



A DOUBLE-MINDED
MAN

A NOVEL *by* BILL PRICKETT

To the brave survivors of these harmful “ex-gay” programs.

I acknowledge your wounds.

Your perseverance and courage inspire me.

To those who couldn’t endure the soul-crushing message.

My heart grieves your death, so my commitment is to honor your life
by trying to prevent others from being hurt.

To other “ex-gay” leaders who walked away,
then stood up and spoke out.

Many of you are my friends. *All* of you are my heroes.

Finally, to my patient husband.

You didn’t suffer the trauma of this religious abuse (*Thank God!*),
but you’ve seen the detrimental impact it had on my life.

And still you love me, for better or for worse.

First person, *imperfect*.

My name is Nate Truett. I'm five-ten and weigh around one-sixty. I don't think it's self-deprecating when I admit that I'm not classically handsome—you know, high cheekbones, square jaw line, deep dimples, cleft chin, and thick, wavy hair. My face has light freckles across my nose and cheeks that have lightened over time to almost unnoticeable. My ears and nose seem proportional to the size of my head and perform their function as intended. Girls never swooned when I entered a room, but they've called me "cute," which I took as a compliment. I'm told my exceptional feature—what people first notice—is my eyes; they are large and blue, with long lashes. My aunt used to say they were "too pretty" for a boy, which I assume was also a compliment. I wish my hair had stayed the light blond color of my childhood; however, as I got older, it washed out to brownish-blond. These days, it's also mixed with generous amounts of well-earned gray.

Yes, I know this is an unorthodox way to begin a book, but there's "method to my madness." I recently read an entire novel written in first person—*I, me, my*. It was enjoyable; the main character was relatable though I had no clue what he looked like. Well, this is *my* story. I'm the one telling it, in first person, and didn't want you to have that same experience. (I suppose I could have sneaked it in, using one of those subtle literary devices—describing what I see in a mirror or having another character talk about my appearance—but that seemed contrived.)

As I write this, I'm far enough past forty to *think* I have the maturity and perspective to tell what happened with as much honest detachment as possible when talking about my own life. More than a decade has passed since the events related here began, so I at least have the advantage of reflective hindsight. Thankfully, I also have personal journals, a discipline I began in high school. They've provided an unvarnished snapshot of my emotions and musings during those times, minus my ego's attempts to retroactively improve my history.

I moved from my hometown of Memphis to Birmingham, Alabama, to attend Evangelical Presbyterian College of the South, where I'd received a full academic scholarship. EPCS was one of three schools operated by the National Association of Evangelical Presbyterian Churches, a group of churches too small to be called a denomination but too vocal to remain attached to our previous organization. In the early sixties, ministers from about eighty churches, primarily in the South, grew concerned about the "rising onslaught of biblical compromise and moral relativism" in the denomination, so they broke away to form our renegade association. My father and my grandfather were two of those ministers. That's my ecclesiastical ancestry—a legacy difficult to ignore and impossible to live up to.

I earned a Bachelor of Science in Marriage and Family Counseling, with a concentration in theology and an emphasis on biblical counseling. It seemed an ideal symbiotic combination—I liked helping people and wanted to serve the church, without being a pastor. (A *great* disappointment to my father.) Plus, for years, I struggled with "hidden desires" and lived in fear that someone would discover my secret. I think I unconsciously hoped counseling others might also help me eradicate those sinful attractions. After college, I completed my master's degree along with the state requirements to become a Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist.

For the sake of structure, I have divided the book into three parts, titled with biblical text. (That seemed ironically appropriate.) However, when all these things were happening...*to* me and *around* me...they didn't fit into those precise designations.

They still don't!

How nice it'd be if this were like one of those cheesy after-school specials in which everyone learns valuable life lessons, all the loose ends get wrapped up, and everyone lives happily ever after.

Real life doesn't work that way, does it?

Mom always told me that everything happens for a reason. I'm not sure I believe that now, but here's what I do know: one *seemingly* random encounter, and everything changed. Parts of myself I'd refused to acknowledge were exposed. Then fear and religious dogma prevailed over reason, and I made decisions that would reshape my life, moving me out of the protective insulation of my religious environment and catapulting me into a community on the cusp of seismic change.

I know we all do things we regret later: that's part of being human. But looking back, I see nagging questions that *should* have been answered. Confusion was ignored, not confronted. I dismissed inconsistencies in what I was being told was right and true.

A decade later, and I'm still healing from the damage—to my life, my core beliefs, my very soul. People I cared about were hurt, friendships were lost, and lives were damaged.

One person is dead.

How do I reconcile my role in all this devastation?

Please know that I didn't intentionally, or even consciously, set out to harm anyone. Including myself. But that doesn't change the tragic outcome. I trusted those who were untrustworthy. I believed lies when my own heart told me the truth.

I don't offer this account of the events as an excuse. It wasn't as if I were an unwilling pawn, under the spell of a Svengali master. I take full responsibility for my actions, the beliefs that motivated them, and the consequences. I've dedicated my life to making amends, though I'm aware there are those who can never forgive me. I struggle to forgive myself. At the very least, I hope others can learn from my mistakes.

Finally, just so you know, the more "carnal" elements of my story (Yes, there *are* carnal parts!) have been toned down. I can't avoid including them because, although a couple constituted those bad decisions I've mentioned earlier, one was consequential and life altering. Nonetheless, my strict

Southern and religious upbringing remains an incessant voice of restraint. In other words, I'm a bit of a prude. If you're reading this for salacious content, you will likely be disappointed.

Let's begin in January of 1982 . . .

Part I

The Things Hidden in the Darkness

One

“Why not take off your coat and stay awhile?”

The question came from Miss Gert, my administrative assistant, standing in the open doorway, holding a copy of my morning appointments in one hand and my coffee mug in the other. I forced a weak smile as I stood, removed my coat, and held it close to me, like Linus’s security blanket.

The intrusion startled me, interrupting the moody refrains of Anne Murray’s “You Needed Me” still reverberating in my head.

You gave me strength to stand alone again

To face the world out on my own again

I’d stayed in the warm car, listening to the entire song—partly because I like it but mostly to avoid going into my office. Then I took extra time to compose myself after the wet, flowing emotions the lyrics had brought up.

“Who does the counselor go to when he needs to talk with someone?” she asked.

I didn’t see it as a question with an expected answer. Which was good, since answering would require admitting that I wanted, or needed, to talk.

Which I don’t.

She put the mug on the coaster and placed the schedule next to my phone. Her morning routine. Today she patted me, maternally, on the arm. “I baked a raisin-cinnamon coffee cake to welcome you back. I’ll bring some in and refill your mug. I also have a stack of mail that accumulated while you were away.”

Grace Presbyterian Church had hired me a few months out of college as director of congregational care, a position the church had created. I met the qualifications with my degree in marriage and family counseling, combined with theological education. I assumed that my last name, and

the pastoral pedigree that came from my grandfather's and father's prominence in the denomination, helped the church make its decision. My primary responsibility was counseling church members, but the role also included personal contact with those who were homebound, hospitalized, or in nursing homes. After two years on staff, the results, and my competency, were evident. The counseling load increased, and I had developed education and training programs and implemented the *ASSISTeam*—volunteers trained to handle short-term counseling with couples and parents, matters of faith, and other life issues. I had built solid relationships with other groups around the county, resulting in a steady increase of outside clients from referrals.

That's when I came up with the idea for Arms of Grace Counseling Center. It would serve as an extension and expansion of our congregational care ministry and as an outreach to the community—for those who might never come into the church offices for counseling. It took weeks of meetings and presentations, but the Board of Elders agreed, naming me the executive director—a title that sounded loftier than it was, given that the staff consisted of me and a receptionist, who would also function as my administrative assistant.

Mrs. Gertrude Carmichael—*Miss Gert*—had been on staff with Grace Presbyterian Church, in one capacity or another, since before I was born. She retired, then her husband died, so she offered her time and skills and was “assigned” to help me. Of course I knew who she was; everyone at church knew, and *loved*, Miss Gert. Nonetheless, I had voiced my objections to the Board of Elders, and privately to Dr. Shannon, our senior pastor. My primary resistance wasn't technically related to her age, which I guessed was pushing seventy, though I'd never be so bold as to ask. I was concerned about her adaptability to such a new, innovative venture. Would she be supportive and flexible as we discovered how we should operate? Was she equipped to manage the many details of day-to-day operations, freeing me to concentrate on seeing clients, promoting the center, and forging referral relationships?

She was a petite woman, not more than five feet tall, and I could not imagine her providing much of an obstacle to those who might try to barge in without an appointment. Her hair was mostly white, worn short around her face, and her sense of fashion seemed tied to a different era. She projected the image of a doting grandmother, not a receptionist.

It didn't take long though for her to prove me wrong. On everything! Her organizational skills were astounding, particularly evident in those early days. The church agreed to headquarter Arms of Grace in the old office wing after the ministerial staff had relocated to the new education building. We had sufficient parking, and a separate entrance, which offered a sense of privacy. A heavy wooden double door, with vertical panes of translucent glass on either side, opened to an ample waiting area. The imposing receptionist desk blocked direct access to the counseling offices and conference room. On the tables throughout the room lay copies of Christian publications and informational literature about the services we provided along with pamphlets on various subjects: *Discerning God's Will*, *Raising Godly Children*, *Signs of a Healthy Marriage*, *Overcoming Fear and Anxiety*, *Handling Doubts*, and *Facing Serious Illness*. We purchased most from a Christian publisher, but I'd written several of them myself. The literature rack also featured copies of a slick, full-color flyer about the church.

Once we opened, Miss Gert showed that she had the necessary compassion to greet those who came to see us, often in times of great distress, and the essential discretion to maintain confidentiality. She had an exhaustive knowledge of the membership, complete with first-hand, inside information about marriages, divorces, children, internal conflicts, and touchy or taboo subjects. Her outgoing personality made everyone feel welcome, yet—when necessary—she could be formidable. I had seen her stand up to the insistent and the belligerent and do so with a rare mix of poise, politeness, and tenacity.

In short, Gert Carmichael was indispensable.

“Things going OK around here?” I asked her.

“Not too bad. Of course, people have been wondering when you’d be back, and Millie Garmin got a bit testy when she couldn’t get her niece an appointment right away. Well, I let her know *toot sweet* that it wasn’t like you’d been on vacation or . . .”

The pause spoke volumes. She was unsure how to finish the sentence.

“You were missed, if that’s what you mean, Brother Truett?”

It wasn’t.

In the beginning, I’d asked her to call me Nate.

“Ministers deserve a show of respect,” she replied with demure defiance. “Folks who come here won’t hear me disrespecting you with such familiarity.”

Since I wasn’t technically a minister, and not fond of titles, I tried several times to dissuade the designation, thinking that after she had gotten to know me . . . after we had worked together for a while . . . she’d relent. All I got was a polite nod—her way of informing me that I was wasting my time.

“Things got a bit busy during the holidays,” she informed. I must have displayed a look of concern, and she held up her hand. “Don’t worry. I did referrals to the ASSISTeam and pastoral staff. Even Dr. Shannon pitched in. I was able to push most of your regulars, and they’ll show up on your schedule for the next few weeks, so today should be light.” She moved to where I was sitting, took the coat from my arms, and hung it on the back of my door. “Though I’m still not sure you should be here. It’s hasn’t even been—”

The phone rang, interrupting what was sure to be an uncomfortable conversation. “Arms of Grace Counseling Center,” she answered in her most professional voice. “How may I help you?”

“That was Pastor Shannon,” she informed when the call ended. “He’s at home but heading to the hospital. He’d like to see you this afternoon, if you feel up to it, he said. Let me know, and I’ll call to confirm.”

I let out a puff of air and picked up the coffee mug. It was all the answer I could muster.

“Your first appointment isn’t due for a while.” She turned to leave as I sat down at my desk.

“Brother Truett,” she said in a soft voice. “I’m real sorry about your loss. We all loved her.” Her voice cracked, but without waiting for a reply, she closed the door.

Widower.

It was not an identity that resonated with me. *About* me.

Until two months ago, when it became my reality.

It felt like wearing someone else’s clothes—those of an older man, with gray hair and grandchildren, recollecting memories of all those years together with his wife.

I’m twenty-eight years old. We were only married for five years.

Maybe coming to work today was a mistake. Perhaps I should’ve taken Mom’s, and everyone’s, advice and waited a while longer.

I’d determined after Leigh’s death that I would return to work as soon as possible. At some level, I think I had something to prove. After all, I should be an example, demonstrating how faith prevailed during the time of crisis. So here I was, trying to resume a normal routine, though nothing about my life felt “normal” these days.

I stared bleary-eyed at my schedule, unmotivated. I’d need maximum amounts of caffeine today. Right on cue, Miss Gert walked in with a carafe and an oversized slice of her homemade apple-cinnamon cake.

That’s not going to help with my growing waistline, I concluded, taking a small bite.

The coffee tasted wonderful; I welcomed the warmth as much as I needed the caffeine. As I picked at the cake, I glanced at the mail on the credenza, though I lacked the energy...or motivation...to begin opening it. I couldn’t handle more sympathy—cards or otherwise. I looked at the schedule Miss

Gert had left on the desk. More accurately, I stared through it, taking slow draws from my coffee.

The room was quiet, part of the intended design. My design. We had the walls double insulated to mask outside noises—people talking in the next room, or more accurately, the fear of people in the next room hearing, could disrupt a counseling session.

I was on my third cup of coffee when my first appointment arrived. Ready or not, the day had begun.

The promised “light day” escalated quickly.

My return to work apparently signaled people to drop in, unannounced and unscheduled. A young woman had to meet with me *today* to discuss God’s will in asking her boss for a promotion. One guy in the church’s college group wanted my “Godly counsel” on whether he should date a lapsed Catholic girl he had met at school. A woman who’d been close to my wife wanted me to pray with her about the tedious process of adoption.

There were several short chats with church members who came to welcome me back and offer condolences. Most were sincere, accompanied by sharing fond memories of my wife. I listened with an intentional, practiced smile.

Eulogy, the sequel.

None of these visits took long, but each exacted time and energy. Miss Gert would rescue me with a reminder that someone was waiting. My appointments included one regular client, an intake for a “rebellious” teenager sent to me by her exasperated parents, and a young man adjusting to his new job, in a new city, while his girlfriend back home was “moving on” without him. There was also a couple seeking to avert an impending divorce.

I’d not even had time to finish part of a sandwich; each time I’d exit my office from an appointment, someone was waiting. By two o’clock, I was wound tight and felt the initial hint of a

tension headache. The pain was at the point of causing me to drop my plans to work out—one of my New Year’s resolutions—when the intercom buzzed.

“Mrs. Briggs is on line one. She wants to know if you can see her right away.”

Teresa Briggs was a counselor’s dream, if you charged a hundred dollars an hour. Which we didn’t! A middle-aged, wealthy woman, she complained with a multitude of problems, all stemming from an unconscious desire for sympathy. Her husband had long since stopped caring, so she sought it from whomever she could find. I’d been “counseling” her, off and on, for three years.

It was an easy choice.

“Please tell her I have another appointment. See if next week is acceptable.”

Off to the gym!

In the past, I’d kept in decent shape by playing tennis and with a less-than-consistent jogging routine. Admittedly, I’d put on some weight in the past year. I refused to beat myself up about it because...well, it had been a monumentally crappy year. As Leigh grew sicker, my diet consisted of too many fast food meals, unhealthy snacks at all hours of the night, and way too much stress eating. Plus, in those final six months, a complete lack of exercise. Once Mom arrived, and stayed after the funeral, there was an abundance...and over-indulgence...of comfort foods. I wouldn’t have considered myself fat, though I did see the formation of “love handles.”

So I purchased a gym membership at a large facility near the church that boasted aerobic classes, an indoor track, twelve racquetball courts, separate whirlpools for men and women, a pro shop, and a juice and snack bar. While our church had a Family Life Center that housed a room with fitness equipment, I preferred to embark on this odyssey of good health without church members and staff watching.

“The Pastor came by,” Miss Gert informed when I pushed through the doors. “But had a meeting downtown and couldn’t stay.”

“Was he upset I wasn’t here?” I propped my elbows on the waist-high counter of the receptionist desk.

“Not at all,” she said, looking up from her files. “I explained how your day had filled up and that you didn’t even have time to eat lunch.” She moved in close, lowering her voice like she was sharing a secret. “Your last appointment rescheduled, so you *could* go home early and get some rest.”

“That sounds great, but I’m gonna tackle all that mail that’s been piling up. Plus, I have tons of thank-you notes to write.”

“If you concentrate on writing the notes, I’ll address the envelopes.” She handed me a pink piece of paper. WHILE YOU WERE OUT was printed in big letters at the top.

I glanced down to see Susan Bradley’s name and office telephone number printed in Miss Gert’s flawless handwriting.

“I’ll call her later,” I muttered as I entered my office and hung up my coat. I stood, fixated on the credenza across the room.

It’s just mail, I reminded myself, hoping to inspire some courage, or force my legs to move in that direction.

Once I started opening them, and reading them, it would invite the memories back to the surface. And everything else as well. I would need to write sweet, personal notes of gratitude when what I felt was anything but gratitude. I was sad and angry. And alone.

For more than a year, I watched my wife suffer through the treatments, the pain, and the sickness that accompanied her cervical cancer. Getting worse. Fading away. Through all of it, she exhibited those qualities associated with the brave folks in inspirational Lifetime movies: faith, strength, humor,

courage, and positivity. Until that day she informed me, “I can’t do this anymore.” The surgery, the chemotherapy, and the radiation had not worked. Her body was tired, and she needed rest.

Two months later, just before Halloween, she was gone.

In the weeks after she had died, I patiently endured Mom’s ever-present, sometimes incessant, ministrations. Proper Southern etiquette and Christian deportment—my mom was staying with me, so I couldn’t avoid compliance—required that I cordially greet guests who dropped by to express their condolences, offer their support, or pray with me. I listened to countless expressions of love, augmented with stories of what she’d done and the impact she’d had. I kindly deflected invitations to get me out of the house for a movie, a racquetball match, a walk in the park, or lunch.

I carried out my daily activities with perfunctory obligation. Even my favorite holidays, Thanksgiving and Christmas, passed as nothing more than another day, different only because of the food and festive activities, which I also declined.

Who wants a morose mix of Scrooge, Grinch, and Eeyore at their Christmas party?

Despite Mom’s chagrin, I watched lots of TV, more for distraction than entertainment, caring little about the activities on the flickering screen. At night, sleep required my headphones and cassettes of my favorite hymns to drown out the endless turbulence inside my mind.

My training and experience recognized these symptoms as grief and depression.

Time heals all wounds had been repeated to me so many times, by so many people. Each time, I coerced a civil “thank you,” though my mind screamed, *Shut up!*

God is my strength, I affirmed to myself today. Leigh repeated this throughout her illness. It seemed to bring her such peace. She would insist I say it aloud with her, aware that my faith was not as strong as hers.

Resisting the urge to begin with the innocuous mail, I reached for the shoebox of cards Mom had

collected from those who'd sent flowers or donated to Leigh's requested charity—Magic City Women's Shelter, where she volunteered, using her degree in elementary education to set up a tutoring program for the children who couldn't attend school. There were several piles, organized and labeled. The stack of sympathy cards, from groups, organizations, and individuals I worked with throughout the city, was the biggest.

The intercom rescued me from writer's cramp. "Miss Bradley is on line two," Miss Gert informed. "Says you *better* take her call."

"Suz," I said in the contrived cheerfulness that marked most of my casual interactions in recent weeks. "Why aren't you here helping me open all this mail?"

"Sounds like more fun than I'm having. I've been working on a report to the Finance Committee all day," she groaned. "I could take you to dinner as a consolation prize. It's time you clock out, kiddo."

It was almost five o'clock; before answering Susan's call, I'd insisted Miss Gert go home, as there was nothing more she could do until I finished writing the notes.

"How was your first day back?"

"Not bad," I replied. "It's been busy. Had some scheduled appointments, and two drop-ins. Several folks came in to welcome me back." Knowing she questioned my returning to work right now, I inserted, "Oh, and I even hit the gym this afternoon."

"Such a good boy, keeping that New Year's resolution."

Susan Bradley and I met on our first day at college; we were both trying to register for the Monday-Wednesday-Friday morning "Introduction to the Old Testament" class, a required course for all freshmen. The school's simple registration system laid out a predetermined number of index cards, printed with the class, the times, and the professor. If there was a prerequisite before taking the class,

that was included. All you had to do was show your student ID, sign a list, and pick up the card. You were registered.

However, if there were no cards left, the class was full. Keep looking. The school offered most required classes at various times and days, and by several professors.

“I need that,” I’d objected when she picked up the last card.

“We all do,” she replied, clutching the card close to her chest. The mandated nametag identified her as *Susan*, from Little Rock. She was short, though I think girls preferred the term “petite.” Her red hair, with bangs cut above her eyebrows and loose curls around her head, gave a fuller frame to her thin face. As she talked, her hair moved and bounced, unlike most hairdos I’d seen around campus and at church—the ones that sat on their heads like a domed structure, held inert with a coat of shellac.

“But that’s the last one,” I explained, in case she didn’t understand how the system worked.

“Making the class full.”

“So *that’s* what it means when there are no cards left?” Her tone was condescending, and for added effect, she slapped her palm against her forehead. “There are lots of other choices.”

I shut my eyes and took in a measured breath through my mouth, which I let out through pursed lips. “I figured taking Old Testament first thing in the morning, after several cups of coffee, would help me stay awake.”

Susan turned to the woman sitting on the other side of the table. “He didn’t mean that, professor. I’m sure your class is stimulating and informative.”

I was mortified. Had I just insulted the professor who would decide my fate?

They both laughed. Then I read the nametag around the woman’s neck: *Volunteer Janet*.

“You are too easy, kiddo.” She checked out my nametag. “So, Nathaniel from Memphis, we seem to be at a stalemate.”

“Whatever.” I threw my backpack over my shoulder, ready to move to the next table to get away from her. “And it’s Nate.”

“It’s also offered on Tuesday and Thursdays.” This was Volunteer Janet, being helpful.

“Yeah,” I replied, forcing a politeness. “I have English Comp at that time.”

Volunteer Janet was persistent. Taking out a printed sheet from a manila folder, she perused through it. “What about eleven, on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday?”

I checked the schedule I’d recorded in my spiral notebook as I had gotten class cards. “I have P.E.”

“Tell you what,” Susan interjected. “Take this one, but you owe me lunch after registration.”

I regarded her, and her intentions, with suspicion. “Lunch is provided in the cafeteria.” Again, I wondered if she was aware. “And it’s free,” I added.

She slipped the card in the pocket of my shirt and walked away. After two or three steps, she looked back over her shoulder. “See you outside the lunchroom Friday, at one-fifteen...*Nathaniel*.” She blew me a kiss and was then lost in the crowded room.

She’s very forward, I concluded.

“Nathaniel, are you listening to me?”

“Yes,” I responded, drawn back to our conversation.

“So, buy you dinner? It’s your first day back at work. I’m sure you haven’t stopped to eat.”

She was correct. I’d been concentrating on the tedious task of being repetitively grateful. In cursive.

“It sound great, but there’s still so much work to do here. Rain check?”

We set a tentative lunch for next week. “I’m gonna hold you to that,” she reminded me as we ended the call.

Shortly after Susan and I met—on that fateful day at registration—we did have lunch. I was relieved to discover it was not a date. We discussed the usual things: hometown, parents, high school, and class schedules. Our inherent differences surfaced when the conversation turned to career plans. I was surprised at her intentions to go into the ministry since our Association didn't allow women to serve in such leadership roles. My face must have signaled my thoughts.

“Maybe I can change them,” she said with defiant confidence.

For the next hour, we discussed the Bible, Paul's writing, and the church. We also veered off to social issues such as the war in Vietnam and women's liberation. We disagreed on most everything! The only conservative thing about her was her outfit, which was in keeping with the school's dress code.

For the next two years, we had several classes together and often studied together. Her coarse language could offend me, but she was witty, smart, and incredibly insightful. We became one another's confidant. I would listen as she ranted about the sexism of our Association, and was her shoulder to cry on when an upperclassman dumped her. In return, I talked to her about being overwhelmed by my class load and my part-time job as youth minister at a rural church in Gadsden, about thirty minutes north of Birmingham. She listened when I was discouraged or in those times at which I struggled with decisions—what she deemed “too much inside my own head.” I talked to her about switching my concentration from Christian education to counseling. Susan was my sounding board. Of all the people I knew, I could count on her to be honest with me, often to the point of merciless. In her words: “Don't come to me if you want someone who'll bullshit you.”

At the end of our sophomore year, she told me she was transferring to Birmingham-Southern, a liberal arts Methodist college on the other side of town. From what I knew of the school, the operative word was *liberal*. She'd realized there might never be a pastoral role for her in our denomination. “I'm

so pissed at male chauvinism at this school. Even when it's cloaked in Scripture, it's demeaning."

I tried to convince her to stay, but she'd made up her mind. "I know what I'm called to do, and I do not believe God made a mistake. I have to pursue this, so I'll go somewhere where having a vagina is not an issue."

We continued to talk on the phone, and got together for lunch or dinner. Then I met Leigh in my junior year, and she captured much of my time. Susan wanted to meet Leigh, so we scheduled dinner. I was stunned when she arrived, fifteen minutes late. Her hair, which had once been short, wavy, and red, was now long, straight, and black. It reminded me of Morticia Adams, an observation I did *not* say aloud. If we'd passed one another on the street, I would not have recognized her. I expressed concern at how thin she looked; she appeared sick. "I'm fine. I eat organic, with very little meat and almost no sweets," was her explanation. Her face had almost no makeup, and she wore large, black-rimmed glasses that slipped down her nose when she talked. Which was a lot. And with fervency and volume.

She showed great interest in Leigh, asking how we'd met and about her training to be an elementary school teacher. For the most part, I was the spectator as they got to know one another. When I did enter the conversation, we fell into the routine of old times: we disagreed. It was infuriating. I left with the conclusion she was a raving, opinionated, left-wing liberal feminist with aspirations for domination. Leigh thought Susan was "brash, but interesting."

When Susan went to seminary out of state, we lost touch. I'd been at Grace for a couple of years, still in the position of director of congregational care, when out of the blue, the church's receptionist buzzed my phone to say, "I have a Susan Bradley on the line for you. She says you went to college together."

I learned she'd returned to Birmingham and was on the ministerial staff at Forestdale Methodist Church, a medium-sized congregation in a very affluent section of Birmingham's Southside with a

reputation for social activism and liberal teaching that attracted a huge college crowd, along with the artistic types who lived in that area. It didn't take long to reveal our differences had only increased. We were cordial, but when the call ended, I determined it was the end of my friendship with Susan.

I had been wrong! From the time we'd found out about Leigh's cancer until the funeral, Susan had been there for her, and for me. She brought food, took Leigh to doctor visits, sat with her during chemo, and even cleaned the house. Her compassion, like her theology, was liberal.

"I saw your car in the parking lot."

There was no mistaking that resonant voice.

"Sorry we missed one another today, but I wanted to stop by before heading home and welcome you back."

"Thanks, Pastor. It's good to be back. I needed to be here more than anyone who came in today."

Dr. David Shannon was Grace's senior pastor, only the third man to hold that title. He'd taken the position in 1967, when the church was still relatively small. Under his leadership, helped by remarkable growth in the city, the church had become the second largest in the Association. Fortunately, the elders who founded the church in the late forties had had the foresight to buy a large parcel of land, so expansion—which would be cost prohibitive—had not been constrained by the burgeoning development of the city of Homewood, just south of Birmingham.

He had a PhD from Westminster Theological Seminary and served as an adjunct professor at EPCS—Evangelical Presbyterian College of the South, my alma mater—and a nationally renowned preacher and speaker. His Sunday morning sermons aired live on the local ABC station and also around the country on a Christian radio network. There were plans to broadcast the entire worship service nationally on TV as well.

He took a chair facing my desk. “You’re working late.”

I looked at my watch; it was after six. I motioned to the stacks of mail. “Catching up.”

“This can’t be an easy time, Nate,” he offered with visible concern. “Nor will it get easier in the coming days. God is sufficient, and He is our strength, but with your training, you know that you can’t rush the grieving or the healing.”

He spoke from personal experience. His son, a police officer, had been killed in the line of duty the year I came to work for the church. Nonetheless, talking about Leigh’s death was still difficult, so I just nodded my agreement.

“Is there anything you need, son?”

He’d never called me that before, and I fought getting choked up. “The church has been so thoughtful. Every time I think the supply of food will slow down, another Sunday school class comes by with more. The ‘fridge stays full. I reckon at some point I’ll have to learn to cook.”

Dr. Shannon was a firm but fair boss. He listened to my thoughts, concerns, and ideas, which was helpful when we were starting Arms of Grace. Nothing seemed to ruffle or stress him out. I’d never seen him angry or heard him yell. His demeanor was always professional, detached, and somewhat formal. Cordial, but not chummy. Even though he was busy, talking to him never felt rushed, as though he had other things to do.

“Claire wanted me to invite you over to dinner. When you feel up to it. She likes being a mother hen.”

“That’s so kind. Tell her I would love that. I’ll have Miss Gert call and set it up.” Rather than rely solely on my memory, I made myself a note on the pad I kept by my phone.

He stood, and as I moved around the desk, he embraced me in a strong hug.

Another first.

The second week of January, Birmingham had a freak, unexpected snow and ice storm, after temperatures had hovered near zero for weeks. More than a foot of snow, which then froze, paralyzed the city.

Grace Presbyterian opened our Family Life Center as a shelter for people who were without power or for those who'd been stranded on the roads. All staff who could get there "camped out" in various Sunday school rooms for five days to help with the duties of keeping the kids entertained, cooking meals, offering Bible studies to those interested, singing songs ... whatever necessary to help people through the crisis. Once it was over, the pastor encouraged us to take the next two days off to rest.

I went home, slept for ten hours, then had lots of coffee. With the two uninterrupted days, I decided it was time to tackle a task I'd been putting off for weeks: cleaning out Leigh's things. Mom and Suz had been nudging me since Thanksgiving. I wasn't ready then.

Was I ready now?

I expressed the collision of emotions in my journal. Just after sunrise, I visited her grave, where I tearfully shared my plan.

My emotions were erratic. Moods could shift without warning and at breakneck speed. Anger. Joy. Nostalgia. Sadness. Such as when I came across the small ceramic bell I'd given her for our first Christmas together. I gave myself permission to cry for exactly five minutes. Then I continued.

Throughout the process was an ever-present temptation to detach and distance myself from what I was doing.

This is not another house-cleaning project. Stay present. In the moment. Embrace the memories and the emotions.

The small dining room—little more than an extension of the kitchen—was my sorting station. Our combined life—her presence in my life—was reduced to a series of pragmatic decisions: Should I keep it? Give it away? Trash it?

I hated being dispassionate about things that mattered. About *someone* who mattered.

Worse, as I discarded so many items, the question came: *Now, where do I fit here?*

A hot bowl of oatmeal was on the counter; I stirred to cool it enough to eat. The phone startled me. “How’s the cleaning project going?” It was Susan.

“How did you know—”

“I talked to Charlotte yesterday. She told me you were packing up Leigh Anne’s stuff. I can come over and lend a hand.”

“That’s very... Wait, what? You talked to my mom?”

I might have been too tired to wrap my brain around that one. Mom had expressed her admiration for the way Susan had cared for me and Leigh, but when did they start talking to one another? I could imagine, in horror, Mom’s reaction to some of Susan’s liberal beliefs, profanity, and sacrilegious tendencies.

“Yes, of course. She likes to know how you’re doing and assumes you won’t tell the truth.”

“I’m stunned. You two are like ...polar opposites”

“We both care about you. Besides, she’s a hoot. Yes, she presents all prim and proper and old-school on the outside, but she can read a person in short order after meeting them. Guess it’s her training as a real estate agent, and all those years being a pastor’s wife. I think in a past life she could have been a psychic fortuneteller.”

I had no response to that.

“So can I help?”

“Too late,” I answered, “I finished last night.”

“How are you handling it all?”

I paused and heard myself let out a breath. “Some of it was emotional. But I’m glad I did it.”

“Are you remembering to eat?”

“Talking to my mother has you channeling her.” I suppressed a snicker.

“You didn’t answer the question.”

“I’m having breakfast now. And I promise to stop and eat lunch later, so you don’t have to call to check on me.”

“Am I being a pest?” She sounded hurt.

“No, of course not. I was kidding. I appreciate that you’re here for me.”

Susan was coming over Friday morning, before work, and would take boxes and bags to the women’s ministry. All Leigh’s jewelry had gone to her sister in Huntsville. Just before Leigh died, she had made me promise to leave her wedding rings on for burial and to put my wedding band in with her as well.

“If not,” she said, “You’ll keep it on out of love and loyalty, which will prevent you from moving on with your life.”

“What’s wrong with that?”

She ignored my objection and made me promise.

There was still a picture of her in my office, but I’d relegated all our wedding photos to an antique steamer trunk I’d gotten after my father had died.

“I want you to go on,” she’d pleaded.

Her words had echoed in my head all day as I cleaned, pushing me as I’d resisted every one of

those “practical” determinations of what to keep and what to discard.

I glanced over my shoulder at the boxes and bags in the dining room.

This is me...going on.

Two

This afternoon's workout was not very serious; I'd used coming to the gym to escape a ladies luncheon at church, so I wasn't putting forth much energy. It had only been a few weeks, but it was intimidating trying to use those shiny metal machines with the confusing names. Dip bar. Hack squat. Lateral pulldown. Leg adduction. Most days, I thought I belonged in the room with the dumbbells, a name that better described me trying to maneuver the routine.

As I strained to pull the overhead press bar down to my waist, I glanced over at the free weight section of the room and saw someone who personified the type of body I would have ordered, had the decision been up to me. *That* man deserved admiration for the artful crafting of his physique.

An ache in my shoulders reminded me that I had the bar halfway down and was concentrating on his physique, not the machine. I relaxed and sent the bar upward, and the weights downward, with a loud clank. On instinct, I peeked over to see if the guy had heard the clangor. He had, and then nodded his head in my direction, a slight smile etched across his face.

Flustered, I returned the gesture, then continued my routine. But several times I cast a glance in his direction. Twice he caught me, so I looked elsewhere, hoping that he couldn't see me blush from over there.

"Scuse me." The voice interrupted my thoughts. "Are you finished?"

A woman stood by the machine. I'd become lost in my thoughts and was no longer working anything other than my imagination.

"Sorry," I said, grabbing my towel. I glanced back at the weight room but didn't see him.

My favorite part of working out was sitting in the whirlpool afterward. Being encompassed by the swirls of hot water and steam was as comforting to an aching muscle as a mother's kiss to a skinned

knee. Due to my flexible schedule, I was there when most men my age were still at their nine-to-five jobs, and the place was not crowded. After several luxurious minutes, my mind relaxed with my body, and I almost dozed off. When the water level rose, indicating the entrance of another weary afternoon athlete, I opened my eyes. And they probably bulged out like a surprised cartoon character. The guy I'd noticed earlier in the weight room, now stark naked, was standing knee-deep in the tub, not more than two feet away from me. Embarrassment rushed through me. He smiled, but not like he was amused at my reaction.

Did he think I was staring?

I nodded to acknowledge him and then relaxed back into the tranquil caress of the heated currents. But imprinted on my memory was the vivid image of his naked body. I was surprised at the details I could remember. Even my quick glance had confirmed, up close, how well-crafted his chest was. As he held himself on the side of the spa, his biceps flexed, and the veins in his arms streaked down his arm. At that moment, I understood, up close and personal, what the term “washboard” stomach meant.

Whenever possible, I avoided being naked in the presence of others, but he didn't appear bothered.

With that body, why would he be?

“The water's a little hot today,” he said, obviously to me, as we were alone.

It would be rude not to talk with him.

He was propped against the side of the tub, with both legs in the water, but everything—*everything!*—else exposed. When I looked up, he smiled. It encompassed his whole face, revealing cavernous dimples on either side and causing the corners of his eyes to crinkle. If he weren't naked in front of me, that smile would be the feature that I'd most remember about him.

“It feels good on my calf,” he continued. “I hurt it playing racquetball last night; got a ball slammed into it. Left this big bruise.” He pointed to a round blue area on his left leg. His voice was not the bass voice of a radio newscaster. It was very informal. His manner of speech was friendly and easy on the ears.

“You play racquetball?” I asked. “I picked it up a few years ago. Spent years perfecting my tennis skills, and now this indoor fad is drawing everyone away. I had to give in.”

“We’ll have to play sometime,” he suggested.

“I wouldn’t offer much competition.”

“To get better, you have to play above your level.”

An elderly man joined our ranks, and I excused myself so I’d be on time for my next appointment. “I look forward to seeing you again,” I said as I exited.

Good grief, I thought. I hope he doesn’t take that the wrong way.

I distinctly remember the first time I admitted to having *those* desires. It was in high school, at our church’s annual summer youth retreat—the one where I learned to journal. That year, we had a well-known author and youth leader as our teacher, and he spent the week talking to us about “the power of journaling,” showing us that many of the biblical stories were personal records ... journals ... of one person’s perspective of what was happening: times of sorrow, pain, confusion, or joy.

At the opening session, he gave us all spiral notebooks and encouraged us to write in them during the scheduled “quiet times” throughout the retreat. He emphasized two primary elements: personal honesty and staying in the present. Over and over he taught: “Be real and write in the now.”

In those initial entries, I confessed that I “noticed” other boys, particularly those with muscular physiques. I liked looking at them in the locker room or at the pool, where I’d linger on their chest,

stomach, or arms. I was young and sheltered, so there wasn't an adequate vocabulary to my admitted feelings, but it didn't take long for others to fill in the blanks, giving a name ... many names, actually ... to my feelings.

My father referenced it in his sermons. *Abomination. Sodomite. Unnatural.*

It was on the news and in magazines. *Gay. Pervert.*

Guys at school told jokes. *Queer. Fag.*

My journal became the sole outlet for examining the desires and expressing all my questions:

Where did the feelings come from? Why do I have them? Am I the only one?

And the one most repeated: *How could I make them go away?*

As a Christian boy, determined to be a faithful disciple of Jesus, I prayed every night to have this sin excised. Every morning, I expected to wake up freed of this "thorn in my flesh." However, over time, I acknowledged the feelings were not going away, so I rationalized my fascination as innocent envy of those better built than I. Then I achieved a "neutral coexistence," likening it to someone allergic to peanuts: they might *want* to eat peanut butter, but they refrain, knowing it would make them sick.

I made a sincere oath: I could never eat peanuts!

But while my rationale and discipline served me well in the waking world, in my dreams, the desires emerged with a vengeance. Promises were not binding, self-control was abandoned, consequences were not considered. "Peanuts" were on the menu, and I consumed them without restraint. The guilt I'd feel was oppressive, leading to repentance and renewed perseverance to overcome. Hours of prayer, reinforced with intensive Bible study, occupied my time and energy.

In my senior year of high school, I "felt the call" to the ministry. The church, and the Bible, placed high moral standards on God's servants. Even though college had strict rules, living away from my parents offered me freedom and autonomy, and it presented new challenges for those old feelings.

The campus was apparently a magnet for good-looking guys seeking to serve God. And distract me. My roommate, with his well-developed body, never wore a shirt in our dorm room. Being on the tennis team provided an outlet for pent-up energy, until we got to the showers. I worried those long-suppressed desires would become stronger than my ability to control them.

In my junior year, I met and began dating Leigh. We fell in love and decided to get married a year later—the summer before her senior year. My marriage vows were sacred and eternal, so those long-renounced desires were to be ignored. Matter closed! I maintained the prevailing hope that once I could experience sexual fulfillment righteously with my wife, normal feelings would eventually supersede the unnatural desires.

Throughout the years, I'd kept my promise and never acted on the feelings. Attractive men who stirred up those desires also reminded me of that vow. The guys could be admired, then I'd renew my resolve and plunge myself back into intensive Bible study, memorization, and prayer. Their manly allure would soon be relegated to nothing more than a pleasant afterthought.

Except for that guy from the gym. The *naked* guy in the hot tub. He refused to fade.

Why couldn't I stop thinking of him?

For reasons I refused to acknowledge, I adjusted the time of my workouts to the afternoon. However, I never saw the handsome, naked guy from the whirlpool. I also knew that referring to him...remembering him...in that way only reinforced the mental image. And triggered a new barrage of guilt's recrimination.

Maybe he doesn't work out on a regular basis, I rationalized.

The flawless details of his body dismissed that possibility!

More likely he comes in at another time.

Today, because of back-to-back meetings, my usual workout time had been impossible, so I came around six o'clock, after my last appointment.

"How's it going?"

I was pushing up the bar on the bench press machine when the greeting came. I bent my head backward and saw *him*. He was wearing a pair of sweat pants, cut off at the knees, and a T-shirt that came down just below his navel. His stomach was wet from perspiration.

I didn't see him working out.

I grunted as I lowered the bars and swung around to a seated position on the bench. "Pretty good," I answered, gasping like an elephant in labor. "Who doesn't love grunting and sweating in a room full of strangers?"

"But the end results are worth the price," he retorted. "How ya' doing on racquetball?"

"To tell the truth, I haven't played since we talked. I might have scared everyone off."

"That good?" he questioned with a raised eyebrow.

"Self-preservation is more like it. I can be dangerous."

"I thrive on danger. Wanna play?"

I forced my mind to stay on racquetball.

"When?" I mumbled through my huffing.

"How 'bout now? You got time?"

I was probably wasting time on my haphazard workout, so at least I'd get some exercise. "Sure."

"By the way, my name's Alex." He extended his hand. "Trey to my friends."

Does seeing him naked in the hot tub, and since then in my dreams, qualify me as a friend?

Thankfully he answered by saying, "Please, call me Trey."

"Trey?" I questioned with genuine curiosity, taking his handshake.

“Well, my full name is Alexander Bastien Stavros, the third. Third...Trey.” He held up three fingers. “It’s a family legacy,” he explained.

“Trey it is,” I replied, mirroring his three-finger gesture. “Stavros, like the—?”

“Stavros Hot Dogs. Another family legacy. My grandfather started it back in the forties.”

“I love them. There was one near the college campus, and we’d go there for lunch.” When he didn’t reply, I worried I might have embarrassed him by bringing up his connection to the well-known restaurants. “I’m Nate. And just so we’re even, it’s Nathaniel Stanton Truett. No number at the end.”

He seemed to be thinking. The gaze made me uncomfortable, though his intense dark eyes were captivating. “Nice to meet you...*Nathaniel*.”

Only two people—my mom and Susan—used my full first name, though it appeared that short list had just grown to three. Three...Trey.

I stood, and retrieved my towel. “Let me go get my racket.”

“It’ll be fun.”

“Said the Japanese as they headed for Pearl Harbor,” I remarked, turning toward the locker room.

Afterward, we got juice in the downstairs snack bar. “You are fast as hell, and have a killer backhand.”

“Right,” I replied with exaggerated sarcasm. We were both sweating; I was panting from my humiliating display of athletic prowess.

He fixed his gaze on me as he sipped his orange juice. The simple act of raising the bottle to his lips caused his biceps to noticeably flex. “Your tennis background has given you the skills necessary to be a great player. Keep at it, and you’ll soon be beating the pants off me.”

Don’t go there!

“Wanna try it again tomorrow night?” he asked. “I have a standing reservation for the courts, but

my usual partner canceled.”

Drat, that’s church night.

“Can’t tomorrow. How about Thursday?”

He cut his eyes upward for a second, giving the suggestion some thought. “That should be OK. Let me give you my home number so can call me tomorrow evening. By then I’ll know my Thursday schedule.” He tore a rag-strip of paper from a flyer on the bulletin board and borrowed a pen from me. “If I’m not home, Gennie will take the message.”

Gennie?

We said our good-byes, and he exited to the showers. I returned home to shower, risking a smelly car over seeing him naked again.

Lead us not into temptation.

But it wasn’t so easy to restrain temptation. That night, when personal convictions couldn’t assert control and while conscious resolve rested, long-forgotten specters overpowered my dreams, tapping into suppressed desires that would not be ignored. This incarnation involved a naked Trey—working out, playing racquetball, entering the hot tub.

It had been years since such activities had invaded my sleep. In the past, it had been like watching frames of an old home movie. A few flickers, then gone. This was different. More vivid.

It felt *real*.

In the morning came the all-too-familiar guilt. And an accompanying wet mess in my underwear.

“Is this an intake?” I asked Miss Gert after skimming through my afternoon appointments.

She walked to her desk, thumbed through file folders, and pulled one from the stack. “No, he’s director of a ministry the church supports as part of our community missions. He was scheduled back in

October, but since you were on leave, I moved the appointment. I think he wants to talk about what they do.”

When I returned from the gym and lunch, a young man was in the waiting room. He sat upright in chairs not designed for long-term comfort, with his hands folded in his lap and his ankles crossed under the seat. Even as he turned his head to see me enter, his posture remained precise, and his gaze was expectant. Avoiding him would be impossible.

Did my workout run longer than planned?

A discreet glance at the clock gave the answer.

He's thirty minutes early.

“I’m Scot Nelson,” he informed as he stood. The way he extended his hand, I wasn’t sure if I was supposed to shake it or kiss his ring. “That’s Scot, with one t.”

“I’m Nate.” His hand was soft and his grip, nonexistent. “Also with one t.” He laughed, but it was more like a childish giggle.

“Let me get settled, and I’ll be right with you.”

From the frown and the pout that came over his face, you’d have thought I was sending him away instead of asking him to wait. Nonetheless, I hung up my jacket, took a couple of swigs of water from the jug in my small refrigerator, and briefly sat in silence before buzzing Miss Gert to send him in.

Scot with one t was dressed to the nines in a royal blue three-piece suit and shiny patent leather shoes. The fitted suit accentuated his thin build. He could pass for a sales associate in the men’s department of an upscale clothing store. Or a televangelist. I estimated him to be five-two or five-three based on standing beside him. His light blond hair was neatly combed back with a curve that gave some height. Guessing his age would be difficult; his baby face was deceptive.

Moving gracefully into the room, he did a slow survey of his surroundings. “This is nice,” he

remarked, sitting in the area where I talked to clients. “Thank you for seeing me.”

I took the chair across from him. “So tell me what brings you here today.”

He reached in his side pocket and drew out a business card, which he handed me. “I’m the leader of a support group, and your church is a financial contributor.”

That didn’t answer my question.

Printed in large letters in the center of the card was *Whole-Hearted*, and Scot’s name and phone number were in the bottom corner. “So you’re also a therapist?”

He had steel blue eyes, with near-white eyebrows that arched as he examined the room, and a smile like he was about to have his picture taken. “Oh, no.” He was staring at a painting. If he hadn’t continued, I might have assumed he was offering a critique of my office decor. “I founded the ministry.” There was more animation now... more enthusiasm ...in his enunciated response.

“That’s great, but I’m not involved in the church’s finances and budgeting—”

“I know,” he interrupted, still smiling. “I met with the treasurer and one of the elders last year. They are very kind.”

“Is this a group for recovering addicts, like AA?”

“We do use some of the concepts of a twelve-step program, but it’s not AA.”

Enough!

Time to end this game of Twenty Questions. “Tell me about your group.”

“We minister to men who want to leave the gay lifestyle.”

Years of training kicked in to prevent any outward reaction; it’s inappropriate to telegraph reactions to the person talking. Silence could encourage more disclosure. But not always. Scot seemed fascinated—or amused, from the still-present smile on his face—with the bookcase behind my desk and apparently not in a hurry to provide more information.

Time slowed in the lull.

What does he want with me?

A long-forgotten anxiety engulfed my stomach with nausea, simultaneously causing my ears to ring and my mouth to go dry. If he spoke now, it might not be possible to hear over the pulse pounding in my ears.

Say something, my rattled brain screamed to my parched mouth.

“I’ve not heard . . .uhm, are there many such groups?”

He appeared to be in no hurry to answer, then looked at me, smile intact. “We are seeing acceptance of homosexual behavior increasing. More boys and men are experimenting. The world is telling them that ‘gay is okay.’ The problem is growing, but praise God, the Holy Spirit is raising up groups like mine to stand against the attack of the devil.”

His words were measured and deliberate, like he was reading a prepared statement.

“I see,” my professional-self replied.

“Since your church supports the work we do, I wanted to meet. And talk. In person.”

His cryptic responses were annoying. “Why?”

“In case you had any referrals.”

“Referrals?” I hope he didn’t hear the exhale of breath I’d fought to hold in.

“Yes, if you have young men—do you call them patients?—who are struggling with homosexual desires, our group is available as a resource. We can help them like we have helped so many others.”

“Good to know.” I stood to end our meeting. “Yes, I do like making suggestions to my *clients*.” I held up his business card. “I’ll put this in my Rolodex.”

Once he’d left, I flopped down on the sofa and allowed my heart rate to normalize.

“Scot Nelson was here earlier and left this package for you.”

The contents were in a plastic bag emblazoned with the name of Lighthouse, a local Christian bookstore.

“Hmmm,” was my response as I picked up the wrapped bag from Miss Gert’s desk and headed back to my office. Since he’d first come by, Scot had called several times, leaving messages with Miss Gert.

He’s persistent.

There wasn’t another appointment for about an hour, and I could return phone calls later. I cut open the shopping bag, which he’d sealed with enough tape to thwart a master criminal. Inside were two paperback books. One was titled *The Unhappy Gays*, written by a preacher I’d heard of: Dr. Tim LaHaye, who’d written several books on depression from a conservative Christian perspective. I put it in the bottom drawer of my desk, to read later, and to prevent my next client from seeing it on my desk. I’d never heard of the other author, Kent Philpott, but his book was *The Third Sex*, with a subtitle of *Six Homosexuals Tell Their Stories*. I skimmed through it. While the front cover identified them as *homosexuals*, the actual stories inside—related in an interview style—were about how these three men and three women had left the homosexual lifestyle.

Scot also included a spiral-bound booklet, with a simple cover and large lettering: *We gave Jesus our whole life, and we are Whole-Hearted*. Below, in smaller, italicized letters it read, *Gay men tell their personal stories of God’s Transformation*. The table of contents listed twenty-six people, first name and last initial. I read them all. Some were emotional and dramatic. Each expressed a simple faith that brought powerful change in the desires and their behavior. They had all been able to do what I hadn’t: overcome their impure homosexual desires.

What’s their secret?

Up to that point, I'd more or less dismissed Scot. Maybe his ministry was doing good works, but it had little to do with me, like those parachurch organizations that had targeted ministries to truckers, or cowboys. For years, I'd acknowledged my inclinations but never considered them a *serious* problem. More of a persistent reminder of the weakness of my flesh. Like a gnat, buzzing around my head.

I had them under control.

In a moral rebuke, an image of Trey, naked in the hot tub, again popped in my head.

Could this group be the answer... finally!... for my struggle?

Read the rest when the book is released October 4th in paperback and e-book.