

COLOR OF LIES

ABBE ROLNICK



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Library of Congress Control Number: 2012904793

Rolnick, Abbe

Color of Lies/ Abbe Rolnick • 1st edition

ISBN: 978-0-9845119-14

Cover design and prepress by Karen Parker
(www.karenparkerdesigns.com).

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Author photo: Jim Wiggins.

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Also by Abbe Rolnick:

RIVER OF ANGELS (2010)

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Color of Lies would not have existed but for the glimpse of a woman dressed in white, seated in a wheelchair, rolling herself along the tarmac at the Concrete Fly-In. Thanks go to the hard working volunteers at the Concrete Fly-In, the Civil Air Patrol, and all the pilots. Special thanks to Carl Lindberg for his great explanations of the CAP procedures, as well as to Ralph Black, and those at the Heritage Flight Museum in Bellingham, WA.

Jim, your sense of adventure and openness to learning aided my thirst for knowledge. Without your encouragement and thoughtful readings of the manuscript, the book would still be an idea.

As always those in my writing group—Barbara Defreytas, Iris Jones, Mary Store, Terry Parakh, and JoAnne Chavre—your careful listening kept the voices honest.

A very special thank you to Sara Stamey, my editor and friend, who understood the ideas behind the words.

DEDICATION

To my family and those who have become my family.

“Open your heart, soften your eyes,
Between your truths, a story unfolds.”

—AR



PROLOGUE

Truths swept under the sand, carried by the wind,
lie at the bottom of an ocean.

Off the coast of Puerto Rico, two months and six days before the city of Hiroshima rose in a cloud of nuclear haze, a practice bombing mission went terribly wrong. A young man in a rowboat witnessed the sky explode and waves plough into the wings and tail of a metal bird.

As a local fisherman, he knew to hurry with patience. Waiting for the waters to settle, for the wind to carry the flames away, he studied the pilot struggling to inflate a raft. He paddled toward the crash site, a mile out along the point of the Borinquen coast. The engines in the B-29 Bomber must have failed, and the pilot missed the approach to the longest runway in the Caribbean, Ramey Air Base.

Chaos, black smoke, screams rose from three of the thirteen crew members as they sank below the surface, caught in the plane's fuselage. Of the ten remaining crew, five men scrambled into the plane's raft, leaving five stranded. Sirens from the air base sounded. The young fisherman focused on one man who dove below the surface, frantic. He popped up and then dove again. Obscured by the veil of smoldering oil, the fisherman hid from view. The rescuers from Ramey Air Base scooped up four of the remaining survivors. As the air base's crashboat and plane's raft made their way to shore, the fifth survivor surfaced.

The fisherman rowed to his side. He reached down, grabbed the frantic diver's forearm, and hauled him aboard. Not a man of many words, he said in his best English, "What are you looking for?"

Out of breath and in despair, the survivor coughed and sputtered, "Cracks. This plane carries a nuclear bomb."

A sheen of oil covered the spot where the plane sank. Both men stared as the waves engulfed the black hole of danger.

The fisherman passed him a bottle of rum. "My name is Tuto. And yours?"

"Spencer T. I'm the engineer, the person responsible for the crash."

Tuto picked up his oars and rowed along the coast to shore. The wind caught the boat as they headed inward to a small cove. He watched the man called Spencer T brush a tear from his eyes.

"By now your plane has sunk 120 feet below the surface."

Spencer T held his head in his hands. "What have I allowed to happen? I am such a fool. There is no going back now, too much secrecy, too much destruction. I...."

Tuto strained to hear the engineer's lament, but the wind carried off his words.

CHAPTER 1

Dinner Plate

Maria studied her Aunt JoAnne who had taken the leader's seat at the head of the table. She chose a chair at the opposite end with three settings between them. The two faced one another, giving Maria a clear view of her aunt's plate, and her aunt a direct sight line into Maria's face and plate. Maria chose her spot so she could spy. Not with malice—no one deliberately hid anything in this household—but to uncover truths among the peas, potatoes, chicken and rolls.

Maria had arrived late last night from back East. Anything past the Cascade Mountains was East in her mind. She could see the signs of the Pacific Northwest in the table setting: lacking a tablecloth, a forest green placemat framed each setting. Rosy red tulips with yellow centers, mixed with pale white daffodils, graced the middle of the mahogany dining table. Fern sprigs circled the beeswax candles.

Maria felt pleased to be back home in Concrete, Washington, where she could depend on the subtle complexities of their simple life. As Maria took her place, she noted her aunt's nod, an indication of approval as well as a gesture to be alert. JoAnne wore the white linen dress, a sign that Maria was still in her favor, and she had pulled her hair back in a low bun with a black velvet ribbon encircling stray hairs. Around her neck a scarf of red tulips hid the necklace of hearts, a necklace rarely

worn and even now obscured. Her wheelchair, concealed by the adaptation of padded armrests with a cloth that matched the sofa and armchairs, fit snug under the dining table.

Maria had been gone for over a year, and this dinner was a valiant attempt at appearing normal.

“Pass me the chicken, will you, Maria de la Via?”

Maria de la Via was a nickname that Aunt Jo used when she needed Maria to be on her best behavior. Ever since Maria was little, they would pretend that she came from an aristocratic family from the Deep South. In order for Maria to learn her manners, Aunt Jo would continue the ruse when they dined with influential families from town. Now at 26, Maria found this game annoying. She had come home because of a frantic phone call: Aunt Jo needed to fly to the Caribbean on a “mission”.

As Maria passed the roasted chicken, she watched for signs of why her aunt had invited this group of people to their home. She knew that the chicken on the platter was from their own yard since Aunt Jo held a strict food philosophy. Never eating meat or poultry outside of their home, her mantra was, “If you can’t grow it and kill it, you shouldn’t eat it.” For that reason alone, the town thought her Aunt Jo was a finicky eater, or worse yet, a vegetarian. Roasted chicken was reserved for family and friends who appreciated the hard work of raising, slaughtering, and cooking.

“Good to have you back home, young woman.” It was their old neighbor, Russell. At 95 he looked kinder and sweeter than ever and had clearly dressed up to be here. His white hair no longer covered his head, the few strands left standing up to salute the sky, competing with his beard that refused the edge of a razor. He wore an old blue shirt that showed the wear of buttonholes frayed from washing. The shirt complemented his blue eyes that could still penetrate a stranger’s soul. Today they peered out from behind the bouquet of flowers he had strategically placed at his setting. Even though Aunt Jo had made peace with his gossiping ways, he still shied from her

sharp eyes. He must have brought the flowers as an offering, since tulips and daffodils were his specialty.

As Maria passed the chicken, she winked at Russell. His thin lips curled upward until Aunt Jo looked at him. Maria felt an undercurrent of disapproval. Something was going on.

"Please, help yourselves," JoAnne directed. "Spencer must have been delayed."

Each of the guests took a helping of chicken. Of the five settings, one seat to her aunt's left remained empty. JoAnne was a stickler for timing, and Maria wondered who was this Spencer who would receive her aunt's wrath?

Molly McCain sat opposite Russell with her head down as if praying. She was the same age as Russell, but meaner and uglier. Maria could almost hear the hushed whisper of warning from her Aunt Jo: "Unkind thoughts beget unkind actions." Molly and her aunt had been feuding over property rights since Maria was four. Why, after so many years was Molly here eating with them?

Molly took the chicken and the potatoes, peas and applesauce, piling the food in the center of her plate. She heaped the food so high that her chin touched the edge and stuck there, defying anyone to mention the obvious. Nothing had changed in her world of greedy entitlement.

After the mysterious phone call of a week ago had brought Maria home, she had expected a heart to heart conversation alone with Aunt Jo, not this odd dinner party. Intrigued, she studied her aunt's plate for clues.

Her peas were scattered around the edges of the potatoes, a clear sign of nerves. Usually Aunt Jo would make pictures or circles before she devoured them one by one. Today they were strewn with no pattern, cast off. Clearly without appetite, JoAnne cut each piece of her chicken until her plate was filled with bite-sized chunks.

After the silence of mouths chewing, the swallowing and sipping of wine, Maria finally caught her aunt's eye. The green flecks that peppered her hazel eyes flashed a warning. Not sure if it was anger, fear, or excitement, Maria kept her head

bent. Although she was starved, she couldn't eat. A missing guest, no toast or words of thanks for a meal? Despite her good intentions of keeping quiet, words spilled from her lips, "Let's all make a toast to—"

Before Maria could finish, Aunt Jo clicked her wine glass with her fork, "A toast to seeing old friends."

Maria almost spilled her wine. Russell was their benevolent knight not ever quite dressed in shining armor. He was nosey and a nuisance and always trying to propose to Aunt Jo, and when that didn't work, he'd go on a drinking binge. He lifted his glass of red wine and winked at Maria.

Molly peered up from her plate. Instead of lifting her wine glass, she grabbed at her glass of water and raised the goblet in the air. "I guess we are old, aren't we."

After all these years Molly could still twist words to suit her.

Maria sipped her wine slowly, letting the rich earthy flavor warm her throat as the wine made its way down. She took another taste and nodded at JoAnne. "I like your choice tonight. Is this from the winery downriver?"

"Yes, it's the first bottling since the new owner took over the old Tarheel bootleg operation."

At this, Molly's glass slipped. Ripples of water flowed toward Maria's plate, which acted as a dam, diverting the water away from her lap but toward Aunt Jo. Maria sopped up the table with her napkin and righted the glass. Russell winked at Maria again. Aunt Jo wheeled her chair slightly away from the table. Co-conspirators, they were up to something.

As if on cue the front door opened, and in walked the mystery guest. Aunt Jo swirled her wheelchair toward the door, and Maria admired her aunt's enduring elegance and strength as she whisked herself around. More than forty years without the use of legs, and she made Maria feel clumsy.

"Speaking of the devil, here is the new vintner. We didn't wait for you, Spencer, but we haven't even finished our first course. We were just sampling the wine from your grapes. Let

me introduce you. Everyone, this is Spencer. Spencer, this is Russell, the gentleman who follows me around like a puppy, my neighbor Molly whose property butts up against the river, and my beloved grandniece, Maria de la Via.”

Everyone nodded from their seats. Maria, hearing her aunt’s warning code, stood up with wet napkin in hand and walked over to the front door. But the man—probably in his thirties—had already bent down to kiss Aunt Jo on the cheek, and was wheeling her back to the head of the table as Maria approached. She stared at the closeness between her aunt and Spencer, wondering why she hadn’t heard of him before. A twinge of jealousy hit as her aunt blushed at his attention.

Maria thought if she were to use a color for what she was feeling she would not pick green or red, more of an orange infused with the white light of dawn. This Spencer, a tall, tanned figure looking the part of an outdoorsman, walked with the grace of knowing one’s self. His smile took her by surprise. Maria was used to looking for smiles through the lips or the eyes. When she played poker with the other pilots, she could judge when they felt the luck of the cards, when they felt happiness. Spencer’s smile came from his hands, his gait, the way he held his shoulders.

Maria impulsively held out her wet hand to shake. Spencer nodded a hello as he returned her Aunt Jo to the head seat at the dining table. Maria felt irrelevant, as if this person had slipped into her home and family and taken her spot.

Holding back her irritation, she modulated her voice to a low pitch, one of Aunt Jo’s tricks to soften words. “Obviously you know my aunt, but I am sorry to say I have no idea who you are. I am at a disadvantage.”

“I think your aunt planned this dinner so I could meet all of you.”

Before Maria could respond, Molly chimed in, “And why would she do that? I have no interest in meeting a young hooligan who grows grapes, steals water, and takes over property that he has no rights to.”

Spencer took his time to respond. Filling his plate with chicken and salad, he took a bite of each, then a sip of wine.

“You do jump to conclusions. Should we break down each of your declarations one by one, challenge each other, and stomp off, or just enjoy a good meal?”

At this Maria couldn't help but smile at her aunt. No one had ever put Molly in her place so quickly.
