

“Thomas Martin’s *A Silver Cord* transports us to a world above ours—the clouds, but the clouds as a realm of the spirit, where each word spoken below, each thought we breathe, in love or anger, takes on substance, heightened and purified and thunderously clashing. The book is a visionary re-tuning of our world below into a song of praise, an epic battle of the heart, yearning and inventive and strikingly unfolded.” Thomas Gardner, Alumni Distinguished Professor Emeritus of English, Virginia Tech

“Thomas Martin has crafted a wondrous story of joy within a world of adventure. Here is a fantasy novel complete with trial and triumph. His mastery of description and dialogue fills each page with life. Riveting for any reader, young or old, the journey through this book is an exploration where friendship leads to discovery and light extinguishes darkness.” Professor Dan Haase, Wheaton College

“The mysterious and powerful silver cord that transports Ellie to the fantastic world of Nephele, transported me as well. Martin has authored a high fantasy story complete with both animal and otherworldly characters to both aid and battle Ellie in a journey of self-discovery that triumphs with the redemptive power of love.” Steven L. Layne, author of *This Side of Paradise*

“*A Silver Cord* combines many elements of the best fantasy fiction: a complex heroine who goes on a harrowing journey, animals that not only speak but shape-shift, and the twists and turns of an exciting plot. Ellie, the heroine, stays in our minds not only because of her imaginative curiosity, but especially because of her courage.” Greg Maillet, Crandall University

“A *Silver Cord* will suffuse your imagination with great mythic force. Its unadorned grammar moves with rapidity so that the force of the language resides in deep metaphors drawing the reader into a realm where the abiding goodness of solid reality has become fractured and faces the threat of disintegration in the flow of time. The story is redemptive with a scope as large as *The Divine Comedy*, so much so that, like Dante, we will need a guide across its landscapes. Grab hold of the Silver Cord with Ellie and let this story work on you.” P. Andrew Montgomery, Samford University

# CLOUDS OF FIRE SERIES

BOOK ONE

# A SILVER CORD

CLOUDS OF FIRE  
BOOK ONE

THOMAS L. MARTIN



*For Dyanne*  
*Like the clouds that adorn the earth each day,*  
*you inspire me.*

*“When the silver cord is cut...”*

—Ecclesiastes

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## CHAPTER I

# A SAD, STRANGE DAY

Like a single white daisy in a field of black was Ellie's hat on the day of her grandfather's funeral. Her mother had dressed ten-year-old Ellie in a black dress and tied a thick black ribbon around the hat's white crown, but white was left sprawling from the brim. That daisy fluttered and floated toward the head of the church, past the women in black dresses and men in black suits. Ellie was seated in the front row with the rest of her family, her chestnut brown hair framing her wide brown eyes and intent face below the standout hat. Her mom's woolen skirt prickled the skin on her bare forearm.

Never had Ellie been to a funeral before. Everyone was whispering, and everything felt strange. She was in a kind of disbelief at what was happening. When she heard sobs behind her and across the aisle, her emotions swung between sadness and confusion. The glossy casket was on her family's side of the church, but Ellie could see little from where she sat. Rather than making sense, every new scene left her more bewildered.

The minister ascended the dais. The murmur of the congregation hushed as he began to speak. His tone was solemn, his countenance grave. He started the service with words of invoca-

tion and formal pronouncement. Ellie didn't understand all he said, but the rich tone of his voice was like music filling the sanctuary to the wooden rafters. He introduced the family, whom she understood were to stand at the front. She joined her grandmother, parents, uncles, aunts, cousins, sisters, and brother as they faced the people. Slender Ellie, the smallest of the bunch, tried not to fidget while standing there. She wanted to be out of that stiff dress. She wanted to be on Grandpa's farm.

Those in the pews greeted the family and paid their last respects to her grandfather. The congregation formed a single line that circled around the front of the church. Many of these people Ellie didn't know at all, especially the older ones. Older women passed by holding embroidered handkerchiefs. Older men with bowed heads moved with slow gait. Familiar family faces dotted the crowd but were outnumbered by many other mourners who had come. They gave lots of squeezes with lots of regrets to Ellie on their way to say their goodbyes. Many remarked on what a fine man her grandfather was.

Sadness welled up within Ellie. She tugged her mother's skirt. Momma looked down with a question in her eyes.

"Is he gone forever? Will I see him again?"

Momma's eyes softened, and she smoothed her hand over Ellie's hair. "He's not gone, sweetheart. He's just someplace else."

After people gave their condolences, it was time for the family to pass by the casket and say their goodbyes to her grandfather. Ellie waited her turn at the end. This line moved slower than the last. She felt terribly uneasy about the moment that lay ahead. Would she look or not? Her grandmother stood first by the casket, silent tears slipping down her face. As the line inched forward, two of her aunts leaned down to kiss her grandfather. Ellie was more than a little shocked. She would not

do the same, she decided. More quarter-steps forward. She finally came close enough to peer into the casket. Ellie felt heavy in her shoes. She decided she would look, after all, if only for a moment. If she became uncomfortable, she would quickly turn away.

Just tall enough to peer over the edge of the casket, Ellie looked inside. What she saw neither met nor missed her expectations, for she really hadn't known what to expect. What she saw was her grandfather's body, what everyone said goodbye to. Somehow, though, it didn't look like her grandfather. Somehow what was before her was different. To her, the body looked vacant. The familiar face looked, not like he was sleeping, but as if he just weren't there anymore.

Perplexed, she stood at the casket by herself. She knew it was her turn. She could see herself saying something like goodbye in maybe five different ways, but none came out. She found it difficult connecting what was happening this day and the body before her to the grandfather she knew and loved. She thought of Grandfather busy in his woodshop, telling her tales and laughing heartily, or stealthing away cookies for her from Grandmother's china pig. She thought of the plaid shirts he wore, the deep woods green and dusk blue flannels. She thought of his high-laced boots and floating on top of them as he danced her across the floor. She thought of his weathered leather saddle over the colorful blanket in his barn. She had been the only kid in her family who pressed her parents to sleep over at her grandparents' house every holiday that year.

"I want to see the baby foal born!" Ellie insisted. Grandma had thought it would be too much for Ellie at her age. But Grandpa in his overalls and with a bundle under his arm said, "Let her keep vigil with me, Marilyn."

In the late hours, with a kerosene lantern at his side, Grandpa shared one story after another. The mare kept getting

up and down and rolling on her belly. Ellie felt a shiver of fear as she saw Grandpa work Misty's stomach with one hand and reach under her with the other.

"Breech." His word was grim.

"What is that, Grandpa?"

"The baby is backwards. If I don't turn it around, both the foal and Misty might die."

Misty's chest heaved as she snorted and panted, tossing her head back and forth. Ellie bit her lip in an effort to be brave. She stared at Grandfather's busy hands attending to the mare. He felt the weight of Ellie's concern and glanced up. "I'm so glad you're here to help me, Ellie. Comfort Misty while I help the foal." Grandpa's words strengthened Ellie. She stroked the horse's neck and murmured softly while Grandpa worked. "You'll be okay, Misty. Grandpa will help you." Ellie watched her grandfather wrestle one of the foal's glistening hooves and then another into position. Misty writhed, her eyes rolling. Ellie patted the mare. "Your baby is coming, Misty. It's coming!"

It wasn't long before Ellie heard the flow of water and saw the baby foal in Grandpa's lap on the ground. Ellie's eyes opened wide in wonder, and a smile stretched across her face. "You did it, Misty!"

Grandpa wiped the foal's nose and mouth with a towel.

"You did it, Grandpa!"

A thousand thoughts swirled in Ellie's mind. *How did the baby horse fit inside Misty? How did it breathe in there? What happened if no one were to help?*

"How did you know what to do, Grandpa? What if we hadn't been here?"

Grandpa's soft gaze landed on Ellie's face. He smiled in the lantern light, one corner of his mouth higher than the other. "Well, Ellie," he said, "others before me have shown me. Nature has rules. There is an order to these things, but sometimes that

order is disrupted. When that happens, we must step in. Did you know that often next to a poisonous plant grows the cure? Look for the solution right next to the problem, Ellie. This time we were the solution.”

Now Grandpa lay completely still in the casket, dressed in a suit, in front of Ellie. But unlike everyone else in the church, his suit was gray. It didn't seem to fit him at all. Where were his dusty blue jeans, his plaid shirt, and his worn gloves? His smooth forehead was absent the wrinkles that usually creased his face when he smiled at Ellie. His lips held no rosy glint of her grandfather's humor. Nor was there the knowing light hidden behind closed eyes.

What Ellie did see at this moment was something else, however. What she saw was a single thread sticking out.

From a button near the bottom of his vest, one solitary thread twisted up into the air. How out of place and strange this seemed to Ellie. Like a doll dressed for the fair was her grandfather, surrounded by flowers and presented to the church, yet there was one long thread sticking out. Everything was in its place except the thread, and there it was protruding so conspicuously. Ellie knew she was standing there too long. She nodded awkwardly and returned to her seat.

The church quieted and the minister proceeded with his message. His deep and steady voice filled the sanctuary again. Sonorous talk of the dust of the earth and the grass of the fields. Ellie listened, as well as she could, until her forearm again brushed against her mom's itchy skirt. This time the skirt's prickle started Ellie fidgeting in the wooden pew. She was so uncomfortable she couldn't help moving. As she twitched in her seat, her legs collided with Momma's.

“Sit still,” her mother admonished.

Ellie clasped her hands together and crossed her ankles. But one heel stubbornly drummed the bottom of the pew. “I'm

trying,” she answered softly. She didn’t want to upset Momma any more than she already was, but she didn’t know what to do with all the anxious energy in her body.

Ellie looked this way and that around the sanctuary. She looked up, she looked down. Her legs wanted to flutter. Her attention alit on something unexpected. There was a thread stuck on her leg. How did that get tangled up there? She followed with her eyes the line it formed. The thread ran all the way up to the casket! How could that be? Rather than leave it alone, she slowly pulled back her leg. No one noticed. She furtively reached down to disentangle the string. As she pulled it with her hand, though, the thread did not come free. It lengthened. The length of the thread pulled from the casket. She pulled a little more. It lengthened again. The minister talked on.

Ellie was in a fix. She tried to be still. But this thread was all tangled up with her leg. She pulled with her hands slowly and steadily. The thread’s silky filament ran out of the casket and along the ground. It glistened in the afternoon light slanting from the church windows. Yet no one seemed to notice at all. Ellie continued pulling, hand over hand. The thread was not taut in her hands. Surprisingly, it moved along with her. She silently gathered a ball of it in her lap. No warning pinch from her mom—no one noticed a thing.

The silver filament was lively and even lighter than it looked. Sparkles moved along its supple length. It was lovely to behold. Ellie directed her gaze to the front of the church as much as possible while she carefully pulled the thread so as not to attract attention. She continued pulling as quietly and with as little movement as she could manage. She was gathering quite a bouncy mass of it in her lap. *What next? Where will it end?* She couldn’t stop pulling. She certainly couldn’t put it back. Just about the time she thought that, the filament came

free from the casket. The end of it was on the floor ahead of her. Her mom squared her shoulders, focused her attention on the minister, and straightened herself in her seat. No sign as Ellie sat up that her mom noticed what she was doing at all.

So far, so good. Ellie needed to get the last length of the filament that lay on the floor without making a disturbance. She continued, pulling it quietly and gathering it in her hands. Not even her sisters and brother on the other side of the pew saw what she was doing. Just a little more, and she would have it. The trailing end of the filament finally came across the floorboards toward her feet. She was close now. The last little bit flipped up, curled over her scuffed knee, and landed in her lap.

What a relief. She had the whole thing. This strange thread was a jumble, all shiny and springy between her two hands. It was lively to the touch, and its silver surface emitted tiny flashes of light. Pressing the thread together, Ellie folded it over on itself several times. She moved the bundle gingerly toward her dress pocket and slipped it inside. She kept her hand over that pocket for the remainder of the day.

WHEN SHE RETURNED HOME that evening, after all the gatherings and ceremonies, Ellie ran to her room and withdrew the strange bundle from her pocket. There it was, all right. But it had changed completely. The string was nothing like before. The thread's springy life was gone, as were the silvery sparkles. *What a disappointment*, she thought. It was only a slight piece of gray thread snarled up, after all. She sighed a deep sigh and walked over to her bedroom window. Passing the bookcase Grandad built her, she paused to consider whether one of her favorite stories might lessen her sadness. From her early years, her deep love of reading brought joy of discovery and adventures into other worlds. Her teachers sometimes seemed



surprised by the knowledge she had gained from her reading and the words she used to express herself. But this night, memories of Grandad's reading to her brought the sting of tears to her eyes. She passed a hand across the spines of the books and turned to her closet, her head hanging low.

Mom came in. "Ready for bed, Ellie?" she said weakly, giving Ellie an extra-long squeeze. Evidently, all other words had been wrung out of her that day.

Ellie clung to her mom. Her cheek rested on the top of Ellie's head, and Ellie felt a drop of wetness. Sadness welled up in Ellie's heart again. Her dad came to the door. "How are you doing, baby girl?"

"I miss Grandpa. I wish he were here to read me a story."

"I can read to you," her father offered.

Ellie shook her head. "That's okay, Dad." Tonight she wanted her grandfather. No other would do.

Momma kissed the top of Ellie's head and reached for Dad's hand. Her parents gave her a final hug and exited the room.

Ellie went through the motions of getting ready for bed. She fastened the window and tossed the wad of string she had been holding on to the chair. Over that she threw the black dress her mother made her wear that morning. She slung the hat to the other side of the room and slipped into bed.

Out went the light. Up went the covers. What a day it had been. Her grandfather was gone. Nothing that had happened made sense to Ellie. But what was unsettled and care-ridden began to melt away. She trusted implicitly the rest that sleep brings. Her arms fell open wide, and her head rolled gently over. She was fast asleep. She breathed serenely.

And over on the chair by the window, under the black dress in that dark room, glowed one silver tail of light.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Thomas L. Martin is an award-winning author whose poetry, fiction, and scholarship seek to brighten minds and uplift souls. He believes that the language of fantasy is the vehicle to the best places of the imagination, and, as such, its literature ought to be beautiful, vivid, and captivating. In his writing, teaching, and editing, he has contributed to the understanding of this literature for over two decades. He is the Clyde S. Kilby Professor of English at Wheaton College, a liberal arts institution known for such past voices as Frederick Buechner and with strong connections to C. S. Lewis, J. R. R. Tolkien, and Madeleine L'Engle, among others.

