

The Boaz Secrets

A Novel

Richard L. Fricks

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Richard L. Fricks

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Author's Note

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Richard L. Fricks

This book is dedicated to all open-minded and reasonable people, especially those who resist dogma and myth.

Chapter 1

June 1970

“Matt, if we’re going to get there before dark we have to be going. Now.” Dad yelled up the stairs.

“I’m coming. Give me five minutes.” It was nearly 9:30 a.m. and I’d dawdled away the last two hours. Last night we had finished packing the moving trailer, leaving me with packing a few books and my workout clothes this morning.

I really wasn’t interested in driving ten plus hours to a whole new world. I was happy living on the South Side of Chicago, working part-time making pizzas at Papa-Mama’s on Dearborn Boulevard until high school starts back in a little over a month. I couldn’t imagine being away from Brantley, Jessie, and Tyler for my entire 11th grade year.

“Don’t forget your tennis racket. Dean Naylor said the College has a pretty nice tennis court.”

“It’s already on the trailer.”

An hour and a half later we were south of Gary, Indiana filling Dad's truck up with gas and eating breakfast at a Waffle House at the I-90 and I-65 interchange.

"Since you're on your third helping of pancakes, take a breather and tell me again what your job is in Alabama. I want you in role from the minute we get there." Dad said having eaten about half of his eggs and one piece of toast.

"We've been over this a hundred times since last Saturday. It's now only Tuesday. Do you think I forget that quickly?" I responded pouring more syrup on the best pancakes I had ever eaten.

"Last time. I promise. At least for a week."

"Dad, it's simple. I start attending First Baptist Church of Christ and get tied in with their youth group. As soon as I can, I'm to become friends with the kid who's the most active, the one who's always present. My job is to observe what the youth leaders and students are doing and saying and report these things to you."

"Don't forget to note the Bible passages being referenced and the interpretations being used."

"Remind me how much I'm earning for all this work. You've never told me exactly, just that it will be well worth my time." I said as the waitress came by and asked if I wanted another stack. Dad motioned her away.

"Twice what you make at Papa-Mama's. It will probably amount to over a thousand dollars, minimum, before the year is up."

"Plus, you promised to buy me a good, used car for my birthday. That's next month you know."

“I thought we had decided on a new bicycle.”

“Don’t be funny.”

For the next nine plus hours we rode mile after mile with hardly a word exchanged between us. Dad’s collection of eight tracks tapes, all flavored with classical music, quickly lulled me into semi-consciousness, and a dream, or nightmare, of how my life had taken such a bad turn. One that was forcing me, along with Dad, to Boaz, a small town in North Alabama. This wasn’t going to be a vacation. A year of living with a bunch of hillbilly rednecks was not what I had envisioned for my life, especially now.

Dad, Robert William Benson, was on assignment and I was stuck with tagging along. If Mother had lived, I believe I could have convinced her to stay in Chicago and let Dad travel alone seven hundred miles to the little community named after the Old Testament Jew that befriended the lovely Moabite woman named Naomi. Or, was it beguiled? Deceived? Whatever.

Dad was a tenured professor of Biblical History and New Testament Theology at the University of Chicago’s Divinity School and, for the first time in years, had been granted a year’s sabbatical to work on a research project. I still didn’t know exactly how or why he had gotten interested in Southern Baptist Fundamentalism. Dad’s choices for a mission field to study had boiled down to Sanford, North Carolina and Boaz, Alabama. The School’s Committee that Dad answered to left the final choice to him. I think he chose Boaz because of his interest in college football and the opportunity to go see Paul ‘Bear’ Bryant’s Alabama Crimson Tide. Also, it didn’t hurt that Sarah Dickerson, an Old

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Testament professor at the Divinity School, had been undergraduate classmates with John Naylor at Duke University in the early sixties.

Naylor was now the Dean of Snead State Junior College in Boaz.

Professor Dickerson, at the request of Dad's Committee, had asked Dean Naylor if he would provide Dad with a part-time position for a year. The timing had been perfect since Snead State was adding a Bible Literature class to its English Department and had not found a suitable instructor. Dad would teach this class, beginning in September. This provided Dad plenty of time to conduct his Divinity School project without becoming too suspicious.

The Committee had approved Dad's request to hire me to go undercover with the youth group. A key part of Dad's research project dealt with how young people were indoctrinated into a virtual life-long commitment to Southern Baptist Fundamentalism. Dad's short definition for this brand of Fundamentalism was, "They believe the Bible was written by God. They read it literally." The best way Dad and the Committee had come up with to learn what teachings and methodologies were being used to expose young people and obtain their allegiance was to infiltrate a youth group at a large enough church that had a full-time youth pastor and had a long history of year-round events and activities. Since Dad was way past his youth, and was in no position to be hired by a church as a youth pastor, education director, or any other position, the brilliant folks at the Divinity School had suggested I assist Dad. Thus, I was now an undercover agent. I just hoped my mission wasn't dangerous.

As we drove south I couldn't think of anything to look forward to, so my mind settled on my job. I was concerned that I wouldn't fit in. Not only did I have a Chicago accent, but I was a far thing from being a Jesus lover. Mother was a Catholic and I had gone to Mass with her all my life. Dad was a virtual atheist. He rarely went to church and when he did it was on a special occasion such as Easter or Christmas. Dad had influenced my religious thinking more than Mother, but he had always done it out of her earshot. He was good to Mother and respected her beliefs and worked hard to keep peace in the family. However, this didn't mean he hadn't often shared his beliefs with me. Dad and I had always been close and had, for years, spent a ton of time together. We both were avid runners and ever since I was in fourth or fifth grade, Dad and I had shared a couple of runs every week, normally on the weekends.

I thought it strange that Dad could be a professor of Biblical History and New Testament Theology at a major Divinity School but not believe that Jesus was the Son of God. Dad had always told me that he was a researcher and teacher and it was unnecessary to buy into what he discovered. He said he was more like a reporter who researched the effects of steroids on an athlete's performance. The reporter didn't have to agree that steroids were a good thing. I knew Dad's story like the back of my hand. I had heard it many times, for mile after mile along the banks of the Chicago River that we often ran on Sunday afternoons.

Dad said, "if it weren't for my profession, my research and writing, my work at the Divinity School, I probably would still be a believer." Dad had grown up attending First Baptist Church in Western Springs, Illinois. As luck, fate, or God's grace would have it, Billy

Graham served briefly as pastor in 1943–44. Dad was thirteen years old and became enamored by Graham. From then until Dad started graduate school at Princeton University, he was sold out to Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. It was in the mid-fifties, after I was born in 1954, that Dad's beliefs started to ebb. His journey of disbelief took several years but by the time he landed an associate professorship at the University of Chicago in 1962, he was a die-hard agnostic, virtually an atheist, even though he never said that he knew God did not exist, but always laid it out as, "there simply isn't good evidence to believe in the God of the Bible, or Jesus for that matter."

We pulled into Boaz after dark. We found the Dairy Queen and bought hamburgers and onion-rings and two giant strawberry milkshakes. We ate at an outdoor table beside one with a man and woman and what we gathered were their four kids. We did our best to not laugh out loud at the Southern drawl that rose from the six voices like a drunk cow on a foggy morning, lost and looking for the path to the milking barn. I didn't know much about cows and could only imagine that a soused cow would bawl at a much slower pace than one that had avoided the brew. The only words the family spoke that registered with us were something the mother said as they left their table and walked close beside us on their way to an old Ford pickup where the two oldest children, a boy and a girl, climbed into the bed of the truck. The mother said summer revivals always made her repent, repent for failing to keep her kids noses in the Bible. She said, "Clint, mark my words, that's going to change beginning tonight."

After a second trip back inside for another burger, Dad and I drove to downtown Boaz and College Avenue to the little four room house Dad had been able to rent through Ericson Real Estate. I was glad Dad had David Adams, the property owner, furnish the house with cheap but suitable furniture. It was hard enough unloading our clothes, books, bicycles, pillows and bedding, and a dozen or so boxes containing Dad's research materials. By 10:00 p.m., we were sweating profusely and sitting on the front porch listening to a host of crickets that seem to be living in the thick hedgerow along the driveway. For the next hour, until we went inside to make our beds and go to bed, not a single car passed in front of 118 College Avenue.

"Good night. I hope you sleep sound in your new home away from home." Dad said at 11:30 as he pulled his door shut. As I lay across my bed, all I could think about and see with my mind's eye was Brantley, Jessie, and Tyler hanging out in Hyde Park across from Papa-Mama's talking about girls, and girls, and girls.

Chapter 2

December 1, 2017

Professor Olivia Tillman walked down the long corridor to Lecture Hall 201 in the Harborough Tower to her final lecture this semester. After her presentation she was leaving for an extended leave of absence to return to her hometown of Boaz, Alabama to support her father and brother who are facing criminal charges.

As usual, the large classroom was crowded and noisy. The 150 or so male and female students, were first and second year students at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and most came from Christian homes across the Southeast United States. As Olivia stood behind the lecture podium and opened her notebook she noticed three older men sitting side-by-side across the front row. “Good morning to everyone and especially to our three visitors.”

The oldest looking of the three, a man at least 70, short and stocky with a mountain of flowing gray hair that made his body look too

small for his large head, stood as the other students grew still and silent, “Professor Tillman, I’m Bert Davis and this is Pete Appleton and Ralph Kindle. Our lovely wives asked us to join them here today for your last lecture.” Minnie Davis, Sarah Appleton, and Bernadette Kindle were three older students who both delighted and frustrated Olivia. It seemed they wanted themselves, almost believed themselves, to be the professor of Olivia’s New Testament History and Formation’s class.

“Nice to meet you and welcome to our class.” Olivia said with a smile and then looked out over an ocean of youth, all struggling to square what they had been exposed to this semester at the feet of Professor Olivia Tillman who for the past six years had filled the shoes of professor emeritus, Harrison Bolton, who retired in the summer of 2011. Her students were not the only ones who had struggled. Olivia, from the mid-1980s until 2011, had served as Professor of Systematic and Historical Theology at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Dallas, Texas where she had taught various subjects related to Systematic Theology, Historical Theology, Early Christianity, and Baptist Heritage. During Olivia’s last five years at Southwestern she had experienced the complete devolution of her faith. Skepticism and unease since the loss of her husband in 2008 had grown into a private but exhaustive exploration of every aspect of her long-held beliefs. Ultimately, the struggle to say and teach one thing to her Divinity students and live and believe quite the opposite, had heralded the complete transformation of her professional life, including a move to the secular world of Chapel Hill where Olivia was focused on teaching historical truths.

Bert responded with, “we’re excited to be here, and I apologize for interrupting. We’ll sit here and be good students.”

Olivia looked up and scanned the entire classroom. “Tomorrow is your final exam. Today, I will review. I strongly suggest you listen and take good notes. You might hear something important.” Olivia said fully present in body, but the true location of her mind was another matter. She was worried sick about her brother Wade, and father Walter, both former pastors of First Baptist Church of Christ in Boaz. Leading this church was a long tradition for the male side of the Tillman family. In addition to Walter and Wade, their forefathers, Rudolph, Morton, and Waymon had also held the same position. And currently, Wade’s son Warren was the head pastor at the Southern Baptist Church.

As Olivia glanced at her notes she wondered if there was something else working in her deep subconscious. She felt almost a foreboding spirit descending into the depths of her mind and heart.

“Class, first recall that we don’t know, historical evidence does not reveal the authors of the four gospels that made it into the final version of the Bible. We do know they were not Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Clearly, they were not written by the named person. These gospels were written by highly literate Greeks, not uneducated peasants such as Matthew, Mark, and John. Luke could have been some sort of doctor, but it is undisputed he spoke Armenian and not Greek. It is difficult, impossible to write in the Greek language if you do not speak that language. Recall, evidence indicates that the Gospel of Mark was written somewhere around 65 to 70 A.D., with Matthew and Luke following a generation later, say around 85 to 90 A.D. and the Gospel of

John, most likely, around the year 120 A.D. It is important you note that there were many other competing gospels written during these same time frames and none of them were chosen to join the biblical canon. It may have been, in part, because of some of their more fantastical claims, such as Jesus, as a young man, a carpenter, causing some furniture to suddenly appear, or some lumber to mysteriously stretch to the lengths needed. Know that all original manuscripts are lost. And, what manuscripts we have are all copies of copies of copies, all containing countless discrepancies. As to the Bible, the earliest complete manuscript we have is dated around 900 A.D.”

Olivia spent the next hour covering a variety of topics her New Testament class had covered during the semester, including the Apostle Paul’s writings from 25 to 35 A.D., where he admitted his knowledge of Christ had come strictly from revelation and not directly from man. Other topics included Second Peter; other forgeries; a mini-lecture on how an illiterate peasant became an itinerant preacher and later developed a reputation of being the son of God. At 11:45 a.m., Olivia completed her lecture and dismissed the class. As she was gathering her things, Sarah Appleton approached the podium and asked if she had a few minutes to talk to her and her five friends.

“Sure, I’d be happy to, but I do have a lunch appointment at 12:30, downtown Chapel Hill.”

“Minnie, Bernadette, and I know your story, but our husbands don’t really believe we have been totally honest. They simply don’t see how a devoted Christian could ever leave the faith and stop believing in the existence of the Christian God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit. Do you

mind giving them a short version where they can hear it, pardon me, from the horse's mouth. No disrespect intended of course." Sarah no doubt was the queen bee of the sizzling six, the three older ladies and their husbands.

"I'm always willing to share my testimony, nobody knows it better than me. Thanks again Bert, Pete, and Ralph for coming today. It is an honor to meet you. I suspect you already know this, but you guys have wonderfully inquisitive wives and I have thoroughly enjoyed my time with them this semester. They each remind me of myself in so many ways. Now, let me say it is virtually impossible to give you, in the few minutes I now have, a full representation of every stage I went through in abandoning my faith and belief. So, keep that in mind.

"I grew up in Boaz, Alabama in a devout Christian home, my father, his father and on back for generations were all Southern Baptist preachers. From the time I could walk and talk I was sold out on Jesus and Christianity. I spent as much time in church as I did at home. I followed my father around like I was his shadow. From junior high throughout high school I was the ring leader of our youth group. My number one priority was sharing the gospel message. About the only regret I can recall from my high school years was failing to evangelize an eleventh-grade boy who had come to Boaz for one year. He was there with his father who taught at the local college on loan from a big school in Chicago. After high school I devoted the next ten years to earning four college degrees including a double masters and a Ph.D. in theology. After three years teaching at Liberty University's School of Divinity, I spent the following 24 years at Southwestern Baptist Theological

Seminary in Dallas, Texas, first as an associate professor and then as a full professor.

“In 2008 I lost my husband of nearly thirty years to cancer. Up until his sickness and death my faith had never faltered. Of course, there had been times of doubt. Looking back, these periods all revolved around some science subject. When Jack got sick I started reading about cancer and cancer research and got interested in chemistry and biology, and my reading expanded to a few atheist authors.

“The big turning point came in 2009, some three years or so after Jack’s diagnosis. I was sitting in my bedroom lounging chair early one morning having my devotion as I had done thousands of times during my life, when it hit me that I was living a lie. My thoughts centered on prayer and a study Harvard professor Herbert Benson had conducted in 2006. I had recently read several articles about the study, even read the peer review article in the *Journal Nature*. The results clearly showed that prayer didn’t work. Over 1800 coronary artery bypass surgery patients at six different hospitals participated in the study. It was a double-blind experiment, meaning no one, including the patients, their doctors, and anyone else involved with the study, knew which patients were being prayed for and which were not. Members of three congregations were asked to deliver the prayers, using the patients’ first names and the first initials of their last names. The bottom line was that prayers offered by strangers had no effect on the recovery of people who were undergoing heart surgery.

“I knew this study, in of itself, didn’t absolutely prove that prayer didn’t work. But, it sure got my attention and it triggered my interest and

motivation to further explore my relationship, and beliefs, concerning prayer. After weeks of research and contemplating my own life, I realized that I truly had no proof, real proof, that prayer worked. Oh yea, I had countless stories, from my childhood, my youth, my almost half-a-century as a Christian adult, that, at least on the surface, indicated the power of prayer. But, that morning in 2009, I let it finally penetrate my closed mind that prayer, praying to the Christian God, worked about as well as praying to Santa Claus or Zeus. I got so frustrated sitting in my chair thinking what a fool I had been all my life to buy into Christianity. Finally, after an hour or so of growing angst, I literally threw my Bible, Oswald Chambers' devotion book, my journal, and several commentaries out of my lap and across the floor hitting against my bedroom dresser.

"This led to more and more thought, contemplation, exploration, and exhaustion over the next two years until I finally was forced, internally, to confess to the Seminary's Dean that I had to resign and why. After a few weeks of job-hunting, I wound up here at Chapel Hill. Now, I've never been happier from a spiritual standpoint. Of course, I'm still human and must deal with the same type things as all people do, including Christians." Olivia tucked her notebook under her arm, shook hands with all six of her entranced visitors, thanked them again for coming, turned towards the exit, and walked away.

"Professor Tillman." Sarah said standing up.

"Yes?" Olivia turned and said.

"Please know, we will be praying for you." Sarah said as seriously as though she was standing before the twenty members of her Sunday School class at Olin T. Binkley Memorial Baptist Church.

Olivia smiled, waved, and continued toward the exit.

Chapter 3

June 1970

“Well Matt, how did you sleep?” Dad asked seeming extra chipper this morning.

I was surprised that I had slept so well my first night in the Bible Belt. I woke up to the smell of bacon and coffee. Dad didn’t even have to rouse me out of bed. I concluded that he had gotten up early and found a grocery store. I doubted the breakfast set before me and the cans and boxes of groceries on the kitchen counters had miraculously appeared.

“Like a rock.” I said pouring me a large coffee, thankful that Dad had set up the coffee maker and pulled my favorite cup from the dozens of boxes last night before we went to bed.

“I love how you are practicing.”

“What does that mean?”

“You are talking like a true Southerner, not just a Southerner, but anyone who uses broad language. How do you know how a rock sleeps?” Dad said devouring his toast and eggs. I guess he was finally hungry since he had eaten so light yesterday.

“It’s not meant to be a literal statement. It’s a figure of speech.”

“Just making conversation. By the way, I must deliver my Fall syllabus to the Dean this morning. Then, I plan on exploring the area. Would you join me?” Dad said. I was hoping he wasn’t going to make it a requirement.

“Thanks, but I need some exercise after yesterday’s long ride and given all the heavy food I ate yesterday and now this morning. If it’s okay with you I’m going to ride my bike.”

“That’s good. But, as always, use your head and make wise decisions, don’t go anywhere dark, dingy, dilapidated, or deathly.”

“I know. Your quadruple ‘d’ test. Dad, keep in mind, we are now in a quiet, almost crime-free Southern town. This isn’t South Chicago.”

“I realize that but, just be safe, always.”

“I will.”

“Do you mind cleaning up here while I take a shower?”

“You don’t have to ask me that every day. Haven’t I been head of the mop-up crew ever since Mom died? I just assumed I’d continue this tradition even while we’re in this foreign land.” If we had moved to China or Brazil, I would have felt the same way. I was now living in a country so radically different from where I had been born and raised. At

least that's how I believed from all the reading I had done since Dad broke the news to me early last winter.

After I cleaned off the table and put the groceries away I sat on the front porch. I had enjoyed last night with Dad out front. Our place in Chicago didn't have a porch of any kind. This one even had a swing. Something, another something, I had never experienced. Come to think of it, the back and forth motion could have been the reason I had slept so well. Lullaby. It was a motherless way of being rocked to sleep. Will I ever go a day without missing my mother?

"Good morning." The voice bolted me out of my dream or subconscious wanderings. I looked over to an older woman standing in the front of the house on the sidewalk. "I'm hoping I have some new neighbors. I'm Clara Rollins from two doors down."

"Hello, I'm Matt Benson. My Dad and I just arrived last night."

"I'm happy to have you in the neighborhood. Where are you guys from?"

"Chicago."

"That's a way from here. What brings you to our wonderful town?" Clara said inching towards the front porch steps.

I was just about to respond when Dad walked out with his briefcase.

"Dad, this is Clara Rollins. She's a neighbor." I said, trying to use my best manners.

"Hello. I'm Robert Benson, Matt's father."

"Dad is here to teach at Snead State Junior College."

“It’s a great school and right up there.” Clara said pointing in the direction behind where I was seated.

“Maybe we can talk more very soon. I’m sorry but I have a meeting in five minutes with Dean Naylor.”

“You two have a nice day. Robert, if you will, tell James I said hello.”

“James?”

“James Naylor. We’re friends. We also go to church together. First Baptist Church of Christ. On Sparks Avenue. You both are invited.” Clara seemed to hardly catch her breath as she appeared to have several more paragraphs to follow.

“Thanks again Clara. We’ll probably take you up on your invitation.” Dad said walking down the porch steps and towards the sidewalk alongside College Avenue leaving me with perky Miss Rollins.

I stood up and hollered at Dad, “I’ll work on those chores right now.” He didn’t respond.

“I’ll be going now. Please feel free to come visit me anytime. I’m the pale-yellow house on the left with all the flower pots on the front porch ledge. By the way, we have a great youth group at church. I think you will enjoy getting involved. You know now is the time to be making the right decisions for your life?” Clara seemed ready to launch into a sermon.

“I appreciate you telling me. I must unpack some boxes right now. You have a nice day.” I moved toward the front door trying to give Clara the hint. If I didn’t it seemed she would have no difficulty talking all day.

“Bye for now, Matt. It’s so good to meet you.”

“Thanks for dropping by.” I said going into the house.

I unloaded a box of books to kill some time, I guess afraid to leave the house thinking Clara Rollins might return. My room was furnished with a full-sized bed, a chest of drawers, and a small desk and chair. Above the desk was two shelves. The box I had chosen was filled with my favorite books: murder mysteries and a mix of fantasy. I even had two college-level Biology Textbooks Dad had bought for me at a used book store. Ever since the ninth grade I had gotten interested in some big questions, things like, ‘where did I come from?’ and ‘why am I here?’ Dad had always encouraged me to think critically and openly.

After placing a few dozen books on one of the long shelves, and reorganizing them a couple of times, I showered and dressed. It was already hot. Sitting out on the porch I could tell there was something different about the weather. Dad had told me yesterday to expect very humid conditions the next few days. Apparently, he had gotten interested in weather. I chose a pair of short pants and a tee shirt. I even left off wearing socks beneath my sneakers.

I rolled my bike down the back-door steps. Last night Dad and I decided since we didn’t know much about the neighborhood it was best to bring our bikes inside. Again, it was nice having a porch. This one, right off the kitchen at the back of the house, was large enough for a washing machine and clothes dryer, and two Schwinn bicycles.

I rode east towards the sun and without thought turned right at the end of College Avenue. This led to a quaint, older grouping of

mostly two-story buildings. I saw a sign that said Main Street. I chose the sidewalk for the first block but then nearly ran into a man coming out of a drug store. He politely informed me that bikes were not allowed on the sidewalks in the downtown area. I thanked him and told him I was new in town. I walked my bike across the street and left it by a parking meter. I visited two of the stores, a department store, mainly clothing, named Dobson's, and Southern Hardware. I liked the smell inside the hardware store. I'm not sure what it was but it was a weird combination of the smell of leather and dirt. At least from what I remembered about dirt from an Earth Sciences demonstration last Spring when Mr. Watson, our teacher, took us on a field trip to his grandfather's farm in a little town east of Chicago. I don't even remember the name.

After being greeted by four men sitting around what looked like an ancient wood-burning stove, thankfully inactive, like the ones I had seen in a History book, I left and headed back towards College Avenue. Instead of going home I decided to ride by First Baptist Church of Christ. One of the older men at Southern Hardware had told me, after I asked, where Sparks Avenue was. I crossed the railroad track and rode past a Chevrolet dealership and on to Brown Street, then left until it intersected with Sparks. I turned right and crossed Elm Street two blocks away. The church building was much larger than what I expected. It was at least as tall as the tallest building I had seen in downtown Boaz, but had beautiful stained-glass windows along the front and sides, and a steeple with a huge cross that seemed to reach to the clouds. I knew it was absurd, but the steeple seemed so tall it would cause airplanes to detour.

I laid my bike on the grass beside the sidewalk leading to a set of twenty or more steps along the entire front of the building. I could see a bulletin board of sorts beside the front door, but I couldn't read it from where I stood at the bottom of the stairs. I walked up and saw the times and dates of service on a red felt bulletin board behind glass to block the rain from getting inside. I saw a listing for a Wednesday night meal, prayer meeting, and youth group, starting at 6:00. Just as I was turning to walk down the steps towards my bike, one of the huge double-doors opened and a man came out.

He was tall and thin, probably about my Dad's age, late thirties I guessed. At first, he didn't see me since I was standing twenty or thirty feet away in front of the bulletin board that was to the far right side of the large landing at the top of the stairs. He took three or four steps down and must have somehow sensed I was there. He turned and looked at me, visibly startled.

"Hey, hello sir, young man. May I help you?"

"Not really. I was just looking at your bulletin board, wondering what time you hold services." I said, thinking I might be in trouble. Was I trespassing, since it wasn't Sunday? I was oblivious as to church rules, especially in the South.

"I'm glad to hear that. Are you wanting to visit? I don't seem to know you." The man said, now back up the stairs and onto the landing and walking towards me with an outstretched right hand.

I introduced myself and shook his hand. I gave him the same short-version story Dad and I had given Clara Rollins.

“Awesome. I’m Peter Grantham, Associate Pastor here at First Baptist Church of Christ. Welcome to Boaz, and I certainly hope you will join us. Today’s Wednesday. Of course, you know that. Why don’t you and your father join us for supper tonight. Afterwards, he can attend our prayer meeting and you can meet with our youth group.”

“I’ll talk to my Dad.”

“I assume you will be going to Boaz High School. You said you were about to turn 16, right?”

“June 28th. I will be in the eleventh grade.” I said, starting to dread meeting new people, realizing I would be answering the same type questions a million times.

My son, Ryan, will be a classmate. You can meet him tonight if you come. He can introduce you to Olivia Tillman, the pastor’s daughter. Oh, sorry, she’s out of town on a mission’s trip. Olivia assists our Youth Pastor, Randy Miller. He talks to the group for thirty minutes at most, including a short Bible lesson. Then, Olivia leads a prayer time. After that, it’s just you guys hanging out. The youth department has, in the basement, its own place, equipped with two ping-pong tables.”

“Sounds interesting. Thanks for telling me. I have to get back home now but I promise to tell my Dad I met you and pass along your invitation.”

“Take care Matt. I hope to see you again very soon.”

I quickly walked down the steps. As I rode my bike home, I was proud of myself for having, by fate or accident I’m not sure, established a connection to the enemy’s camp. I didn’t really mean that, but it seemed to fit with some of the novels I had read. The undercover agent

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befriending the enemy to gain access to the inner circle of those who would attempt to destroy the world. I had enjoyed meeting Mr. Grantham and looked forward to my mission that lay ahead, mainly because it would be nice to have a friend or two. I was still surprised at the sad and lonely feeling I had for my three dear friends in Chicago.

Chapter 4

December 3, 2017

“You will always be remembered here with fond affection, but just as important, for your contributions to cutting edge Biblical scholarship ever since you arrived in 1962, at least a decade before most of the current staff was even born. With this, we wish you well. Please come back for a visit very soon.” Laurie Zoloth, Dean of the University of Chicago Divinity School, ended her detailed biography of Robert Benson’s life and career, and his conversion to professor emeritus.

I had walked across the campus from my post at the Department of Ecology & Evolution to Swift Hall to join my honored Dad and celebrate with him the end of his 55-year career here at the Divinity School. What made today equally special was Dad’s birthday and its coinciding with his official retirement. Professors Arnold Davidson and Michael Fishbane had spoken before Dean Zoloth, with them excelling

at alternating everyone's emotions from sad and back to happy through their stories of working with Dad and experiencing his many sides, including his ability to uncover the tiniest of relevant leads from a mountain of, what academics referred to as 'garbage data.' The ninety-minute formality was now over and Dad and I, along with Professors Davidson and Fishbane, were continuing our celebration, on a more private basis, at Piccolo Mondo on East 56th Street.

After the four of us sat down at a corner table in the busy near-campus restaurant, and as Fishbane encouraged Dad to try the Fettuccine Apulliana, I couldn't help but recognize another coincidence. This one didn't bode as pleasant as Dad's retirement and birthday. Later this afternoon, after a leisurely lunch and a brief meeting, hopefully, with Sally Edgeworth, one of my doctoral students, I was driving to Boaz, Alabama. It would be the first time there since Dad and I drove away after the completion of my eleventh-grade school year in June 1971. The occasion was anything but a vacation. I was going to offer all the support I could to my good friend, James Adams, who was facing criminal charges and a Federal jury trial.

"Robert, just last night I read your article, "A Jew-less Faith" in *The Journal of Religion*. A long discussion ensued between the three Bible scholars with me attempting to display interest and understanding. The article's thesis was that Christianity had been hijacked by America and its infatuation with Republican politics. After a lull in their discussion, Davidson asked Dad how his 1970's Alabama research on Baptist Fundamentalism had affected his career.

“I’ve thought a lot about that question myself. Looking back, it is easy to say that if Matt and I hadn’t spent that year in Boaz, Alabama, I don’t think I would have pursued my theory. It was the people there, their beliefs, traditions, and daily lives, that spawned such an interest. I was fortunate to be in the right place at the right time to capture a preview of Americanized Christianity before it spread across the country.” Dad said, dipping a french fry into a mound of ketchup. I knew he would reject the Fettuccine Apulliana. He wouldn’t dare spend \$25.00 on lunch.

My meeting with Sally took an hour longer than I had expected or wanted. After thirty minutes to return to my house on Claremont Drive, I was finally ready for the ten-hour drive to the little town that I would never forget. It was there that I discovered that love, real love, had the power and capacity to either displace or circumvent vast differences in deep-seated beliefs. I was both excited and sad. Forty-six years ago, a wonderful teenage girl and I had held each other for the last time outside a four-room rental house on College Avenue. Olivia and I both thought at the time that our separation would be temporary. It was only three short years until she would graduate high school and be able to join me in college. It hadn’t worked out that way. She had chosen, or had it decided for her, that I was not worth it. The love we had discovered had wilted and virtually faded from my mind. It was as though something more powerful than love had prevented Olivia from taking the road our hearts were seemingly destined to travel. *The Road Not Taken* by Robert Frost blasted across my mind, especially the stanza:

And both that morning equally lay
In leaves no step had trodden black.
Oh, I kept the first for another day!
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
I doubted if I should ever come back.

The last of today's sunlight faded as I drove south through Gary, Indiana. I was beginning to despise all of today's coincidences. Once again, I had stopped at the same interchange that Dad and I had stopped at for him to fill up his truck with gas and for us to eat breakfast at a Waffle House. It was the same I-90 and I-65 exit but the 1970's service station had long been razed and replaced by a multi-million-dollar Pilot Truck Stop. There was still a Waffle House but no doubt it too had been completely transformed. Even still, I couldn't help but pull in, fill up my truck—Dad's influence here too—and enjoy a quick cup of coffee in the imaginary spot where Dad and I had sat over forty-six years ago.

South of Nashville I had to pull into an I-65 rest area. It was past midnight and I could barely hold my eyes open. I found a quiet spot on the back side, a parking spot behind the one where the diesel engines of a dozen or more semis were humming their drivers a midnight lullaby. I slept for over an hour, woke up from a dream about being thirsty while walking across a desert with nothing in sight but an ocean of sand. I walked inside the Information Center, used the bathroom, and bought a cup of vending machine coffee.

Between Nashville and Decatur, Alabama all I could think about was the past, what my life had been like since June 1971 when I had left

Boaz. For over a year Olivia and I had communicated, mostly through our letters, but with an occasional phone call. At that time, it seemed nothing had changed. During my entire high school Senior year, I firmly believed that Olivia and I would follow our dream and be together just as we had planned when I left Boaz. Then, I couldn't see it happening. I have since reread her letters a million times. Now, with the benefit of hindsight, it is easy to spot little clues. I couldn't help but think that if I had shared them with Dad, he would have spotted them immediately. As that first year apart passed, Olivia spoke more and more about her prayer life and how she wanted to honor and please God. I think it was in December 1971, maybe January 1972, she started interjecting her duty to honor her father. This doesn't mean we didn't speak about our love for each other. Again, looking back over these letters, it was clear that Olivia was deeply troubled about something. I still wonder if it was about God and Walter Tillman or if it was about something else. I will never know because during the fall of 1972, during my second month at Harvard I received Olivia's 'Dear John' letter, followed by her late-afternoon phone call declaring she had decided to break up with me. I will never forget her words, "Matt, you know I love you, but God has other plans for my life. I can't keep you hanging on. I have to let you go."

I almost flunked my first semester at Harvard. I don't know how long it took for me to regain some form of normalcy, but I know without a doubt I experienced post-traumatic stress syndrome. To me, it was every bit as bad as if I had been blown up in Iraq or Afghanistan. I'm sure I've forgotten a lot of the details, but I know I would never have made it if it hadn't been for Dad. From then on, every night for the next

four years, Dad called, and we talked for at least an hour. I now realize what a sacrifice this was for Dad. He was extremely frugal with his money and his time. He must certainly have recognized how near death I was to have committed his most valuable resources to saving his only son.

After graduating Harvard with a Bachelor of Science in Molecular Biology, I moved on to Duke University in Durham, North Carolina for my Master's and my Ph.D. I then did a two-year postdoctoral fellowship at the University of California, with Timothy Prout, Ph.D. In 1981, with these excellent educational credentials and, I'm sure, a little help from Dad, I was hired by the University of Chicago's Department of Ecology and Evolution as an Associate Professor of Evolutionary Biology working under the direct tutelage of the world-famous Jerry Coyne, assisting him in his work with evolutionary genetics.

Of course, my education and profession weren't my entire life. I had met Alicia Harrison in 1982. Once again, I must thank Dad. Alicia was a new associate professor of linguistics in the Divinity School. Her office was across the hall from Dad's and he liked her from the beginning. Long story short is that he introduced us. I had walked over to visit him the day before our Christmas holidays began. Alicia didn't have family so Dad invited her to share Christmas dinner with the two of us. Less than a year later we married. If losing love one time wasn't enough, fate, God, whatever, visited tragedy once again on my delicate heart. In January 1984, Alicia died two hours after being t-boned by a drunk driver while she was driving Dearborn Boulevard to begin her day at the Divinity School. Later, I discovered in her journal that she had

planned on telling me that night that she was pregnant. She had written, “found out yesterday that I am pregnant. I wanted to tell Matt this morning before work but thought it best to wait until tonight when we have more time to celebrate. Can’t wait. He will be overjoyed.”

As I exited I-65 and turned east on I-565 towards Huntsville, I now, once again, realized, why I had remained single after Alicia died. I was doomed, destined, tainted, to never have love, real love, live in my life. There was something inside me, something opposite from fertile ground, that was like poison to a long-term and healthy relationship. As I drove towards Boaz I wished, long ago, I had pursued counseling or psychiatry or a ten-year Himalayan meditation, something, to discover why I could not hold on and succeed with a woman I loved.

Crossing the bridge into Guntersville, across the Tennessee River, I became almost sick thinking I was returning to the place I first fell in love. I knew beyond doubt that I had loved Alicia, but I also knew that my love for Olivia Tillman was unique, a once in life love.

Chapter 5

June & July 1970

Three days had gone by since I had first met Associate Pastor Peter Grantham on the front porch steps of First Baptist Church of Christ, and I still hadn't met Olivia Tillman. That didn't mean I hadn't learned more about her.

That night, Dad and I had walked over for the 6:00 p.m. Wednesday night fellowship meal. He then had attended the 6:30 Prayer Meeting and I had, reluctantly, sat and listened to a Raymond Radford lead a handful of kids, most seemed younger than me, in a short Bible study taken from Genesis, centered on what made Eve eat the apple. I later learned that Mr. Radford owned Radford Hardware and Building Supply Company in Boaz and his son, Randall, and about 40 other members of the 'Explosion' team, whatever that was, were in New Mexico on their annual summer missions trip.

Mr. Radford shared with us that six junior high aged kids had already been ‘saved’ during the Vacation Bible School the youth were holding at the Mescalero Apache Indian Reservation in southern New Mexico. The youth were holding this two-week school while their adult chaperons were helping the Tribe complete three Sunday School rooms on the back of the church building they had been working on the past three summers. I gathered that the team had left last Saturday morning and had arrived late Sunday night. By lunch time Monday, all sixty adults and youth were busy working diligently to spread Christ’s gospel.

Dad dropped by the youth center down in the basement shortly after Mr. Radford had released us for what he referred to as ‘hang time.’ I told Dad to go on home, that I wanted to stay. I whispered to him that I was on a mission. He smiled and winked at me and walked away.

Within a few minutes I was talking with the only other kid who looked older than 13. He was sitting in the corner eating cookies and drinking Kool-Aid from a table I had noticed when Dad had left. James Adams was the son of David Adams, the man who Dad had rented our house from. I wasn’t hungry after the fellowship meal, but I did join him in the red bean bag chair sitting across from him. We seemed to hit it off very quickly. He was laid back and easy going. He asked me where I was from, what had brought me to Boaz, and if I played basketball. I gave him my pat answers to the first two questions and told him I liked basketball okay but had never played except in pickup games in our Chicago neighborhood. He seemed to want to talk about nothing else, which didn’t interest me, so I finally asked him did he want to play ping-

pong. One of the two tables on the far side of the large room was unoccupied.

He easily beat me in five games. I think it was his reach. After he stood up, I noticed how tall he was, several inches taller than my five feet ten-inch frame. His arms appeared to be a foot longer than mine. During the games, I learned he had been sick with a virus last Saturday when the missions team left for New Mexico. He said he had planned on going but couldn't leave the bathroom. "It was coming from both ends." James, no doubt was an open book type of guy.

I asked him about the youth group and what goes on when everybody is in town. James said that the youth minister, Randy Miller, and Pastor Walter's daughter, Olivia, were the heartbeat of the youth ministry. "Randy is the thunder and Olivia is the lightning. Even though she'll only be a 9th grader this year she operates like she is in college. She's sold out for Christ. Let me give you some advice. Don't think because you are the new cool guy in town that she will be fawning all over you. I'm not sure Olivia has ever thought about having a boyfriend. Now, that doesn't mean she's homely. She's drop-dead gorgeous, could easily pass for an A-Team cheerleader, that's the varsity team. Sometimes I think she's not fully human. She's so dedicated to God, and her father's work here at the church."

James and I had talked for nearly two hours, an entire hour after Mr. Radford had ran everybody out and locked up the basement door. James and I had sat outside on the Church's front steps. I had learned that he and Wade Tillman, Randall Radford, John Ericson, and Fred Billingsley were five guys known as the Flaming Five and they lived for

the basketball court. James invited me to start coming to the Boaz High School gym on Thursday nights to watch them scrimmage. He also said that I was welcome to join them any time. I quickly declined and told him I would just stick to running. He said, “see there, you are a natural, all you would have to do is learn to dribble, shoot, and pass.” I thanked him, told him I might come watch him and the other members of the Flaming Five, and walked the three blocks home.

For the next two weeks I had developed a routine. Jog or ride my bike around town early every morning during the week. Divide the rest of my day between watching TV and reading. Thursday nights I hung out at the gym watching the Flaming Five devour every five-man team that challenged them, except last week when a group from Emma Samson High School came up from Gadsden. This was a close game but, so far, it was the only time I saw James’ team suffer a loss. Wednesday night and Sunday mornings, Dad and I went to First Baptist Church of Christ. Last night, I had thought I would finally meet Olivia since the mission’s team had returned yesterday on my birthday. I had, as usual, gone down to the basement after the fellowship meal and was astounded by the number of kids. I could feel an electricity in the air that was clearly absent the other times I had attended. I was disappointed to learn that Olivia couldn’t make it. Seems like she had caught a bug like James’ on the return trip from New Mexico. Word was, she was holed up next door in her bedroom at the Church’s parsonage where she lived with her parents, her brother Wade, and her sister Juanita. I learned that

Wade and Juanita were close to my age and would also be in the eleventh-grade.

Dad and I had spent nearly all day yesterday looking for me a car. He had told David Adams at Adams Chevrolet, Buick & GMC that we would return today and make the final decision between a 1964 Pontiac Bonneville and a 1965 Chevrolet Corvair. I had instantly fell in love with a 1965 Chevelle Malibu SS396 hardtop coupe. I knew that wasn't going to happen. Dad confirmed that when he said, "too much car, way too expensive. You'd kill yourself with that much power." Dad was insanely particular, about most everything. This certainly didn't preclude him from wanting to test drive the Bonneville and the Corvair one more time. I knew there was no use in trying to argue that nothing likely had changed since yesterday and that he already knew he was going to buy the Corvair. Why? It was cheaper on gas.

After we returned to the dealership with the Corvair, and after Dad and David Adams spent another thirty minutes talking about the reliability of the rear-mounted air-cooled engine, we drove Dad's truck to First State Bank of Boaz and met with Fritz Billingsley. I quickly learned that Dad had, two days earlier, gone to visit Mr. Billingsley who had approved a \$1,000 loan with Dad signing as co-signor and guarantor. As a birthday present, Dad was paying the difference between the car's cost and the money I was now borrowing. I liked Mr. Billingsley. He was personable and seemed interested in me. He asked if I had met his son Fred. I told him we had met at church and that I was enjoying watching him play basketball on Thursday nights along with the other four members of the Flaming Five.

After signing my life away, Mr. Billingsley gave me a \$1,000 check made payable to me and Adams Chevrolet, Buick & GMC. Dad and I returned to the dealership and signed a few more documents. Dad was glad David Adams had someone on staff to bind the insurance coverage. He handed me the keys and I quickly sat down in my very first car. Dad made me take him for a long ride towards Attalla and back before he would let me drive all by myself. Even though we had spent weeks in Chicago with Dad teaching me how to drive. He even had borrowed cars from half of his fellow professors just to expose me to different vehicles. As I drove down Main Street I let irrationality control my thoughts. I was now a quasi-adult. Cool. Had bought my own car. Owed a bank money. I could feel the eyes of the three girls that crossed Highway 168 in front of me as I sat at the red light. They were thinking, 'I sure would like to meet that good-looking guy in that cool car. I wonder if he has a girlfriend?'

By the time I got home, reality set in. Having my own set of wheels now, not just bicycle wheels, but those of a real car, didn't mean I wasn't still a full-fledged kid. My little car didn't mean I was any smarter. In fact, trying to go to sleep at midnight, all I could think about was how on earth I would ever be able to befriend Olivia Tillman. It seemed from what James had said, she would never even notice me, certainly she wouldn't become human enough to think I was cool with my new car. My five-plus year-old car. As my subconscious rose up to take me towards my dreams, I wished tomorrow was Wednesday and it would be the day I finally got to meet the gorgeous Olivia. The dreams started with a question, 'how had she become some sort of goddess to me?'

Chapter 6

December 4, 2017

Yesterday's ten-hour drive from Chicago, along with the near half a century jaunt my mind had traveled, had left me exhausted, so much so that I had spent the night at the Hampton Inn in south Guntersville. It was like a mighty wind kept me from ascending the mountain after crossing the last body of water before leaving the beautiful little town encircling the Tennessee River.

I had slept until nearly noon, eaten the Hotel's continental breakfast and now was within a mile of College Avenue in Boaz. After looking at Google Maps, I had decided to take Highway 205 from the bottom of the mountain in Guntersville, through Albertville, and on into Boaz. I passed the Downtown Mini-mart and turned right onto College Avenue. At 1:15 I was sitting in the swing, what looked like the very

same one Olivia and I had sat on the night before I left Boaz over 46 years ago.

When I drove into the driveway of the now empty rental house I had not intended to get out of my car. Was it the same force that kept me in Guntersville last night? I had thought about this during my entire ride this morning. If I didn't know better, I would think I was being guided or prompted by some unseen hand.

I lay my head back and reminisced. Soon, I was sitting at the dinner table of Walter and Betty Tillman. Wade was there. It was what we had called dating practice since Olivia had not been allowed to start dating until she was 15. Olivia sat across from me, her parents careful to protect their young and inexperienced, somewhat naive daughter. For some reason my subconscious had skipped over the first several weeks that I had tried to persuade Olivia to see me as more than an evangelical project.

"Sir." At first, I thought someone was standing outside the Tillman's window hollering to get the Pastor's attention. Suddenly my mind was jolted forward nearly half a century. "Sir, may I help you?" The young lady stood halfway down the sidewalk from the street. She had on a painter's smock and was holding a paint brush.

I almost tripped forward as I stood up. "Hello. I'm sorry. I used to live here."

"The house is for rent if you are interested. I can go get the key if you want to see inside."

"Do you own the property?" I asked for some strange reason.

“I inherited it and the one next door. My grandmother left them to me when she died. I live two doors down from here, in the bright yellow house.”

“Was your grandmother Clara Rollins?” I asked.

“Yes, did you know her?”

“I sure did. But, she didn’t own this house when my father and I rented it in 1970. I think it was a Mr. Adams who owned these two houses.”

“He sold them to a Mr. Weathers. My grandmother bought them from his estate after he died. She then passed away in the early 90’s. She was ninety -seven when she died.” The woman by now had walked onto the porch steps and had laid her wet paint brush on a towel she had placed on the concrete ledge that encircled the porch.

“By the way, I’m Matt Benson. May I ask your name?”

“I’m Brandi Ridgeway. What brings you here? I assume you don’t live around here anymore?”

I gave Brandi a brief, but thorough, accounting of my story, including the year that my father and I had spent in Boaz. She responded with her own story. It turned out that Clara Rollins was really Brandi’s great-grandmother and Belinda Rollins was her mother, now deceased. After a Q & A between us I figured out that Belinda would have been a classmate of mine during my eleventh-grade year. I apologized for not remembering her mother. For some reason she brought up the pending criminal cases against several residents.

“It’s rather funny to me that the largest church in town is holding a prayer meeting for two of its former pastors.” Brandi said, now sitting

directly across from me on a concrete ledge. She had encouraged me to resume my seat in the swing.

“Would you be talking about Walter and Wade Tillman?” I asked.

“Yes, every Thursday night at 6:30 First Baptist Church of Christ holds a prayer meeting in the old auditorium.”

“Are you referring to the Sparks Avenue location?”

“Yes, around the time Grannie Clara died the Church built a huge new facility, but they still use the old one for the Hispanic services and other stuff like these prayer meetings.”

“I think what has happened in this crazy town is ridiculous. And now, ninety-nine percent of the locals believe that God can be talked into saving these men from what seems to me a certainty they will spend the rest of their lives in prison, and that assumes they don’t get the death penalty.”

“I take it you are not much of a fan of the Tillman’s. What about James Adams?”

“To me, he’s no different. Do you know James?” Brandi asked.

“Yes, I knew him in high school. It’s been years since I’ve seen or talked to him. After I left Boaz we kept up with each other for years and years. Even though we haven’t been close in probably twenty years I wanted to come, surprise him, and hopefully encourage him, just show my support.”

“I guess you have a right to support a murderer if you want. You should fit right in with the big crowd that comes to the weekly prayer meeting.”

“I’m not much of a prayer warrior.”

“Me either. Well, I’ve got to get back to my painting. I started yesterday on the outside of the back porch. It’s time to turn yellow into green. Nice to meet you Matt.”

I stood. “Nice to meet you too Brandi. Maybe I could buy you a cup of coffee while I’m in town. I’m planning on being here until New Year’s. At least that’s what I’m thinking right now.”

“Thanks, but you are a little too old for me. I don’t see older men.”

I couldn’t help but laugh. I guess in the South asking a woman to go have a cup of coffee is a come on, unlike in Chicago where all it means is, ‘I would enjoy talking with you.’ “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean it that way. I simply meant I have enjoyed talking with you right here today and I just thought it would be nice to continue our talk. I’m sorry if I offended you.”

“No big deal. Come to think of it, you are cute for an old man. See you around Matt.” With that, Brandi picked up her paint brush and towel and headed back toward her house.

I sat back down in the swing and laughed out loud. Cute. Old man. I was 63. I certainly didn’t think I was cute, but I’m a long way from being old. Sixty-three was old when I was sixteen, but now it is, at most, middle aged. I laughed some more.

At 6:30 p.m. Thursday night I slipped into the back of the old First Baptist Church of Christ auditorium. Outside, I had almost turned back after I reached the landing at the top of the stairs. I now realized

that Brandi was right. I was not only old, but I was crazy old. Why else would I be here? It made no sense at all. I tried being quiet as I walked inside. There was no one seated under the balcony. As I turned the corner I could see a man at the front behind the podium with his head bowed. Nearly every pew was occupied, most full of folks leaning forward, also with their heads reverently bowed. I decided to turn right and take the stairs up to the balcony. I would like nothing better than to become invisible. Maybe no one was upstairs.

I was correct in one respect. No one else was upstairs. The problem was I was anything but invisible. As soon as the man concluded his prayer he looked up at me and said. “Sir, the balcony is not safe. We are having it renovated. I encourage you to come join the rest of us.”

It seemed every eye turned and looked at me. I thought I heard someone right down below me say, “Can’t he read? There’s a sign at the bottom of the stairs.”

I walked down and sat under the balcony. I was relieved when dozens and dozens of questioning eyes turned back towards the man behind the podium.

It didn’t take long for me to figure out that he was Warren Tillman, the current pastor, and the son of Wade Tillman and the grandson of Walter Tillman, both former pastors and now, presently, criminal defendants. After a few other remarks he sat down, and another man took the stage behind the podium to lead the prayer service. He referred everyone to their ‘prayer list.’ He instructed everyone to break up into their groups and go to their assigned areas. A young girl, maybe six or seven, walked back to me, with the encouragement of what should

be her grandmother, and handed me a sheet of paper, the ‘prayer list.’ I smiled and thanked her.

“If anyone doesn’t yet have a prayer group please choose one. For example, if you have been led to pray for Walter Tillman, that group is meeting downstairs in the small auditorium. The locations are listed on the back side of your ‘prayer list.’

I turned the sheet over and noticed that the James Adams prayer group was meeting in the basement. This was all too real. The basement had to be the same basement I had spent a year in with the youth group during 1970 and 1971. I didn’t know how to pray, didn’t even believe in prayer, but I had to take this opportunity to see, once again, the place where I fell in love. The basement at First Baptist Church of Christ is where I found my Olivia, my once in life love.

It didn’t take me but a few minutes to follow the path etched deeply in my mind. When I exited the stairs I turned right, like I knew where I was going. Directly to my spot in the huge circle of chairs that Youth Pastor Randy Miller always had setup and waiting for us on Wednesday night. I looked in that direction and saw four or five people standing around a tall woman who was facing the other way. One of the group, a woman, the grandmother of the young girl who had given me a copy of the ‘prayer list,’ looked towards me and said, “this is the James Adams prayer group. Is that who you want to pray for?”

As soon as she started speaking, the woman in the center of the circle, the woman who was facing away from me, turned to look at who the grandmother was speaking to. I nearly fainted. The tall and drop-dead gorgeous woman was Olivia Tillman. I would have recognized her

anywhere and at any time, even a million years from now. Although I was probably twenty feet away, her blue eyes penetrated my heart like we hadn't been apart for nearly half a century. I stood still. Frozen.

Chapter 7

July 1970

It was my fourth Wednesday to be living in Boaz, and I still had not met the girl who was becoming more perfect and more mysterious in my mind as every day went by. The first two Wednesdays she was in New Mexico on the Church's missions trip. The third kept her home. According to Youth Pastor Miller, she was sick with a virus. Last Sunday Dad made me go with him to First Baptist Albertville, so I missed a chance to at least see Olivia. Hopefully, today would be the day I met the mysterious ninth-grader.

I spent half the morning at Boaz High School. It was my second trip to register. Last Monday, a week ago Monday, I had gone and a lady, a Ms. Gilbreath, in the office told me I needed my birth certificate and records from Woodlawn High School. I had returned home and called Mrs. Beaumont to request she mail a copy of my ninth and tenth grade

transcripts to Boaz High School. I had also called Mrs. Gregg, our neighbor across the street. She was watching our place while we were away. Dad had given her a key. He had also told me to bring my birth certificate, but I had forgotten.

When I walked in, Ms. Gilbreath saw me and smiled. “Hi Matthew.” No doubt she had received my records.

“You can call me Matt. It’s shorter. Matthew sounds too, well, Bible.”

“Okay Matt. Looks like we have us another scholar. Congratulations on being a straight A student.” She said walking to the counter where I was standing. She was probably fifty or so years old. Attractive, a little. No make-up. I would have bet my life that she was deeply religious.

“I’m pretty average at Woodlawn. But, I do work hard and try to keep up. I’ll do my best to do the same here at Boaz High.”

“We are all set to complete your registration. I just need to know which electives you have chosen from the list I gave you last week.”

“I’ve decided on Poetry and Vocational Agriculture.” I said.

“Mr. Johnson’s Poetry class is a mixed class. Oh, that sounded weird. What I meant is there will be all ages, from ninth-graders to seniors. There are so few interested that we cannot limit registration to simply one grade.”

“That’s okay. I don’t see a problem. I’m used to mixed classes at Woodlawn, truly mixed.” I said wanting to gauge how well my subtle humor would affect Mrs. Trudy Gilbreath. I had just noticed her name tag.

“We don’t have that problem here. ‘Thank the Lord.’”

“Yes, thank the Lord.” To her, I wasn’t humorous at all. I was deadly serious.

“I’ll register you for Poetry and Vocational Agriculture. Oh, here. I almost forgot. Here’s the *Pirate Practice*. It’s our guidebook. Read it and know it inside and out. It will keep you out of trouble. The first day of school is Monday, August 10th. We’ll see you then.”

I rode my bicycle home. I was as frugal as Dad, well, almost. I tried to conserve my weekly advance. For the next hour I sat out front in the swing and read through the *Pirate Practice*. It seemed all standard. I then took a long run all the way to the Boaz Country Club and back. I returned and napped until Dad woke me a little before 5:00 p.m.

As usual, Dad and I walked to First Baptist for the Wednesday night fellowship meal and services. No way was I going to miss my fourth opportunity to see, and maybe meet, Olivia.

I sat with James Adams, which had become my custom after the first week. Two missionary couples had taken an interest in Dad and the five of them unintentionally pushed me away. Tonight, Wade Tillman and Randall Radford, along with James and me, sat over in the corner by the back door. As I listened, and the three basketball stars discussed their skills at passing, including making passes at lucky members of the opposite sex, I saw a group of girls sitting two tables over. James and Randall were bantering back and forth about how the twins were already dating, even though neither of them had started the ninth grade. Randall surprised me when he said he knew the two guys who had moved in on

the two Boaz girls. “That’s not going to work. No Aggie is going to get first servings from either of these girls. James, you agree?”

Even though I might at times have less than honorable thoughts, I would never have said such a filthy thing. Girls were not food. I couldn’t help but think of Mother, she had made sure that I had learned the importance of treating members of the opposite sex with honor and respect. She had said that gentlemen never tried to take advantage of anyone, especially of a young girl. Mother also taught me that even when I had a girlfriend and she appeared willing to explore and become a little loose, as she called it, a gentleman maintained control. I didn’t have any personal experience in these things, so I believed Mother knew what she was talking about, and she believed I had the ability and power to become a true gentleman.

At 6:30 p.m. I was seated in the Church’s basement with about fifty other kids. After the mission’s team had returned, Youth Pastor Miller had added another concentric circle to accommodate the growing youth group. I tried to not be so conspicuous, but I was able to look all around me. I again was disappointed that I could not see Olivia. Or, maybe all the facts I had gathered about her were wrong. Maybe, Olivia was that rather plump redhead sitting directly across from me. The poor girl needs a Dermatologist.

Pastor Randy, as he instructed us to call him, again, just like last Wednesday night, stepped into the middle of the two circles and began his sermon. It was nothing like what Pastor Tillman had done on Sunday mornings. I guess the energetic youth minister knew that young people are wholly different than adults, with unique ways of learning. Last week

Pastor Randy had talked about freewill and how it was a blessing and a curse. He had said, the decisions you make during your teenage years will go with you the rest of your life. If they are good decisions, you will be rewarded. If they are bad, well, you can fill in the blanks. It will be like shooting blanks. You won't hit your target, your goals."

It seemed last week's talk beat us up. He seemed to leave us with the thought that we had one chance to get it right, and if we got it wrong, we would be forever doomed. Tonight, it was a radically different talk. He called it redemption. "Only God's children get a second chance. If you screw up, you may suffer some unpleasant consequences for a while, but you can start over. No matter what you have done." He said walking the circle and engaging, it seemed, with every one of us.

I particularly liked how he interacted with our group. He would be talking and then would call someone to the center with him. Tonight, I thought it was absolutely fitting that he called Randall Radford out and said, "big double R, we all know you are a young man and you have the desires that all young men have, which is to pursue the girls. If you don't allow God to guide your mind, you will most likely make some mistakes. Oh yes, sin is fun for a season, but it always comes at a price. I'm not trying to embarrass Randall, but simply want each of you to know, whether you are a young man or a young woman, sexual desires are possibly the most difficult desires to conquer. Hear me carefully, you cannot, by yourself, even come close to defending yourself, warding off the attacks. Satan will use every one of his powers to seduce you into believing that it is okay to fool around, to go all the way. Let me tell you the world will tell you, gosh, it is already telling you, do what you want,

do what feels good. Hear me carefully, that is a lie. Be smarter than that. Call on the power of Jesus to come walk beside you and let Him battle the Devil.”

Pastor Miller went on for a full forty-five minutes, keeping Randall Radford beside him the entire time. I was feeling frustrated when the two of them walked outside the circle towards the refreshments table along the back wall beyond the ping-pong tables. As everyone else got up and started following them I remained seated and pondered what I had just heard. It all sounded pretty good. Especially, if you believed that God and Jesus existed. What I didn’t understand was the detailed mechanics of how it worked. How would I ask Jesus to help me? I figured it was by simply saying a prayer. But then, did He always respond positively and invisibly go tie up the Devil and change my mind about those sexual desires Pastor Randy spoke of? I was confused.

Standing in line for some lemonade I learned that at 7:45 we were to reassemble for a skit. While all the youth were enjoying refreshments a group of adults had moved all the chairs to the other side of the basement. I hadn’t paid any attention before to a stage with an open set of long curtains over behind a large row of boxes that seemed to divide the basement.

I sat with James and Wade on the front row. James had encouraged me to follow him if I wanted to finally see Olivia. The skit was in two scenes. Both took place in a make-shift cardboard box car. Someone had done an excellent job of creating a make-believe Bonneville. I suddenly thought I should have persuaded Dad to buy the 1964 model David Adams had offered.

The first scene opened with a boy and girl inside the car. The sound of crickets and a background setting out along the edge of some woods, indicated the couple was alone, parking. Without words, the two started making out, kissing. Remember, it was a skit. They didn't kiss but it sure looked like they did. After a few moments of intense kissing the boy said, "you wanna get in the back?" The girl responded. "I know we shouldn't but okay if that's what you want." The scene ended with the boy and girl crawling into the back seat and disappearing from the audience's view.

The crowd was howling until Pastor Randy got up and said, "I hope you know that was what you are supposed NOT to do. Now, let's watch another scene."

In a few minutes the curtains reopened, and the setting had changed. The car and the woodsy background had been moved to the right side of the stage. In the center was what no doubt was a movie theater. Another boy and girl sat with their faces away from us. It hit me like a brick. I could see this girl had silky straight blond hair. I had no doubt this was Olivia. I missed details from this skit I'm sure. But, the gist of it was, as the two were exiting the theater walking back to his car, the boy asked her if she wanted to go parking. I didn't think that's probably how it would happen, but I acknowledged time was of the essence in theater productions. The girl said, "I don't think that is a good idea. Christians are to flee temptation. Why don't we instead, go play cards at my house. My parents love playing cards."

There were a few boos coming from the back of the audience. Again, Pastor Randy stood up front and seemed disappointed. "Ladies

and gentlemen, that's what I want you to become. I pray you will take this seriously. Olivia, in the second scene, was obedient. She let Jesus help her avoid a dangerous situation. David and Karen, in the first scene, were virtually doomed by their initial decision to go parking in the first place. Take note of this example. If you get inside the lion's den, you stand a big chance of getting mauled. You are safer on the outside. The key to battling sex sin is to be smart, make wise decisions. In other words, stay close to Jesus, listen to Him, allow Him and the Holy Spirit to control your every thought and action. That's it for tonight. Take care and see you on Sunday."

It didn't take five minutes for everyone to leave. Except me. I couldn't move. I was still in a daze from seeing Olivia after she and Ryan had left the movie theater and she had faced the audience. I was in no way disappointed. She was more beautiful than I had let myself imagine. She was tall, maybe as tall as me. I couldn't tell exactly since she was up on the stage. Her straight blond hair came down to her shoulders. It looked natural, not dyed. She wore baggy clothes, so I couldn't tell much about her figure, but she was not as slim as had been described to me by James.

As I was contemplating what I would say to her the first opportunity I got, the basement lights went out. I realized that whoever was the last to leave had not seen me. I was on the stage side of the row of boxes and they would have blocked the view. "Hey, I'm still here." I didn't know what else to say. I sure didn't want to get locked down here.

"Whose there?" It sounded like a mix between Pastor Randy's voice and a young girl.

“Matt Benson.” I said walking back towards the main door.

“Come on Matt or you’ll be stuck here until Sunday.” Pastor Randy said.

As I rounded the row of boxes I saw Olivia standing beside the youth pastor. She was smiling. “Hey Matt, I’ve been hearing about you. It’s nice to meet you.” Olivia said walking towards me and reaching out her right hand.

I took her hand. I almost held on too long. That would not have been the right way to start off.

“Matt, this is Pastor Tillman’s daughter and she helps me manage a rowdy bunch of teenagers.”

“It’s nice to meet you too.” I said looking straight into Olivia’s eyes. They were blue. Oceanic. I hated that word, but it popped into my head. Olivia surely wasn’t a rising 8th grader. She was too, well, mature looking.

“I hear you’re from Chicago. I’d love to hear about the windy city. I’ve always wanted to visit there. Will you be at the Lighthouse this weekend?”

“Lighthouse? I’m confused.” I responded barely able to listen and respond while experiencing a shock, a feeling I had never had before.

“It’s a weekend hangout on South Main Street. It’s run by none other than Pastor Randy and a group of adult volunteers. That sounded funny, Randy is an adult too.” Olivia giggled.

“Well, you are not an adult Ms. Olivia, and don’t you forget it.” Randy said. I wasn’t sure what his intent was.

“The Lighthouse was started last year to give local young people something to do, a Christian alternative from hanging out at the movie theater or the skating rink. Too much temptation around those places. There’s always plenty of good food, music, and fellowship. I’m usually there on Saturdays. Come if you want to. Again, I’d love to hear about Chicago and your Christian experience.” Olivia said.

I could tell Pastor Randy was ready to leave by the way he was looking back and forth. Olivia apparently had concluded I was a Christian. Boy, was she in for a surprise.

“Sorry, I assumed you are a Christian. Matt, have you been saved?” Olivia blurted out. I couldn’t believe what she had just said.

“Uh, I need to get home. I’m already late. Dad will be worried. I’ll try to come to the Lighthouse on Saturday afternoon. We can talk about my Christian experience and Chicago if you want.”

By the time we were up the stairs and outside the church I was pouring sweat. I was glad it was nighttime, and my discomfort wasn’t so apparent. I said goodbye and started walking west on Sparks Avenue.

Chapter 8

December 7, 2017

Thursday night in the basement for James' prayer group I had acted like a love-struck dumb teenager. I hoped Olivia hadn't paid too much attention. Although, it was glaringly obvious to me that I had stuttered on two or three sentences, and I nearly tripped as we took our seats. Now, I had convinced myself that my being completely frozen when our eyes had first met had been matched by her own shock as her smile seemed to linger just past the time it took me to melt enough to speak.

Hopefully, for the both of us, the initial awkward moment we encountered and endured faded into memory and was replaced by a mutually rewarding conversation after the prayer service had ended. When the group dismissed, Olivia had asked me to meet her on the front

steps in ten minutes. She had wanted first, to stay behind to speak with Randi Radford, Randall's widow.

I had waited at the bottom of the stairs and was vividly reminded when she came out the front door of the old auditorium that her manner and movements were etched in my mind. They almost unerringly matched that of Olivia the 14-year-old teenager I had stood here with after first meeting her, after the skit where she suggested her, and Ryan go to her house after the movie and play cards with her family instead of going parking. Her simple descent down the stairs was (I hate the cliché), poetry in motion. She had always, to me, defined, a woman of grace.

Now, back in my hotel room, I could recall every word that had been said. "Thanks for waiting on me Matt. I'm speechless. I never imagined seeing you here. Did you know that it has been over forty-six years since we have seen each other? I have to say, that I still am so sorry for what I did to you. It's unforgivable."

"It is, but time has a way of creating the forgiveness. Otherwise, life is smothered. I have to admit, it wasn't easy, and it did take a very long time." I responded, having rehearsed this little speech forever.

"Thanks for being so respectful and kind. Can I ask you what you are doing in Boaz?" Olivia said setting her purse down and pulling on the jacket she had been holding. The temperature was approaching freezing, but I wasn't cold at all. I could feel a bead of sweat forming on my upper lip.

“You can. I am here for James Adams. I guess the proper thing would be to include your father and brother too. I know this must be very difficult on you.” I said straightening the collar to her coat.

“It is the most awful thing I have ever encountered. I can’t imagine what, especially Wade, is going through. I will never believe he could have killed sweet Gina. You remember Gina Culvert from school? She was in your and Wade’s eleventh grade class.”

“Barely. She was a cheerleader, right?”

“Yes. Her and Wade married shortly after high school and, as far as I know, had a great marriage.” Olivia said, obviously cold. Her teeth were chattering.

“I assume you are married and have children? Hope that’s not too personal a question to ask.” Over the years I had intentionally avoided the urge to investigate Olivia. I figured it wouldn’t take a private investigator to find her and to learn about her life after she ditched me. But I hadn’t. Now, standing in front of the woman who had broken my heart, I wanted to know everything about her. I wanted her forty-six-year biography.

“I was married. Jack, Jack Crowson, my husband, died of cancer in April 2008. We never had children. I was in my late thirties when we married. He was over ten years older. Children were just not in the cards for us.”

“Olivia, you are freezing. I don’t want you to catch a cold out here.” I said thinking and hoping Olivia might suggest we go to MacDonald’s or somewhere for a cup of coffee. But, she didn’t.

“You’re right. I think I’ll head on over to Warren and Tiffany’s. They now live in the Church’s parsonage. He was Associate Pastor for years but has been pastor since 2014, I believe.”

“Thanks Olivia for talking with me. Would it be possible to find a time to share a cup of coffee? I’d love to hear more of your story, if you wouldn’t mind.” I was surprised at my courage.

“I’d love that. I have an idea. Let’s meet for lunch but for now, why don’t you call me in a couple of hours. That’ll give me time to warm up and to visit with Warren and Tiffany. By 10:00 p.m., I’ll be in my old room. My cell number is 706-294-7319.”

“Let me write it down.” I pulled a notepad out of my back pocket. It was a habit I had developed during my undercover work. I almost laughed out loud at my thought as I was writing down Olivia’s phone number. “I’ll call you at ten o’clock sharp.”

I walked to my car and drove to MacDonald’s for a large coffee before heading to the Key West Inn on Highway 168. I had checked in before coming to the prayer service.

I didn’t know why I had wanted coffee. I never liked it when I was hot. My encounter with Olivia had made me sweat. It wasn’t about sexual desire. I was simply nervous, extremely nervous. And when I got caught in that state, I always broke out in a sweat. By 10:00 p.m., I was back to normal. Watching nearly three episodes of Seinfeld reruns probably helped. If Kramer couldn’t make you laugh, no one could.

“Olivia, this is Matt. Is now still a good time to talk?”

“Perfect. I’m in my Crimson Tide bean-back chair. Can you believe that Mom and Dad kept my room like a shrine? It’s just like it was when I was a kid. I would have thought that Warren and Tiffany would have dismantled it. Seems like there’s plenty of bedrooms in this castle for my four grand-nephews and nieces.”

“I want to apologize. Earlier, when you mentioned your husband dying in 2008, I didn’t respond. I want to say that I am very sorry for your loss. I know what it’s like to lose a spouse.” I said, truly sorry, and in no way wanting Olivia to feel sorry for me or to prompt her to ask about Alicia.

“Sounds like we have a lot of catching up to do. I have always assumed you married.”

“Alicia and I married in 1984. Dad had introduced me to a rising star in the Divinity School. In a sense, she and I hit it off like the two of us, back in our day.”

“Children?”

“None. It’s difficult talking about it. Alicia was killed by a drunk driver. I discovered from her journal that she was, that very night, going to tell me she was pregnant. It was devastating to lose her. She was a wonderful woman. I guess I don’t have a very good record when it comes to long-term relationships.”

“Matt, that certainly wasn’t your fault. I am so sorry for your loss, you’re double loss.” Olivia said, thoughtful and clearly concerned.

“Let me ask you. Do you feel this all very strange?” I said.

“Are you referring to us? What with our meeting today after forty-six years and now talking on the phone?”

“Exactly?”

“Maybe it’s God will that I do what I should have done way back in the day.”

“What do you mean?” I said.

“To be professional about our relationship. To be open, honest, and avoid as much hurt as possible.”

“From your statement I take it that you still believe God has a plan for everything?” I had to say it. This was no place to tip-toe around the issue that, to me, had destroyed our teenage love.

“This is going to blow your mind. Are you sitting down?”

“I am.”

“Matt, I no longer believe.” Olivia said it with a confidence that had me speechless.

It took me a minute to respond. “That’s not something to kid around about.”

“I’m not kidding.” She went on to tell me a little about her journey concerning her loss of faith. I didn’t find it unusual. I had read and heard about this type thing. What was surprising was that it had happened to Olivia. The one person in the world that I would have bet my life that would have forever remained unalterably committed to Jesus, God, and Christianity.

“I don’t know what to say. I won’t say ‘I told you so.’ That would be insensitive, even mean. Maybe I’ll just say welcome to the family.”

“That’s the first sign I’ve noticed that you are still rather funny Matt Benson.” Olivia said recalling how she used to call me by my full name after she had tried to persuade me of my need to be saved.

“Let me ask you, was it an interest in science that finally convinced you?”

“Actually, that came later. Maybe I should say, it was Jack’s sickness, the cancer, that prompted my interest in reading more broadly than I ever had. In seminary, it’s slanted you know.” She tried to continue, but I interrupted her.

“Seminary? You went to seminary?”

“You really don’t know?”

“Olivia, all I know about you, other than what you have told me tonight, is what I learned back in 1970 and 1971. To be frank, after you ditched me, I promised myself that I would never do anything that would enable me to discover what was going on in your life.”

“That’s cold, but I fully deserve it. I not only attended Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Dallas, Texas, but I taught there for years, I resigned in 2010 and have been at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill since 2011. I teach Bible related subjects there but simply from a historical and not a theological standpoint.”

From here, our conversation went deeper into Olivia’s story of how she walked away from her faith. It was nearly 1:00 a.m. when the talk subsided, and our alertness faded.

“Matt, I’m about to crash. Please know how much I have enjoyed our dialog, everything about seeing you tonight. Is it too much

to ask that we have lunch? I really need to tell you what happened after you returned to Chicago in the summer of 1971.”

“Olivia, I’m going to be very direct with you. These past few hours have been the best time for me in ages. I would love to see you again. I only have one request.”

“What’s that Mr. Benson?”

“That we be completely honest with each other. At this stage of my life I need and want the truth. I hate mind games. I would love to know the inside story, what went on in your head and heart. Please. Is this too much to ask?”

“Not at all. I promise to be totally open with you.” Olivia said.

“So, when is this lunch you are talking about?”

“I have commitments tomorrow. How about Saturday? A late lunch?”

“That’s good with me. I assume we couldn’t just go to the Lighthouse, could we?”

“I’m afraid that’s long gone. Funny you bring that up. I have wonderful memories of our Saturday afternoons. That place was truly a beacon among the storms for a lot of people.”

“Do you want to meet somewhere Saturday? Or, would you be okay if I came by and picked you up. We could drive somewhere together.” I again surprised myself with my boldness.

“This is sounding more like a date. Is it?”

“Only if you want it to be.” I said.

“Pick me up at 1:30 here at Warren’s. Okay?”

“See you then. Goodnight Olivia.”

Richard L. Fricks

“Goodnight, uh, no, good morning Matt.”

With that we ended our call. I lay across the bed and reminisced for another hour before falling asleep. If I dreamed, I don’t remember.

Chapter 9

July 1970

I spent the next 65 or so hours thinking of nothing but Olivia and her question. If all I had to do was fulfill my promise to Dad, gather information for his research project, my work would be a piece of cake. Things were radically different now. Somewhere along the way, ever since Dad and I arrived in Boaz and I met Associate Pastor Grantham, the mystical and mysterious Olivia had invaded my mind and heart. I think it was the three weeks it took to meet her. This gave the double M's enough time to sprout, root, and evolve into a life-force that saddled up against my initial promise and equally competed for my time and attention. Not to say my heart. My twin mission now was to fulfill my commitment to Dad while at the same time win the heart of the most beautiful and captivating girl I had ever met.

On Thursday, I had pretty much convinced myself to lie to Olivia, to answer her ‘have you been saved?’ question with a resounding yes. I had anticipated that this approach would avoid a mountain of interrogation and allow me to focus on my mission to become Olivia’s boyfriend. I was confident I could pull this off. I probably knew more about the Bible than anyone, well, maybe except Olivia, but I could act the part of a dedicated Christian. I was excited about my decision and my plan. Then, Mother showed up. I could never do this, the lying, to her. She, with her Catholic teachings, had instilled in me the importance of truth, of always being honest with myself and others.

On Friday, my mind had settled on answering no. I would say, “I’m not sure what being ‘saved’ means. Can you help me?” Oh man, this was it. Olivia would think God Himself had given her the best blessing of all. A lost young man who was open to hearing the Gospel of Christ. By the time Dad and I returned from the Dairy Queen, now, our Friday night tradition, I knew I was on the right path. ‘Can you help me?’ It was brilliant. And, I wouldn’t make it easy on her. This could take a while. She would be determined to answer every question I had no matter how long it took. A year? No problem. During this time, I could reveal to her that I was not only a gentleman, one her mother would pick out of a ‘potential boyfriend’ lineup, I was also a prince. I would become Olivia’s protector. That would surely win the hearts and minds of her parents. I knew that was imperative. Once again, Mother showed up, reprimanding me for being hellbent (not her words) on lying.

By Saturday morning, I was hopeless. All I had left, something remotely akin to a strategy to use when, no doubt, Olivia popped out

what I suspected was her favorite question. ‘Are you saved?’ I would simply be honest with her. I would answer ‘no.’ And, if she continued her interrogation by asking me what I believed, I would tell her that I didn’t believe there was a God. This wouldn’t be lying. It seemed Mother had been a little vague about this strategy. She, at least according to my interpretation, had allowed me to rationalize that not telling Olivia about my promise to Dad, about me being an undercover agent of sorts, wasn’t directly relevant to Olivia’s question. I could just as easily, and honestly, be a writer, falling in love with his character while at the same time taking notes of her every word and action.

It was 2:05 p.m. before I left the house. I had already timed my bike ride to the Lighthouse. I would be there easily by 2:10 or 11. I didn’t want to be early or on time. It was better for Olivia to not think I was overly eager to please her. I hated a suck-up.

The Lighthouse was on the south end and west side of Main Street. It was next door to the First State Bank of Boaz. The building, like all along Main Street, was old. It was easy to tell this one hadn’t been well cared for over the past several years. The ceiling carried the obvious signs of multiple long-term leaks. The walls were cracking plaster that appeared to have had some recent patch work. The recently applied blue paint helped. The lingering smell didn’t. The front part of the building was crowded with odd chairs, couches, and bean-bags. Two girls, maybe thirteen years old, sat on a couch to my left and smiled and said as I entered, “Welcome stranger, welcome to the house of light.” I wanted to tip my hat, but I wasn’t wearing one. To the right, at the center and

along the outer wall was a small stage. Three guys with guitars were playing and singing “Amazing Grace.” On the left wall, about midway to the rear of the building, was a half-circle wooden bar that looked like something I had constructed. I suspected all the renovation had been performed by the youth group, with little adult supervision. There were two guys sitting on bar stools, both about my age. Olivia was behind the counter. It looked like the three of them were playing cards. She looked up and said, “Hey Matt, come join us.” As I walked forward I could see the back half of the building was filled with multiple rows of chairs and a podium facing me from the back wall. I suspected this was the nerve-center of the Lighthouse, where real Christians, both adults and teenagers, shared the gospel of Christ to anyone who would sit and listen.

Olivia introduced me to Ben and Danny from Sardis, and instructed them to ‘man the bar’ while she talked with me. She motioned for me to follow her to the back towards the podium. I guess she had a lecture planned for me. “I’m glad you came.” Olivia said as she pulled us two chairs from the front row, positioned them facing each other, and moved the podium back out of the way.

“I’m glad you invited me. I was expecting more of a crowd.” I said looking shyly into Olivia’s eyes. I had to learn how to look at her. Her eyes were like magnets. If I kept staring, she would start to think I was obsessed. She would be right. Not all versions of obsession are sin.

“I forgot, there’s a preseason scrimmage tonight at the football field. I think that’s today’s competition. This afternoon there are flag football games, one for girls and one for guys.” Olivia said.

“Matt, I’ve been looking forward to hearing your story. You said Wednesday night that you would share with me your Christian experience. It’s funny, but I’ve been trying to guess what you would tell me. I’m sorry, but I even thought you might try to bamboozle me.”

“Why do you say that?” I said, a little shocked how direct and quick Olivia was to jump right into the fire.

“I’ve heard about you Yankee types. You’re rather slick and can dazzle a girl with bull.”

“I’ve heard it called bullshit.” I said.

“Me too, but I don’t talk like that.”

“I’m going to surprise you. I’m going to be honest in answering your question, your Wednesday night question. You had asked me if I was saved. The short answer is no.”

“Thanks Matt. I take back my insult. You are not the typical Yankee. Truthfully, I don’t know much about Northerners, just the typical southern rumors. I appreciate your honesty. Would you allow me, us, to talk about Christianity and how you become a Christian?”

“I’m all ears.” Here we go.

“Jesus Christ is God’s only Son. He came to make a way for every man and woman, boy and girl, to go to Heaven when they die. He, like God, was perfect, sinless. He was crucified on a cross and thereby paid the full punishment for your sin and mine. Three days later He was resurrected, came back to life, reflecting His power over the greatest enemy of all, death. Jesus now sits on the right hand of God in Heaven longing for everyone, including you Matt, to surrender to Him, and make

Him Lord of your life.” Obviously, Olivia had given this little speech before.

“Olivia, is it okay for me to ask a few questions? I don’t have any intent on hurting your feelings or making you mad.”

“Oh gosh, you don’t even have to say that. This is a conversation. I doubt you could make me angry.”

“I’ve heard your story, the story you just told. My Mother was Catholic, and my Dad is a Bible professor. First, how do you know all this stuff?”

Olivia didn’t pause a second. “I have always wondered when I’m going to hear a question that either I haven’t heard before or that is difficult and perplexing. I’m still wondering, but don’t take that as an insult.” I wasn’t insulted, but I was surprised. Her response seemed unlike the goddess I had constructed in my mind.

“I don’t. Now, back to my question.” I replied. Olivia was certainly a fireball.

“Oh, didn’t I answer it already? I’ll repeat. It’s the Bible. I may have not said that directly, but I assumed even the son of a Catholic mother and a Bible professor father would know that I’ve been virtually quoting the Good News. No problem, I’ll start from scratch.”

Olivia could have become a smartass without much more practice, I thought as her blue eyes were becoming distracting.

“The Bible is God’s word. He wrote it for mankind, His children. He didn’t physically write it, but men wrote it under the inspiration of the Holy Ghost. Matt, the Bible is God’s story. It contains

everything we need to know to worship God. That's how I know all these things I shared with you."

"How do you know the Bible is true?" I began feeling a little nauseous. Not about my work for Dad. In that regard, I was doing fine. It concerned my other mission. How on earth would I win the heart and mind of the sweet, gorgeous, and naive Olivia, by cross-examining her about the foundation of her life?

"It's history. The Bible has been around for centuries. It was written by men who either knew Jesus or who had special revelations from God. The Bible itself says it is God's word." Olivia said. I suspected she fully believed what she was saying but had never truly questioned her beliefs.

"Let me ask you. Set aside the Bible for a moment. How else do you know that your story about Jesus is true?"

"Several reasons there. As I said, the Bible has been around a long time. The New Testament for nearly two thousand years. The Old Testament, probably four or more thousand years. History is full of men and women who believed the Bible and lived their lives dedicated to its teachings, with many dying for the truth of the Bible. Their testimonies cry out from history for the truth of God's word. If it weren't true, don't you think we would know that by now? Also, my heart and mind tell me Jesus is real. From a child, I have heard the powerful message of Jesus Christ. When I was six years old, Jesus spoke to my heart and I was saved. Since then, my faith has grown leaps and bounds. I could tell you of tons and tons of prayers that I have seen answered. Matt, you are lost

without Christ, therefore you question Him. It seems foolish to a lost man.”

“Correct me if I’m wrong. Apart from the Bible, your belief in the truth of Jesus as savior is based on your personal experiences, not on any tangible, documented evidence?” I said, realizing that I never wanted to become a lawyer. I had too much sympathy for the witness.

“This is why I brought up the Bible to begin with. Your question is not valid. The Bible is the real evidence. You can’t exclude it. That would be like saying, prove the United States is a real place but you can’t use the land we live on, the land containing the 48 connecting states.”

“So, let me see if I get this. The Bible itself is the evidence that the Bible is true?” I said.

“Absolutely, it is God’s Word, and it has withstood the test of time. I’m wrong. Stupid me. I’d go so far as to say that even if we didn’t have the Bible, I would know God exists. Matt, all you must do is look at nature, flowers, animals, the stars, everything. They all scream out that they were created. It is only basic common sense to know that the earth, and the entire universe is designed. That requires a creator. That’s exactly what the Bible tells us.” Olivia said standing up. I couldn’t tell if she was getting frustrated with me or not. She walked over and pulled the podium back to its spot.

“Would it be okay with you Olivia if we gave this a rest. I’d like to have some water, maybe go listen to the band. Those guys are pretty good.” I felt compelled to change the subject. I was not ready to continue my cross-examination. It would surely be an attack on Olivia’s logic.

“Sounds good. But first, Matt. Don’t you believe for one minute that I am finished with you. You won’t get off this easy. I like your attitude. I’m thankful you are asking questions. You realize you’re lost. You are blessed by God to be seeking the truth. Let’s go to the bar. The youth group has dubbed it the water of life well.”

Chapter 10

December 9, 2017

At 2:15 Saturday, Olivia and I were at Cracker Barrel Restaurant off Highway 77 in Gadsden. After I picked her up, we had decided to go out of Boaz. She Googled restaurants in Gadsden and found what she described as her favorite place in Chapel Hill. “I was hoping there was one around here. I love their turnip greens and cornbread.”

“That fits. I always thought of you as Ellie Mae Clampett.”

“Not a chance. She would have been intimidated by my bust-line.” Olivia said looking over at me with a faint smile. I was the one intimidated. She was, as always, so open, but never about anything sexual. She was the most modest girl I had ever met. But now, had she changed? Was she flirting with me? Coming on to me?

Last Thursday morning, I had driven to Brandi Ridgeway’s house and asked if I could rent 118 College Avenue for a month. She had

reluctantly agreed. I had the utilities turned on, bought a sleeping bag and two large pillows, and moved in. The only appliance in the house was what looked like the same old stove that was there in 1970. I doubted that to be true. I had purchased a coffee maker and coffee but nothing else. I had been eating every meal at a little cafe called Rooster's downtown where the Sand Mountain Bank was when Dad and I lived in Boaz nearly half a century ago.

I was surprised to learn that Olivia did love turnip greens and cornbread. She had them and country-fried steak and the biggest slice of coconut pie I had ever seen. Everything was coming back to me. It's weird how everything that we have ever experienced is buried somewhere in our heads. I recalled the appetite Olivia had as a teenager. Now, as then, I couldn't figure out how she maintained almost a perfect figure. In the past, she was never one to exercise formally, although by the end of mine and Dad's time in Alabama, Olivia was my regular companion on the running trails. I wonder if she was now a workout freak to rank her perfect 10. I thought it inappropriate to ask her.

"Are you going to eat the rest of your pancakes?" Olivia eyed my plate. I had ordered breakfast after seeing the older couple at the table across the aisle from us eating pancakes, bacon, and sausage. It was the best smelling bacon ever.

"No. Do you want them?"

"I'd like to try the pancakes. I usually eat dinner at our Cracker Barrel in Chapel Hill but Sissy, my new research assistant, has been trying to get me to go one Saturday morning with her. She says they are divine."

“Here, help yourself. I’m sure they will taste great after that coconut pie.”

The next ten minutes were almost surreal. Olivia ravaged my pancakes and then we simply sat silently. We both had taken the first minute or so to investigate our surroundings. When our waitress came by to refill our drinks, Olivia had asked her if there was a private place we could meet. “I’ll check but I bet it’s okay for you to sit in our smallest banquet room. The big one is occupied with a birthday party.” The older woman said with the best Southern drawl I think I have ever heard.

After our move had been approved, Olivia and I sat at a long oak table, one along the far-right side of a room that would hold probably thirty people. Within a few seconds after sitting down, I noticed Olivia was staring at me. I didn’t linger at first, but quickly came back for a peek. She was still staring and the mood on her face had grown almost pale, with a tinge of sadness given how she was not smiling and the pupils in her eyes were on alert, even attempting to penetrate my mind.

“Matt, I have something I must tell you. I’ve put it off for way too long. This isn’t a good time to do this, but I have to take this opportunity.” I couldn’t imagine what she was talking about.

“Okay, you have my permission. But, you don’t have to be so frightened. You know we decided early on that we would be completely open and honest with each other. I suspect that’s the main reason I didn’t fall apart when you ditched me. It was weird, but I trusted you and your decision. I knew you had done what you thought was best for both of us.”

“Matt, I have lied to you. I broke my promise to you, the promise you just mentioned. I did promise you to be completely open and honest. But, I wasn’t. This is going to hurt you Matt, but it’s the truth. You deserve to know.”

“Just tell me. You’re killing me with all this suspense.” I said trying to imagine what could be so terrible that she had born such a burden for so long and now was about to crawl out of her skin.

“When you left Boaz in 1971, I was pregnant.” She finally said it. Then, she just sat there.

“Olivia, we had sex the first time, and the only time, the night before Dad and I moved back to Chicago. It, the sex, took place June 9, 1971.” The date was etched in my mind. Forever.

“Do you have to call it sex? It was the most wonderful and beautiful thing I have ever experienced. That night, in your room, in your bed on College Avenue, we made love.”

“I agree. My point is, and this sounds cold. Had you been having sex with someone else? How did you know you were pregnant?” I said.

“No, no, no. Matt, you must know that I was a virgin before you. I’m confusing things. That night, I didn’t know that I was pregnant. I found out three months later. Until I married Jack in 1988, you were the only man, boy, whatever, I had ever slept with.”

“Then, how could you, you of all people, have ditched me. You were carrying my baby when you abandoned me? No, that wouldn’t have been right. That took place nearly 18 months later. What happened to our child Olivia?”

“John and Paul, twins, were born March 9, 1972, nine months to the day after our one and only sexual encounter.”

“Well, I guess I’ll have to ask every follow-up question since you seem to not want to give me, at one time, the full narrative. What happened to John and Paul? Tillman, was that their last name?”

“Matt, I had no choice, really. My father, the fundamentalist of fundamentalist preachers, the hard-liner Walter Tillman made me promise to never tell you about the babies. I suspect you can fathom his power over me. Once mother found out I was pregnant and told Dad, he insisted I drop out of school. I became an absolute shut-in for the next six months. He convinced the community that I was sick and couldn’t have visitors. I was an involuntary recluse during that entire time. It was awful.”

“But, you kept me on the line. It seemed to me, for at least the first year after I left, that we were fine, that our plans for you to finish high school and join me were right on track.” I said.

“I did too Matt. Dad’s only condition, at the time, was that I couldn’t tell you about the babies. He convinced me that if I truly loved you that I shouldn’t tell you, and it was in your best interest. I was such a fool. Please know that it was an absolute shock to me that after I delivered, in Birmingham mind you, the babies were taken away. I never got to hold the only children I ever had.”

“I take it, they were put up for adoption. Right?”

“All I was ever told was that Dad had a friend in Texas, another pastor. He and his wife were in Birmingham when I gave birth. I never

saw them. Two days later they left with John and Paul. I didn't get to name my two precious boys."

"And, you have never had any contact with them?" I asked.

"Here's what, I suppose, prompted me now, at least in part, to come clean. Matt, you must know that if I hadn't seen you, in the flesh, here in Boaz, I don't know if I ever would have told you the truth. That makes me so sad, and angry at myself. But, when I saw you in the Church's basement, the moment our eyes met, my first thought was 'Matt has somehow found out and has come looking for me. I must deal with my secrecy and lying.' Of course, you hadn't found out. But, I still knew I had to tell you."

"You didn't answer my question. "Have you ever had any contact with John and Paul?" I said, feeling anger build up in my gut. Anger was so foreign to me. I sometimes wondered if I was human.

"A few days ago, before I left Chapel Hill, I received a call at my office, at the School. It was John, John Cummins. The conversation was most awkward, but some way he had found me. I think it was because I had gone back to being Olivia Tillman when I moved to Chapel Hill from Dallas. The real clue that had started his intensive search was some documents he and Paul had found going through their parent's things after they died. The boys, from an early age, had known they were adopted, but they hadn't been told the truth. They had been told their parents had gone through an adoption agency, one long-defunct. John and Paul literally knew nothing about where they came from. Included in the documents they found was a type of journal entry their mother had written. It gave the entire story, including my name and where I was

from. With modern technology, it was easy to find me. If John and Paul hadn't found those documents, I suspect they might never have known the truth."

"How did the two of you leave things, after that phone call?" I asked, absolutely blown away by what I was hearing.

"I know it is natural for a mother to want to see and hold her children. I suspect most of them feel the same about their parents. I sensed from the tone of their voices they were excited about talking and with me and were serious about taking the next logical step. We three agreed we had to meet."

"This is rather selfish of me, but did John say anything, ask anything, about his father?" I had to ask.

"He did, he asked, 'Who is my father and where can I find him?'" "I told him that I would tell them the entire story and try to help them find you. Matt, like you, I intentionally stopped keeping up with you after we broke up."

"Do the three of you have a plan to meet?"

"We do. They will be in Boaz next Thursday. Is it too much to ask for you to be with me when we meet?" Olivia said, unable to even look me in the eye.

"One question. I'm sorry but I must give you one more chance to be honest if you have not been. Is there any way that I am not the father of John and Paul Cummins, the twin boys you gave birth to?"

"Matt, you are their father. But, I must tell you something else. I would hope, somehow, you would know this. I have loved you forever, almost since the first time I saw you. I love reading romance novels and

they are filled with stories of how beautiful it is for the adage, 'love at first sight,' to be real. Novels are fiction. Our story is not. Even though I cared for Jack, loved him deeply, it was nothing like what I felt for you. Matt, you are my once-in-life love. That will never change. Please forgive me for what I have done." I looked closely at Olivia as she talked. I would have bet my life that she was laying open her soul to me. She wasn't lying.

"I'm sorry Olivia that I was not someway there for you. I love you too. I hope you know that if I had been told the truth, I would have abandoned my life in Chicago and, if I had to, walk the 700 miles back to Boaz. Maybe we could have worked things out, eloped or something, raised our boys and spent the last near-fifty years enjoying each other's company. I would have liked that."

"Thank you Matt for being you. You are exactly the man I fell in love with. You are too good for me." Olivia said, now looking at me so sweetly.

"Don't even go there. Would it be alright with you if we got out of here and went for a drive?"

"I'd love that."

Olivia and I did go on a five-hour journey with multiple stops including a hike at Noccalula Falls Park, a photo session in downtown Chattanooga, and a milkshake detour at a Sonic's in Fort Payne. We returned to Boaz at 9:30 p.m. and sat on my front porch swing, just like we had sat together, here on this same porch, nearly a half-century ago. At midnight, I walked Olivia the three blocks back to Warren and Tiffany's house.

Richard L. Fricks

“I’ll call you tomorrow if that’s okay.” I said, still holding Olivia’s left hand, facing her outside the parsonage’s front door.

“Early, okay?” Olivia said with a quick, out of the blue kiss to my lips.

With that she went inside, and I stood spellbound. I didn’t sleep much that night.

END OF FIRST TEN CHAPTERS

Thanks for reading the first ten chapters of *The Boaz Secrets*. I would be honored if you bought this book. To order, please visit 'Books' at my website: richardlfricks.com.