

Foreword by Ben Crump



AFTER BOTHAM

Healing From My Brother's Murder by a Police Officer

ALLISA CHARLES-FINDLEY

with Jeremiah Cobra

AFTER BOTHAM

by Allisa Charles-Findley
Jeremiah Cobra



Copyright ©2023 Allisa Charles-Findley; Jeremiah Cobra
Foreword Copyright ©2023 Ben Crump

All rights reserved. For permission to reuse content, please contact
Copyright Clearance Center, 222 Rosewood Drive, Danvers, MA
01923, (978) 750-8400, www.copyright.com.

Print: 9780827201132
EPUB: 9780827201149
EPDF: 9780827201156

ChalicePress.com

Printed in the United States of America

Contents

Foreword	v
Chapter One	1
Chapter Two	7
Chapter Three	15
Chapter Four	25
Chapter Five	31
Chapter Six	41
Chapter Seven	47
Chapter Eight	51
Chapter Nine	59
Chapter Ten	67
Chapter Eleven	75
Chapter Twelve	83
Chapter Thirteen	89
Chapter Fourteen	95
Chapter Fifteen	99
Chapter Sixteen	103
Chapter Seventeen	109
Chapter Eighteen	119
Chapter Nineteen	129
Chapter Twenty	143
Chapter Twenty One	153
Chapter Twenty Two	173
Chapter Twenty Three	181
Chapter Twenty Four	189

Chapter One

My mind was not my own.

I couldn't remember how I'd gotten in the plane. It was as if I'd always been there. Flying. High in the sky. Up among the clouds. So many clouds. I should have felt something. A certain weightlessness, perhaps. But I felt nothing. Not the wind turbulence occasionally moving the plane. Not the cabin air around me. Yet still, I knew I was flying. Like a ghost.

"Ma'am, would you like something to drink?" I heard a voice say into my ear.

No. How can I drink anything at a time like this?

"Ma'am?" I heard the voice again—a woman's voice.

I said no. Why are you still here?

"Ma'am, are you okay?" she asked.

"No." The sound of my own voice snapped me back to reality. I *was* flying. On a Boeing 747 headed to Texas. To my baby brother. Wouldn't he be so surprised to see me?

"No," I said again. "No, I am not okay."

"So you *would* like something to drink?" The young flight attendant smiled, appearing friendly enough. Her smile was the only thing I noticed about her. Certainly she had other noteworthy attributes, like hair, ears, hands, a body—all the components people were supposed to have. But I wouldn't remember any of them.

She kept talking, but I had already stopped hearing. So much of the day's occurrences had become a blur. I couldn't even remember walking through LaGuardia Airport. Couldn't remember waiting at the gate. Couldn't remember boarding the plane. The last thing I truly remembered was speaking with Botham.

"Guess where I'm heading, Big Sis?" he had asked me on our FaceTime call the previous day. My commute back home in New York City during rush hour was often a perfect time for our daily chat. I was an hour ahead of Botham, so when I took his call at 5:29 p.m., I did not expect him to also be heading home. Nevertheless, on September 6 I recall hearing the joy in my brother's voice; it was a bit more intense and contagious than usual. I could not help laughing even before he told me his good news.

"Where are you heading?" I asked, mirroring his smile.

"Home!" Botham exclaimed. "Apparently, a bit of rain in Texas means everyone gets to go home." Botham loved his job at PricewaterhouseCoopers, where he had been an accountant since graduating from Harding University two years prior. PwC is one of the Big Four accounting firms worldwide, and Botham had worked hard to secure a position there. He'd been so proud to get his degree, and I will never forget his smile when he framed his diploma.

But if graduating from Harding was Botham's proudest achievement, securing a position at PwC was his second proudest. He loved the work he did at that firm, and the firm loved him in return. Still, he was ecstatic about the prospect of ending his day early, even if it came with inclement weather. That was one of the things I loved most about Botham, how easily he could find the silver lining in a rain cloud.

"And what are you gonna do with all of this new free time?" I asked, still smiling. How could I not smile? His joy had always been so infectious.

"What do you think?" he asked. "The dentist says I'm finally free from eating soup. So I'm gonna celebrate with as much ice cream as I can carry out the store!"

"Well, just be careful," I replied. "Don't eat the whole tub in one night."

"And why not?" He chuckled. "I've earned it!"

"Too much sugar," I protested, startling myself once again to reality on the airplane. I looked around a bit sheepishly, realizing I had said those last words out loud.

"So no sugar?" a different, slightly older woman asked with the same pleasant-enough smile. I looked back at her, dumbfounded. Only then did I notice that the first flight attendant had moved several rows away. I didn't know how long this second attendant had been standing there. I looked to my mother, but her eyes had not opened.

"Sugar for your tea?" the woman repeated.

"What?" I turned back to her.

"No cream, but how about sugar?" she asked.

"No," I said. "Just tea." She placed the cup of steaming-hot liquid on the tray before me. Perhaps that tray had always been there, lowered in front of me. Just like I had always been there. Flying. I stared at the tea-filled paper cup, confused.

I don't drink plain tea.

I did not trust my hands to reach for that cup any more than I trusted my body to be on this plane. How could I be on a plane? Sure, I vaguely recalled booking the ticket to Dallas, but I would have only done that if something was wrong. I had gone to work that morning. How could I have started the day as usual if something was wrong?

You went to work because you go to work every day. Everything must be fine if you're doing what you have always done, right? Wake up. Pray. Get the boys ready for school. Get the boys ready . . . Get the boys . . .

I had spoken to my three sons just a few hours ago, explaining things to them before I left for the airport.

Last night . . . I remembered saying as I looked into the brown, expectant eyes of my eldest son Jayden, my second son Jareem, and

my youngest son Jordan, who was only three years old and probably would not even remember this conversation. *I mean, this morning I got a call about your Uncle Botham. Well, I got a call last night and another one this morning. He is . . .*

"Excuse me!" an urgent voice interrupted my thoughts, and I was startled to discover that it was my own. I was walking up the aisle, past the rows of other passengers, past the older flight attendant, who now looked at me with concern. The aisle seemed incredibly long, but soon I was at the lavatory door. Relieved it was unoccupied, I pushed my way into the tiny space, locked the door, and breathed a heavy sigh. I tried to calm myself, but a wave of nausea overcame me. I looked into the small, cloudy mirror, trying hard to remember what I'd said to my three sons.

Last night, I got a call about your Uncle Botham. He is fine. Perfectly fine. I mean, he is in trouble. A little trouble. Nothing he can't handle. And he can handle anything. You see, this trouble has him in a place where we can't reach him. We won't be able to reach him for some time while he goes through . . . witness protection, I think they called it. Yeah, that's it. He's in witness protection. And we won't be able to talk to him until . . .

"No," I said to my reflection. "That's not what I told them because that's not true.

But wouldn't it be easier if . . . ?

"No."

A knock at the lavatory door interrupted my thoughts.

"Everything okay in there?" The young attendant's voice seemed only inches from the door, making the room feel even smaller. I quickly unlocked the door and pulled it open.

"I am fine," I replied, smiling as best I could. I pushed past her and headed back to my seat where my mother, Allison Jean, remained motionless, her eyes still closed. There was no furrow in her brow, no quiver in her lip. I wanted to pry her eyes open to see if she was as peaceful as she seemed, or if she was going through the same hell that I was. I sat down next to her and closed my eyes, although

I had no intention of sleeping. How could I sleep? Nevertheless, I dreamed. Perhaps that is all my mother was doing: dreaming about the way Botham must have been last night—snuggled up on his sofa, holding a big tub of vanilla ice cream.

Milky Way. That was our nickname for him because Botham loved dairy: milkshakes, eggnog, cereal with milk, and—of course—ice cream. He loved ice cream the most. He was always happy when he had some and would smile when he knew he was going to get some. I will never forget that smile of his: a little uneven on the right corner, but always wide, always joyful.

Not anymore. Last night was the last time Botham would eat ice cream and the last time he would smile. Last night, the night of September 6, 2018, a police officer entered his home and killed him.

Now, I was on my way to see my brother, who would not be surprised to see me. He wouldn't see me at all. Botham was dead. A cop had shot him. He was killed in his own home while he ate ice cream. And my mind suddenly raced to find a reason.

Thus began the biggest test I'd ever had in my life. A test of my faith, my sanity, my life. I wondered, *Is this your will, Lord? To test me for the rest of my days? I do not know if I am that strong.*

But as the plane began its descent into Dallas/Fort Worth International Airport, an emptiness hit me as I came to the sudden realization that Botham would not be there to greet me. He did not know I was in town. He would never know.

When my feet touched the ground, I would be starting a life after Botham. But I was not yet ready to turn away from my life before.

Chapter Two

Botham was born ten years after me. Our mother is Allison Jean, but we have different fathers. His father is Bertrum Jean. Maybe he got his musicality from his father. I mean, I enjoyed music, but Botham love-loved it. He was a musical baby. Before he could even crawl, he would rock and wiggle back and forth to whatever music was playing. He understood rhythm before he could talk. When he was only six years old, he would sneak off with my tapes and CDs.

Jay-Z. Hard Knock Life.

That one was my favorite. I always noticed when it was missing, and Botham would always become sheepish when he had to admit he'd taken it.

And boy, could my brother sing! Botham started singing in our church before he was eight years old. He also wanted to be baptized young, but at age eight was told he was too young and would have to wait until he was ten. He was allowed sing all he wanted at church though. By the time he was a teenager, he was preaching at our church, and we all knew he had found his calling. Not only could Botham sing his whole heart out; he found himself in a position to teach the choir how to read music, keep the rhythm, project their voices, and sing with their whole hearts. He would later teach the choir at his university. When I heard them perform, I knew he had shared with them a large measure of his soul. Oh, how they sang like him.

I remember the last time I watched Botham conduct his university choir. He stood before them like a ship's captain, guiding

every hymn and note from their mouths with a self-assured hand. His shoulders, which looked like they could carry the weight of an entire congregation, had grown broad like a warrior's but were made regal by the tailored suit jacket he wore. Though he wasn't wearing a tie, I can't help but think that if he had worn one, it would have been his favorite color: red. And not just any red, but a passionate, vibrant shade. I was his elder sister, but looking at him in his element, I wanted to be like him. Be like Bo, as I lovingly called him.

He conducted me once, late in the summer of 2007. He was only sixteen at the time, and one of our cousins, Andrea, was getting married. Botham wanted to sing Kelly Clarkson's "A Moment Like This" at her wedding, along with Aunt Desma and me. He tried his very best to share a bit of that passion he had for music. If only we could just get the notes right.

"Yeah . . . no," he said as Aunt Desma and I joined him in laughter, shaking with hysterics. "I don't know which notes those were, but they're not the ones to this song."

My ears grew warm, and that warmth spread to the nape of my neck and all around my collar. I knew that I was the one who had not hit the right note. "Don't worry though," he encouraged. "We'll get it." I was sure my cheeks had also grown flush with embarrassment, but the feeling quickly faded as I reveled in Botham's humor and resolve. He was too young to be guiding me the way he was, yet I felt perfectly secure following his instruction.

"Catch me when I fall," Botham sang. Then he explained how to emphasize words. "You have to come up on the word *catch*." He demonstrated the note twice more before Aunt Desma and I tried again.

"That's it!" he said, delighted. "See? I knew you could get that note."

"Now we just need to get it in front of dozens of people," Aunt Desma said.

"On the most important day of Andy's life," I chimed in.

"And we'll be great," Botham reassured. "Trust me." His grin was reassuring, and for a moment I forgot about all the eyes and ears that would be on me at the wedding.

"Let's take it from the top," he said.

I filled my lungs with air and exhaled the notes, feeling their frequencies vibrate in my chest and head. I heard them mingle perfectly with Desma's soprano notes while Botham anchored us with his baritone. My confidence began to grow as we approached the chorus. My eyes were glued to Botham's steadying hand as he guided us through the troublesome high notes and the notes we had to hold the longest.

By the time we reached the end of the song, there was a divine resonance that seemed to spread from within our bodies, out through the entirety of my mother's living room, and all over the island of Saint Lucia. I felt that I could go into a recording studio and lay background vocals for Kelly Clarkson herself. But then we separated. Desma went to the kitchen as Botham, most noticeably, went to his room, closing the door with a resolute thud behind him. The hallway darkened, and I found myself alone in the living room, beginning to doubt myself.

I imagined standing before the attendants of the wedding, family, and friends. I feared I would not be able to breathe into my diaphragm the way Botham had taught me. I feared I would not be able to open my mouth wide enough or get my tongue out of the way. What if my voice got caught in my throat, making it sore? Then my voice would sputter from my lips in a croak, shattering the harmonies into an array of disjointed, dissonant chords. I would look around at the disappointed faces, but none would hurt me so much as Botham's face if I failed him. I was determined to not do that.

The day before the wedding, I tried to back out of the performance.

"You should do it yourself," I said. "You're good at this. I can't be that good."

"Did you not hear yourself yesterday?" he declared. "Did you hear us? We're amazing, and we'll be amazing at the wedding.

Together.” He put his arm around my shoulders and enveloped me with his embrace. At nearly six feet, Botham was already nearly a foot taller than me. I did not know what it was like to embrace my own father in this way; he was out of the picture when I was very young. Although I had always been Big Sis to Botham, in that moment, with him towering over me, I felt protected and my confidence returned. Perhaps I really could do it after all.

“And besides,” Botham continued, “can you imagine a big ol’ burly dude up there singing Kelly Clarkson by myself? I’d look crazy! I need you up there with me.”

When we practiced that day, the sound of our voices harmonizing made me feel giant once again.

“I think we’re ready,” Botham said at the end of the session, and I believed him.

The day of the wedding was perfectly tropical. The sun shone brightly on the horizon and the sky became a deep, cobalt shade of blue. The ocean breeze rustled the leaves on the gum trees, mingling with their scent and carrying them through every open window in the church. The songs of black finches and island parrots also rode that wind current. Their music was subtle outside of the window, but I heard it clearly. I soon became anxious with the prospect of singing in front of the many people who were filling the pews. I tried to keep my mind on Botham’s encouraging words, but the chatter of those in attendance began to drown them out. Then I noticed the birdsong again. And the sound of my beating heart. These sounds swelled and swirled around me. Even my tongue felt as though it would block my throat and keep me from breathing. When Botham approached me, he must have seen a truly pitiful creature because his expression instantly became sympathetic.

“I can’t,” I blurted out when it seemed Botham was close enough to hear me over the noise.

“I’m right here,” he said. “You don’t have to shout.”

“I can’t,” I said, softly this time.

“You can’t what?” he asked.

"I can't sing."

"Of course you can! You sing beautifully. You've *been singing* beautifully all weekend."

It wasn't that I did not believe Botham. Together, I knew we would sound great. But he had arranged the song so that we each sang our verses solo. It would just be me for the second verse. Me, alone.

"I mean, I can't sing in front of everyone," I said. "Not by myself."

"You can," he assured me. "You're just nervous, and that's okay. Everyone gets nervous. I would even say you're supposed to be nervous. I could tell you how to overcome it. Perhaps you can picture everyone naked, but that's not necessary. You just have to sing. Also, picturing our entire family naked . . . Well, that would be gross."

I forced a smile. He was not convinced that his humor had overcome my anxiety.

"You will be great," he assured. By this time, Desma had approached us both.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

"I'm not going to sing," I said resolutely, knowing that if I let him, Botham would talk me into it. And I had already surrendered my nerve. I would not find my voice on that day.

"Well, if she's not gonna do it, I'm not either," Desma said. Although Desma was my aunt, she was only two years older than I and felt more like a cousin to me. On the day of the wedding, we wore our hair in a similar updo, and our dresses had similar shades of yellow and brown. We stood together in our refusal to sing, so we outnumbered Botham. I saw the disappointment settle into his whole body. He all but pouted, and I was again aware that he was hardly old enough to drive. I wanted to hug him until I remembered that I was the reason for his being upset.

"Fine," he said quietly. "I can't make you." Then he walked away, dejected. I felt both awful and relieved. Botham had a love of singing, but I didn't, yet I knew how excited he had been to bestow his gift

of song to our cousin. It was the only gift he could afford that was worthy of his admiration for her, and I had denied him the chance to give it.

Next time, I thought. I won't refuse him next time. Next time, whatever the circumstances, I'll find my voice for him.

The wedding was beautiful. Andrea was stunning in her gown. She and her beau said "I do" under the orange sun and cobalt sky. Then we were off to the reception where we ate, drank, and danced until the sunset sky turned pink and purple. At some point during the reception, I thought to find Botham and see how he was doing. As our time to sing came and went without a single note from Desma, Botham, or me, my guilt at having refused his wish grew and grew. I also knew that his anger was a quiet one, much more akin to sadness, and it worried me that at such a festive time, he might be in some corner brooding. However, just as I stood to go find Botham, I saw him emerge from the crowd on the dance floor. With a smile as wide as it ever was, he sauntered over to me as if he had the most fantastic secret to share with me.

"Dancing is not for everyone," he said quietly when he was close enough that only I would hear him.

"I don't know whose side of the family this guy is on," Botham said between fits of laughter, "but it isn't the side with rhythm." Of course his laughter was contagious, so I joined in without even knowing who he was talking about.

"Just out of curiosity, what kind of dance move is this?" he asked, imitating what he had seen someone doing just moments earlier. Perhaps the dance was supposed to be the Bogle except that Botham was moving in feigned, exaggerated spasms to the song by Tony Matterhorn blaring through the speakers. He transitioned to some form of the Butterfly and said, "Look, the wings are broken!" Then he placed his hands on his knees and began whipping his head back and forth.

"Dutty Wine!" he cried before tilting his head back and hollering with laughter.

"I don't know what any of those are, but you should make him stop," I said. "That's not dancing. That's a medical condition!"

"Ha!" Botham said. "I'll go get him some help then."

He disappeared into the crowd again, and with him went all of the guilt and anxiety I had been feeling over the past few days.

Botham's anger was never loud, and it never lingered. As the reception came to an end, I even wondered if he had not put on that little performance just for me. Just as I had wondered if he was still upset about not singing, he always seemed to know when I was feeling upset about something. The only difference is that he seemed to know exactly what to do to alleviate the tension. The night of Andreas's wedding, he knew exactly what to do to put me in a good mood, even when I was the one who had caused the tension between us. It might be easy to assume that Botham simply had a short memory and a strong desire to dance out of rhythm. But his timing had been too perfect. Whatever the case might have been, I will remember that wedding for the way he lifted me up twice: once when I did not even know how high I could soar, and again when my own disbelief in myself brought me low.

* * *

As my mother and I rode in the taxi from the Dallas airport to our hotel, I pictured Botham's smile. Then the idea that I would never see it again occurred to me. I wanted more than anything to turn back time. I prayed and asked God to turn back time. Of course, He did not.

I knew then that all of this must have been His will. This was a test for me to see what I could endure. God wanted to see if I could be like Job, if I could still live by His will and follow His Word after he took away one of the biggest blessings I had in this world. It is said that He gives only the biggest tests to His strongest children. So He was testing my faith. But why should my test cost me so much? And why had Botham been the one to pay the ultimate price?

Perhaps his life was the cost for a greater cause, a greater good. After all, wasn't Botham the perfect victim? Before him, others had

always manufactured some excuse for why White police officers were killing Black people: “That Black man was resisting arrest!” “Maybe it was the drugs in his system, not the knee on his neck, that stopped him from breathing.” “Maybe he reached too quickly for his wallet.” Or “That Black woman was in the wrong place around the wrong people.” But there was nothing for them to twist here, nothing to spin, no lie to conjure against Botham. Botham was a church pastor and a college-graduate professional who’d been in the *right* place doing the *right* thing around the *right* people—in his own home by himself minding his business. How could the police twist that? He was in the right place at the wrong time?

Was this just one more innocent life, or would it be that last one, the one that would shine a light on and put an end to police brutality? And if so, must that be my cost? Because no one else has to pay it, only me and the rest of his family.

Botham was only a beautiful, innocent man to us.

Yet he was a scary silhouette to the cop who shot him.

A statistic to politicians and lawmakers.

He was just another name and a few pictures to the media and those who will only ever know him through the media.

They never told the joke that made him smile. They never heard him sing. They never watched him direct a choir. They did not know how he suffered from a recent dental surgery and was overjoyed to finally eat ice cream on the night—last night—when he was killed. They did not see the horror on his face as he looked down the barrel of that gun and wondered what was happening or what he had possibly done wrong. They did not know him in his real life. And they will not suffer in their real lives. Not like I had suffered in the twenty-four hours since I’d heard about his death.

Not like I will suffer for the rest of my days.