

Second Edition  
- Expanded -  
*with new ending*

# Sow the Wind, Reap the Whirlwind



A Novel by **Bill Prickett**

## ONE

The clock radio issued its pre-set alarm, disrupting the silence. The noise snaked inward until the unrelenting, high-pitched tone penetrated his sleep. He slapped at the snooze button. The dark of the room denied the time on the clock's dial as he opened his eyes and focused on the lighted display, bright in the poorly lit room.

*Seven thirty-one.*

His tired body proclaimed a different opinion about the time.

*Where am I?*

Seconds passed. Disorientation faded into grogginess as he struggled to focus his thoughts and his sleep-filled eyes. Memory came to the rescue, despite the unfamiliar surroundings.

*My new home.*

He looked around the room.

*Good grief, what a mess!*

For several minutes, he wrestled with the decision to get up. Rolling onto his back, he stretched. His muscles resisted in stabs of aches and stiffness. New beds wreak damage on unaccustomed bodies.

*How many places have I slept in over the past few days?*

The events blurred in a whirlwind of activity. Real estate agents. Visitors touring the old house. A mass of papers he had to sign. Weeks of packing, loading the rental trailer hitched to his truck, then the four-day, no-sightseeing trip across the country, with late night stops in chain-motels next to the interstate, and meals—and bathroom breaks—in fast-food restaurants. It was long hours of driving, scrolling across the radio dial to find a station. He avoided country, and would skip to the next channel when he heard another news story covering the impending end of the Vietnam War. Talking to other drivers...mostly truckers...on the CB radio kept him alert when he couldn't find decent music.

Remembering only increased his fatigue.

The four-minute lapse of the snooze button fulfilled, and the shrill noise again pierced the room, pulling him back to the reality of his new environment. He yawned and flipped the switch from wake-up to radio. The DJ was chattering: "I've got that new

song by the talented young lady from just down the road, near Montgomery. Here's *Love Will Keep Us Together* by The Captain and Tennille."

As the music faded up over the hype of the announcer, he got out of bed, weary from lack of sleep.

Finding the box with the percolator dominated his thoughts and directed his attention.

He wanted—no, he *needed*—some coffee. Shuffling past a pyramid of cardboard, he lifted a smaller box from the top of a larger one.

The movers had stacked the boxes in every available vacant space. After they left, he arranged the boxes in order to unpack enough clothes for a few days until he could get the townhouse in order. He had also hoped to buy some groceries, but it was after midnight before he had enough things sorted and by then, he was too tired to care, so he crawled into bed. This morning, his body suffered the full effect of the past ten days, and he needed a potent dose of caffeine to jump-start his day.

He lifted a hamper of clothes and turned toward the den, smashing his toe into a large, immovable box. He resisted the impulse to scream, though he retaliated with a swift slam of his fist into an innocent bystander-box.

The clutter, combined with his lack of sleep and need for caffeine, brought frustration. The recurring doubts around his decision to move to Birmingham in the first place increased that frustration, but he avoided engaging in the internal debate again. Instead, he redirected his attention to the mountain of chocolate-brown cardboard containers. He exhaled as he surveyed the room.

With Coffeemaker as the holy grail, he began his quest. Just as he ripped open the first box—marked Kitchen—the doorbell issued a rather obnoxious noise.

*Obnoxious*, that is, to someone who has not had his morning caffeine fix.

Automatically, he walked over and opened the door. Outside stood two young women holding a tray of doughnuts and a decorative carafe.

"Is this how you greet all your guests, Sweetie." The brunette gave a sly scan of him, up and down. "Or is there some kind of special message...just for us?"

The blonde just stood silent, with her eyes wide and round.

"Huh? I'm not sure I know..." He stalled in his attempt at an answer. Somewhere in the flash of time between the amused glances exchanged by the two women on his

landing, his sleepy daze dissolved, and the situation became clear, and he looked down...at his underwear.

“Excuse me!” He left the door open and dashed upstairs. In a few minutes, he returned wearing a pair of gray sweatpants and buttoning a lightweight flannel shirt over his muscular upper body. He refused to acknowledge the grins of the two unknown voyeurs still standing on the doormat.

“Let’s start again,” he remarked, trying to appear blasé.

“Hi, neighbor,” said the blonde. “I’m Carol Russell. This is Nancy Sanders. I suppose you could call us the Magnolia-Highland Welcoming Committee. This is just a little something to energize your morning.”

“You sure did energize *my* morning,” Nancy quipped.

Magnolia-Highland Villa—in Birmingham’s Southside—was the name of the complex where he’d purchased his townhouse, after touring several areas of the city, but settled on this neighborhood because of the older, stately homes, the scores of hills, the abundance of trees, and the proximity of several parks.

Carol lifted the tray as if to display what they contained. “Krispy Kremes for a quick sugar rush and coffee to jumpstart the brain.”

“Krispy Kreme?”

“The best doughnuts in the world,” Nancy asserted. “Get ’em while they’re hot. You *do* drink coffee, I hope?”

“Yes, most definitely.” They were still standing outside. “Please come in. By the way, my name is Peter...Peter Broussard.”

“French?” Nancy noted. “Ooh, la, la.” She repeated his last name. It sounded different with her accent. “Brew Sard.”

“On my father’s side, yes.” He moved them into the den.

“We didn’t wake you, did we?” It was the blonde—Carol—speaking, as she looked for somewhere to set the tray.

He pointed to the coffee table.

“Oh, no. Well, I *had* just gotten up,” he corrected. “I was unpacking, well into the night.” He took a seat and motioned to the sofa for the two of them. “How did you know I moved in?”

Nancy sat in the chair, and Carol took the seat next to him on the loveseat.

“She gets credit for that one.” Carol pointed to Nancy. “She has a deal with the apartment manager to notify her when anyone new moves into the complex.” Carol leaned in, lowering her voice. “*Especially* men. I come along to make sure she doesn’t get in too much trouble.” Carol gave him a light swipe on the side of his shoulder, making him part of the inside joke.

“I can hear you!” came the rebuke as Nancy stood and wandered around the room.

“Besides, it’s a nice gesture...welcoming newcomers. This is really a very close group who live here.”

“It’s mostly singles,” Nancy said. “No kids allowed. Just boys looking for girls...and girls looking for boys. It’s very exciting. Of course, lately, we’ve even had some boys who are looking for other boys. Hope you don’t fit *that* category.” She looked at him with a wrinkled forehead.

He heard Carol gasp.

“No, that would *not* be where my interests lie.”

“There *is* a God,” Nancy commented, crossing herself as if she’d just finished her Rosary. Carol laughed nervously. He blushed.

“Carol,” Nancy called back from the kitchen, “he’s got all new appliances in here, including a microwave. They keep promising to put us one in.” She bent over the counter that separated the kitchen from the living area. “How much did this place cost you, Pete?”

“Nancy!” Carol looked at him with an expression of apology.

Nancy shrugged with indifference.

When he’d decided on the location, he had chosen the larger of the townhouse floor plans, with an average-sized kitchen, a half-bath and a combination den and dining room on the first floor, along with a fenced-in patio. Upstairs was a generous master bedroom, a full bath, and a smaller bedroom. And as Nancy had noticed, it included new, high-end appliances.

Carol leaned in, speaking again in a whispered voice, “She can be forward. Just take it with a grain of salt.” She patted him on the arm, then increased her volume. “Why don’t I give you some help in there?”

He began shifting boxes, but also watched the two girls move around the kitchen area, arranging the doughnuts and pouring the coffee. They chattered about such matters as the placement of glazed doughnuts next to the cream filled.

There was a calming effect in the smooth, southern drawl that drew his attention to their mundane discussion. Since arriving, two days earlier, he had been smitten with the Alabama accent. From the bank teller where he opened his account to the woman at the townhouse complex office to the young gas station attendant down the street, he loved to hear them talk.

“Hand me that mug over yonder.” Nancy pointed at an opened box on the floor.

He noticed the tendency to chew up the last parts of a sentence. “Over yonder” came out “ova’ yonda.”

“I’m fixin’ this tray, if you don’t mind. See if you can find some spoons for the sugar bowl,”

Most of the *-ing* endings became “a” along with words which had an “r” on the end, like sugar. “Suga’ bow.”

He liked the folksy charm of the inflection, the stretch of the pronouncement, and the imagery of the various cultural idioms. Sometimes he felt like he had stumbled into a *Tammy* movie, but the accents were more genuine, without the artificial, over-emphasis applied by Hollywood. He wasn’t sure where “yonder” was, or why the tray needed repair, though.

“Do you take it straight?” Nancy held up a coffee mug.

“*Stray-eight?*” He exaggerated the accent, causing her to frown. “If you mean black, yes. Will you two join me?”

“Sure, but only for coffee. We can’t have doughnuts.” She glared at Nancy, already reaching for the tray. “It’s gettin’ close to swimsuit season.”

He picked up one doughnut and took several slow drinks of coffee, savoring the flavor. He expected them to join him back in the den, but they continued pattering in the kitchen.

While he savored the coffee and the wonderfully tasty doughnut, he returned his attention to the neighbors.

Nancy was short—probably five-three or four. Her body, as if responding to increased gravity, was thick. However, she possessed a definite and well-defined

feminine distribution, which she accentuated with the form-fitting blouse tucked into her slacks. She wore her long brown hair tied in two ponytails on each side of her head, giving her round face a cute, girlish look.

Carol was attractive with her curly blond hair. Her eyes were a translucent blue—like a stained-glass window in a lighted cathedral—and continued to draw his attention. In conspicuous contrast to her friend, she stood lean and at least four inches taller. With the smooth grace of a dancer, she maneuvered the obstacle course occupying his kitchen with ease. As she spoke, her words flowed through lips formed in a grin, adding to the drawl of her accent.

He insisted they join him.

“You’re new to the South,” Nancy said, more as a statement than a question.

“Uh, yes,” he stammered, swallowing the doughnut. “Did you get that information from the apartment manager, too?”

“Elementary deduction.” She tapped her finger to her temple. “You don’t know about Krispy Kreme doughnuts. That’s a dead giveaway.”

“So far, so good,” he affirmed with a nod.

“You have no accent. You didn’t get that mar-r-velous tan around here. Not this time of year. Your hair is also bleached out, a combination of sun and saltwater, I’d say.”

“I’m impressed. Care to hazard a guess?”

“California?”

He confirmed her conclusion.

“And you’re obviously an athlete; your body screams of lots of physical attention: recreation and exercise. Definitely swimming...probably jogging, along with some weight training.” Her intonation and focus made him self-conscious. He nodded in agreement.

“You sure know your logic—”

“Not to mention the male body,” Carol chimed in, with a friendly tone of reprimand. “She likes to envision herself a female version of Barnaby Jones. Being a physical therapist probably helps in the, shall we say, more carnal areas.”

“I work in rehab at UAB—the University of Alabama in Birmingham, which is one of the largest medical centers in the country.” Her hands pointed when she talked, as if she were giving directions with her biography. “I work with people recovering from accidents.” She smirked. “Being a detective is merely a hobby.”

“And the male body is a *passion*.” Carol rolled her eyes.

Uncomfortable with the amount of attention given to his anatomy, he stood and headed to the kitchen, feigning a need for a fork. “Carol, what do *you* do for a living?”

“I’m a paralegal at a law firm downtown.”

“That’s cool. Do you enjoy it?”

“Really, I do. My parents wanted me to be a lawyer, but school is so gross. This is sorta a compromise. Besides, it pays the bills.”

He learned that while he owned his unit, Nancy and Carol rented their condo from someone who owned several in the complex. Taking a seat in the chair, he paused long enough to grab another doughnut. “These are incredible,” he garbled with his mouth full. “I’ve never tasted doughnuts like these.”

“Welcome to the South. One of the few perks around here,” Nancy said with a groan.

“Need some help with the unpackin’?” Carol had her hand on a stack of boxes.

Her offer seemed friendly and sincere, but he declined.

“Are there things in these boxes you don’t want us to see?” Nancy raised a curious eyebrow, then took the initiative and opened a box.

“Just my underwear, and you’ve already seen them,” he countered through the warmth of his reddening cheeks.

“What’s this?” Nancy pulled the contraption from the box.

“That’s my telephone answering machine.”

Carol spoke up, “I thought mostly businesses used them.”

“They’re catching on for personal use. Back home, everyone uses them.”

“Yeah,” Nancy said, “Rockford has one...on TV” She turned it over in her hand, pushing buttons and flipping switches.



“It doesn’t appear he wants our help, Nance. We should be going.”

She put the answering machine back in the box, then crossed her arms to accompany a pout.

The girls moved toward the door, but Carol turned back. “Okay, we’ll leave you to unpack, but can we at least invite you to lunch later? There’s a great deli not far from here, near Magnolia Park. How ’bout it?”

“I’d better not. There’s still so—”

“What’re you gonna eat?” Nancy waved an arm in the direction of the kitchen. “I’ve seen in your cupboards and your ’fridge. It’s slim pickins.”

He nodded in agreement. “Okay, what’s proper apparel for lunch?”

“Very casual,” Carol said. “Anything is acceptable.”

“Well, what you were wearing when you came to the door this morning is probably a bit *too* casual,” Nancy informed with a twinkle in her eye.

Alone again, he began rummaging through the various sized, multi-labeled cartons and putting them in the appropriate places. Kitchen/Cooking Utensils. Kitchen/Dishes. Bedroom/Sweaters. Bath/Towels. Office/Books.

He was very meticulous at packing, and for now, concentrated on getting boxes in the proper room. Then, he could organize one room at a time. After several hours of backbreaking work—he got the kitchen and bathroom boxes emptied—he glanced at the clock on the microwave oven.

*Twelve-twenty.*

He had told his new friends to come back around one so they could go to lunch.

He ran upstairs, took a quick shower and, with meticulous care, chose his favorite casual outfit. When the doorbell rang, at a few minutes before one, he’d just finished.

“Damn, he’s got clothes on,” Nancy carped when he opened the door. “I told you we shudda come earlier.”

## TWO

“We’ve been friends since high school and roomies for over a year now.” Carol placed her hand on Nancy’s arm as she recounted the history of their relationship.

Talking was more than conversation to Carol; it was overt. She employed various parts of her body in the process: bobbing head, swaying shoulders, and she seemed incapable of talking without touching.

“We share everything,” Nancy added. “Except men.”

“And we never argue—” Carol chimed in.

“—Except about men,” they completed the sentence in unison, as if they’d rehearsed the line.

Peter’s new neighbors had insisted on walking the distance to the restaurant. Along the trek, they furnished him with all the essential neighborhood information.

“This part of Southside is known as Five Points, because of the five streets that intersect there.” Carol pointed to the streets as she named them.

“I love to come here,” Nancy said. “The shops are very trendy, and the people are so avant-garde.”

“Yeah, if there’s a new fad sweeping the rest of the country,” Carol illustrated with a sweeping motion of her arm, “it will be seen in Five Points first.”

“But still not until two years after the rest of the world,” Nancy groused.

The business district consisted of rows of shops lining the streets that intersected at the “point.” There was an antique store, a metaphysical bookstore, a card and gift shop, several clothing stores, an old-fashioned ice cream parlor, a couple of restaurants, and some professional offices. They walked around a large fountain in front of the gothic Highland United Methodist Church and crossed the street to enter Ringo’s Deli. Once they received their orders, they took a table on the sidewalk.

“So we can watch the people,” Nancy informed.

The April weather was cool, and he wished he’d worn a sweater with his long-sleeve shirt. Once he took a seat outside, the warmth of the sun felt nice. He remained silent, taking in the commentary of his companions and the explanation of his surroundings.

“So, Peter, what called you away from life in the fast lane to the Magic City?”

“Magic City?” he inquired, puzzled by the designation.

“It’s like a nickname,” Carol clarified, “dating way back. Not sure why, though.”

“I read it was because the city grew like magic,” Nancy inserted. “But I call it the ‘*Tragic*’ city.”

“Which still leaves my question: what brings you here?” She pointed a limp french fry in his direction.

He stared at the uneaten portion of his turkey sandwich. He’d anticipated this conversation, but still didn’t have an adequate answer. “I wanted to get away from L.A. before it falls into the ocean,” he quipped. Then he became more serious. “Besides, life in the fast lane can get *too* fast sometimes. I needed a change of pace and scenery.”

“Birmingham is a change from California, without a doubt!” Nancy made it clear she was not a fan of the city.

“Well, we will have to take you on a guided tour.”

“There isn’t much in the way of tourist traps, like in L.A., but it could kill an afternoon.”

“We could go to the zoo, the botanical gardens, and Vulcan,” Carol offered, popping up her fingers as she counted off the sights. “They’re all close together,”

“Vulcan?” His only reference was from *Star Trek*, which he sometimes watched on TV.

“He’s the Ironman—” Nancy pointed upward and over his head, “—on top of the mountain, watching over the city.”

He let his eyes follow the direction of her finger to the massive statue of a man mounted on a marble pedestal at the top of the nearby mountain. In his left hand, he held a hammer resting on a large anvil. His right hand, extended upward at an angle, held what looked like a giant Popsicle.

“Vulcan is the god of the fire and forge,” Carol explained, “and a symbol of the city’s steel industry. It’s a very historic monument, and a magnificent view of the area from the observation deck.”

Nancy looked surprised at Carol’s knowledge.

“What?” she responded. “Tim and I visited a few weeks ago during lunch, and I read the brochure.”

*These two are a hoot.*

“If you look carefully,” she also pointed, “you can see a torch in his right hand. At night, you can see it better; it’s lit up. If the light is green, that means there have been no traffic fatalities in the last twenty-four hours; if it’s red, there has been.”

“The best view is from the other side of the mountain,” Nancy said. “You can see his bare ass... mooning the rich folks over there.”

It hadn’t taken long to figure out Nancy enjoyed being bawdy, so he looked at Carol, who scrunched her face and shrugged. “It’s true. His butt is bare.”

“And *that* makes for some great sightseeing. I mean, who doesn’t want a Roman god with a tight butt watching over us? Almost as enjoyable as our new neighbor, in his underwear.”

He figured his blush was her intention, but said nothing.

When they finished lunch, the trio walked in Magnolia Park through the lush, flowered pathways and blooming dogwood trees, then took a seat on one of the benches.

“So, Peter Broussard—French beach boy from Southern California—tell us about yourself.” Carol’s tone was friendly; she nodded her head and widened her eyes with interest.

“The basics are, I’m twenty-seven and grew up in Malibu, which is near Los Angeles.”

Saying his age was strange, since he’d spent his most recent birthday on the road. The actual day—March twenty-fifth—he’d “celebrated” in a diner near Meridian, Mississippi, eating a hamburger, drinking iced tea, with a piece of blueberry cobbler for dessert.

“What can I say? My parents, Lucas and Julia, were wealthy and funded most of my wishes.”

As Nancy guessed, he was an avid swimmer. “I almost made the Men’s U.S. team, but I broke my arm playing volleyball.”

“Have you ever seen a TV star?” Nancy had the energetic interest of a groupie.

“I stood next to Clint Eastwood once, at a street corner, in Beverly Hills.”

That story seemed to fulfill her curiosity about his encounters with the rich and famous. Meanwhile, Carol plunged into another conversation. “California must be a beautiful place to live. Warm weather, swimming all the time. A kid’s fantasy.”

“I guess that’s true, for the most part. Growing up there was a real trip. Hippies, flower children, race riots, Viet Nam protests.”

“What did your folks think about you movin’ way out here?” Carol asked.

He inhaled, slow and deep, before he answered. “They were both killed in a private plane crash, when I was about sixteen.” A tentativeness came with telling the story—learned from a decade of seeing the reactions. “My Dad was a private pilot; they were flying back from a business trip...”

It was unnecessary to provide the details.

Neither of his companions spoke, and he sensed that awkward silence when people want to say something but were afraid it would be the wrong thing or would come out sounding stupid.

“Dad moved here from France as a kid,” he recounted, hoping to ease the discomfort. “Which is why I’m saddled with *Stéphane* as my middle name. He was a successful architect and too busy to spend much time with me. Mom, a social worker, spent most of her spare time trying to reform me into a responsible adult.”

“I’m so very sorry.” Carol placed her hand on his knee.

He accepted the gesture as casual, having learned through the day that touching was a significant part of her communication.

He resumed his story. “Besides massive grief, they left me *taken care of*.” He shook his head, as if rattling an image from his thoughts.

“The rich little orphan boy,” he quipped, then cleared his throat. “After they died, an aunt came to live with me until I finished college. When a job came open here, I sold the house, packed up my stuff, and hit the road. Which is how I ended up in your fair metropolis.”

The story, though accurate, left out important details. As usual.

“Look at the time, Nancy. It’s almost four. We have to be at Marty’s at seven.”

“Is it that late? Damn!” She leapt up. “I still have to wash my hair and shave my legs...just in case I get lucky tonight.”

“We’re going to a party at one of the units in the complex.” Carol took him by the arm. “It’s really gonna be great. Why don’t you come with us? It’ll give you a chance to meet our friends...make some new friends.”

“I appreciate the offer. It’s very kind of you, but I can’t.”

“Why not?” Nancy asked in a near-whine.

“Two new friends in a day is my limit.” He grinned, but could see his explanation wasn’t working. “Frankly, I’m dead tired. There’re still hours of unpacking to do. Besides, I have to be at work early tomorrow. New job and all. I need to be rested and sharp.”

“Tomorrow?” Nancy frowned. “What kind of tyrant-boss makes you start a new job on Sunday morning?”

To cover up the slip of that information, he shook his index finger at her. “Not everyone has the good fortune of weekends off, my dear.”

Her mouth assumed the classic pout position. “Yes, but it’s still a cryin’ shame,” she whined. “I wanted to show you off to all our friends.”

“Believe me, it’s very tempting. And flattering.”

“By the way,” Carol said, squinting her stained-glass-blue eyes, “What do you do?”

He hesitated for more than a moment. “What if I said I’m a mobster, planning to rob a downtown bank? Sundays are perfect for that. Would you still want to be my friend?”

She didn’t respond, but her inquisitive eyes were fixed on his face, as if attempting to probe his mind.

He winked, partly out of self-preservation and partly from self-consciousness. “Let’s just say I’m an honest man making an honest living.”

“I love a man of mystery,” Nancy remarked as they got to the entrance gate.

Carol remained silent, offering only the long, thoughtful stare that made him uncomfortable.

His two new friends turned to go to their unit, leaving him under the atrium, which housed all the mailboxes.

## THREE

He closed his Bible with deliberate and artful grace. It was not the end of his sermon, just a dramatic pause, planned in precise detail. The eyes of everyone in the spacious, opulent sanctuary were fixed on him.

If he allowed himself the license, he could revel in the attention he commanded—the adulation and respect from those who constituted “his flock.” He considered it his purpose in life to preach to them a sermon both fraught with meaning and packaged in persuasive eloquence.

Dr. Clyde Langley Simms stood before the congregation in his Sunday best. Fashion made as clear a statement as his sermon, and with the same attention to detail. He wore well-known labels, purchased from the finest men’s shops in the city. And why not? Everyone in his congregation—one of the most affluent in Alabama—dressed in style, and they expected the same from their pastor.

“The Bible was written so that we might *know* what God requires of us; that we might be *certain* of His will.”

He wouldn’t be considered an arrogant man, not in the mainstream understanding of the word. Outright egotism would distract from his purpose, and he allowed nothing to interfere with that. However, pride comes in many varieties and goes by many euphemisms; in him, it manifested in what he would call ministerial confidence. He *knew* he was good at his job, and preaching was the part he enjoyed most of all!

To him, the preparation of an effective sermon was like creating a work of art. Much as an artist labored slave-like over a particular work, painstakingly choosing the precise hues and brush strokes, each week he would spend hours planning and preparing his two sermons—one for the Sunday morning service and another for Sunday evening. It was a time-consuming process: selecting the appropriate Biblical text, then researching the nuances of word meanings and the historical context of the scriptural passages. Then he would meticulously choose the correct words to compose a precise outline, adding a generous garnish of pertinent examples, vivid illustrations, and witty stories. All done to communicate his intended design: the specific theme of the message.

And despite the popular notion, the execution of a sermon was difficult; its correct delivery demanded much of the practitioner. The same passion that drives the artist propels the entire being of the conscientious preacher into the sermon.

“Indeed, God’s ultimate will for each of us is that we would know Him. Saint Augustine said, ‘Our hearts are restless, O Lord, until they find their rest in Thee.’ The discovery of God’s will bring the satisfaction that comes in finding your intended location after repeated and failed attempts. It is coming home after being lost.”

He rested his hands on either side of the pulpit and waited, staring at various locations in the auditorium. It gave the effect of actual eye contact with specific individuals.

Through years of training and practice, he had a precision in both the organizational and oratorical aspects of the sermon—how to outline his thoughts in connected ideas, how to arrange them in logical sequences of ascending or descending order, how to get everyone’s attention at the beginning, and when to stop before losing their concentration.

Once prepared, he could deliver it with quality, utilizing many techniques to maximize his message, such as modifying his volume and increasing his projection. A slight altering of his pace—faster, slower, or even silence—allowed a salient point to penetrate the audience. Emphasis had to be precise, timed, and punctuated on the correct word and even on the specific syllable. Changing the focus of his eye contact or animated gestures were all designed to maintain attention and drive home the content. He believed the dramatic subtleties were justified if the weight of the message touched their lives.

“To follow God’s will is to surrender anything and everything that *you* would place in a position of higher priority over a relationship with our loving God.” He stared for several moments at the congregation, denoting the seriousness of his statement.

He had the perfect eyes for staring down a congregation; they were a striking shade of green that mirrored the intention of the owner. In anger, they could issue an icy-lime freeze; when joyous, they danced with flickers of aqua reflection. Now, they shone emerald with intensity at his proposition.

Today’s sermon, about knowing God’s will, was finished. It had been built around four main points, serving as steps leading up to the invitation—the tangible measure of a sermon’s success, and the ultimate objective of his hard work. He spent as much time on the verbatim presentation as he did on the sermon itself.

The invitation was the pinnacle of the sermon, appealing to the listeners for a public response. Evangelist Billy Graham brought the invitation to national attention and was still considered the master of the smooth, effective execution. While in seminary, Simms began his quest to perfect it as well. The result had formed the basis of one of his bestselling books, *The Pastor as Evangelist*.

“The invitation is the apex of the well-prepared sermon,” he wrote in his book. “You would no more want to go into its execution unprepared than you would go into the pulpit half-dressed.”



First, he would state the precise nature of the decisions that were called for in the message. It always included salvation—a major focal point for Southern Baptists, who had become the largest Protestant denomination in the world by emphasizing this point with regular, dogmatic determination. Those who wanted to accept Jesus as their personal Savior were invited to make a “public profession” of their faith by walking down the aisle. The church had trained altar workers who would listen, share pertinent Scripture, and pray with them.

But in the local church setting, the invitation also carried a broader appeal, since there were many other needs within a congregation of this size, such as a serious call to personal holiness or a greater dedication to the mission of the local church. Those who were interested in joining the church—also very important to Southern Baptists—were asked to come forward.

Once he had stated the thrust of today’s invitation, he prayed aloud, asking God to “grant that many decisions would be made for Jesus’ sake.” Then, he left the pulpit and stood at the front of the sanctuary, along with several trained deacons, waiting for those who had been moved by the message to “come forward.”

Today’s invitation did not disappoint: two children from the church-sponsored kindergarten had come forward to be baptized and three new families in the community—contacted through the Tuesday night visitation program—joined the church.

When the last verse of the invitation hymn ended, and the congregation sat down, the noon hour was fast approaching.

“I realize we’re running close to schedule,” he acknowledged, aware it was not a normal practice. “But I wanted a few minutes to welcome a new ministerial staff member to our First Baptist family. As I announced last week, for those of you who were playing hooky—” He amplified his smile and paused, allowing his jab to bring the expected amusement from the congregation. “—we’ve hired someone to work with our young people.” His demeanor was now a friendly, down-home manner—distinctly different from his preaching style. “Son, please come stand here with me.”

The man who rose in the fourth row probably stood over six feet tall, with white-blond hair and broad shoulders. His face reflected the effects of a life in the sunshine—a deep brown tan that appeared darker under his bleached hair. He would be regarded as handsome, in the rugged, Roman tradition, with high, prominent cheekbones curving downward to a firm, square jaw. He adjusted the tie and buttoned the jacket in his three-piece suit, accentuating his solid build.

If he was nervous, he didn't show it, displaying a pleasant demeanor when he turned to encounter the massive congregation of unknown faces. The white-teeth smile seemed to glow against his tanned skin and his hazel eyes took on the blue hue of his suit.

The pastor put his arm around the man's shoulder. "There's going to be a 'get acquainted time' in the fellowship hall tonight, and you'll learn more about him then, but this morning, I wanted the folks here to show him some good ol' southern hospitality." He glanced over at the man beside him. "And I don't mean *southern* California!" Many in the congregation laughed with him.

"Once the service has concluded, I invite you all to come by and give the right hand of Christian fellowship to Brother Peter Broussard, our new Minister of Youth and Recreation."

"Wonderful sermon, Dr. Simms. It was such a blessing."

"Thank you, Mrs. Franks. How's Brother Harold this morning?"

"Ornery as ever. He's fishin', as usual."

The ritual of shaking hands following a sermon is of unknown origin. Though many pastors might carry it out with dutiful but detached emotion, Clyde Simms enjoyed chatting with the people, particularly in this setting that almost forbade any deep or extended discussions. Occasionally, there would be the self-proclaimed expert who attempted to disagree with portions of the sermon, or the college student who wished to add to it, while adding to his self-esteem. But most of the time, it was just cordial small talk.

In keeping with proper "ministerial etiquette" and propriety, he always referred to women as "Miss" or "Mrs." and to the men as "Brother." To him, it prevented the trap of familiarity and favoritism, and maintained a strict veil against intimacy. He considered friendships within the congregation risky to the effective minister. He made that point very clear in a chapter of his book, *The Pastor and His People*.

"Dr. Simms, our new Youth Director is *wonderful*." The young girl's comment made it obvious that "wonderful" more likely meant "attractive."

He'd known the fourteen-year-old since she was in kindergarten. Seeing her this morning, grown up, took him back to earlier days.

*Ten years, he thought. Things sure have changed!*

Birmingham was his home; he had been born and raised in the West End area, attending the large Central Park Baptist Church as a child. He was converted at age nine during Vacation Bible School. In his early teens he “felt the call to preach,” so his pastor encouraged him to pursue ministerial education. He chose Howard College—later Samford University—a Baptist-sponsored college instituted for the training of ministers in the eastern section of Birmingham.

While at college, he met and began his courtship with Emma Jean Edwards, an elementary education and music student. In his junior year, he proposed, and they were married during the summer following graduation. He furthered his training and education at New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, where he earned his Master of Divinity degree and then his Theological Doctorate.

Throughout his education, he balanced his time serving various part-time churches, all of which saw growth under his ministry. While he was in seminary, Emma became pregnant, but the child was stillborn. His grief devastated him, to the point his church asked him to resign from his position. He took a semester off and worked in the business office of a local department store. Emma accompanied him to several sessions at the seminary’s counseling service, which helped to heal his heart and re-focus his desire for the ministry.

Once he received his doctorate, the couple moved to the South Main Baptist Church in Dothan, Alabama, where they stayed for over seven years. Their two children—Glenda and Richard—were born while they were there. Broadman Press, the Southern Baptist publishing company, published his first book, *Your First Pastorate*.

They both loved their ministry in Dothan, seeing it as a rewarding time of service. The church saw a substantial growth, and the denomination often called upon him to speak at conferences throughout the country. His second book, *The Pastor and the People*, had been published and did well in religious bookstores.

One day, he surprised Emma by coming home from his office in the middle of the day.

“Is everything okay?”

“A church contacted me. They want to interview us.” He waited and then appended the additional piece of news. “The church is in...Birmingham.”

“Birmingham?” she repeated, with a soft lilt in her voice.

The decision to move to Birmingham had worked out well, both for the family and for the congregation. The children flourished in the social climate of the community and the church had experienced unprecedented growth in every conceivable criteria.

Hundreds of people had joined; additional staff were added. And they both loved that they were serving God in their hometown.

Of course, there were problems. A few years after coming to First Baptist, there had been a disagreement and confrontation with the Chairman of the Deacons—a man he had considered his closest confidant and ministry partner. It was the first test of his leadership, and, for a while, he wondered if he would survive. But he did.

Life was good and comfortable now. And the external evidence of his fruitful labors gave him great joy and a sense of accomplishment. For the past six years, he had averaged publishing at least one book per year, including his latest, *The Pastor as Theologian*. He'd held multiple offices in the denomination, both nationally and within the state and local organizations. In many ways, he had reached a pinnacle in his chosen career.

"I understand our new Youth Director is from California?" a middle-aged man was saying to him, and brought his attention back to handshaking.

"That's right, Brother Jack. He has some fine credentials."

"Why did we have to go all the way across the country when we've got Samford University right here and some mighty fine preacher-boys just aching to fill the position?"

Jack Carlisle's present display of opposition didn't intimidate the pastor, nor did it merit a discussion, since the church had voted to hire the new youth minister, and Jack didn't even have any children in the church.

"Well, you'll probably need to talk with the Personnel Committee about that. The young man had the qualifications, and he wanted to make a move in this direction. Give him some time, and lots of prayer. Good to see you here this morning."

The conversation had ended. If the man had wanted to pursue further points, it would have been futile. The pastor had already turned his attention to Mrs. Fredricks, empathizing about her recent surgery.

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Peter had shaken hundreds of hands; the introductions, names, and faces blended into a mire of trite dialogue with little concentration. He was in that lulled state of monotony, half-listening to an elderly saint of the church, when a familiar voice, whispering behind him, jerked him back to the proceedings.

"I must say, *Reverend* Broussard, you look different with your clothes on."

He paled at the content of the statement and turned to see the person walking away at a brisk pace. "Carol!"