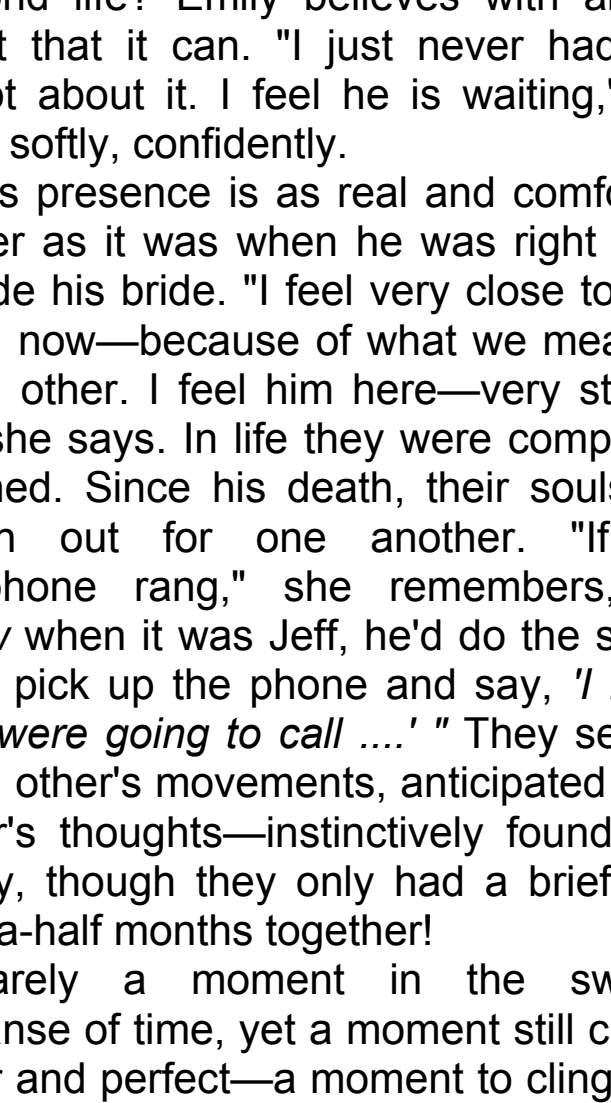
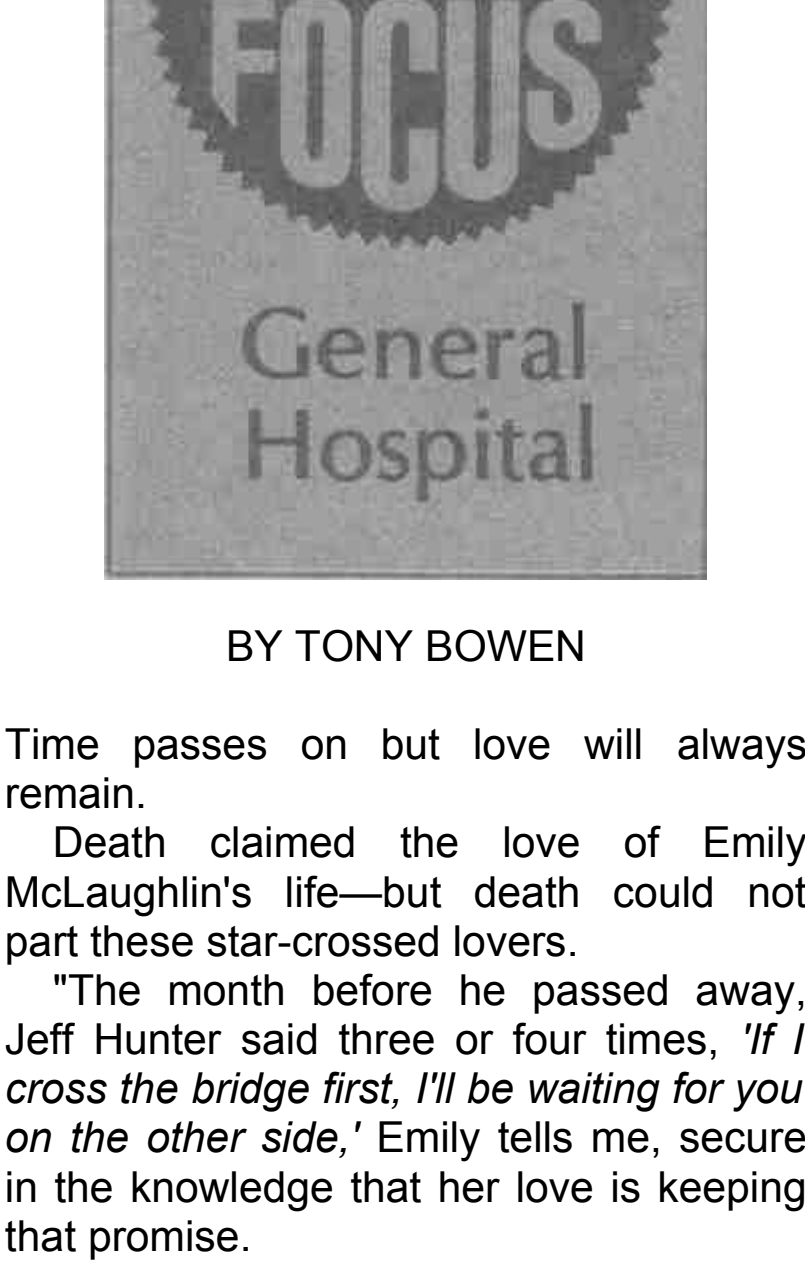


## Emily McLaughlin insists no man can replace Jeff Hunter—

# "HE TAUGHT ME THE TRUE MEANING OF LOVE!"



BY TONY BOWEN

Time passes on but love will always remain.

Death claimed the love of Emily McLaughlin's life—but death could not part these star-crossed lovers.

"The month before he passed away, Jeff Hunter said three or four times, *'If I cross the bridge first, I'll be waiting for you on the other side.'* Emily tells me, secure in the knowledge that her love is keeping that promise.

Does love transcend life? Can it truly go beyond life? Emily believes with all her heart that it can. "I just never had any doubt about it. I feel he is waiting," she says softly, confidently.

His presence is as real and comforting to her as it was when he was right there beside his bride. "I feel very close to Jeff, even now—because of what we meant to each other. I feel him here—very strongly," she says. In life they were completely attuned. Since his death, their souls still reach out for one another. "If the telephone rang," she remembers, "I'd know when it was Jeff, he'd do the same. He'd pick up the phone and say, *'I knew you were going to call ....'*" They sensed each other's movements, anticipated each other's thoughts—instinctively found harmony, though they only had a brief five-and-a-half months together!

Barely a moment in the swirling expanse of time, yet a moment still crystal clear and perfect—a moment to cling to, a reason for living.

Emily's first marriage to actor Bob Lansing ended a couple of years before she and Jeff met—a traumatic time for Emily. "I felt a tremendous sense of failure," she says. "The idea of raising a son more or less alone was terrifying to me. I never dreamed of romance, nor of ever marrying again! And then, I walked through a door and there was Jeff...."

*Kismet.* At a friend's urging, Emily went to a party at the Beverly Hilton Hotel with "no intention of staying. I'd said to the parking attendant, 'Just hold my car—I'll be back in twenty minutes.' *I wasn't,*" she says simply. "It was two people meeting—skyrockets bursting and all those things. It was like magic—it was pure joy!

"I thought I knew what it was to be in love—and then I met Jeff and found out what it *really* was!" Emily says, her eyes shining. "A month later, we were married.

"The first thing Bobby said was 'What could I call him?' she laughs. 'You can call him Hank (his real name) or you can call him Jeff,' she told Bobby—and his answer was swift and direct: *'Can I call him Dad?'*

"Jeff had a childlike quality—as opposed to childish—the kids adored him and he adored them. I think half of the pre-teen girls in the neighborhood were in love with him! They used to come to him with their problems, and he would take them for a drive and talk to them about how to deal with them.

Her new husband had been filming in Europe and didn't have a car, she recalled. But when his parents wanted to give them a car as a wedding present, "instead of buying a sports car or something like that, Jeff chose a station wagon so we could haul kids—and believe me, we did!" Memories came flooding into her thoughts—lighting her eyes, softening her words.

How could she have known it would all end so soon? But Jeff Hunter knew that he was going to die, she feels sure—and tried to spare her the pain of parting, even as he prepared her for the inevitable! He was only 42—vital, brilliant, talented—far too young to die, yet he gently, carefully, lovingly prepared a legacy of love to leave behind. A promise that they'd be together for always!

She saw no hidden meaning when he told her he'd be waiting for her—only a reaffirmation of their closeness. A pre-cognition, perhaps? "It never occurred to me, when he said it," she says thoughtfully. "He would have known that I would be upset, unhappy." They were so close, so wrapped in each other's thoughts and hopes and dreams. Perhaps he didn't know that he knew?

*"I think he did,"* Emily says. But only in retrospect could she understand that. "A couple of people who were very, very close to him, who knew him long before I did, have asked me that question. Immediately after his death, they asked me, 'Did he know?'—and *suddenly, I knew that he did!*"

Almost as though she were hearing them again, his prophetic words came back to her: *'If I cross the bridge first, I'll be waiting for you on the other side....'*

Emily had gone to rehearsal that fatal day—vaguely troubled by what she describes as "a funny feeling"—a nameless fear that persisted, despite the fact that Jeff said he "felt great." She'd returned to find him sprawled on the stairs, victim of a massive cerebral hemorrhage! They'd rushed him to an emergency hospital where for fourteen hours he lay in a coma—and then he was gone—without a word or a sign, my Jeff was gone!"

Only Emily's deep faith carried her through the days that followed. "Without some kind of faith, I really don't know how people survive," she says. "I don't think I would have—nor could I now. All through my life, my faith in God has helped me. My earliest feelings about God had to do with nature—I grew up in White Plains, New York, which was a small town then, and there were open fields." She remembers a summer place in Connecticut where she ran barefoot through an "almost deserted area in the Berkshires."

It was years, she says, "before I understood what the story of Christ was really about" though she taught Sunday School—and ultimately married a man who undertook to play the role of Jesus Christ! ("Which Jeff did not do lightly, believe me!" she says. "He was an extremely spiritual man." They shared close rapport on the spiritual plane, too.)

"I was fortunate enough always to be in beautiful surroundings, and I think the religious feeling I had came from nature. As I got older I began to have more interest in Christianity, but that interest never really crystalized into study—until after my husband died."

Emily began to delve deeper and deeper into Bible reading—studies of the Judeo-Christian tradition, and the deeper she searched, the more she found. "I've only scratched the surface," she smiles, as she tells me she was "looking over available college courses" and planning for further study in the fall.

She's also collaborating on a book about her late husband—a labor of love for the lady who feels his nearness as she did during their brief days together. "We were so happy—so happy!" she says. "We had five-and-a-half months of a happiness that nobody else has had and I keep saying, 'Thank you for that. I am so grateful.' Some people don't find the happiness we knew in a whole lifetime of living!"

They met on January 3rd—married on February 4th—and on May 27th, Jeffrey Hunter was dead! Six years later, his death is still shrouded in mystery. No one will ever know what occurred in those moments before he fell on the stairs—what caused the massive hemorrhage, the coma that followed, and finally his demise. Their secret went with him to the grave, but death could never claim his spirit—nor the memories and love they shared.

Wearing not one wedding ring but *three*—the slim, tiny band they'd bought in Mexico, and then the two they'd found back home in Beverly Hills, Emily spent the sixth anniversary of Jeff's passing with his parents. It was a time for memories, a time for sharing them with those who loved him most, a time for reliving the happy moments. Too late now, for those other thoughts: The series of freakish accidents they examined and re-examined, hoping for clues to cling to. In those short months, he'd been badly burned when the hot grease-and-gravy of roast turkey spilled into his lap. (Upon leaving the next day for Spain, he'd refused to see a doctor, then gone into shock aboard the plane.)

During filming (in Spain) he'd sustained injuries again when a car window blew up on the set. Still later, a playful karate chop had unbalanced him, and he'd hit his head as he fell. Each time, Emily worried—and Jeff reassured her he was "feeling great"—he was not in pain. Yet, once more he'd suddenly gone into shock, when they were on their return flight! "He couldn't speak, he could hardly move," Emily says. An ambulance took them straight to Good Samaritan Hospital, where he recovered quickly, and once more "life seemed wonderful again"—*but for so little time.*

The closeness, the communication, the *oneness* remains, for Emily. "I feel his closeness near me all the time," she says. Aside from that closeness she still feels toward Jeff, Emily also has his friends who have been very kind to her. And a son.

Her son has been the mainstay of her life since Jeff died—but he, too, will be going away to college soon. He has never encouraged his mom to remarry—never even discussed the possibility. "He knows I have no intention of remarrying—there's no question about that," she says. She goes out, of course—and Bobby sort of drops in to chat and see what they're like," but they both know her heart belongs to Jeff.

"I know a lot of men I like, but I can't imagine marriage," she says, "I really can't! Most of the men I've known have accepted that, too." When a few have not, Emily found honesty her best defense: "I simply say, 'I'm sorry—let's be friends.' It's much easier to tell the truth."

She's a positive-thinking lady who believes that love is never really lost—that loved ones merely pass from this world to the next. Sometimes they are even given the knowledge that they must leave loved ones behind and go on ahead.

"Looking back almost immediately after Jeff's death, I'd have said, 'Yes, *he knew.*'" Time passes, but love remains to comfort those who have not yet crossed that bridge.

Not for a single moment does Emily doubt that somewhere beyond that bridge, her Jeff is waiting.