

The Boaz Stenographer

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A Novel

Richard L. Fricks

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ISBN-13: 978-1973954507

ISBN-10: 1973954508

Richard L. Fricks

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

Chapter 1

I will not lie for President Kane. I will not lie for the President. I kept saying to myself as I waited in the secretary's office just one door away from where the world's most powerful man sat with Fritz Archer, the President's Chief of Staff, and Zack Quitman, my boss and Head of the Stenographic core.

"You can come in now Mr. Shepherd." Jane Goodman, the President's secretary said as she walked in from the Oval Office.

I tapped my forehead with my handkerchief one final time, stood, and walked through the door into a room with six eyes of hot steel that instantly wounded my determination to hold unwaveringly to honesty and truth. These men would give me only two choices, lie or walk my integrity off the gang plank into a raging ocean.

"Good afternoon Walt." Fritz said, reaching out to shake my hand. The President sat behind his desk without a word, or glimmer of a smile. Zack twisted in his seat and gave me a slight affirmative nod, like he was signaling me to say yes to whatever demand was coming my way. "Thank you for coming. Please sit here."

"My meeting with Billy Graham yesterday in the Rose Garden has created quite a stir." The President said while looking at his laptop screen that sat on his desk in front of him.

"Walt, I have reviewed your transcript of the President's and Mr. Graham's meeting. I've also reviewed Tad Goldstein's transcript. Tad, as you know, was the closest to the President when he said, 'Billy, I

never met with a single Russian during my campaign.’ Why is it that you didn’t hear the word never?” Zack asked.

"Sirs, I can only record what I hear. I heard the President say, 'Billy, I met with a single Russian during my campaign.'"

“Mr. Shepherd, even though you have worked nearly 35 years as a White House stenographer, Tad Goldstein has won every major competition the National Stenographic Society has held in the past five years. I believe you simply misheard. Why is it that you cannot acknowledge that?” The President said, continuing to look at his laptop screen.

“Sir, in all due respect, I am not the only one who did not hear the word ‘never’ in the subject sentence. I’m aware that several reporters have said they did not hear the word.” I said feeling the sweat run down my back.

Fritz glared at me and sat forward to the edge of his seat, “Sharon Hawkings with Fox News, who, like Tad, was closer to the President than the reporters you mention, is adamant. She says the President never said he had met with a Russian during his campaign. In fact, she said his next sentence confirms that. ‘I am the most patriotic president this country has ever had.’”

I didn’t respond but acted like a school kid who had been caught cheating on an exam.

“Let’s be very clear Mr. Shepherd. You will change your transcript to match Tad’s or you’re fired. Do you understand what I’m saying here?” the President said.

“Yes, clearly.” I said wanting to stand up and run out of the Oval Office.

“Walt, it’s 3:30 now. I’ll give you until 5:00 p.m. today to make your decision. I fully expect you to get on board with Tad.” Zack said, continuing to give me an affirmative nod.

“Am I dismissed?” I said as I stood up directly facing the President. He never made eye contact. He never even looked up from his laptop.

“You may leave Mr. Shepherd but please know there is a price to pay for blindly following your principles. I trust you are hearing what I

am saying.” Fritz said as the door to Jane Goodman’s office opened and she herded me like I was a cull cow headed for the slaughter house.

As I walked outside the West Wing and toward the Eisenhower Executive Office Building I knew my thirty-five-year career here at the White House was over. No Administration had ever asked me to lie. No one had even asked me to correct a verb tense. But, that hadn't stopped me from making the biggest mistake of my White House career. The only time I ever modified what a President said was in 2000 when I changed President Bush’s ‘is’ to ‘are.’ At a stump speech in Florence, South Carolina on Jan. 11, 2000, Bush asked a question — "Is our children learning?" I had caught hell over transcribing the statement to “Are our children learning?” I was wrong. It was not my job to protect the President. My duty was to record the truth, exactly what was said. I swore then I would die before I ever recorded anything except exactly what the President said. I was not about to change my mind. I didn’t care if it cost me my job.

Three days later, at 6:35 a.m., we left Washington, D.C. It was me in my loaded down 2014 Ford F150 pickup with all my boxed-up transcripts in the truck’s bed under a new camper shell. Behind me, for now at least, were two men in a Peterbilt with a growling CAT engine pulling a 53-foot dry box trailer loaded down with the remainder of my worldly possessions.

The two men crew and rig from Elrod Moving and Storage arrived yesterday shortly after noon and began the ten-hour loading sprint. I had paid their overnight hotel bill at the Georgetown Inn on Wisconsin Avenue and they had returned at 6:00 a.m. to conduct their required 26-point truck and trailer inspection, and to eat a Hardee’s breakfast I had waiting for them. Our plan was simple: drive, virtually non-stop, to 5583 Crosson Road in Boaz, Alabama. They would manage their own schedule, I would mine. I could lead or follow, go on without them, or stop for a nap. One of the requirements was for all to meet at 6:00 a.m. in the morning at the designated spot and start unloading the trailer.

Eighty miles after leaving my home on Rosalyn Street in Georgetown, somewhere around Middleton, Virginia, I pulled past the

long semi and settled in to endure one of my least favorite things. I always thought driving, and even worse, riding as a passenger, was boring. For a little over seven chapters I listened to *The Last Juror*, a John

Grisham book, but surprisingly got tired of Clanton, Mississippi and Willie Traynor, although it was one of my favorite stories, having previously read it in hardcover and on my Kindle.

My mind took a different direction just as Miss Callie Ruffin finished her prayer, and her and Willie were about to eat a feast for lunch out on her front porch in Lowtown. I was 15 and was walking up the back-porch steps to my parents' house, my home on Crosson Road, when I was startled by a woman's voice coming from the swing on the far side of the porch. Vann Elkins, my 16-year-old friend, the same grade as me but a few months older, had just dropped me off from an after-church gathering at the Dickerson's house in Country Club. The back-porch lights were off, and I hadn't seen Mother. I also hadn't seen her crying. This is what altered her voice and startled me.

"Walt, let's talk." Mother's voice was clearer now.

I walked over and sat down in a lounging chair. "Are you okay? It's after 10:00, late for you. What's wrong?" Mother was always in bed by 9:00 p.m. sharp.

"I'm worried about you. You're changing, and I don't like it."

"You don't like me growing up?" I was really confused. Why would Mother be worried about how much I was growing. Since last year, the beginning of 9th grade, I had grown nearly three inches taller and gained fifty pounds. She knew how hard I had worked with Coach Hicks in the weight room, on the practice field, and running an obstacle course, he had helped lay out here at Shepherd's Cove, our 40acre domain off Crosson Road.

"No, silly, it's not that. I am very proud of how you have stuck to your goal of playing football. Son, what is breaking my heart is how you are falling away from God." Mother barely got the words out.

Before I could think of what to say Dad opened the back door and turned on the porch light. He didn't get a word out before Mother shooed him back inside.

"Mom, I was at church tonight and I led the prayer at the

Dickerson's before ice cream and cake."

"That's good Walt, but don't patronize me. I hear the type of questions you are asking in Mr. Smith's Sunday School class and I see how you act during Brother Walter's sermons. When you slouch down in the pew I know you are not listening or you are disagreeing with what you are hearing. Be honest with me. Tell me what is going on." Mother had laid her tissues aside. She was gaining composure. I knew my goose was cooked.

"I have my doubts about Christianity. There, I said it." I said standing up and moving over by the porch rails.

I know now a little more how those words broke Mother's heart. That night we talked until after midnight. I told her how the year before I had started reading how the Bible came about, and, this year, had gotten interested in evolution, thanks to Dr. Ayers, my Biology teacher. At the end of those two hours, the only thing we accomplished was to agree to disagree. For sure, one thing didn't change, and that was my love for my Mother and her love for me.

My mind was now solidly in the past. I kept driving. By the end of high school, I was, at a minimum, a closet atheist. No, I didn't stop going to First Baptist Church of Christ. I respected my Mother more than that, Dad too. By graduation night, May 25, 1972, I had accumulated nearly four years of reading, studying, and contemplating. Atheist was not the right word. I didn't have the right word to describe me. What do you call a person who strongly doubts most of the stories from the Bible? Who believes in an old, old earth, and that all life is connected and has arisen through the evolutionary process? What do you label a person who both doubts God and loves God, or the things my life had associated with God? Whatever I was, by the end of high school, I still was open to God, most days was eager to hear from Him. I truly was open to knowing Him. I just needed evidence.

Mother was the most open-minded about my fall from grace, as she put it. In fact, her and Dr. Ayers were the only two people I knew of who didn't think I was a disgrace to the community. It didn't take long for word to spread around church and around town that I was different. It didn't take me long to figure out that a closed mind is such a dangerous thing. In a way, I felt like church folks threw me into the

same camp with homosexuals. We were all heathens and destined for hell.

After graduating, I attended Snead State Community College for one year. During the summer of 1973, Jennifer Ericson and I married, and her rich father opted to pay our way at the University of Virginia, a truly great school, and the one I had dreamed of attending since the tenth grade. I majored in English and minored in Creative Writing. We had stayed in Charlottesville during the summer after our sophomore year. I got a job at Pizza Hut and right before the end of summer I delivered a pizza to Craig Langston sitting on the steps of the Rotunda. He was a talkative professor. After he learned I was an English major, he invited me to sit, even gave me a slice of his pizza. He asked me a dozen questions and ended advising me to take a couple of stenographic courses. He said I needed to find a way to, as efficiently as possible, take notes from what I was reading. He warned me that my sophomore year was going to be heck, but my junior and senior years would be hell. He strongly encouraged me to pursue “the best note-taking system known to man.” I will never forget those words.

I did follow his advice, ultimately taking six courses over the next three years, almost deciding to change my major. I’ve often wondered if Craig Langston was an angel sent from God to guide my life. Probably not, but for sure he played a significant role in my future. After graduating, I tried for over a year to find a teaching position. I wanted to teach at the college level but soon learned I needed a PhD. That wasn’t happening. I wound up teaching night classes in stenography at Prince George’s Community College in Largo, Maryland. How I got there was a whole other story. It was only fate that I met Sally Pelham, the sister of the College’s President who had been a stenographer at the White House for nearly twenty years. Out of the blue one Thursday evening, nearly six years after I started teaching at Prince George, Sally and her sister, Suzie, the College’s President, dropped by my class. They stayed the remaining hour of the class, even had me demonstrate my ability on the steno machine. After all my students left, Sally gave me her card telling me to call her if I wanted “a note-taking job in a high stress environment.” A month later, November 18, 1982, I was the newest staff member of the White House’s stenographic core.

Over the next eight hours, my mind jumped between alternating scenes, from my 35-year career at the White House, back to high school girlfriends Regina Gillan, and the late Jennifer Ericson. At 6:35 p.m., twelve hours after leaving my townhouse in Georgetown, I pulled my Ford pickup into the driveway at Shepherd's Cove, 5583 Crosson Road, Boaz, Alabama.

Chapter 2

It was almost 8:30 p.m. before the moving van arrived. After Ed and Larry parked the van and left for a hotel, I drove to Walmart to pick up a few things. As I was loading up on ten kinds of yogurt, I glanced over and saw an attractive woman at the milk cooler pulling out and returning several gallons of milk. The woman had on tight jeans and a sleeveless pink top. I had a feeling I knew the woman but all I could see was her profile.

After she finally selected a gallon of milk, placed it into her buggy, and headed towards me, I knew exactly who she was. “Regina Gillan, is that you?”

“Who’s asking?” She replied looking towards me for a second before abandoning her cart and walking over to the eggs directly opposite the yogurt coolers.

“Walt Shepherd is asking.” I said.

She then ignored her need for eggs and walked over and hugged my neck without saying anything. We just stood and looked at each other for what seemed like a minute or more. By now, I couldn’t help but notice her pink top was exposing just enough cleavage to remind me she still had a teenage figure. Even though I hadn’t seen her in nearly 50 years, memories of our last conversation flooded my mind.

“I can’t believe this. Last week I heard you quit the White House and now you’re in Boaz Walmart?”

“My story isn’t as good as yours Miss Gina. Not long ago at all you were giving President Kane hell in editorials at the Chicago Tribune. Now, you’re checking out expiration dates on twenty gallons of milk in Boaz Walmart.” I said.

“You always were a smart-ass Walt Shepherd.”

“Seriously Regina, you here for a New Year’s visit or still hanging around after Christmas?”

“Neither. As of ten days ago I am the Editor-In-Chief of the Sand Mountain Reporter.”

“You’ve got to be kidding. Why would the editor of the editorial page for the Chicago Tribune jump from that high pedestal and fall so far south? Living around a bunch of liberals is one thing, but living amongst red-neck Christian fundamentalists can get you killed?”

“Not only a smart ass but rather insulting too, aren’t you?” Regina said.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean it that way. It just seems such a radical move.”

“It wasn’t as sudden as it might appear. I’ve been wanting a change for a while. Over forty years in the windy city is enough. Since our class reunion in 2012 I’ve been homesick of a sort. It was surprising that my nostalgia from hanging around a bunch of our classmates, all who still live around here, didn’t go away. No doubt, it was a post-midlife crisis of a sort. By the way, why didn’t you come to one of our class reunions?

We’ve had them at least every ten years.”

“I didn’t want the pain.”

“Pain? What the hell are you talking about?”

“It’s a long story, but you are one of the leading characters.”

“That’s a story I would love to hear, but now I have to get back. Mother needed milk for her banana pudding. She makes me swear to triple-check the expiration dates.”

“It was nice seeing you.”

“Oh, I forgot to ask. What are you doing in Boaz?” Regina asked.

“I not only quit the White House Stenographic staff, but have moved back home, home as in right here in Boaz. I just got in town around an hour ago. I guess you could say I’ve retired.”

“Walt Shepherd, you will never retire. You can’t sit still. Come talk to me at the Reporter. I’ll be in the office first thing Monday morning.”

Chapter 3

I spent the next three days unpacking. The moving company had placed all my furniture neatly around the outer walls of the great room, study, and two bedrooms, and stacked the dozens and dozens of boxes inside the master bedroom. All the boxes, except my White House transcripts. I moved them to a safe and secure, climate-controlled, unit at Paradise Self Storage in Albertville. I toiled with this decision, but for now decided it more prudent to spend the extra money to protect the fruits of my 35 years working with five Presidents until I could have the documents scanned.

I had mixed feelings about moving back into my childhood home, what my paternal great-grandfather had dubbed, Shepherd's Cove. Mom and Dad had deeded the home-place to DeeDee, my sister, and me in 2007. Dad died in 2012 and Mom had moved into Brookdale Assisted Living in Albertville three years ago. She was not doing well. DeeDee had listed Mom and Dad's place with a realtor in 2015. There had been a little activity during the first few months after it was listed, but none for nearly the past two years. Since I was moving back home anyway and needed a place to live, I decided to buy the 118-year-old thrice-remodeled cabin that Stephen Parker Shepherd had built in 1899, motivated greatly by my DeeDee's offer to buy her out at a great price.

This morning, Thursday, would be a change of my recently created routine. I had to meet with Dean Naylor at Snead State to finalize my adjunct professor duties in the business department. That

meeting wasn't until 3:30 p.m., which gave me plenty of time to waste here sitting in a padded lounging chair on the back porch, one that likely was the same one I sat in as mother and I talked when I was 15. I had been here since daylight watching three ducks swim and frolic in the pond along the edge closest to the old barn which was built shortly after the house.

At 6:50 a.m., I heard a car horn. I really didn't want any visitors, so I stayed put, lowering the back of my chair into a sleeping position. If it's important, the person will find me. I shut my eyes as though I was asleep.

"Walt, you can hide from your troubles all day." Vann Elkins shouted from the porch steps. I kept my eyes closed until he walked over and shook me with both hands until I nearly fell out of my chair.

"I wasn't hiding from my troubles. I was hiding from you. Well, I guess that's about the same thing."

"Good to see you Walt. I've been seeing activity around here for nearly a week. I just figured DeeDee had sold the place and my new neighbors were moving in." Vann said unfolding another lounge chair.

I raised the back of my chair. "I hear you've retired?"

"Thought it was time to fish, hunt, garden, and gossip anytime I wanted without distraction from 250 high schoolers." Vann said fiddling with the settings on his chair.

"I'm glad you stopped by but I'm hungry. Let's go grab a bite and we can catch up. That good for you?" I said finding it difficult to get up out of my low-slung chair.

"Sounds great, I was headed to Grumpy's Diner when I decided to pull in."

I rode with Vann in his 90's model Ford pickup and found one table available. Three men I didn't know were just abandoning the table in the far left-hand corner. I followed Vann and stopped every time he did to greet folks at four other tables. I felt like a member of the Secret Service. He didn't introduce me to anyone and no one even looked my way. Maybe I'm invisible. That might not be a bad thing.

After the waitress brought us coffee and took our orders, I asked Vann why he had really retired. I knew he wasn't much of an

outdoorsman, even though his wife insisted he help her in the garden. The truth is, he was a bookworm.

"I've been teaching American History at Boaz High School since 1978, two years after I graduated from the University. Time for a change. I might finally get to writing that book I've been dreaming about for a quarter of a century." Vann said.

'University,' in these parts always referred to the University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa. And, no other college in the world. Cross-state rivalry Auburn could never earn such a title. "How will you survive without the interaction with your students? I've always heard and believed that was the key to your longevity."

"Oh, horse radishes, let's talk about you for a while. I see where you really got your ass in a crack with old man Kane. I have one question. Did you quit or were you fired?"

"Both. I quit and got fired."

"That makes sense." Vann said hesitating to go on while the waitress delivered our food. "Clarify please."

I realized for the first time since high school why Vann Elkins and I were best friends. We had always been totally transparent with each other. There was nothing, and I mean nothing, that we couldn't ask or divulge to the other. "Before my meeting with the President I had already decided how I would respond. If he asked me to lie, then I was out of there. That's what happened. The President let my boss, Zack Quitman, have the honors of telling me to change the transcript or hit the road."

"You're my hero man. The rest of the country's also. Well, except for ninety-nine percent of the Wacko's supporters." Vann said.

"You're right. Just like Kane said, 'I could be in the street in downtown Manhattan and shoot somebody and wouldn't lose a one of my supporters.' The man is a Presidential disgrace. But, his day is coming. I feel it in my bones." I said noticing my voice rising as I spoke. "Not so loud my friend. Half of Kane's supporters live here in Boaz. Since you've never been so good at math, that means most every person you will encounter in Boaz, no matter where you are, Walmart, church, here in the diner, are die-hard Kane fans."

"You've got to be kidding. Surely, it's not more than 50%."

Wouldn't that be what it should be given the general election results?" I said.

"Kane math doesn't work that way. For some unknown reason, Boaz voted nearly 100% for Kane. But, that might change."

"Vann, who's your new friend?" The waitress, Gloria, said pressing a large and protruding hip into Vann's shoulder.

"Some nut job liberal I found on Highway 431 broke down heading to New York City. No, sorry. Gloria Brown, this is my best friend since high school, Walt Shepherd."

"Nice to meet you Walt, can I call you Walt?" Gloria said walking over and filling my coffee cup.

"I wouldn't have it any other way. Nice to meet you Gloria."

"Hot stuff, coffee please." A sixtyish looking man sitting with three younger men halfway across the dining room shouted at Gloria. And, she was gone.

"What did you mean before Gloria came up? You said something might change." I said.

"Regina Gillan, your old flame, has taken over as Chief Editor at the Sand Mountain Reporter. You do know she has spent the past hundred years or so with one of the most liberal newspapers in America, the Chicago Tribune?"

"Funny you mention her. Last Friday I ran into her at Walmart. She mentioned moving back and her new job." I said with my mouth stuffed with the best pancakes I'd eaten since my mother's when I was a kid.

"I predict things around here are going to get interesting. Especially since Belinda, you know, Regina's twin sister, is married to Frankie Olinger."

"Oh shit. When did Belinda lose her mind? You are talking about the same Frankie Olinger we went to school with?"

"Yep, and we thought he was crazy 45 years ago. He is bat-shit crazy now. He'd have to be to be head honcho with the local Kanites. I forget what they call themselves. Oh yea, Kane Tribe." Vann said.

"I thought I was moving away from a screwed-up city. Looks like this town may be just as bad, maybe worse. I got to go." I said cramming a whole slice of bacon in my mouth.

Gloria brought us two coffees to-go as we were walking to the checkout counter beside the front door. As we were leaving, I heard behind me, “Vann, remember Sand Mountain Tire needs your business. I thought you were coming by after our little chat at Walmart a couple of weeks ago.” It was the older man who had yelled at Gloria for coffee from across the restaurant.

“I’ve been busy.” Vann responded. “Who’s your friend?”

“Frankie, don’t you remember Walt Shepherd? We all went to school together.” Vann said.

“Oh hell no. Walt, good to see you. It’s a shame you didn’t have the balls to support our President. I read all about it.”

I wanted to kick him in the balls, but I just stood there and looked at him. Frankie was bigger than ever, a couple of inches taller than my six feet and probably weighed three hundred pounds. Even with half of it being fat, I didn’t want to wrestle a bear. I also didn’t want to smell like oil and gas for my meeting with Dean Naylor. “Nice to see you Frankie. I don’t think I’ve seen you since you quit school at the end of the eleventh grade.”

Vann gently pushed in between Frankie and me and said, “hurry up you two, there’s people waiting. Let’s go.”

Vann dropped me off at my mailbox next to the road. As he started to drive off, he stopped, leaned out his window, and said, “you better stay away from the foxy Regina. You know she’ll come with a Frankie bonus.”

I waved him off, checked my mailbox, and walked the long and winding driveway home.

Chapter 4

My meeting with Dean Naylor was cut short by a ‘human issue’ as he called it. Seems like an assistant coach and the new head basketball coach hired during the Christmas holidays were having difficulty expressing brotherly love. During the twenty minutes we had before Naylor was called to the gymnasium, we discussed the second semester stenographic course I was to teach on Monday and Thursday evenings from 6:00 to 9:00 p.m., including lab time. From his bragging about Snead State winning last year’s Tri-State Regional Stenographic Tournament, I could tell he had high expectations. He also was supportive of my decision to stand up against the President. As Naylor was rushing out of his office he said, “Thanks for being a man of principle when you chose truth over job security. Let’s have lunch one day soon and I’ll introduce you to a couple of other supporters.” With that, he was gone leaving me sitting in his office.

For five minutes or so I continued to sit and reminisce. After graduating from Boaz High School in 1972, I couldn’t make my mind up about what profession I wanted to pursue. So, I spent the next year here, what was then called Snead State Junior College, taking general curriculum courses. The Dean’s secretary came in and said she had to run an errand and needed to lock-up his office. I walked out and instead of descending the nearby stairs to the first floor I walked down the long hallway towards the classroom Jennifer and I had taken a Speech class together. The room was the old auditorium. I sat down in a seat closest

to the area I remembered sitting every day during that semester. I imagined Jennifer right beside me, her blowing that crazy, unruly black curl out of her right eye. That was January 1973. Where in hell had forty-five years gone? “You got to leave, I’m locking up.” A short, older man holding a key ring with a hundred keys shouted from the double doors by the hallway.

Chapter 5

I left the College and drove to the Sand Mountain Reporter. I don't know why for sure. It may have been the lingering nostalgia that was morphing in a different direction. I had married Jennifer, but it was Regina who was my first love and the one I had walked away from. Was my mind playing tricks on me? Or, was my heart reminding me of what I was blind to see nearly fifty years ago? I had to find the answer. Regina would know. As I pulled into the parking lot I was happy to remember that Regina had invited me to drop by. We could at least talk shop. Talking about how we were nearly half a century ago might be a little premature.

It was almost 4:30 p.m. when I asked the receptionist if Regina was available. I told her my name and she disappeared. Just as I sat down and picked up the latest edition of the Reporter from a table in the corner, the receptionist reappeared and instructed me to follow her. Behind a desk in an office that dwarfed the size and intimidated the furnishings of Dean Naylor's office, sat the gorgeous Regina. I shook my head to push back the past as she motioned for me to sit with her at a round table in the corner.

"I'm so glad you dropped by. What's up Mr. Walt?"

"Nothing much. I've been by to see Dean Naylor and confirm the details on the class I'll be teaching."

"You're taking Stella Gillman's position, aren't you? I heard she accepted a position at Wake Forest?"

“A great promotion for her but also the opportunity to be near her aging parents in Winston-Salem. I’m happy for her.” I said glancing at Regina’s straight, short-cropped brown hair. Brown sounded so bland.

There should be one word to describe silky, brilliantly bright, and sexy. “Talking about opportunity. Snead State is rather fortunate to have a world-renowned stenographer like you. One with a radical reputation at that.”

“I’m just me, plain and simple Walt.”

“Oh, give me a break. You’ve always undersold and underestimated yourself. Of course, I do admit you are rather lame in some respects.” Regina said sitting back and crossing her legs.

“What department are you referring to?” I said feeling a little sweat breaking out on my forehead.

“Women, your ability to choose women, is grossly inadequate.”

“Funny, funny.”

The receptionist announced over an open intercom she was leaving. Regina rushed out and when she returned she said, “I was overwhelmingly the best choice for you when you were a teenager and look what you did.”

“I have recently thought about that. You may be right.”

“Right? You know I’m right. But, that was a lifetime ago. Hey, I owe you an apology. I don’t have a clue how I got us started on that little conversation.”

“No apology needed. In fact, let’s continue the conversation over dinner, tonight, my place.”

“I’d love to Walt, but I have a Board meeting tonight. Rain check?”

“Absolutely.”

“In fact, I need about an hour to prepare then I have to run a couple of errands. I hate to push you out but duty calls.” Regina said coming towards me reaching out her right hand offering a friendly handshake.

“Thanks for seeing me without any notice.” I said, standing and taking her hand. Her grasp lingered a few seconds more than normal. It seemed 45 years of adult scales fell off our eyes and we were back in the

barn loft the night before our high school graduation. It was there, a place we had met late at night for nearly two years, I told her Jennifer was wanting a full commitment. Now, standing here, what I had done those many years ago, seemed the most stupid thing a man could ever do.

“Oh, I knew there was something I wanted to ask you. I was in Guntersville this morning at the Courthouse. After the Draper sentencing hearing was over, I lingered while the courtroom emptied, hoping to get an interview with the District Attorney. The court reporter, Ginger, something like that, and I, got to talking as she was packing up her steno stuff. She was frantic to leave saying she had to drive to Huntsville for a deposition. Long story short. She works for Rains & Associates, a big court-reporting agency based in Birmingham. Ginger said they were very short-handed, so much she was driving herself mad as she drove all over North Alabama trying to meet demands. Anyway, I thought of you, thought you might like another part time job. Something to keep the restless Walt out of the bars and honky tonks.

“Again, funny. Thanks for the tip. I’ll give it some thought. Now, you go do what you need to do. I’ll call you later to remind you of the rain check you owe me.” I said glancing over at Regina who by now was back at her desk ruffling through a stack of files and papers.

“Later gator.” She said without looking up.

I dropped by Pizza Hut for a large Supreme and drove home feeling more nostalgic than ever.

Chapter 6

I was just walking into the kitchen from the back porch when my cell phone vibrated. It was DeeDee. My one and only sister. The one I loved and loathed.

“What’s up? You had supper?” I could hear road noise. She had always loved driving with her window down, no matter the weather. It took a hard, driving rain for her to keep her window up. She rarely ever turned on the car’s air-conditioner. Of course, she didn’t need it now. I was freezing outside.

“Just got here. I have a Supreme pizza, hot and ready. Where are you?”

“In front of Boaz Walmart heading home. Been with Mom.”

“How was she?”

“Sleepy, listless, hopeless. She said very little.”

“I’m going to see her tomorrow. I hate she is so depressed. Come by if you want.” I instantly regretted my invitation. I really didn’t know why. DeeDee and I had always gotten along, if we didn’t talk about God and religion. We had never been close, close but had great respect for each other. One thing that kept us in the same ditch together was our mutual love for Mom, and Dad too when he was alive.

“I’m starving. I’ll be there in five. Got any beer?”

“No dear. You know I don’t drink.”

“I’ll pick some up. You need some milk?”

“You trying to be funny?”

“See you Walton.”

Walton Alec Shepherd. No one ever called me Walton anymore. Also, no one called me ‘Was.’ In ninth grade, Vann had dubbed me, ‘the Was.’ This came about in an English class where Mrs. Stamps taught us the importance of tenses in our writing. She was concentrating on the verb ‘be.’ After she stated the past tense of ‘be’ is ‘was,’ Vann, almost instantly, said, “hey Walt, that’s you. You, Walton Alec Shepherd, is a ‘was.’ Of course, the class burst out laughing. Everyone except Mrs. Stamps. Thus, the beginning of a nickname that spread like wildfire through high school. It never failed, nearly every day, walking the halls, someone would meet me. Their greeting was always, “hey Was, you are the past, man.” I was (there it is) glad ‘Was’ died shortly after graduation in 1972.

I was hungry, so I sat at the counter and was working on my second slice when DeeDee walked in with a six-pack of Coors Lite, and two gallons of milk.

“Thought you might want to make some ice-cream.” She said looking at me with her left dimple more pronounced than I could remember.

“Thanks. All afternoon I’ve been planning an ice-cream party. It will take two freezers, one vanilla, the other grape. You’re not invited.”

“Move over.” She nudged me, and I scooted my barstool toward the wall.

We sat for the next ten minutes or so and ate pizza. She drank a beer. I drank a glass of milk just to play that card. With only one slice remaining, I left it for her and walked to my chair in the den. It was part of the kitchen, what they call a great room. It was only an evolving idea when Mom and Dad had, in the early 1950s, remodeled the house his grandfather had built in the 1890s. Most folks those days stuck with a separate kitchen/dining room, a separate den, and a separate living room.

I’m glad they broke that tradition. I loved this pine-paneled room.

DeeDee joined me and flipped on the TV. I made her turn it off after five minutes of Fox News lauding President Kane’s loyalty to his supporters. Apparently, this afternoon, he had signed an Executive Order commanding the Immigration and Naturalization Service to start

rounding up illegal aliens, especially Hispanics, and shipping them back to Mexico.

I figured DeeDee would make a supporting comment to Kane's action but instead she said, "I hear you and Regina may become a thing again."

"What, what are you talking about?"

"I ran into Vann at Walmart and he told me about you guys having breakfast at Grumpy's this morning. Said, he had to move to another table when you started undressing Regina."

"Oh, he's such a jerk."

"You know Vann, always the jokester."

"Now, I've got good reason to pull a little prank on that retard."

I said.

"Seriously, he did say that you had seen her the other night at Walmart."

"I did. We talked just a few minutes. I also saw her this afternoon. At the Reporter."

"You have business there?"

"She is the new editor and invited me to drop by."

"I can see it now. The smoldering fire erupts. I knew those embers had never gone cold. Is she as gorgeous as ever?" DeeDee said moving over on the couch and propping her feet on the coffee table.

"No, actually. She is more so. I'm completely blown away that I still have feelings for her."

"I'm not. You know I never could understand why you chose Jennifer over Regina. Jennifer had played the field before she latched on to you. I think she wised up and knew it was time to find someone with a future. It took her a while, but she finally realized spread-eagle in the back seat of a car wasn't likely the best way to make a living."

"Don't talk about her that way." You have her all wrong. She made a mistake with a guy that was three years older than her."

"Believe what you want my dear Walton."

"Stop calling me that, okay?"

"I'm sorry, I was out of line. I must admit Jennifer was good to you. You will probably never find someone more loyal and faithful to you. She died way too young. I do miss her."

“I do too, but most days I try to think as she wanted me to think. As she was dying she made me promise her that I would move on with my life. That, I would know that she was in a better place. I can’t believe that was nearly forty years ago.”

“Do you believe she is in a better place, in Heaven?” DeeDee knew this was a touchy subject. She knew that I had long given up my childhood faith.

“No. Jennifer is dead. She’s in the same place she was in, mentally, psychologically, before she was born. I now, more than ever, believe that when you die, you die, and that’s it.”

“Mother still doesn’t know, does she?”

“Know what?” I said looking and feeling perplexed.

“That you no longer straddle the fence as she called it when you were a teenager. She doesn’t know how, what, thirty years ago, you pulled the other leg over that teetering fence?”

“I doubt it. And, I’m not telling her. You either, okay?”

“You know you don’t have to worry about that. I could never hurt our dear Mother.”

“I think you are rather ignorant to continue believing in God and Christ and the Bible, but I know you have good reason. You just know one side of the story.”

“Walton, don’t start. I don’t want to hear it. I know God is real. He talks to me every day.”

“Sis, I know you believe that. And, I know you believe He has everything under His control. He has a plan and it’s all good. I get it.”

“I’m not mad but I do have to go. Kevin’s plane should be landing in Birmingham about now. I want to be home when he arrives.”

“He still traveling a lot?”

“Too much. Thanks for the pizza and I hope you get serious about your Regina stalking.”

“Get out of here you lamebrain. Love you sis.”

Chapter 7

Kip Brewer was the U.S. Congressman from Alabama's Forth Congressional District. This district covered Dekalb, Etowah, and Marshall Counties, and ten other counties stretching westward to the Mississippi line. Kip lived with his wife of twenty-seven years in Boaz, west of town in the Red Apple Community. When he was not in Washington, D.C., or traveling in other parts of his district one would find him mending fences or remodeling the one-hundred-year-old barn his great-grandfather had built in 1919 after returning from World War I six months earlier.

Kip was elected to the U.S. House of Representatives in 1996 filling the seat of 15-term Tom Bevill. Kip had served ever since. He was a member of the Republican Party, a non-active member of the nonactive Tea Party Caucus, and one of only a handful of Republicans outspoken against President Andrew Kane. Kip's opposition wasn't so much against Kane's policy ideas, but against his manners and methods. Kip believed the President of the United States, the most powerful man in the world, should conduct himself always with honor, humility, and respect. To Kip, there was never a time the President is justified in calling names like a drunken sailor. The full truth be known, in the center of his rationality, Kip believed Kane was wholly incompetent to serve as President.

Four hours earlier Kip and his wife Darla returned from a Town Hall meeting at the Bevill Center at Snead State Community College. It

was their last stop from a thirteen-county tour that began two weeks ago on Valentine's Day in the northwest Alabama city of Tusculumbia. The Beville Center meeting had gone well, at first, with difficult but respectful questions from a well-mannered audience including thirty members of the Etowah County Democratic Party who grilled Representative Brewer on whether the Republican Party had any plans of confronting President Kane on his conduct and his involvement with the Russian attack on the 2016 Presidential election.

The meeting got ugly when Kip wholeheartedly agreed with the Democratic group. Shouting started in the back rows on the far-right side under the balcony. Frankie Olinger stood up and without microphone, thundered above everyone, "you Rino, don't you know Kane is God's man to drain the swamp. I elected him, we elected him, to get rid of all you talk and no action puppets. You better get on board the Kane wagon or get run over. The Revolution has started. You're the enemy and enemies get killed."

It seemed every member of Frankie's gang was present and spoke out. He was the outspoken leader of the local chapter of Kane Tribe, a grassroots organization that sprung-up in early 2016 after Kane's train began gaining steam. The shouting for and against got louder and louder. The opposition was mainly from the Etowah County Democratic Party. The other 600 attendees joined in as Frankie's group approached the front and attempted to mount the stage. It took fifteen Boaz police officers and thirty cans of pepper spray to squelch the uprising. In the middle of the storm, Kip's secret service team pulled him out the back exit and transported him home.

At 2:30 a.m. Kip eased out of bed, frustrated over the outburst at the Town Hall and frustrated he couldn't go back to sleep. He tipped toed into the kitchen and made a pot of coffee. As it percolated, he recalled meeting Frankie Olinger in 1997 during his first campaign. Kip's father, a banker, had done business with Frankie and his father, helping them build a new building for Sand Mountain Tire & Battery, their automotive repair business. Frankie had supported Kip's initial efforts to get elected, even sponsoring a three-month radio campaign at WQSB. Kip poured a large cup of coffee and walked outside on the

back deck, flipping on the light as he stepped out into the cold and near-moonless night.

He stood by the railing and looked out towards the old barn. He was beginning to think he would never complete the remodeling he had started in 2002, at the end of his third term in the House. Kip started to sit down but as he turned he caught a glimpse of a light in the distance. It was five or six hundred yards east of and beyond the barn. It was at the edge of the woods that started along the edge of the pasture. His mind convinced him it was some odd reflection of the moon, or possibly the aftereffects of a campfire built by a group of teenagers hanging out at the creek, though it seemed too early and too cold for that.

Kip never heard the shot. Just as he was sitting his coffee cup on the top rail at the back of the deck, the bullet arrived. Its sound trailing by only milliseconds. The bullet's impact exploded the mind of one of only a handful of men who stood between a Constitutional crisis, and the most narcissistic man Americans had ever sent to the Oval Office. Kip Brewer, already dead, collapsed into a pool of brains and blood. In less than a minute Sean Miller with the Secret Service was on the deck with Kip calling 911, and radioing his team-mates to, under no circumstances, allow Darla to come outside.

Chapter 8

I decided to get up early and visit Mother. I was ashamed that I had only visited her five times during the nearly two months I had been back in Boaz. Other than the first visit, where she did smile at me when I walked in and whispered a goodbye when I left, our visits had become routine. I would gently knock on her door, receive no response, go in, walk-over to her sitting in your lounging chair, take her right hand, hug her, and then sit in front of her in a straight-back chair, and talk about old times, hoping and waiting for any response. There had been none, so far. I hoped today would be different.

I signed with the receptionist at the information desk and walked two long halls back to Mother's room. I lightly tapped on her door and heard, "come in." I was temporarily encouraged but then realized when I opened the door that the words had come from a nurse's aide. Mother sat in her chair and looked at me. No smile, but at least she had looked my way.

"Are you Harriet's son?"

"I am."

"Please tell her she needs to leave the air-conditioning set on at least 78 degrees. I know it's winter-time, but these rooms don't know that. I came in a few minutes ago and it was nearly 90 degrees in here. If you click over to Heat, the thermostat doesn't work, and it thinks you want to boil. If you click over to Cool and turn down the thermostat to 78 degrees or below, the unit will keep the room temperature comfortable. These old units need throwing away."

“I’ll remind her when I leave. Would you be so kind, along with your team-mates, to look in on Mother? By the way, when is Brookdale going to address the heating and air-conditioning issue?”

“We’ll try. We have a full-house right now. Talk to the Director about your last question.” The aide said walking towards the door. “Don’t forget to remind her. Her getting too hot and breathing all this stale air can cause pneumonia. She doesn’t want that.”

“Me either.” I said as the short and wide woman left Mother’s room.

I walked over to Mother, took her right hand and hugged her, this time kissing her on her forehead. I pulled over the straight-back chair and sat down in front of her. She was dressed in a navy-blue jogging outfit, pants and top, the top being, to me, an overly thick sweatshirt. I looked her in the eyes and saw a glimpse of my real mother for the first time since I returned from D.C. I may have been simply imagining. I’m not sure. But, it seemed we were back on our back porch, sitting in the swing, that Sunday night, me at fifteen, and her at thirty-eight.

This glimpse and my mind recalling my conversation with the on-duty nurse I nearly bumped into turning down the last hallway on the way here, brought tears to my eyes. That was an understatement. I was crying.

The nurse had said Mother’s condition had deteriorated a great deal since she moved in nearly three years ago. When she arrived, Mother could get up out of her chair, and with the use of her walker, get about in her room. Now, she can barely sit up in her chair. And, she has no power to move herself at all. The nurse said that aides transfer her from her bed to her walker, from her walker to her chair, from her chair to the bathroom, even though Mother now wears diapers. Also, she said that Mother’s near inability to speak was common for Parkinson’s patients in the disease’s final stage—something about how it affects the throat muscles. The biggest shocker came when the nurse said that Mother’s days here may be limited. When the first of two things happen, inability to swallow, or when she can no longer sit up in her chair, will be the time she must transfer to a nursing home. The

nurse said Brookdale, like all other assisted living facilities, is not equipped to deal with either of these problems. These issues require skilled nursing care, the type care provided only by a nursing home.

I took out my handkerchief and dabbed my eyes. It took me a few minutes to suppress my crying. This alone, that is, my crying, troubled me. I wasn't the crying type. All my experience told me this. However, I was now dealing with a whole new experience. One, that broke my heart. Seeing my dear mother, broken by Parkinson's, broke my heart.

When I could finally see Mother again, she was half-pointing towards an end-table beside her chair. There was a half-folded sheet of paper with my name written on it.

"Mom, do you want the sheet of paper?" I asked feeling more tears about to surface.

She nodded her head, forward and back up just a little.

I took the paper and handed it towards her. She moved her head sideways back and forth just a little.

"Do you want me to look at it?"

Another affirmative nod, which was hardly a nod at all but I knew her response wasn't a 'no.'

I opened the sheet and immediately recognized DeeDee's handwriting. It was the same that had printed my name on the outside of the paper, but I hadn't even thought to question it.

"Mother, I assume you want me to read this. Is that correct?"

Another affirmative nod.

DeeDee introduced what was to follow by saying that Mother had asked her to write all this down. I glanced down to the bottom of the sheet and it was signed, "Harriett Shepherd, by DeeDee." Written beside her signature was the date, February 10, 2018. It was now February 25th.

Basically, Mother's message to me was short and simple, stay open-minded about God. Apparently, Mother had shared with DeeDee several events that had taken place during my youth, including that infamous meeting on the back porch when I was fifteen. Another one was the talk we had in my room after I came in at 3:00 a.m., the morning after I graduated from Boaz High School. That meeting included her

having the two of us kneel beside my bed and her praying a rather lengthy prayer which included her pleading God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit, to gift me with what she called, 'Walt's Damascus Road unveiling.' At the bottom of the sheet, DeeDee had written. "Walt, Mother had me help her get down on her knees beside her chair to pray (it took two aides to help her back up after she finished). These are her exact words, no paraphrasing, 'Lord, open Walt's eyes, show him your face, please God, give me a sign before I die.'"

I reread the note and looked back up at Mother. Now, she was the one with tears.

"Mother, you know I love you and have always respected your beliefs. For years now, I have had a closed mind when it came to God, but I promise you, right here, right now, I'll change that. I'm going to be looking for that sign you talked about. I am going to be wholly open to having my Damascus Road unveiling."

The tears kept rolling down Mother's cheeks.

"Mother, please believe we are back on the porch having just finished the two-hour talk we had when I was fifteen."

Until lunchtime around 11:30, I talked, and Mother listened, slightly nodding up and down, or sideways. At first, I shared with her the significant moments in our relationship. My tears almost erupted when I realized the huge gap between a host of wonderful moments growing up, and now, nearly a half-century later. While I was in college I called Mother every week. Since leaving Charlottesville in 1976, our contact had been very sporadic, maybe eight to ten times per year. I realized here, now, how I had broken Mother's heart, the one person primarily responsible for my life.

When an aide came in with Mother's lunch tray she told me she needed my space. I asked her to give me just a moment. I knelt down in front of Mother, reached over, with tears in my eyes, kissed her on both cheeks, bowed my head and prayed, 'Lord, oh Jesus, I want to hear from you. And please, take care of my Mother.'

I squeezed Mother's hands and stood with a flush-red wet and sloppy face. She slowly raised her head and smiled. I could barely breathe out the words. "Goodbye Mother, my Queen." I turned and

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walked out of her room and down the two long hallways contemplating my next visit could be at Mother's bedside in a nursing home.

Chapter 9

Saturday, six hours after Sean Miller had called 911, the search began. Twenty-eight officers from an assortment of local law enforcement personnel, including Boaz, Albertville, and Guntersville police officers, Etowah and Marshall County Sheriff deputies, and FBI, and ABI (Alabama Bureau of Investigation) agents fanned out and walked south from the Brewer's backyard, across the open pasture, and towards the tree-line a quarter of a mile away. Information from the Alabama Department of Forensic Sciences conducting Kip Brewer's autopsy indicated he had died of a gunshot wound from a long distance. To Marshall County Detective Darden Clarke, an average-ability shooter could have made the shot from within the front half of the pasture, the half closest to the Brewer's back deck. A highly-skilled shooter would have chosen the cover from within the tree line. For two reasons. It was a comfortable shot, and for cover. Given Kip Brewer was a public figure with obvious enemies as well as friends, Detective Clarke concluded the shooter would more likely be a professional, therefore opting to concentrate along the entire 700-yard tree line south of the Brewer resident. Clarke knew the shooter had to have taken his shot somewhere along this line since the contour, slope, and elevation of the pasture prevented a straight-line shot from both the east and west sides of the nearly one hundred-fifty acre pasture.

Thursday afternoon, a Marshall County Sheriff's deputy found one shell casing. It was a 30-06 cartridge. It was found in clear sight but

tucked slightly under the edge of a decaying oak tree 644 yards from Kip Brewer's back deck. The location was accessible only by foot, four-wheeler, or horseback. It was three-quarters of a mile from the dead-end of an old logging trail that began at Highway 179 just beyond Clear Creek Snacks & Spirits. An expert at Forensics confirmed a 30-06 cartridge could not be excluded as the bullet that killed Representative Brewer.

Other than the shell casing, the crime scene offered little else. Just over the fence from the pasture there was a man-size depression in the grass. At the southern end of the depression the ground was semi plowed. Likely, the shooter's boots, while he was laying down scoping his rifle, created two, inch deep and three-inch-wide indentations. After the depression was photographed, videotaped, and evaluated for DNA material, an FBI marksman arrived to attempt to simulate the shooting. After less than five minutes laying with a 30-06 Springfield rifle equipped with a Leupold VX-2 3-9x40mm Rifle Scope with Duplex Reticle, Agent Tedder declared, "easy shot for an expert, assuming he could see Mr. Brewer standing on his back deck. Must have turned on the porch light."

Detective Clarke was thankful for the cartridge discovery, but knew it was frighteningly little to mount an extensive investigation. The shooter's motive would hold the key. Frankie Olinger appeared centerstage in Clarke's mind. "Damn, Olinger had declared Brewer an enemy at the Bevill Center Town Hall. Frankie, Frankie, you are one fucking dumbass."

Halfway during Clarke's return trip to his office in Guntersville, sitting, waiting for a train to pass in Albertville, he said to himself. "Maybe I'm the dumbass here. How could Frankie Olinger have made such a shot? The word professional and Frankie seemed to go together about as well as oil and water. There was no doubt the shooter was an expert marksman. As the last train car rumbled by, Clarke asked himself, "why would a professional marksman, in this case, a professional assassin, leave the one and only cartridge he had fired?"

Chapter 10

Sunday morning, patrons of Grumpy's Diner were weaving a Kip Brewer story that was sure to land in Hollywood. Their imaginations were ignited by an article in The Birmingham News, "Shots Heard Round the World; Second Revolution Begins?" The two reporters introduced their story by reviewing how in the first American Revolution, the "Shot Heard Round the World," had been fired just after dawn in Lexington, Massachusetts, the morning of the 19th of July 1775, and quickly described the Battles of Lexington and Concord and the Siege of Boston ten days later.

In the second paragraph, drawing from a New York Time's article, the reporters, described, in detail, how U.S. Senator Ralph Evanston from Malden, Massachusetts, was found dead yesterday morning in his luxury suite at The Kendall, the oldest hotel in Boston. His wife, Julie, had previously attended three other Town Hall meetings but this time she had stayed at home, nursing the flu. However, the New York Time's article did not answer the glaring question: How did the killer get inside a highly guarded and secure U.S. Senator's room at The Kendall?

Evanston, had come out of nowhere on the national political scene. In November 2016, he had defeated multiple-term Democratic Senator Ed Markey. For the prior eight years Evanston served in the General Court, Massachusetts' law-making body. There, he had been a virtual parrot of Markey. He even heralded from Malden, Markey's

hometown, although Evanston moved to Springfield when he was thirteen.

To Kane's base, Evanston was a true turncoat. He had ridden into office on Andrew Kane's coattails. It had been shocking to most Massachusetts citizens when in July 2015, Evanston had switched parties, from Democratic to Republican. It was a gutsy move, and surprisingly, won him a U.S. Senate seat. Kane didn't do so well in Massachusetts, losing to Hillary Clinton by a 2 to 1 margin.

However, after arriving in D.C., it didn't take long for Evanston to reveal his true colors. He voted against Kane's legislation at virtually every turn. Even worse, he appeared often on national news programs castigating the President's 'deplorable tweets and elementary intelligence.' This riled nearly a third of Massachusetts' citizens, the 33% who had voted for Kane.

The New York Times article, in its fourth paragraph, recited the Alabama shooting of U.S. Representative Kip Brewer. The NYT was arguing for a connection between the two deaths. Both men were discovered within a few hours of each other. Both men had been shot, although one from a long distance and the other from close range. Both men were, "on the wrong side of Kane." And, what had 75 diners stirred almost into a frenzy, was The Times' accusation that the shooters "most likely were embedded into the growing ranks of Kane Tribe, which, up until now, was thought to be a rag-tag group mostly comprised of rednecks. The New York Times ended its article describing how Frankie Olinger in Alabama, and Albert Lawrence in Massachusetts, had both led a near-riot at the Friday night Town Halls Kip Brewer and Ralph Evanston had held in their respective states.

The Birmingham News (TBN) elaborated mostly on Frankie Olinger and the North Alabama Chapter of Kane Tribe. Someway, TBN had unearthed news from Kane's inaugural weekend in January 2017 that revealed a secret-meeting of sorts between Andrew Kane, Jr. and nearly a hundred men and women who had been hand-selected by the Kane team. Most of these were uneducated white men. Each of them had attended a Kane event in their home-state during the election campaign. Each of these one hundred were openly anti-Hillary, virtually, antigovernment. And, most important to President Kane, was that each

of these had openly and consistently supported him for at least six months before he won the election. TBN had no knowledge of what took place during that inaugural weekend meeting, but it identified both Frankie Olinger and Albert Lawrence as attendees.

Vann and I arrived at Grumpy's Diner as the crowd was dissipating. When I saw Frankie and four of his parrots getting up from the same table I had seen them the first time Vann and I were here, I wished we had gone to McDonald's. We took a seat near the far-left corner, as far away from the Olinger table as possible. This didn't keep the five stooges from coming over, probably to invite us to church. I must say, Frankie looked better than the last time I had seen him with his greasy coveralls. Now, he was dressed in a pair of clean khakis, and a blue button-down shirt with a green and yellow-striped tie. All four of them could have been members of an older, boys band.

"You boys going to church?" Frankie said placing his left hand on Vann's back.

"Sorry Mr. Olinger, we gave up on myths a long time ago, although, Walt here still hangs on pretty tight to Santa Claus." Vann said removing Frankie's hand.

"Typical tongue from a liberal. Anyway, know Pastor Warren and all of us at First Baptist Church of Christ, are always extending an invite to all, even to you liberal atheists."

"What are you teaching today, Frankie? Civil disobedience?" I said, recalling how close Frankie and I nearly came to blows during the last time we were together here at Grumpy's.

"God's for it, under the right circumstances." Frankie said raising his chin slightly, like he was a Bible scholar.

"Vann, you and Walt ready to order?" Gloria Brown said nudging Frankie out of the way.

"See you boys later." Frankie said as he and his four buddies walked away.

After Gloria left, I told Vann, "please shoot me if I ever come back to this place. Really, shoot me if I ever mention or agree to coming here."

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“I agree, seeing those clowns doesn’t do wonders for the appetite.” Vann said pushing his chair back and reaching for The Birmingham News laying on the table closest to the window.

END OF SAMPLE

