CHARLES MARTIN

WHEN CRICKETS CRY

A Novel of the Heart

When Crickets Cry

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FOR STEVE AND ELAINE

A Note from the Author

Twenty years ago, I was a green writer wandering the streets of a small town in north Georgia when I bumped into a little girl on a street corner selling lemonade. The result of that day was a novel that turns twenty this year. This is the story behind that story.

In 2003 and 2004, I published two novels, *The Dead Don't Dance* and *Wrapped in Rain*. Comparatively, I was young, wet behind the ears, had no real idea what I was doing, and was happily under contract with Thomas Nelson for another book. For which I was grateful. (There are still days when I have no idea what I'm doing.) With a deadline looming, I had begun digging around in both my mind and my heart trying to find a story. During this process, several unexpected things collided. Sort of a perfect storm, in a good way.

Sometime in 2003, people in the know politically had begun a conversation in which they theorized that President George Bush would jettison Vice President Dick Cheney from the Republican ticket and select the leader of the Senate, Bill Frist, to be his running mate. Bill Frist was, and I suppose still is, an extremely talented cardiothoracic transplant surgeon. Possibly one of the best in the world. Having left medicine for politics, he had been elected to the United States Senate by the good people of Tennessee and elected by his colleagues to lead the Senate, where he was well-liked on both sides of the aisle.

I have no idea if any of this is true. Politics is not my thing. But what I do know is that when my publisher called and offered me the job of penning a biography on the life of Bill Frist, I had never entertained

the thought of writing a biography. At least not for very long. Both my master's thesis and my doctoral dissertation had dealt with the lives of two men. William Wilberforce and Walker Percy. So I had dabbled in biographical detail, and I knew from writing those texts that a biography was not my cup of tea nor my skill set. My talents did not lend themselves well to that genre. Having said that, the advance for my first two novels was $15,000—for both—so my wife and I weren't crushing it financially. In February 2003, our third son, Rives, was born, which meant we had diapers to buy, a mortgage to pay, and, while I was writing and had published two novels, I was still pulling a pressure washer behind my truck and rebuilding my neighbor's dock—all four hundred and eighty-five feet of it. Writing was not paying the bills. To add insult to injury, our hot-water heater had quit. Completely. And our septic system had been flooded by a few hurricanes. So when my publisher called and offered me the chance to write the unauthorized biography of Bill Frist, and offered to pay me to do it, it didn't really matter whether my talents lent themselves well to that genre or not. I was pretty sure I could fake it.

Given a tight turnaround, I flew to Nashville, where I met with my publisher and with people who knew Dr. Frist and offered to get me access to his friends, colleagues, and himself. Great. What could go wrong? I signed the contract, got to work, and my wife, Christy, called the plumber to replace the hot-water heater before her folks found out. For the next several months, I flew around the country meeting with some of the finest doctors in the world. Most of whom focused in and around the heart. These were some of the most brilliant minds I had ever encountered, and our conversations were amazing. At least to me. In every one, I was met with a singular realization: These doctors function in a different stratosphere. They may look normal, but they're not. Far from it. I learned that in an operating room, there is a definite hierarchy. An authority structure. And while it's not fair to say doctors are God, in the environment of the operating room, standing over the table, they're pretty close. No one argues with them. When they say, "Scalpel," the nurse doesn't turn up his or her nose and respond, "You

sure? Wouldn't you rather have a spoon?" What the doctor says goes. Period. There's no argument. No rebuttal. Theirs is the final word. Why? Because someone's life depends on it, and that person is currently asleep on the table, resting in their hands. Those months of research were an amazing education. Most of the doctors I met had graduated from Harvard or Stanford, so I donned my best button-down and sport coat and tried to look like I knew what I was doing, which I did not. I imagine they knew this too. Despite my inexperience, they humored me and gave me insight into their friendship with and admiration for Dr. Frist. During our conversations, half of my brain was engaged in trying to understand the influencing factors on Dr. Frist—his upbringing, medical training, etc. What made him tick? How'd he get from there to here? While the other half of my brain was trying to figure out my third novel. I was still under contract and the clock was ticking.

Pause.

Somewhere in this time, I had been reading Matthew 12. Jesus is wrangling with the religious elite. Something He did a lot. Not because He enjoyed the wrangling but because they were not listening. Which was not a new problem. Neither then nor now. In Matthew 12, Jesus is explaining how a tree is known by its fruit. In verse 33, He says this: "Either make the tree good and its fruit good, or else make the tree bad and its fruit bad; for a tree is known by its fruit. Brood of vipers! How can you, being evil, speak good things?" And then He says this, and this is what caught my eye: "For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. A good man out of the good treasure of his heart brings forth good things, and an evil man out of the evil treasure brings forth evil things. I say to you that for every idle word men may speak, they will give account of it in the day of judgment. For by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned."

Jesus' words got me thinking about a couple of things. If something is stewing or bubbling down in my heart, then according to Jesus, it is going to come out my mouth. Kind of makes me want to filter what I let in there. And then He talks about our words, both careless and not, and how by them we will be either justified or condemned. This

led me to the thought that what's in the heart is the ultimate source of the mouth—not the mind. Now, it's true, what's in the heart has got to travel up the neck and be filtered by the mind before it is spit out the mouth, but the bedrock of us is the heart. Not brain matter. People might speak what they think, but it's their heart that will reveal what they believe.

In my meetings with these doctors, I would ask the expected questions about their friend, Dr. Frist, but then I'd slip in one about the heart and how it works. I became so curious about this thing in my chest pumping blood that I began asking multiple questions that had nothing to do with Dr. Frist. Total rabbit trail. And because most of them had spent over twenty years in school becoming one of the world's leading experts in that field, they were all too happy to answer.

One of the things I've done since I was about fourteen is work out. Regularly. It's just a thing with me. I enjoy it. It's a part of my life. I'm not what I once was, but I'm still working at it and for the most part feel healthy. During this stage of my work-out life, I was wearing a heartrate monitor. It allowed me to see, in real time, the number of times my heart would beat in a minute. At rest? Maybe 55bpm (beats per minute). Working out? Maybe 180bpm. Although that was rare. This real-time feedback got me thinking about the actual tissue we call our heart. The muscle that weighs maybe two pounds and is about the size of your fist. Somewhere in the womb, I had my first heartbeat. And sometime down the road, at a point of the Lord's choosing, my heart will beat a last time. There was a first beat and there will be a last. And somewhere between those two there have been and will be many more. Eighty thousand times a day. Thirty-one million a year. Maybe 2.5 billion in a lifetime if I make it to eighty. How many times to be exact? No idea. A bunch. But in my funny way of thinking, I spent a lot of time wondering about this quiet piece of flesh that sits hidden in my chest. It does its job without fanfare or reward and really draws no attention to itself until it quits. By the hand of God, it gives me life and yet I take it for granted. I wake up every day giving it little thought, expecting it to just keep on keeping on.

When I go to sleep, it's beating. When I wake up, still beating. If I eat poorly, it's still beating. Work out too hard? Still beating. Poor habits will certainly catch up with all of us, and I'm not recommending we abuse our bodies, but I just became amazed that no matter how much punishment we dole out or how much we take it for granted or how much we abuse it, the thing still pumps. That is, until it doesn't, but I haven't reached that point yet as evidenced by the fact that I'm sitting here typing. My point being, the heart is a priceless gift.

To finish the biography on Dr. Frist, I traveled to Lake Burton, Georgia, where Christy and I have spent some twenty-odd summers. It's one of our favorite places, and some of our dear friends have a cottage there where I've spent time writing several books. My window to research had ended, and I was in the writing phase of the biography. Up against a very hard deadline. But I'd bumped into a slight problem. The promise to meet Dr. Frist had not materialized. That meant I was writing things about him that I'd not checked with him. Just a little disconcerting. One day while taking a break from writing the biography, Christy and I drove to Clayton, one of our favorite towns, and walked around. Window shopping. Reeves Hardware is always a perennial favorite. They always seem to have something we need. On that visit, I think we bought a corn creamer, and then while Christy wandered into another store, I found myself standing on Main Street. On the corner. Reeves Hardware before me. Just outside the door stood a large wooden box full of crickets that the hardware store was selling to folks who wanted to fish in Lake Burton. And for reasons I cannot explain, other than to say I've always been a good daydreamer, I saw, in my mind's eye, a little girl standing just across the street. A few feet from that box. She wore a yellow dress and a hat with a ribbon that trailed down to her waist, and she was standing on her tippy toes hollering, "Lemonade!" As I looked closer, I noticed she had a scar on her chest partially concealed by her collar, and she wore a silver necklace that held a small pill fob. And again, for reasons I don't pretend to understand, I had the notion that inside the pill fob was nitroglycerin. How'd I know that nitroglycerin was given to people with weak hearts? Well, remember those conversa-

tions I was telling you about? Next to her sat a table, and on the table was a large pickle jar full of lemonade. The sign taped to the glass read, "Fifty cents. Fresh squeezed." Next to that sat a tip jar. Then I watched as a parade of people bought a glass of lemonade, but when they did, they didn't just drop two quarters in the jar. They put tens and twenties and the occasional fifty-dollar bill into the jar. I remember thinking, "That must be some lemonade."

Obviously, there was more going on here than just the sale of lemonade. And while she and her lemonade stand surprised me, the next image surprised me more. A man, standing in the shadows, watching this girl. I had never seen him before and had no idea who he was, but I had some inclination that their two stories were connected. Or about to collide. I knew she needed someone special to help her with her heart. And that she didn't have long. Like my deadline, the clock was ticking. But as I looked closer at him, I could see his heart was broken too. Maybe more than hers, but both needed new hearts. Hers physical, his emotional. As I studied him more, I knew he was hiding. Afraid. And that somewhere in those gifted hands, he had exactly what she needed. I also knew that offering it to her would be the most painful thing he'd ever done. Having sold all her lemonade, she packed up her table and began walking across the street at the stoplight, where two things happened: She failed to see the bread truck, and the bread truck driver failed to see her.

And thus begins our story.

If I'm honest, I never expected my third novel to have the life it has had. Twenty years is a long time for a novel to stay in circulation. Sure, many do, but on the whole, it's uncommon in today's market. When *Crickets* first released, I received a lot of emails from people who had read about 85 percent of the book and reached a place in the text that made them very angry. Several threw the book in the trash can. And wrote me to tell me they had. Many cussed me out. As best as I could, I tried to respond and ask them if they would consider reading past that. Most responded quickly with four-letter epithets telling me how they

did not wish to do so and what I could do with my book and where I could put it. I responded that they might dig it out of the trash and give it a few more pages and left it at that. I have no control over a reader. Least of all an angry one. Sometimes, an hour or so later, I would receive a very apologetic, often groveling, email. They were effusive. For which I was and have been forever grateful. For the record, if this was you, or might be you in the future, you're supposed to be mad and throw the book.

But, once you do, please keep reading.

I have been asked a thousand times, maybe more, "What did Reese whisper to Annie's heart?" I have never answered that question. At least not verbally. If you look hard enough, it's in the book. I tell you. Word for word. But you've got to look closely. I've often been asked, now that I'm twenty-something years into my career, if I would ever consider editing my earlier novels. While it's an honest question, it's always struck me as strange. Rather odd if I'm honest. Because every novel, no matter where I have been in the span of my career, was and is the best that I could do at that moment. I've often said that I've never written in second gear. Meaning I don't have some reserve or gear beyond what I write in. I write all out, all the time. To quote my dad, I have then and continue now to "leave it all on the field." Every time I've ever written a novel, I've poured all of me into those words and those pages. *Crickets* is no different. And even now when I return and read those words, there is nothing in me that wants to edit them. I still love them. Every one. Now, certainly, my craft has changed, hopefully improved, and how I string words together has changed, hopefully for the better, but I've never wanted to take the writer that is me today and give him some editorial power or assignment to "correct" the books of yesterday. I have no such desire.

I finished the biography, which my publisher quickly printed and sent to shelves across the nation. Shortly thereafter, George Bush voiced his intention to keep his good friend Dick Cheney, which meant my publisher's gamble didn't pay off. The book sat. Collecting dust. No-

body cared. Most were boxed up and returned. At the end of the day, it sold a few thousand copies. Which is understandable. It's a terrible book.

To this day, I've never met Bill Frist. But looking back, had we met, I'm not sure the book would be any better. At the time, I felt this handicapped me, forcing me to write through second- and third-hand stories, but let's be honest, and I'll quote my dad here again, you can dress up a pig and call it a racehorse, but at the end of the day, all you have is a fast pig.

Back home, we bought diapers, took hot showers, and I returned to my desk, where I found a story bubbling. Months later, I would finish a manuscript titled *When Crickets Cry*. When I closed the last page, I cried my head off. That story, those characters, that arc, was and is a priceless gift.

Around age seven or eight, I lied to my dad. And I got caught. Told him I'd not been making a fire when I had. He'd found the matches in my pocket as we sat in the emergency room waiting for the doc to sew up my head. It's a long story and one I've gladly forgotten, but somewhere in there, he put his hand on my shoulder and said: "Son, at the end of the day, all we have is our word." It took me a while to understand what he meant. Months later, we were watching a John Wayne western when the Duke said, "Words are what men live by." I remember thinking, *That sounds like my dad*. Only later would I read the words of Jesus, "Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks." Somewhere in here, I grabbed ahold of the idea that words matter. A lot. And one day we will give an account of them.

While writing *Crickets*, this idea of the weight and value of words settled in me, and I turned a corner in my craft. Or at least I felt a shift. A shift in the way I look at my words. The question for me became not "Can I write a novel you'll enjoy and maybe share with your friends that might hit a bestseller list or bring me some sort of fame and recognition?" but "How can I write and string words together that circumnavigate the rough calloused places of the heart and touch people

where they're still tender, where they still feel, hope, love deeply, forgive quickly, and laugh loudly?" I wanted to know if it's possible to heal the broken with words. The book you hold in your hands is my first attempt at an answer, and if Annie and Reese show us anything, the answer is a resounding yes.

Charles Martin
Jacksonville, Florida
January 2025

Prologue

I pushed against the spring hinge, cracked open the screen door, and scattered two hummingbirds fighting over my feeder. The sound of their wings faded into the dogwood branches above, and it was there that the morning met me with streaks of sunkist cracking across the skyline. Seconds before, God had painted the sky a mixture of black and deep blue, then smeared it with rolling wisps of cotton and sprayed it with specks of glitter, some larger than others. I turned my head sideways, sort of corkscrewing my eyes, and decided that heaven looked like a giant granite countertop turned upside down and framing the sky. Maybe God was down here drinking His coffee too. Only difference was, He didn't need to read the letter in my hand. He already knew what it said.

Below me the Tallulah River spread out seamlessly into Lake Burton in a sheet of translucent, unmoving green, untouched by the antique cutwaters and Jet Skis that would split her skin and roll her to shore at 7:01 a.m. In moments, God would send the sun upward and westward where it would shine hot, and where by noon the glare off the water would be painful and picturesque.

I stepped off the back porch, the letter clutched in my hand, and picked my barefoot way down the stone steps to the dock. I walked along the bulkhead, felt the coolness of the mist rising on my legs and face, and climbed the steps leading to the top of the dockhouse. I slid into the hammock and faced southward down

the lake, looking out over my left knee. I looped my finger through the small brass circle tied to the end of a short string and pulled gently, rocking myself.

If God was down here drinking His coffee, then He was on his second cup, because He'd already Windexed the sky. Only the streaks remained.

Emma once told me that some people spend their whole lives trying to outrun God, maybe get someplace He's never been. She shook her head and smiled, wondering why. Trouble is, she said, they spend a lifetime searching and running, and when they arrive, they find He's already been there.

I listened to the quiet but knew it wouldn't last. In an hour the lake would erupt with laughing kids on inner tubes, teenagers in Ski Nautiques, and retirees in pontoon boats, replacing the Canadian geese and bream that followed a trail of Wonder Bread cast by an early morning bird lover and now spreading across the lake like the yellow brick road. By late afternoon, on the hundreds of docks stretching out into the lake, charcoal grills would simmer with the smell of hot dogs, burgers, smoked oysters, and spicy sausage. And in the yards and driveways that all leaned inward toward the lake's surface like a huge salad bowl, folks of all ages would tumble down Slip'n Slides, throw horseshoes beneath the trees, sip mint juleps and margaritas along the water's edge, and dangle their toes off the second stories of their boathouses. By 9:00 p.m., most every homeowner along the lake would launch the annual hour-long umbrella of sonic noise, lighting the lake in flashes of red, blue, and green rain. Parents would gaze upward; children would giggle and coo; dogs would bark and tug against their chains, digging grooves in the back sides of the trees that held them; cats would run for cover; veterans would remember; and lovers would hold hands, slip silently into the out coves, and skinny-dip beneath the safety of the water. Sounds in the symphony of freedom.

It was Independence Day.

Unlike the rest of Clayton, Georgia, I had no fireworks, no hot

dogs, and no plans to light up the sky. My dock would lie quiet and dark, the grill cold with soot, old ashes, and spiderwebs. For me, freedom felt distant. Like a smell I once knew but could no longer place. If I could, I would have slept through the entire day like a modern-day Rip van Winkle, opened my eyes tomorrow, and crossed off the number on my calendar. But sleep, like freedom, came seldom and was never sound. Short fits mostly. Two to three hours at best.

I lay on the hammock, alone with my coffee and yellowed memories. I balanced the cup on my chest and held the wrinkled, unopened envelope. Behind me, fog rose off the water and swirled in miniature twisters that spun slowly like dancing ghosts, up through the overhanging dogwood branches and hummingbird wings, disappearing some thirty feet in the air.

Her handwriting on the envelope told me when to read the letter within. If I had obeyed, it would have been two years ago. I had not, and would not today. Maybe I could not. Final words are hard to hear when you know for certain they are indeed final. And I knew for certain. Four anniversaries had come and gone while I remained in this nowhere place. Even the crickets were quiet.

I placed my hand across the letter, flattening it upon my chest, spreading the corners of the envelope like tiny paper wings around my ribs. A bitter substitute.

Around here, folks sit in rocking chairs, sip mint juleps, and hold heated arguments about what exactly is the best time of day on the lake. At dawn, the shadows fall ahead of you, reaching out to touch the coming day. At noon, you stand on your shadows, caught somewhere between what was and what will be. At dusk, the shadows fall behind you and cover your tracks. In my experience, the folks who choose dusk usually have something to hide.

Chapter 1

She was small for her age. Probably six, maybe even seven, but looked more like four or five. A tomboy's heart in a china doll's body. Dressed in a short yellow dress, yellow socks, white Mary Janes, and a straw hat wrapped with a yellow ribbon that trailed down to her waist. She was pale and thin and bounced around like a mix between Eloise and Tigger. She was standing in the center of town, at the northwest corner of Main and Savannah, yelling at the top of her lungs: "Lemonaaaaaade! Lemonaaaaaade, fifty cents!" She eyed the sidewalk and the passersby, but with no takers, she craned her neck, stretched high onto her tiptoes, and cupped her hands to her mouth. "Lemonaaaade! Lemonaaaaade, fifty cents!"

The lemonade stand was sturdy and well worn but looked hastily made. Four four-by-four posts and half a sheet of one-inch plywood formed the table. Two six-foot two-by-fours stood upright at the back, holding up the other half of the plywood and providing posts for a banner stretched between. Somebody had sprayed the entire thing yellow, and in big block letters the banner read *LEMONADE—50 CENTS—REFILLS FREE*. The focal point was not the bench, the banner, the yellow Igloo cooler that held the lemonade, or even the girl, but the clear plastic container beneath. A five-gallon water jug sat front and center—her own private wishing well where the whole town apparently threw their loose bills and silent whispers.

I stopped and watched as an elderly woman crossed Main Street beneath a lacy shade umbrella and dropped two quarters into the Styrofoam cup sitting on the tabletop.

"Thank you, Annie," she whispered as she accepted the overflowing cup from the little girl's outstretched hands.

"You're welcome, Miss Blakely. I like your umbrella." A gentle breeze shuffled down the sidewalk, fluttered the yellow ribbons resting on the little girl's back, and then carried that clean, innocent voice off down the street.

Miss Blakely sucked between her teeth and asked, "You feeling better, child?"

The little girl looked up from beneath her hat. "Yes ma'am, sure do."

Miss Blakely turned up her cup, and the little girl turned her attention back to the sidewalk. "Lemonaaaaaade! Lemonaaaaade, fifty cents!" Her Southern drawl was tangy sweet, soft and raspy. It dripped with little girlness and drew attention like fireworks on the Fourth.

I couldn't quite tell for sure, but after Miss Blakely set down her cup and nodded to the child, she dropped what looked like a twenty-dollar bill into the clear plastic water jug at her feet.

That must be some lemonade.

And the girl was a one-person cash-making machine. There was a growing pile of bills inside that bottle, and yet no one seemed worried that it might sprout legs, least of all the little girl. Aside from the lemonade banner, there was no flyer or explanation. Evidently it wasn't needed. It's that small-town thing. Everybody just knew. Everybody, that is, but me.

EARLIER THAT MORNING, CHARLIE—MY ACROSS-THE-LAKE-yet-not-quite-out-of-earshot neighbor and former brother-in-law—and I had been sanding the mahogany top and floor grates of a 1947 Greavette when we ran out of 220-grit sandpaper and

spar varnish. We flipped a coin and I lost, so I drove to town while Charlie fished off the back of the dock and whistled at the bikini-clad girls screaming atop multicolored Jet Skis that skidded by. Charlie doesn't drive much but, ever competitive, he insisted we flip for it. I lost.

Today's trip was different because of the timing. I rarely come to town in the morning, especially when so many people are crowding the sidewalks, making their way to and from work. To be honest, I don't come to town much at all. I skirt around it and drive to neighboring towns, alternating grocery and hardware stores every couple of months. I'm a regular nowhere.

When I do come here, I usually come in the afternoon, fifteen minutes before closing, dressed like a local in faded denim and a baseball cap advertising some sort of power tool or farm equipment. I park around back, pull my hat down and collar up, and train my eyes toward the floor. I slip in, get what I need, and then slip out, having blended into the framework and disappeared beneath the floorboards. Charlie calls it stealth shopping. I call it living.

Mike Hammermill, a retired manufacturer from Macon, had hired Charlie and me to ready his 1947 Greavette for the tenth-annual Lake Burton Antique and Classic Boat show next month. It'd be our third entry in as many years, and if we ever hoped to beat the boys from Blue Ridge Boat Werks, we'd need the sandpaper. We'd been working on the Greavette for almost ten months, and we were close, but we still had to run the linkage to the Velvet Drive and apply eight coats of spar varnish across the deck and floor grates before she was ready for the water.

COTTON MOUTHED AND CURIOUS, I CROSSED THE STREET AND dropped fifty cents in the cup. The girl pressed her small finger into the spout of the cooler, turning her knuckles white and causing her hand to shake, and poured me a cup of fresh-squeezed lemonade that swam with pulp and sugar.

"Thank you," I said.

"My name's Annie," she said, dropping one foot behind the other, curtsying like a sunflower and looking up beneath my hat to find my eyes. "Annie Stephens."

I switched the cup to my other hand, clicked my heels together, and said, "For this relief, much thanks; 'tis bitter cold, and I am sick at heart."

She laughed. "You make that up?"

"No." I shook my head. "A man named Shakespeare did, in a story called *Hamlet."* While most of my friends were watching *The Waltons* or *Hawaii Five-O,* I spent a good part of my childhood reading. Still don't own a television. A lot of dead writers feed my mind with their ever-present whisperings.

I lifted my hat slightly and extended my hand. "Reese. My name's Reese."

The sun shone on my back, and my shadow stretched along the sidewalk and protected her eyes from the eleven o'clock sun that was climbing high and getting warm.

She considered for a moment. "Reese is a good name."

A man carrying two grocery bags scurried by on the sidewalk, so she turned and screamed loud enough for people three blocks away, "Lemonaaaade!"

He nodded and said, "Morning, Annie. Back in a minute."

She turned back to me. "That's Mr. Potter. Works down there. He likes his lemonade with extra sugar, but he's not like some of my customers. Some need more sugar than others because they ain't too sweet." She laughed at her own joke.

"You here every day?" I asked between small sips. One thing I learned in school, somewhere in those long nights, was that if you ask enough of the right questions, the kind of questions that nibble at the issue but don't directly confront it, people will usually offer what you're looking for. Knowing what to ask, when to ask it, and most important, how are the beginnings of a pretty good bedside conversation.

"'Cept Sundays when Cici scoops the live bait at Butch's Bait Shop. Other six days, she works in there."

She pointed toward the hardware store where a bottle-blonde woman with her back turned stood behind the cash register, fingers gliding across the keys, ringing up somebody's order. She didn't need to turn around to see us because she was eyeing a three-foot square mirror on the wall above her register that allowed her to see everything going on at Annie's stand.

"Cici?"

She smiled and pointed again. "Cici's my aunt. She and my mom were sisters, but my mom never would have stuck her hand in a mess of night crawlers or bloodworms." Annie noticed my cup was empty, poured me a second, and continued. "So, I'm here most mornings 'til lunch. Then I go upstairs, watch some TV, and take a nap. What about you? What do you do?"

I gave her the usual, which was both true and not true. While my mouth said, "I work on boats," my mind drifted and spoke to itself: *But I will wear my heart upon my sleeve for daws to peck at: I am not what I am.*

Her eyes narrowed, and she looked up somewhere above my head. Her breathing was a bit labored, raspy with mucus, marked by a persistent cough that she hid, and strained. As she talked she scooted backward, feeling the contour of the sidewalk with her feet, and sat in the folding director's chair parked behind her stand. She folded her hands and breathed purposefully while her bow ribbons danced on the sidewalk wind.

I watched her chest rise and fall. The tip of a scar, outlined with staple holes, less than a year old, climbed an inch above the V-neck of her dress and stopped just short of the small pill container that hung on a chain around her neck. She didn't need to tell me what was in it.

I tapped the five-gallon water jug with my left foot. "What's the bottle for?"

She patted lightly on her chest, exposing an inch more of the

scar. People passed on the sidewalk, but she had tired and was not as talkative. A gray-haired gentleman in a suit exited the real estate office five doors down, trotted uphill, grabbed a cup, squeezed the spout on the cooler, said "Morning, Annie," and dropped a dollar in the cup and another in the plastic jug at my feet.

"Hi, Mr. Oscar," she half-whispered. "Thank you. See you tomorrow."

He patted her on the knee. "See you tomorrow, sweetheart."

She looked at me and watched him hike farther up the street. "He calls everybody sweetheart."

I had deposited my fifty cents in the cup, but when she wasn't looking, I slipped in a twenty dollar bill.

For the last eighteen years, maybe longer, I've carried several things in either my pockets or along my belt. I carry a brass Zippo lighter, though I've never smoked, two pocketknives with small blades, a pouch with various sizes of needles and types of thread, and a Surefire flashlight. A few years ago, I added one more thing.

She nodded at my flashlight. "George, the sheriff around here, carries a flashlight that looks a lot like that one. And I saw one in an ambulance once too. Are you sure you're not a policeman or a paramedic?"

I nodded. "I'm sure."

Several doors down, Dr. Sal Cohen stepped out of his office and began shuffling down the sidewalk. Sal is a Clayton staple, known and loved by everybody. He's in his midseventies and has been a pediatrician since he passed his boards almost fifty years ago. From his small two-room office, Sal has seen most of the locals in Clayton grow from newborn to adulthood and elsewhere. Tweed jacket, matching vest, a tie he bought thirty years ago, bushy mustache, bushy eyebrows, too much nose and ear hair, long sideburns, big ears, pipe. And he always has candy in his pocket.

Sal shuffled up to Annie, tilted back his tweed hat, and placed his pipe in his left hand as she offered him a cup. He winked at her, nodded at me, and drank slowly. When he had finished the

glass, he turned sideways. Annie reached her hand into his coat pocket, pulled out a mint, and smiled. She clutched it with both hands and giggled as if she'd found what no one else ever had.

He tipped his hat, hung his pipe over his bottom lip, and began making his way around the side of his old Cadillac that was parked alongside the sidewalk. Before opening the door, he looked at me. "See you Friday?"

I nodded and smiled.

"I can taste it now," he said, licking his lips and shaking his head.

"Me too." And I could.

He pointed his pipe at me and said, "Save me a seat if you get there first."

I nodded, and Sal drove off like an old man—down the middle of the road and hurried by no one.

"You know Dr. Cohen?" Annie asked.

"Yeah." I thought for a minute, trying to figure out exactly how to put it. "We . . . share a thing for cheeseburgers."

"Oh," she said, nodding. "You're talking about The Well."

I nodded back.

"Every time I go to see him, he's either talking about last Friday or looking forward to next Friday. Dr. Cohen loves cheeseburgers."

"He's not alone," I said.

"My doctor won't let me eat them."

I didn't agree, but I didn't tell her that. At least not directly. "Seems sort of criminal to keep a kid from eating a cheeseburger."

She smiled. "That's what I told him."

While I finished my drink, she watched me with neither impatience nor worry. Somehow I knew, despite the mountain of money at my feet, that even if I never gave her a penny, she'd pour that lemonade until I either turned yellow or floated off. Problem was, I had longer than she did. Annie's hope might lie in that bottle, and I had a feeling that her faith in God could move Mount Everest and stop the sun, but absent a new heart, she'd be dead before she hit puberty.

Her eyes traveled up me once, then back down again. "How big are you?" she asked.

"Height or weight?" I asked.

She held her hand flat about eye level. "Height."

"I'm six feet tall."

"How old are you?"

"People years or dog years?"

She laughed. "Dog."

I thought for a minute. "Two hundred fifty-nine."

She sized me up. "How much do you weigh?"

"English or metric?"

She rolled her eyes and said, "English."

"Before breakfast or after dinner?"

That stumped her, so she scratched her head, looked up and down the sidewalk and then nodded. "Before breakfast."

"One hundred seventy-four pounds."

She looked at me another second. "What size shoe do you wear?"

"European or American?"

She pressed her lips together and tried to hide the smile again; then she put her hands on her hips. "American."

"Eleven."

She looked at my feet, apparently wondering to herself if I was telling her the truth. Then she straightened her dress, stood up straight, and pressed her chest out over her toes. "Well, I'm seven. I weigh forty-five pounds. I wear a size 6, and I'm three feet, ten inches tall."

My mind whispered again: *O tiger's heart wrapp'd in a woman's hide.*

"So?" I asked.

"You're bigger than me."

I laughed. "Just a bit."

"But—" She stuck her finger in the air like she was checking the direction of the wind. "If I get a new heart, my doctor says I might grow some more."

I nodded slowly. "Chances are real good."

"And you know what I'd do with it?"

"The heart or the few extra inches?"

She thought for a moment. "Both."

"What?"

"I'd be a missionary like my mom and dad."

The thought of a transplant recipient traipsing through the hot jungles of Africa, hundreds of miles from either a steady diet of medication, preventive medical care, or anyone knowledgeable enough to administer both, was an impossibility that I knew better than to hope for or believe in. "They'd probably be real proud of that."

She squinted up at me. "They're in heaven."

I said nothing for a moment and then offered, "Well, I'm sure they miss you."

She pressed her thumb into the spout of the cooler and began filling my cup again. "Oh, I miss them too, but I'll see them again." She gave me the cup, then held both hands in the air like she was balancing a scale. "In about eighty or ninety years."

I drank and calculated the impossibility.

She looked up at me again, curiosity pouring out of the cracks around her eyes. "What do you want to be when you grow up?"

I drank the last sip and looked down at her. "Do you do this to all your customers?"

She placed her hands behind her back and unconsciously clicked her heels together like Dorothy in Oz. "Do what?"

"Ask so many questions."

"Well . . . yeah, I guess so."

I bent closer, drawing my eyes closer to hers. "My dear, we are the music-makers and we are the dreamers of the dreams."

"Mr. Shakespeare again?"

"Nope. Willy Wonka."

She laughed happily.

"Well," I said, "thank you, Annie Stephens."

She curtsied again and said, "Good-bye, Mr. Reese. Please come back."

"I will."

I crossed the street and picked through my keys to unlock my Suburban. Key in hand, I stared through the windshield, remembering all the others just like her and the magnetic hope that bubbled forth from each, a hope that no power in hell or on earth could ever extinguish.

And there, I remembered that I was once good at something, and that I once knew love. The thought echoed inside me: *I am poured out like water, and all My bones are out of joint; My heart is like wax; it is melted within Me.*

A strong breeze fell down through the hills and blew east up Savannah Street. It ripped along the old brick buildings, up the sidewalk, through squeaky weather vanes and melodious wind chimes and across Annie's lemonade stand, where it picked up her Styrofoam cup and scattered almost ten dollars in change and currency across the street. She hopped off her folding chair and began chasing the paper money into the intersection.

I saw it too late, and she never saw it at all.

A bread delivery truck traveling right past me down South Main caught a green light and accelerated, creating a backfire and puff of white smoke. I could hear its radio playing bluegrass and see the driver stuffing a Twinkie into his mouth as he turned through the intersection and held up his hand to block the sun. Then he must have seen the yellow of Annie's dress. He slammed on the brakes, locked up the back tires, and began spinning and hopping sideways. The farther the truck turned sideways, the more the tires hopped atop the asphalt.

Annie turned to face the noise and froze. She dropped the money in her hand, which fluttered across the street like monarch butterflies, and lost control of her bladder. She never made a peep because the tightness in her throat squelched any sound.

The driver screamed, "Oh, sweet Jesus, Annie!" He turned the wheel as hard as it would turn and sent the back bumper of the truck into the right-front quarter panel of a parked Honda Accord.

The truck deflected off the Honda just before the flat side of the panel truck hit Annie square in the chest. The noise of her body hitting the hollow side of that truck sounded like a cannon.

She managed to raise one hand, taking most of the blow, and began rolling backward like a yellow bowling ball, her hat sailing in one direction, her legs and body flying in the other. She came to rest with a thud on the other side of the street beneath a Ford pickup, her left forearm snapped in two like a toothpick. The tail end of that easterly breeze caught the bottom of her dress and blew it up over her face. She lay unmoving, pointed downhill, her yellow dress now spotted red.

I got to her first, followed quickly by the lady behind the cash register, who was crazy-eyed and screaming uncontrollably. Within two seconds a crowd amassed.

Annie's eyes were closed, her frame limp, and her skin translucent and white. Her tongue had collapsed into her airway and was choking her, causing her face to turn blue while her body faded to sheet white. Unsure whether her spinal cord had sustained injury, I held her neck still and used my handkerchief to pull her tongue forward, clearing her airway and allowing her lungs to suck in air. I knew even the slightest movement of her neck risked further injury to her spine, if indeed her spine was injured, but I had to clear the airway. No air, no life. Given my options, I chose.

With Annie's chest rising and falling, I checked the pulse along her carotid artery, and with the other hand unclipped my flashlight and lit her pupils. While I watched her eyes, I stuck the flashlight in my mouth, stripped the Polar heart monitor from my chest, and placed the transmitter across her sternum. The pulse reading on my watch immediately changed from 62 to 156. I felt for the point of maximal impulse and then percussed the borders of her heart by tapping with my two hands and discovered what I already knew—her heart was nearly 50 percent bigger than it ought to be.

The lady from the cash register saw me place my hands around Annie's prepubescent chest and slapped me hard across the face. "Get your hands off her, you sick pervert!"

I didn't have time to explain, so I held the transmitter in place and kept monitoring Annie's eyes. Cash-register Lady saw Annie's pupils and her swollen tongue and squatted down next to Annie. She jerked the necklace off the girl's neck, pouring the tiny contents of the pill container across Annie's stomach and sending something else shiny, maybe gold, beneath the truck, lost in the muck alongside the gutter. She grabbed two pills and reached to place them beneath Annie's tongue. Keeping one hand on Annie's neck, and my eyes trained on Annie, I grabbed the woman's hand, clasped my fingers about hers, and spoke calmly. "If you place those in her mouth, you'll kill her."

The woman's eyes lit up and the panic rose, bulging the veins in her neck. She was strong and nearly pulled her hand away, but I held tight and continued to watch Annie.

"Get your hand off me. You'll kill her." She looked at the crowd that had formed around us. "He's killing her! He's gonna kill Annie!"

Two big men in faded overalls and John Deere baseball hats, who had been eating at the café, stepped toward me.

"Mister, you better git yer hands off'n that little girl. We knows Annie, but we ain't knowin' you."

He was nearly twice my size, and this was no time for words, but I was the only one who knew this. Holding tight to the woman's hand, I turned and kicked the bigger of the two squarely in the groin, sending him to his toes and then his knees.

The second man put his huge paw on my shoulder and said, "Fella, tha's my brother and you shouldn'ta done that."

With my free hand, I drilled him as hard as I could square in the gut, which was no small target, and he too dropped, gasping and blowing his breakfast across the sidewalk.

I turned to the woman, who was still screaming and pleading with the crowd. "He's gonna kill her! Annie's dying! For God's sake!"

This was getting worse. I pried open her hand with my other, but made no attempt to take the pills. I looked her in the eyes and said calmly, "Use half—of one."

She looked confused and unable to process.

The bigger brother had made it to his knees and was about to put a hand on me, when I kicked him solidly in the gut, but not hard enough to break a rib.

She looked down at Annie and at the tractor twins at my feet. Her face told me that whatever I was telling her was not equating with what she had either read or been told in the past.

"But . . . ," she started.

I nodded reassuringly. "Start with half, then let's monitor. If you place that much nitroglycerin beneath that child's tongue, her pressure will drop so low that we'll never get it back up." I let go of her hand. "Use half."

The woman bit the pill in half, spitting out one half like the top of a musket load and placing the other beneath Annie's tongue. Annie was conscious; her eyes were having difficulty focusing, and her arm hung like that of a string puppet. There was a lot going on around me—people, horns, and a distant siren—but I was trained on three things: pulse, pupils, and airway.

The nitro dissolved and color soon filled Annie's cheeks—the result of expanded blood vessels, increased blood flow, and oxygen to the extremities.

The woman spoke softly. "Annie? Annie?" She patted Annie's hand. "Hold on, baby. Help's coming. Hold on. They're coming. I can hear them now."

Annie nodded and tried to smile. Her pulse had quickened slightly but remained somewhat erratic.

While the siren grew closer, I gauged how long it would take them to arrive, diagnose and stabilize, and then transport. That meant Annie was about twelve minutes from the emergency room.

With Annie blinking and looking at the people around her, I spoke again to the cashier. "Now, the other half."

Annie opened her mouth, and the woman placed the other half beneath her tongue. When that had dissolved, I pulled my own vial out of my pocket, emptied its contents, and handed her one small baby aspirin.

"Now this."

She did as instructed. I unclasped the watch end of my heart-rate monitor and re-clasped it about Annie's wrist. Even on the last hole, it was loose.

While the sirens grew closer, I looked at the woman across from me and pointed at the watch and the transmitter across Annie's chest. "This goes with that. It's making a record of what's going on with her heart. The ER doc, if he's any good, will know what to do with it."

She nodded and pushed Annie's sweat and mud-caked hair out of her eyes and behind her ears.

The paramedics arrived ten seconds later and jumped alongside me. Seeing me in control, they first looked at me.

I wasted no time. "Blunt trauma. Flail segment left chest wall, cleared airway, spontaneous respiration is 37. Felt crepitus, suggesting subcutaneous emphysema, suspicious of partial pneumothorax left side."

The young EMT looked at me with a dazed expression on his face.

I explained, "I think she dropped a lung."

He nodded, and I continued, "Heart rate 155, but irregular. Brief LOC, now GCS 12."

He interrupted me. "She had her bell rung."

I continued, "She's had 0.2 sublingual nitro times two, five minutes apart." I pointed to her midsternal chest scar. "Post open-heart. Possibly, twelve months ago. And"—I looked at my watch—"polar heart-rate monitor in place and recording for seven minutes."

He nodded, stepped in, and began placing an oxygen mask over her mouth.

Behind me, the tractor twins sat wide-eyed and openmouthed. Having made sense of me, they made no attempt to pull me away. And

that was good. Because I had the feeling that had they really wanted to, they could have. Surprise had been my asset, and it was gone.

The medic monitored Annie's pupils, told her to breathe normally, and began wrapping the blood pressure cuff around her right biceps, while the second paramedic returned with a hard collar and a backboard. Two minutes later, careful not to aggravate her arm, they had inserted an IV with saline fluids to help elevate her pressure, loaded her into the ambulance, sat Aunt Cici alongside, and were driving toward the Rabun County Hospital. As they shut the door, her aunt was stroking Annie's hair and whispering in her ear.

While the street cleared and police questioned the driver of the panel truck, the locals milled along the sidewalks, hands in pockets, shaking their heads and pointing up toward the intersection and down into the wind.

I turned to the two guys behind me and extended a hand to help the first up. "No hard feelings?"

The bigger of the two took my hand, and I strained to help him up.

He pointed toward the ambulance. "We thought you 'as goin' to hurt Annie."

My eyes followed the ambulance out of sight. I spoke almost to myself, "No sir. Not hardly." I helped the other to his feet, and the two walked off shaking their heads, straightening their caps, and adjusting the straps on their overalls.

Behind me, an older gentleman, wearing a brimmed hat and Carhartt overalls, and whose boots smelled of diesel fuel, mumbled, "When's that girl gonna get a break?" He spat with precision, a straight stream of black juice into the gutter. "Of all the people in this town, why her? Life just ain't fair. 'Tain't fair a'tall." He spat again, staining the street, and stepped off down the sidewalk.

When the crowd thinned, I crept alongside the curb, found what I was looking for, and slipped it into my pocket. It was worn and had something printed on the back side. The sound of the siren had faded into the distance, and on the air were the smells

of cinnamon, peach cobbler, barbecue, and diesel exhaust. And maybe the hint of Confederate jasmine. As I drove away, a line formed at the water cooler jug as people silently dropped in bills on their way back to work.