

## PRAISE FOR *THE NOTICER RETURNS*

“*The Noticer Returns* is a magical story that will change how you look at life.”

— Winston Groom, *New York Times* best-selling author of *Forrest Gump*

“I read everything he writes again and again. Andy Andrews is, quite simply, my favorite author.”

— Margaret Kelly, CEO, RE/MAX

“The amazing principles Andy Andrews reveals in his books are a large part of the success we have been able to achieve as a hospital system. In *The Noticer Returns* be sure to pay particular attention to his ‘Secret Philosophy of Extreme Achievement.’ That one nugget of wisdom continues to produce outstanding results for our employees—personally and professionally—every single day.”

— John Heer, president/CEO, North Mississippi Health Services; and the world’s only three-time Baldrige Award recipient

“Parenting . . . creating a profitable business from scratch . . . even a mind-blowing perspective on dealing with Alzheimer’s and death . . . *The Noticer Returns* is a book you and I will purchase by the case. Let’s give this book to as many people as we can and begin changing the world right now!”

— Tim Hudson, Atlanta Braves pitcher

“Andy Andrews is America’s greatest storyteller since Mark Twain and perhaps our most interesting teacher since Robin Williams played John Keating in the movie *Dead Poets Society*. *The Noticer Returns* is another in his long line of winners.”

— Robert Mayes, president, Columbia Southern University

“If Andy Andrews lived in England, the queen would have knighted him by now. Andy’s books—*all* of his books—are just that good!”

— Louie Anderson, comedian and actor

“*The Noticer Returns* is better than *great* and has the power to cement the direction of your family for generations. Andy Andrews has become the wise master of storytelling.”

— Paul Westphal, former Lakers All-Star and NBA head coach

“With *The Noticer Returns* it has become clear that Andy Andrews owns this genre. Once again he has created a satisfying blend of life-changing principles with a fantastic storyline. Andy has singlehandedly turned the ‘inspirational novel’ into an art form.”

— Brenda Warner, best-selling author and speaker

“Parents, coaches, employers, and employees . . . drop what you’re doing and read this book today! Andy Andrews reveals uncommon wisdom in a common sense kind of way. *The Noticer Returns* is a guidebook to the life you’ve always wanted for your family.”

— Kurt Warner, Super Bowl champion quarterback and NFL broadcaster

“Andy Andrews is my favorite author . . . my very favorite.”

— Robert Morris, founding senior pastor, Gateway Church

“If C. S. Lewis were alive today, his favorite author would be Andy Andrews.”

— Sandi Patty, vocal artist, winner of more than 25 Grammy and Dove awards

*The*  
NOTICER  
RETURNS

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RETURNS

*Sometimes You Find Perspective,  
and Sometimes Perspective Finds You*

ANDY ANDREWS



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*To Dr. Wil Baker,  
a college friend of my parents,  
who now, decades later, has become a wise and  
trusted friend to me.  
Dr. Baker is an important mentor to Polly as well  
and is a huge influence in the life of our family.*



## Prologue

**M**y name is Andy Andrews. I am a daddy and a husband. I am a friend to some—a good and loyal one, I like to think—and a member of a small community on the Gulf Coast that boasts a population of around four thousand when the tourists aren't using the beach.

I am also a writer and a speaker. As one who communicates as a profession, it is strangely uncomfortable to involve myself or incorporate details of my own life in a book or a presentation, but I understand that it is sometimes necessary. Occasionally, as much as I wish it were not so, the truth in full context simply cannot be achieved until all the facts—including the intricacies of how those facts might be perceived now and in the future—are on the table.

As we begin this story, please allow me to admit I have found no other way around that reality. Therefore, as reluctant as I may be to cast myself as a character in this particular story, I have come to this conclusion: without knowing a few specifics about my own fears and struggles, it would be difficult, if not impossible, to fully understand Jones or the inestimable value his life and words hold *for you* right now . . . today.

At this very moment, if you have ever read one of my books or listened to my audio recordings or seen me on stage, you probably feel as though you know me much better than you know the old man about whom this story will be told. Of course, my own human nature prompts me (even now) to simply shut up and allow you to continue thinking whatever nice things you might have decided about the written and spoken words for which I get credit.

Through the years and many hard lessons, I have found that no matter how long it takes or how desperately a person battles or denies, the truth always—*always*—makes itself known. In addition, even those casual statements we commonly call half-truths, white lies, or exaggerations are costly and embarrassing when they come to light.

Therefore, for the record, allow me to begin with this particular truth: whatever *good* things you think of me, I believe a certain man named Jones to be responsible. He is also responsible for the daddy and husband I am still in the process of becoming. He deserves the credit. His is the life and wisdom and truth you should carefully examine with any time or connection that you possess. And now I am honored to be one of those connections . . .

As I mentioned earlier, I am a writer. I am not the best writer around here or even the only writer in town. I'm just one of several. When I am away from Orange Beach and people ask what I do for a living, I usually hesitate to use the word *author*. For some reason I have always thought the phrase "I am an author!" sounds like someone who considers himself a big deal. I don't. And I am not. If you wanted me to prove it, you could ask what kind of books I write. Any person who has written a book should be able to answer that, right? Honestly, I'm not even sure myself.

I am not attempting to sound humble or pull some "aw, shucks" routine in order to lure you into disagreeing with me about

myself. Putting a label on the kind of books I write is like lassoing a bumblebee, and I know it. A mental run-through of traditional publishing labels will tell you very quickly that the task will not be easy. Trust me on this: the best minds in the book business have already tried.

The first book I wrote that was read by anyone other than my family and friends was called *The Traveler's Gift*. It was easy to read and interesting—at least that's what folks said. I thought of it as *a story that includes some of life's principles*. It eventually made the *New York Times* Best Sellers List in the Fiction category, but that same week the book made the *Wall Street Journal* Best-Selling Books list in *Nonfiction*. Barnes & Noble placed it in their Self-Improvement section. Amazon.com determined it to be Literature, and there it stayed until they finally settled on the two different categories it still occupies today: Inspiration and Spirituality.

Even the stalwart publication *Publisher's Weekly* struggled to define it. Widely read and greatly respected, *Publisher's Weekly* is an international magazine that has been produced four times a month since 1872, and for the first time in a history of more than one hundred years, *Publisher's Weekly* listed and reviewed a single book—*The Traveler's Gift*—in different sections within a week of each other, in October 2002. Religion loved *The Traveler's Gift* and gushed, “Andrews is an author to watch.” The review even compared the book favorably to the Christmas classic *It's a Wonderful Life*. On the other hand, the Fiction section greatly disliked the book and gave it a negative review.

Meanwhile, the *New York Times* kept *The Traveler's Gift* on its bestseller list but decided the book was not fiction after all. They placed it in the Business category. To this day, I walk into most bookstores and still need to ask for help finding the Andy Andrews titles. Believe it or not, I was once escorted to my own books . . . in the Travel section.

So how does one define my writing? I honestly have no idea, and it has caused many a dinner conversation to end in stories and laughter. Perhaps that is why I struggle at times to figure out what it is that I am supposed to put on paper. And there begins our story . . .



## One

I found him.

I wasn't looking for him, but there he was, real as life. It was only a glimpse at first, but he stopped and turned, almost as if he felt my gaze upon him. The instant we locked eyes, he grinned. And it was like the old man had never left.

But he did leave. He had disappeared several years ago without so much as a good-bye, and like the old man himself, the circumstances of his departure had been odd. Leaving our tiny, coastal community without being seen by a single person was strange enough—small-town folks don't miss much—but tucking a cryptic message inside a beaten-up suitcase and abandoning it in the middle of a parking lot . . . well, the whole thing had been perplexing. It had also been the number-one topic of conversation in our town for weeks.

In time, however, the residents of Orange Beach came to believe he was gone for good, and a mourning of sorts had settled over the whole community. It wasn't a tragedy. We had suffered through hurricanes and oil spills—we knew what tragedy felt like. It was more of an emptiness we couldn't quite define.

So in lieu of anything specific, we talked endlessly about what

we did remember. We discussed his clothes and wondered why we had never seen him in anything other than jeans and a T-shirt. Besides the leather sandals on his feet, that particular ensemble typified his entire wardrobe. We had seen him at a wedding on the lagoon, in restaurants, and even in church a time or two, but never dressed in anything other than jeans and a T-shirt.

No one had ever known where he lived or even where he slept at night. To our knowledge, he had never so much as spent a rainy evening at anyone's house. He didn't own property in our county—we all have friends working at the courthouse, and they checked.

Neither, we all agreed, could he possibly have had a tent in the small brown suitcase that never left his side. And about that suitcase . . . until the day of his disappearance, none of us had ever seen him without it. It was an early weekday morning when Ted Romano, the owner of Pack & Mail, found the old, scuffed-up piece of luggage sitting by itself in the middle of an almost empty parking lot.

Yes, we all had stories about watching the old man struggle through a door with it or carry it with him as he filled a plate from a local salad bar, but as far as we could tell, no one but the man himself had so much as touched that suitcase until the day he vanished.

There was also the age thing. We were almost obsessed with the subject of how old the man might be. We had conceded long before that it was impossible to know his age for sure. His appearance yielded no real clues. "Old" was as close as we could guess. His hair was longish—not long enough for a ponytail, but longish—and as white as polished ivory. Usually only finger-combed, his hair was casually worn and almost beautiful. But his hair was only the first thing about him anyone noticed.

It was the old man's eyes that stopped people in their tracks.

Sparkling as the laughter of a child and imbued with a color I can describe only as tranquil blue, his eyes verged on luminescence. Set against the brown skin of his face and framed by that snowy hair, his eyes would hold a person as long as he cared to talk. And he could really talk . . .

None of us had ever had the opportunity to listen—truly listen—to anyone like him before. It wasn't that he talked a lot. He didn't. It's just that when he *did* talk, the words that tumbled from his mouth were so precise and significant that folks drank in every one.

You may think I am exaggerating, but there are more than a few of us in Orange Beach who credit this old man with changing our lives. In fact, I might be at the top of that long list. But then, my relationship with Jones has spanned more years than anyone else's.

He found me at a particularly tough time in my life when I was twenty-three years old. For several months he was a friend when I didn't have one and told me the truth at a time when I didn't want to hear it. Then he disappeared for close to thirty years.

The next time I saw him was a few years ago when he arrived, as he had the first time, seemingly out of the blue. One awfully curious thing I became aware of during that time was that the old man had apparently been in and out of our town for years. Maybe for decades.

Remember how I said we didn't know how old he was? Well, I talked to some people who were pretty old themselves, and they said the old man had been around when *they* were kids. And they swore up and down that he had been an old man then. Of course, that doesn't make sense to me even now. When I first heard it—and I heard it a lot—I ignored all the talk. Still, I had

to admit that he didn't look much different from the first time I had seen him.

His age wasn't the only strange thing about the old man. His skin color was another. He was deeply tanned. Or dark brown. No one could agree on whether his pigmentation had been determined by genetics or a lifelong aversion to sunscreen. As for me, I simply didn't care.

It was curious, however, that African Americans seemed to take it for granted that the old man was black, and Caucasians assumed he was white. I saw it happen so often that I thought it was funny. I even asked him about it once. His answer didn't have much to do with the question, though, and I was not surprised.

I loved the old man, and I was not the only one. And I already told you how much of a difference he made for many of us. But I would be remiss if I did not submit this for consideration as well: there were people in our town who thought the old man was crazy.

It was all very strange . . . how he was mocked and ridiculed by some and the way he just grinned and took it. Some folks—right to his face—even called him names.

Me? I just called him Jones. Not Mr. Jones. Just Jones.



## Two

*Gulf Shores, Alabama*

*November, thirty-two years ago*

It was a cold night on the Gulf Coast, and I was wearing everything I owned, including an insulated denim jacket I had found in someone's trash. It was almost midnight, and I was coming from a marathon session of cleaning fish for Jeannie's Seafood at the intersection of Highway 59 and the beach road. I was headed back to the Gulf State Park Pier, exhausted and cold, eager to climb under its shelter and sleep.

As was my habit, I got off the main road and walked behind the homes and businesses on the beach. I did this in order to avoid attention from anyone who might wonder what a kid was doing walking the streets of a small beach town alone at night. I was trudging through the concrete pilings under the Pink Pony Pub when Jones joined me.

It was not a surprise, really. I was becoming accustomed to the uncommon way he would commonly appear. This night he simply matched my stride and walked with me. As usual, the old man was in jeans and a T-shirt. "How do you keep from freezing?" I asked.

“I think warm thoughts,” Jones replied, before noting, “Woowee! You smell like fish.”

Continuing to trudge through the sand with my head down and my hands in my pockets, I said, “Yeah, well, spend a day up to your elbows in twenty-six hundred pounds of ’em, and we’ll see what *you* smell like.”

Jones was quiet for a while. I suspected he had sensed my mood and was being careful. My current station in life had taken an emotional toll that was not beyond repair. The circumstances were evident, however, even to those who knew me in passing. Jones was aware that I was a threat to fly into a rage or burst into tears or rip someone to pieces with my words. One or more of these crazy manifestations of how I felt at the moment happened far too frequently, and sometimes they happened in public. I didn’t want to behave or conduct myself in that manner, but I believed it was nothing I could control. *What can I do?* I often thought. *This is me. This is how I feel. This is just the way I am . . .*

I cut my eyes toward the old man and kept walking. He had a habit of turning up most often, it seemed, when I was tired or depressed or angry. I’d look up from washing someone’s boat or pause to stretch while cleaning fish, and there he’d be, over to the side, twenty or thirty feet away, just watching me. He’d smile when I caught him like that, and I didn’t mind. After all, he was the only person remotely interested in a young man who was homeless and living on the beach.

The old man could make me laugh, and he did so quite often; but mostly, he made me think. Not necessarily *about* a certain thing . . . He made me think in *ways* I had never considered. Jones had a knack for turning a situation or a deep-seated belief upside down or sideways in such a manner that it became perfectly clear and made total sense.

I didn’t look at him again, but I could hear the fine, sugary

sand squeaking under his steps. He was quiet, simply offering his company to a lonely young man, and I couldn't help feeling guilty for how I sometimes acted toward him. I often grew frustrated with the old man, sometimes to the point of anger, and then would regret the sharp words I used as I took that frustration out on my friend. In saner moments I wondered if the overwhelming frustration I felt might actually be with myself. I certainly struggled to think the way he did.

"You can't just come up with some answer to everything," I'd said to him only a few nights before. In an ugly tone of voice, I had sneered, "You act like an answer is waiting around the corner, and when you find it—*boom!*—the problem's solved, like somebody waved a magic wand!" I remember stepping close to him for my big finish. With contempt dripping from my words, I had said, "Things are not that simple."

Jones had shrugged and, with the barest hint of a smile, replied, "Seems to me that when the answer appears, the problem *is* solved. You might be scared or frustrated or discouraged or all three, but when you find an answer, life is never the same again. So actually, son . . . things aren't that complicated."

I had wanted to scream.

Approaching the Holiday Inn, we could see that high tide was sending its waves to break upon the foundation of the resort's pool area. Only a seawall protected the hotel's elaborate concrete beach from the waves of the real thing; therefore, it was the only place on our walk where we couldn't stay on the sand. I experienced this obstacle regularly and knew that to avoid wading through the surf, it was necessary to cross the pool deck. Together in the dark, all alone, Jones and I climbed the steps that would allow us to negotiate the array of lounge chairs,

circle the pool, and exit the property by way of the stairs on the other side.

Despite the security guard who roamed the hotel grounds at night, I wasn't too scared. The lady who worked the night desk inside the lobby was a middle-aged, African American woman named Beverly. She was also a friend of mine. I called her Mrs. Beverly and occasionally gave her fresh fish as my part of an unspoken agreement that prompted her to look the other way when I used one or another of the hotel's amenities. Still, I was cautious. I didn't want anyone in trouble with the hotel manager. Especially me.

I crouched low, making my way across the deck. Arriving at midpoint, right beside the deep end of the pool, I turned to tell Jones to do the same. I flushed with annoyance, seeing he was *not* bent over and *not* hurrying. The old man was moving casually, absolutely upright, hands in his pockets, with those leather sandals scuffling along the sandy concrete. Having trained myself to avoid attention and the subsequent problems that came with it, I was striving for silence, and the old man's sandals resonated like a metal rake dragging through gravel.

Irritated, I hissed at him to hurry up, get down, and be quiet. But before I could continue my short trek, Jones inexplicably smiled sweetly and reached toward me in a gesture that indicated he wanted to place his hand on my shoulder but instead . . . firmly pushed me into what was a very cold, unheated pool.

I was under the water—all the way under the water—before I had any comprehension of what had just occurred. Years later I would carry a weird mental picture of the old man at that particular instant. I would see him through the surface of the pool, leaning over me with his white hair blowing in the cold wind. As I surfaced with a gasp, Jones was smiling. Not laughing (I might have killed him) but smiling as if he were curious or expectant

or fascinated with the object in front of him—which was, of course, me.

I kicked to the side of the pool and grabbed hold of the edge at his feet. All the fire or meanness or whatever it was I carried around was suddenly gone. I wiped my eyes with my hands, looked up at him, and asked, “What was that for?” as he reached down to help me out.

Soon I was wrapped in ten or twelve towels from the Holiday Inn laundry room and drinking coffee from the pot in the lobby. We were sitting on the floor, huddled in the not-quite-inside, not-quite-outside doorway that led to the hotel tennis courts. It was not comfortable, but it was out of the wind, and I was relatively sure we would not be run off.

After giving him the silent treatment for a time—conduct that I must admit had no effect at all—I peered at him sideways and said, “Jones. Man, I don’t get you. What in the heck was *that* for?”

He looked up at the ceiling, took a deep, contented breath, and crossed his arms comfortably. “Well,” he began, glancing at me briefly, then back to the ceiling. “Son, you are at this very moment in the biggest war you will ever wage in your life. It is confusing, but you’re fighting for what you’ll one day become. There are forces clashing for space in your head that you don’t recognize, can’t see, and won’t understand until you’re able to look back on the whole thing years from now.

“You know, a lot of folks will tell you that little things don’t matter.” He flashed me a quick look and added, “You’d better turn that on its ear, son. Little things *do* matter. Sometimes, little things matter the most. Everybody pays a lot of attention to big things, but nobody seems to understand that big things are almost always made up of little things. When you ignore little things, they often turn into big things that have become a lot harder to handle.

“Don’t sweat the small stuff,” Jones said with disdain. “That’s a lie that’ll ruin your life.” He looked hard at me again and locked my gaze with his own. “Your choices, your words, and every move you make are permanent. Life is lived in indelible ink, boy. Wake up. You’re making little bitty brushstrokes every minute you walk around on this earth. And with those tiny brushstrokes, you are creating the painting that your life will ultimately become—a masterpiece or a disaster.”

Jones shifted in the small space to gain a little comfort and faced me directly when he spoke again. “Okay, back to your question . . .” The old man tilted his head to the side a tiny bit.

“It occurred to me that I wasn’t always going to be around to help you with your thinking. So I decided, then and there, that you needed to understand a very important fact about your earthly existence. It is this: Every single day for the rest of your life, somebody is going to push you in the pool. And you’d better decide *now* how you’re going to act when it happens.”

Jones squinted and leaned toward me. “Are you gonna come out of the water whining? Maybe crying or complaining? Will you come up mad and defiant, threatening everybody? Will you throw fists or worse?”

“Or will you come out of the water with a smile on your face? Looking to see what you can learn . . . who you might help? Will you *act* happy though you feel uncertain?”

He stared at me for a beat or two before lowering his chin and speaking in an earnest tone. “It’s time to decide, son,” he said. “Almost every result that your life produces from this moment forward—good or bad—will depend upon how you choose. Every day, in one form or another, whether you like it or not, you *will* be pushed in the pool. You might as well decide right now how you’ll act when it happens.”

With that said, Jones got to his feet and left.

I was worn out, tired beyond measure, and I knew I had to leave soon. Before facing the cold night again, however, I dozed, resting somewhat, allowing my mind to drift over and around Jones. I thought again about why he never wore a coat. I thought about where he would sleep that night and about how generally strange he seemed to be. I thought about my life. I thought about Jones's baffling words. And I wondered what in the world I was supposed to make of both.



## Three

*Present day*

The village of Fairhope, Alabama, was founded in November 1894, and for every moment since that time, the salty air has mingled with discarded oyster shells and filtered through the boughs of oak and pine with the occasional trace of fried seafood to create a fragrance unmatched by any lesser town. Tourists come here from all over the world for its shopping, great restaurants, incredible views, and, of course, to stay at the Grand Hotel, recognized as one of the finest golf and sailing destinations in the country.

It was early afternoon on a Monday, and I had driven the forty-five minutes from my home in Orange Beach to Fairhope and was parked in front of the Page & Palette bookstore on Section Street. Shaking my head to clear it, I looked at my watch. How long had I been sitting here? My latest manuscript was overdue, and what I had written, well . . . let's just say that I was not satisfied. In addition to the uncertainty I was inflicting on my publisher, I was at odds with myself and a bit down in the dumps on top of it all.

The root of the problem, I knew, was the type of book everyone expected me to write. For the thousandth time I whined to myself, *If they just wanted a story, I could write a great story. If they wanted just the principles, I could write a straightforward nonfiction book.* Unfortunately the realities of today's modern marketing machine and my own desire to please everyone had combined to yield a fairly strong brand that declared, "Andy Andrews writes stories with principles." Bottom line: I felt trapped. Why? Simply for the reason that *this* time, I had no story.

Oh, I was excited about the principles I had discovered and wanted to teach. In fact, the principles were so powerful that I had already begun to reveal them to the leaders of certain teams and corporations with whom I had long-term contracts. Those clients were already seeing amazing results with the implementation of the new information, but regarding the upcoming book—my typical method for getting the principles into everyone's hands—I didn't have a story. Or, at least, I didn't have *the* story.

In previous books I had always used exciting plotlines as a device to keep the reader's interest as the principle, deftly inserted, made itself known during the action. In *The Heart Mender* I used the true tales of Nazi submarines prowling America's Gulf of Mexico during World War II. An archaeologist and a newspaper reporter chased the origin of a mysteriously powerful object in *The Lost Choice*. I was shaken by the realization that every book I had ever written had a unique and engaging story—something this latest attempt was lacking. I knew it, and with every keystroke of my Mac, I felt a dangerous hole growing larger beneath me. It was a pit being dug by a shovel of my own creation and fueled by disappointment in myself. Worse, the deeper I dug, the more evidence I found that there was something else in the hole. It was, I recognized, the rising tide of panic.

I looked at my watch again and knew I had to make myself

leave the relative safety of my car. I had promised to drop by Page & Palette and sign their stock of my books. In order to do that, I had to go inside. I love Karin and Keifer, the owners, but I knew that immediately after hugs and hellos would come questions about my next book. “When is it being released?” they would ask. “What is it about? What is the title?” How could I possibly answer their questions? *Oh, I don’t know*, I imagined saying, *but my publisher is thrilled with what I have written so far! In fact, just yesterday he called to inform me that I had set a new record for one of their authors. Yes, a new record! Well, no . . . apparently they’ve never before had anyone under contract miss three separate deadlines on one book. Ah . . . no, sorry I don’t have a title for the book. Nope, I haven’t figured out the ending either. Actually, I don’t know what the book is about. It’s all part of a new writing technique: I am keeping everything a big secret. Yes, even from myself. . .*

Without question, I was battling a bit of depression or anxiety or fear . . . or whatever it is that makes me want to sit in my car and never get out. But I *knew* better than to surrender my will. Jones had taught me long before never to give in to a feeling of despair, fear, or defeat. “*Lead* your negative emotions, son,” he’d say. “Never allow those emotions to lead you. Always lead them by quickly moving in the opposite direction those emotions insist you should go!” Therefore, knowing full well that I did not even remotely *feel* like it, I smiled—just as the old man had trained me to do. I even chuckled a bit as I opened the car door and stepped out.

Locking the vehicle, I heard a familiar voice. “*Loovve* to hear that laughter,” the voice boomed. “No sir, we don’t allow droopy feelings to put a leash on us!”

I looked up—and there he was. I almost have to repeat it, even in print. There he was, looking like I had just seen him yesterday. What had it been . . . more than five years since he had

disappeared? But in a deeper sense it also seemed to be the most natural thing in the world to see that old man. Still, my jaw must have dropped a foot. “Jones?” I managed to croak.

He grinned broadly, held out a small white sack, and as if he saw me every day at this time, said, “Hello, young man. Have a lemon bar?”

I was too stunned by his sudden appearance to answer coherently, so I simply laughed as I alternately shook his hand and tried to hug him. Then I babbled like a four-year-old with his first glazed doughnut while the old man who had meant so much to me smiled and waited patiently for me to calm down.

Finally, at a loss for words, I realized that I was still holding fast to Jones’s right arm, the one that held the little white bag. “You don’t have to mug me for it,” he said laughingly, gently prying my fingers from his bicep. “I have an extra one.”

“One what?” I managed, my mind moving in several directions at once.

“An extra lemon bar,” he answered calmly. “I got two. There’s one for each of us.” He paused for a moment before waving his hand in my face. “Hey, you in there?”

“Yes,” I answered. “I mean, yes sir. I am in here.” Then I blurted, “Jones, don’t leave.”

“Settle down, and let’s find a place to sit. How ’bout a cup of coffee to go with these treats?” He glanced toward Page & Palette. Quickly, though, he looked away and muttered, “No . . . you don’t need any coffee. You’re jittery enough.”

Steering me down the sidewalk to an empty bench, he gestured for me to sit, and I did. Joining me, the old man opened the sack and produced two lemon bars. The delicate cakes were from Latte Da, the bookstore’s coffee shop, as anyone who has ever set foot in the town of Fairhope would know. The quaint emporium is almost as famous for its coffee and pastries as it is

for its books, and folks come from far corners of the world to experience the unique atmosphere of this beautiful independent bookstore.

Taking a lemon bar in my right hand, I positioned my left under it to catch any of the powdered sugar that might otherwise fall and be wasted. As I put it to my mouth, a peculiar thought wiggled its way into my head. So before taking a bite, I turned instead to the old man, who, I noted, already had an innocent look on his face before I said a word.

Plunging ahead anyway, I smiled and offered my question. “Jones . . . did you buy two lemon bars for yourself? I think you were expecting someone. In fact, I think that—”

“Let’s be careful,” Jones said, interrupting me and patting me on the knee, “that we don’t read too much into a trivial occurrence.”

The smile remained, but my eyes narrowed. “Jones, there has never been anything trivial about you, and you know it.” He shrugged as if he did not know *what* I was talking about, but I knew that he did. And *he* knew that I knew. I had spent too much time with the old man to believe anything that ever happened around him was coincidence.

“Can I ask why you’re here? Here in Fairhope, I mean. And why did you leave Orange Beach? Jones, it’s been five years since anyone has heard from you. Where have you been? Also, where are you staying? Can I help you with anything? Will you at least come home with me to spend a couple of nights? Polly and the boys would love to see you. What are you doing in Fairhope anyway?”

“You’re jabbering again,” Jones said patiently as he took the last bite of his lemon bar. Wiping the sugar from his hand onto his jeans, he added, “And you asked the Fairhope question twice. You know, you sure do talk a lot. I’m thinking you’d get more books written if you could curb that tendency. Hard to write and talk at the same time. At least that’s what I suspect.”

At that mild rebuke I fell silent and looked away from him. “Oh, come on,” Jones said as he poked at me with his elbow. “I seen little kids who could pout better’n that.” He gave me half a moment to put a grin back on my face, then asked, “You gonna talk or what?”

I turned toward him and said simply, “I have really missed you.” With that pronouncement, he put his arm around my shoulder again, and for some reason I almost burst into tears.

I don’t mind admitting that, at that moment, I was uncharacteristically an emotional wreck. For some reason I had always felt like a child around Jones. Not childish, but somehow *child-like*. That day, I asked him, “Did you miss me too?” just like a kid would have.

Of course, he responded in his typical manner. “Nope,” Jones said. “To miss you, I’d a had to been gone. And I ain’t been gone. I’ve been around.”

I knew better than to question that answer. Instead, I made some comment about his reply being typical of him, and it was exactly that. Jones had always been a walking contradiction. He was the only person I had ever met who could be aggravating, encouraging, evasive, straightforward, demanding, and comforting all at the same time. I wanted to ask him *why* he was in Fairhope, but I knew his answer would have been something like, “Why not?” so I didn’t even bother.

I did, however, question him about how long he had been in town. Again, his reply left me shaking my head. “Not really certain how long I been here,” Jones stated as a matter of fact. “That doesn’t really matter to me, so I choose not to think about it. But I’ve been here more’n a couple of days, that’s for sure.”

After a brief pause he wrinkled up his face as if he were giving the thought every ounce of his concentration and said, “Time is an odd thing. Christmas Eve for most adults lasts

about as long as most other nights, but for an eight-year-old, on that particular night of the year, time slows to a crawl.” Jones laughed and slapped his hands together. “And I don’t know if you ever thought about it,” he said, “but what you and I calculate in years, in reality, might be just a quick dusting of heavenly hands.

“Think about it like this,” he said, shifting on the bench to face me. “What are you planning for next year . . . on today’s date?”

I laughed. “I have no clue. Are you kidding?”

“No,” he said. “I’m not kidding. A year from now seems like a long way off, though, doesn’t it?”

“A year from now?” I replied. “Yes. A year from now is forever. I mean, I’m not even thinking about next *month*.”

Jones nodded. “How old are your boys now? Eleven and fourteen, aren’t they?” I confirmed their ages, and he continued.

“A year or a month or even a week into the future can seem like a long time away. But a decade in the past?” He snapped his fingers. “Why, don’t it seem like those boys were born just a minute ago?”

The old man seemed to have run out of steam. With a satisfied sigh Jones eased back down on the bench beside me and placed one leg over the other. “Yes sir,” he said softly. “Time is an odd thing. Currency is what it is. Once spent . . . it’s gone forever.” And with that he simply crossed his arms and closed his eyes.

I wasn’t sure if he was resting or waiting for me to talk. He was quiet and appeared relaxed, and I didn’t know what to say, so I didn’t say anything at all.

As I studied the profile of his familiar face, I couldn’t help but reflect upon where I might have ended up had it not been for that old man and the “time” he had spent with me. After all, I was living under a pier when he found me. But now . . . ? I considered what was, in fact, the relatively small amount of time

I had been in his presence and tried to pinpoint what he had done—I mean, *exactly* what he had done—that had made such a dramatic difference in my life.

It was my *thinking*, I decided. Jones had challenged the very foundations of my thought processes. He questioned my perceptions, my assumptions, and even—or maybe I should say *especially*—my conclusions. Yes, I nodded to myself. That is exactly how he had managed to change my life so many years ago.

Within thirty minutes of our meeting for the first time, Jones had asked, “Do you read?” His question seemed simple enough, but as it turned out, there was a lifetime of layers to the true answer—an answer that continues to unfold even now, after all these years. When he had asked, “Do you read?” I remember taking a breath to answer affirmatively as he had added, “I’m not asking if you *can* read; I’m asking if you *do*.”

And that was only the first time Jones challenged what I thought I knew or even what I thought I had heard. The shift he created in my thinking at that moment changed my answer to his question from a yes to a no.

“Proper perspective about every facet of your existence,” he would tell me again and again, “is only everything.”

And so, as Jones became a fixture in my broken life—remember, I was homeless at the time—his remarkable way of dissecting situations began to have an astounding effect on me. And the books didn’t hurt either.

“Jones? Are you asleep?” I said softly. He made no response, so I sat back and waited. For the moment, I was content to simply sit there, feeling an odd sense of importance, as if I were protecting him somehow.

After all, I wasn’t the same scared kid he had found living on the beach years ago. Things had changed for me during the three-plus decades that had followed. Professionally—except for

the hiccup with my latest manuscript—I was doing fairly well, and my personal life was on a great track. I had married a beautiful woman with whom I was still madly in love, and together we were in the process of raising our two boys.

I smiled, watching as the old man's breathing gently lifted his brown arms, which remained folded across his midsection. "Come here, son," was what he had said to me that night—the first time I had ever seen him—so long ago. Then he had reached out his hand and added, "Move into the light." And that is exactly what I have been trying to do ever since.

Not a day has gone by in more than thirty years that I haven't thought of Jones. More specifically, I don't believe a day has passed since that time when I haven't rolled those particular four words around in my head: *move into the light*.

At first, as you might expect, I assumed it had been the pier light to which he was referring. When I lived under the pier and night fell, my only light came from the big sodium-vapor bulb that extended from the top of a pole high above the structure. A small slice of that light worked its way down to me through a crack between the huge slabs of concrete. Those massive blocks of cement were set end to end and formed the pier's walkway. They also served as the ceiling to my secret—and very sandy—home.

In the weeks after my first encounter with the old man, it began to dawn on me that the light to which he had been referring was a much brighter source of illumination than I had originally assumed. And the way things turned out, that light—and its source—changed everything.

"It's six minutes after two o'clock," Jones said. He had not moved a muscle. His arms were still crossed. His right leg draped across his left, and his eyes were still closed. I glanced at my phone. He was correct. It was exactly 2:06. Jones had never worn a watch, but I smiled to myself as I looked at his wrists to check

anyway. Surveying the area with a few turns of my head, I also determined there were no clocks within sight at which he could have taken a quick peek.

I had seen the old man do this many times, and it always amazed me. He never missed. I mean, he *never, ever* missed by even a minute. Taking a deep breath, I opened my mouth to ask for at least the millionth time just how he managed that trick, but before I could utter a word, Jones added, “You’re supposed to pick up the boys from school. From here to there is at least fifty minutes with no traffic. You’d better get going and hightail it.”

Surprised as always at his awareness, I nodded. “Okay,” I replied.

With the barest hint of a smile, Jones said, “Good.” Then he shut the one eye he had opened for our brief conversation and settled in with small movements as if he were readying himself for a long nap. Once again, he said, “Good,” and with a deep breath in and a long one out, Jones was asleep.

He really was asleep. Or at least I thought so. The old man could read people and situations like no one I had ever seen or even heard of. Sometimes, during his long absences from my life, I imagined Jones watching me through a pane of glass. I would wonder what he would think about this situation or that person.

Then after five years, or thirty years, of being wherever else he went, Jones would show up and act as though we had seen each other an hour ago. It was weird. And wonderful. There was so much I wanted to know about him, but he was never interested in anything more than my life and what I was learning about myself.

I looked at the time again and knew I had to leave. I seriously considered shaking him and waking him up. I wanted to

know where he would be and how I might find him. Was he staying in town? With someone? Inside? Outside? As much as I loved Jones, this part of our relationship was infuriating. As to where I might see him again . . . or *when* I might see him again . . . I had no clue.

But then I got one.

Out of time but still needing to sign books, I reluctantly turned away and quickly moved toward Page & Palette's front door. Casually aware of the vivid colors of the posters and book covers splashed across the store window, I froze as my hand touched the doorknob. There, in the far bottom left corner of the glass storefront, was a small, hand-lettered sign. In reality a 3x5 index card, the sign was ridiculously overwhelmed by the colors and commercial designs of the larger, more expensive advertisements competing for attention.

I moved to the unassuming, handwritten notice and went to one knee to get a closer look. At the top of the card, the words PARENTING CLASS had been neatly printed in all caps in blue ink with a ballpoint pen. THURSDAY AT 7 PM AND SAME TIME NEXT THURSDAY FOR SURE was centered on the next line. Under that, in parentheses, was written (AFTER THAT, WE'LL SEE HOW IT GOES). The location, GRAND HOTEL, was listed on the last line—and there, at the bottom, in careful script, was the signature of the teacher: *Jones*.

My mouth opened slightly as my eyebrows reached for the top of my head. I was past the point of believing that anything Jones said or did could surprise me anymore, but this . . . well, this was a surprise. I didn't know what to think. Looking back to my old friend, I saw that he hadn't moved. He remained upright on the park bench, arms crossed, chin on his chest. Yes, Jones was still asleep, but my mind raced with the possibilities of how this newest little wrinkle might play out.

Before heading inside the bookstore, I glanced at him one more time. Then with a huge grin on my face, I pushed the door open, shaking my head in amazement, and laughed out loud.

At least I knew where to find him. And when.