resonant voice he thanked God for the bountiful orange crop, the health of the livestock, their little family, their home, their neighbors, and the food that Mama had lovingly prepared. Meggie stole a look at her father’s profile. It was a strong face, gently lined about the eyes. Papa’s dark hair shone in the lamplight. It was cut short on the sides, longish at the back. A little gray streaked the temples and peppered his beard and mustache. His hands were calloused and strong, even when clasped in prayer. Meggie felt safe in his care.

At the “Amen,” Mama began to dish up the stew.

Dalton breathed in the heady aroma of supper. “Smells great, Ma!” At seventeen, the eldest brother, Dalton, was already done with school and nearly a man. He was a farmer through and through and was happiest working in their orange groves. His long day’s work in the fields had brought on a powerful appetite.

The beef stew quickly vanished as did the basket of baking powder biscuits heaped with fresh butter and tangy blackberry jam.

“School starts tomorrow.” Papa looked over at Chase, Meggie and Taddy. “You younguns fixin’ to go?” A hint of humor lit Papa’s dark brown eyes.

“I’m planning on playing hooky myself,” Chase said with an exaggerated yawn and a stretch of his lanky arms.

“Great,” said Dalton. “You can help Pa and me tackle pruning off the suckers on those trees by Chinaman’s wall.”

“Well, on second thought, sitting behind a desk can’t be all that bad.” Chase took a last bite of biscuit.

“You’ll be the first class to be in those lovely new bungalow style buildings,” said Mama. “Shows just how much pride Ojai takes in education.”

Aunt Rose sniffed. "Too much pride, I'd say. Fancy bushes lined up on the front steps in terra-cotta pots. You'd think Nordhoff High was Harvard or something."

"Principal Bristol must think so," said Dalton. "He wanted me to go to college. Got me mixed up with those stuffy, rich, Thacher School boys." Dalton picked at a spot of dirt under his thumbnail. "Farmers don't need college."

"You're so right, Dalton." Aunt Rose agreed. "And... I'm thinking Meggie might be better off here at home learning home-making skills than lollygagging at school, filling her mind with a bunch of fool notions."

Icy fear invaded Meggie's veins. She cast a panicked look at Papa.

"Meggie loves school," spoke out Mama.

Aunt Rose folded her arms across her ample bosom. "A woman's place is in the home."

Papa placed his hands flat on the table, and faced Aunt Rose. "Meggie will go to school tomorrow and the next day and the next. An educated mind is an asset in a daughter as well as a son. I've never been a supporter of ignorance."

Meggie remembered how to breathe.

Papa ran a hand through his thick hair. "Dalton, you've finished high school. You don't have any hankering for college. Raising crops suits you, I guess."

"Yes it does, Pa." Dalton braced his hands against the straps of his overalls.

Looking around the table, Papa studied his children. "Each of you is as unique as an ear of Indian corn. Different colors and patterns. Different dreams..."

Mama spoke up. "Schooling is the first step in making those dreams come true."

"You can see that your Mama aims to raise a fine crop of educated Baxters." Papa exchanged a warm glance across the table with Mama, who colored slightly and moved a slender hand to touch the gold-spun hair at the base of her neck.

Aunt Rose busied herself mopping a spill of blackberry jam on the side of the jar.

Mama wiped at her eyes. "My, how you're all growing up...right in front of me."

"I'm growing up too, aren't I, Papa?" Taddy got into the conversation. He sat straighter in his chair in case anyone was measuring.

"You certainly are." Aunt Rose patted him affectionately on the top of his golden hair. Meggie noted the gesture. Aunt Rose displayed none of her usual antagonism toward Taddy. He was her favorite.

"Big enough to start helping with the haying, I reckon," said Pa.

"Really?" asked Taddy, his eyes alight.

"Yep. I'll add you to my weekend crew of your older brothers soon as the cut alfalfa's dry."

"That reminds me," said Mama. "Got a phone message passed on from Doc Saeger at the drugstore. Your new blade for the hay mow can't be delivered til Wednesday."

"I guess that takes fixing the hay mow off tomorrow's schedule." Papa took a bite of stew.

"I hear Thacher School just got a phone installed." said Chase.

"Really..." Mama passed what was left of the biscuits. "I thought the telephone at Doc Saeger's was the only one in town. It's still the most reliable way to get a message from Ventura."

"And the latest gossip," added Aunt Rose.

Pa nodded. "Times are changing. Telephones are turning up everywhere now. Besides the

Doc's, there's a phone at the Sues Cash Store, one at the Galley Cottages and in most of the hotels."

"I guess now we have three sure-fire ways to get the latest news," remarked Chase with a grin. "The telegraph, the telephone, and the tell-a-woman." Meggie kicked his leg under the table.

"Can I take Cooper tomorrow?" asked Meggie. "Taddy and I could ride together to school."

"Sure," said Papa. "We don't need the mule for plowing tomorrow."

It wasn't any picnic balancing herself and Taddy on old Cooper the nearly two miles to school, but it sure beat walking. She was glad their little school wasn't meeting anymore in the old granary way out in what the newspaper called the "howling wilderness" at the foot of Dennison grade. The newer schoolhouse, several years old, even had a bell tower to call latecomers to class. Meggie could almost smell the wonder of chalk and glue. Even better, Mama had made her a new checkered dress with a real lace collar to wear for her first day back. It looked right smart when she'd tried it on and examined her reflection in the vanity mirror.

"I guess I'm ready for school," said Taddy. "But I already miss summer." He wiggled his bare toes under the table.

"San Antonio School, here we come," breathed Meggie holding back a whoop. Her excitement was growing. All those lovely books. Despite the objections of Aunt Rose, they'd have to hog-tie her to a fencepost to keep her away.

"The Friend family sold those three acres for the school to the district for only twenty-five dollars," said Pa. "A very generous thing to do."

"Very generous," echoed Mama. "I heard that the school is up to 28 students this year. Imagine that." Mama beamed. "Ojai is growing."

"Yeah, growing way too civilized." Dalton excused himself. "Selling good farmland for a school." He headed out the door to take solace in his beloved trees.

Mama started clearing the table.

"Reckon Rusty still has a crush on you, Meggie?" mused Chase.

"I sincerely hope not." Meggie hid her blush behind her napkin. "I'd best get to those dirty dishes."

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Meggie stood on an old starch box to wash dishes in the big enameled sink. She ran a rag over a dirty plate and daydreamed that she was at a podium speaking to a large crowd of admirers about her latest book. *"Thank you... Thank you, one and all."* Taking a bow, she left the starch-box podium and threw the old dishwater on the rosebush by the back door.

She pulled in a deep breath of cooling air. Crickets chirped and a coyote yipped off in the distance. She barely noticed the dark clouds roll in, covering the moon. School was starting tomorrow. Meggie couldn't wait.

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In the rising wind the loose shingles flapped on the sagging roof of the shack hidden in the shadows of Horne Canyon. Russell "Rusty" Stowe picked at a rough spot in the scarred wood tabletop as Ma dished up supper. Bread and warm milk again.



“What’s this slop?” Pa bellowed. His florid face folded into a scowl.

Ma shrunk back as if struck. “It’s...it’s all I had to cook... I...”

“You call this garbage cookin’?” The stench of whiskey was strong on Pa’s breath. “I feed the hogs better.” He hurled the plate across the room. The cream colored mess clung to the wall for a brief moment then sagged in a lump to the dirty floor.

Pa pulled on his ragged coat and banged out the door. Another bender. Old “Cyclone” Clyde Stowe had been at it for a week already. He held his liquor a lot closer than he did his family.

The horse galloped away. Rusty and his Ma held their breaths until the sound faded into the night. Rusty risked a glance at his mother. She was crying.

Elva Stowe looked older than her thirty-five years. Dark circles smudged her eyes. Her once rich chestnut hair had faded, like her soul, to a dingy gray. She mostly wore the same washed out flowered dress these days. That and a dull pink apron edged in lace. It was the lace that got to Rusty. His Ma deserved better. She had once fit the lace. Pretty and feminine.

Rusty could barely remember that woman. He kept an old photo in the box under his bed. In the photo, she was young...smiling....happy. Rusty couldn’t remember the last time he’d seen his Ma smile.

“I’ll clean it up,” said Rusty, avoiding the pain in his mother’s eyes.

She nodded and closed herself away behind the door to her room.

Rusty mopped the wall and the board floor with an old rag. He rinsed it out in the sink. Then the slender fourteen-year-old boy sat down at the table and ate cold bread and milk. It was tough to force it past the lump that clogged his throat. His hair glinted copper in the lamplight. Red hair, like his Pa’s. Rusty hoped that was all he’d inherited from a man as mean as Cyclone Clyde.

After his meager meal, he went out to feed the hogs. The wind had picked up and dark clouds edged the mountains. Rusty welcomed the cool after the long hot summer. He poured feed into the troughs and refilled the water. Pa was right about one thing. The hogs ate better than they did.

Clyde Stowe was proud of his hogs. He fed them good grain and corn. The animals fetched a premium price at market. But Rusty and Ma never saw the profits in their larder. They seldom had a ham or a side of bacon. The hogs were well fed and in turn fed Pa’s great and mighty thirst.

Rusty rubbed a fat sow’s back with a stick. If he thought he could get away with it, he’d swipe a piglet for Ma’s cook pot. But Pa knew his hogs better than he did his boy. He’d notice a missing pink snout or curly tail, sooner than he would the guarded sadness in Rusty’s eyes. Rusty felt older than his fourteen years. He shrugged. It was no use wishing for what couldn’t be. He snuck a little of the corn into the cow’s feed. With the hay running low, it wouldn’t do for her to go dry.

Rusty shivered. The canyon fell into shadow well before the sun set. The moon was rising when Rusty came back in. Ma’s plate sat on the table untouched. Rusty placed it in the icebox, next to the half basket of eggs and moldy sliver of cheese that would be breakfast. He washed up the chipped plates and glasses. Put the mismatched forks away in the drawer.

School started tomorrow. It wasn’t the books that drew him. The words floated on the page, making little sense. It was the quiet. At school, no one yelled and hollered. No one was likely to throw things or hit him. At school the world was the way it was supposed to be.

Rusty sighed and looked down at his worn twill pants. He ran a hand over the patches on his flannel shirt. They'd have to do. He stripped the pants and shirt off and washed them out in the sink. Then he hung them near the wood stove to dry. After, he washed up as best he could. He plunged his copper head of hair into the soapy water, shuddering with cold. He might be the son of an alcoholic pig farmer, but he sure as heck didn't want to smell like one. Rusty found himself humming as he scrubbed himself clean.

School started tomorrow. There was a particular smile he'd longed for all through the long, hot summer. Meggie's smile. He couldn't wait to see her.