

The Authorized Biography

by Michael G. Ryan

In the beginning, Tim Toonby was bewildered to find his biography. Bewildered and ultimately alarmed.

It appeared Saturday morning on his front porch in an unadorned metal box, the fireproof kind meant for legal documents. No key. Tim Toonby had just stepped outside to leave the full diaper pail liner for the service, and in the age of letter bombs, he hesitated when he saw the box on the steps. He looked around as if the deliverer would still be nearby, waiting for the detonation, but the neighborhood was typically quiet—prefabricated homes with lawns of sod, flower boxes along porch railings, stone lions at the end of driveways as affectations of the neighbors' aspirations. Toonby had them, too. It was a street for dreamers, not killers.

When he picked up the box, the lid wasn't latched—it fell open, and he was suddenly looking down at his own face on the cover of a book inside. His own face, thirty years older, hair gone to gray, the crow's feet at his eyes deep and sad. The black-and-white photo looked posed in a cheap hotel room where the nightstand's drawer was pulled open enough to reveal a book, a Gideon's Bible. But when Tim Toonby squinted at the picture, he could see that wasn't right. He could just make out the text on the cover: *Barnabas's Bible* by Timothy Toonby.

This was the book he had started writing six months ago. His first book, his hope for the great American novel, his dream of fame and fortune. The one his agent said would make him a household name.

As if handling fragile glass, Tim Toonby lifted the book out of the metal box. It was a thick hardback of a thousand pages or more. *Toonby or Not Toonby*, it was called, written by Jasper Toonby. Baffled, Tim Toonby looked up and down the street again. A nauseating dizziness settled over him like sunstroke.

His son Jasper was inside the house behind him, napping in the nursery with his newborn baby sister. He was four and still enamored of the Wiggles. He was hardly writing more than his name.

The sky above Tim Toonby expanded, becoming vast and dangerous, as if deities hid behind the clouds like malicious children with sharp knives playing hide and seek. He took the book and the metal box back into the house, returning to lock the front door behind him when he forgot.

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The house was momentarily at peace—Tiffany was gone to the mall, Jasper and Betsy were sleeping, even Gator was snoozing on the deck, dreaming whatever it is golden retrievers dream in their old age. The stillness of the house seemed calculated, but Tim Toonby was grateful for that eye of the storm. He sat at the tiny table in the kitchen with the book—*his* book, as he was already thinking of it, despite being hesitant to touch it. He turned it over to read the back cover.

*Timothy Toonby introduced the world to Barnabas the spiritual nomad, whose willingness to offer his soul to any religion in exchange for divine insight created the cottage industry dubbed "multi-sectarian" fiction. But Toonby's own tragic life was almost as shattered as his protagonist's—from the publication of **Barnabas's Bible** and its overnight success until the end of his life, Toonby was a man in search of something more than just celebrity and wealth.*

In this superb biography, Jasper Toonby, his only son, shows us a side of his father unknown to the public. From the sudden death of Toonby's young daughter to the shattering events in Burlington, Vermont, Toonby's life was as fraught with acts of God as anything his alter-ego Barnabas encountered in searching twenty-one religions worldwide for the answer.

This is a goddamn joke, Toonby thought. Tim Toonby, welcome to This Will Be Your Life, weeknights on the History Channel. He immediately regretted the expletive, and besides, a prank hardly seemed like the answer to him anyway. He could not wrap his mind around any reason for it, any person who could be behind it, any outcome it might hope to achieve. It was too elaborate and too open-ended. It was senseless. And yet...

In the other room, the baby awakened. Her staccato cries came across the baby monitor on the counter, jolting Toonby out of his focus. He let out his breath—he didn't realize he'd been holding it—and pushed the book away across the table, rising to tend little Betsy's needs before she woke Jasper. By the time he'd soothed her back to sleep, he felt ready to approach his biography again. As he rubbed her back and whisper-sang in her ear, he returned repeatedly to that single line: *The sudden death of Toonby's young daughter*. Once Betsy was back in her crib, Toonby felt the dark clouds part, those hide-and-

seek evil gods disappearing with them for now, and he returned to book with a sketch of a plan.

Flipping to the back of the book, he found the index he suspected might be there. His hands betrayed his inner uncertainty by shaking, and he couldn't remember the alphabet for a moment. *Oh, good*, he thought. *I have Parkinson's now. My hands shake but I can't remember why.* The index was a minefield of his life—names he knew and names he didn't, entries so magnetic that his fingers dug into the paper savagely enough to make him wonder if he'd tear the pages. Among the dozens of entries under his own name, two stood out, stacked alphabetically atop one another.

Toonby, Timothy Bernard; death of, divorce and

He heard his own breathing rise and fall like a steam engine leaving the station, but what he wanted was alphabetically earlier than this. So, he didn't even note the page number of his alleged death. Not now. Not yet. Instead, he found what he needed to know more pressingly.

Toonby, Elizabeth "Betsy" Ann; birth of, congenital heart disease and, death of

There was nothing else indexed under his daughter's name; all her entries were clustered in less than 50 pages at the front of the biography. Between her entry and his own were *Toonby, Jasper*, and *Toonby, Tiffany*, but he closed the book before he could be tempted to look closer at either one, the risk of being turned to a pillar of salt by looking back at his own future too great.

"Papa?" he heard behind him. Jasper rubbed his eyes, standing on the porch holding a space gun he insisted on sleeping with, and Toonby knelt to hug his boy.

"The baby's crying," Jasper said.

"Babies do that," Toonby said. "You can call her Betsy, if you want."

"The *baby* woke me up." Jasper made a pouty face, but then he began to grin. "Do *you* want me to call her Betsy?"

"You call her Betsy, and I'll call Mama."

He dug his cellphone out of his pocket and autodialed Tiffany. While the line rang, he remembered something he'd once said in a writers' circle back before he'd started outlining *Barnabas's Bible*. One of the others was a sci-fi writer, Dwayne something, and he'd been sharing his time travel novel with them. But his book was so loaded with paradoxes, with cause-and-effect problems inherent in the future influencing the past to affect the future, that the group spent an hour each week just trying to help him sort out rudimentary plot issues. At length, Toonby found his patience wearing thin.

"Time travel to the past won't happen," he'd said to the sci-fi writer while the others squirmed uncomfortably. "If it were ever going to be possible, we'd already know about it now—the future time travelers would be all over history already. Hitler, JFK's assassination, 9/11, *American Idol*—none of it would have happened. They'd be among us, telling their ancestors which stocks to invest in."

"Maybe there are rules in the future," Dwayne had argued. "Maybe there will be laws about what you can and can't do to affect the past."

"Sure," Toonby had said. "Nobody in the future will *ever* break the law. Forty virgins, Pearly Gates, and your own hot tub. All those post-apocalyptic movies got it totally wrong. "

Tiffany answered and broke his train of memory. "Everything okay, hon?"

"Yes," he said, watching Jasper pretend to talk into his space gun, imitating Toonby's gestures on the phone with his wife, "but I'm taking Betsy to the doctor. Maybe it's nothing, but I have a father's intuition, and given what a mediocre dad I am, I think I'd better listen."

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Within forty-eight hours, Betsy was in surgery for something the doctors called ventricular septal defect—they explained it in detail, but Toonby struggled to understand, even to hear. Thankfully, Tiffany was following the explanation. She had her blonde hair tied back, always a sign of her stress and pinpoint attentiveness. What Toonby heard was "hole in her heart" and "a miracle to find it, since she has no symptoms."

"How did you know?" Tiffany asked him while they sat in the waiting room, waiting to see their daughter. "Father's intuition, Tim? Did she look like something was wrong with her? Was—was she crying? The doctors say there's no way you—I don't understand how you knew."

"I just knew," Toonby said. He jingled his car keys in his lap.

Tiffany said, "I never meant you were mediocre. I'm sorry I ever said that."

"I have a problem with priorities." Toonby tried not to sound as if he were parroting her past words for the sake of fighting. He wasn't. "I had a problem. But no more research. I'm writing the book now. You and the kids, you're my priorities again."

"You saved her life. Really, you saved us all. You saved our family."

Toonby looked up, silencing his keys. Tiffany's eyes brimmed with relief and fear and curiosity and a hint of impatience. *Divorce and*, he thought. *Did I make things any better for us? What's the price here?*

"I don't know how," he said. "You know I've never had any secrets from you, Tiff. It's not like I heard the voice of God warning me. I just *knew*. Maybe a guilty conscience has made me hyper-sensitive."

He could see the suspicion hesitate in the way she searched his face—his words had come rushed from nowhere, as far as she could tell—but it faded before she was through searching. She smiled slowly. "I'm glad you knew. It doesn't matter how."

But Toonby knew that wasn't true. Tiffany wouldn't let this go—on those rare occasions when he'd been in her sights, she'd usually found him out. When he had begun to "get God," as she called it, he'd kept it from her as long as he could, as if his research into world religions embarrassed him on both an intellectual and an emotional level. As if his discovery of belief was shameful. But now it seemed to be serving him in an entirely different way.

God didn't speak to me, he thought as the doctor came to them in the waiting room to tell them they could see Betsy. Nope. He wrote to me instead.

#

His biography was still in the metal box at the bottom of his closet in his office when he and Tiffany came home from the hospital late one night days later. He half-expected it to be gone. It didn't seem real to begin with, so its disappearance would be consistent with the sensation of being in a waking dream ever since it had arrived. Yet when he took it out and set it on his desk, the lamplight on it like fluorescent light over a surgical table, the book both reaffirmed its reality and whispered to him about the intangible nature of time. Gator lay at his feet, a mound of golden fur. Toonby looked down at the old dog; usually he slept at the foot of the bed. Gator's presence in Toonby's office seemed another portent of the sands of time shifting beneath his feet.

The book was thinner than it had been before. Much thinner.

The black-and-white photo on the cover was the same—Toonby in the same no-tell motel, *Barnabas's Bible* in the drawer to soothe the restless souls of weary travelers. But everything else about his biography was changed from when he'd hidden it in the closet three days earlier. The title was different—*My Father, My Savior*, it was now called, and his son was no longer the author: Jasper had been replaced by Elizabeth Toonby-Schwartz.

She's okay, Toonby thought with numb relief. She's even married. It looks like Christmases are going to be a little awkward for us in the future. The book's not as long as it was before—I saved her, but it cost me time. Time is the page count. Jesus, as if this is all real.

This isn't from the future. There's no time travel to the past. It's like I told Dwayne that about his science fiction novel. Too many paradoxes, right? This is a brain tumor or a symptom of schizophrenia. This is me influencing me about me. I'm like a split personality making friends with myself on Facebook and liking everything each of me posts.

But what if the past changed itself of its own accord? Indirect interference?

God?

The second paragraph of the back cover text had shifted as well, and it explained the biography's notably reduced length.

In this deeply personal biography, Elizabeth Toonby-Nicolson, his only daughter, shows us a side of her father unknown to the public. From the death of Toonby's son Jasper at a reading in Burlington, Vermont, to Toonby's shocking suicide, Toonby's life was as fraught with the search for God as anything his alter-ego Barnabas encountered in searching fourteen religions worldwide for the answer.

A black nausea swept over him. With bone-dry fingers, he fumbled for the index at the back of the book.

Toonby, Elizabeth "Besty" Ann; congenital heart disease and, marriage of

Toonby, Jasper; murder of; See Whitmore, Franklin Dean

Toonby, Timothy; divorce and, suicide attempts, suicide of, unfinished works

He slammed the book shut, but then tore it open again so violently that the spine made a crinkling snapping sound.

Whitmore, Franklin Dean; murder of Jasper Toonby and, religious views of

"If they use all three of your names, you're definitely a killer," Toonby said aloud, his voice small and lonely in the midnight hour of his office. The house

was unusually still, as if the power were out. Tiffany was sleeping in the nursery to be near the smells of Betsy. Jasper was still at Granddad and Mumsy's; Toonby would pick him up in the morning and take him to the hospital to see his little sister. The one who would outlive him.

He missed Jasper as if they were separated by more than the four miles to Tiffany's parents' house.

He looked at the clock on his computer. It was still early out west; Greer would be up, he guessed. They'd only been working together for less than a year, but Greer struck Toonby as the kind of man who put friendship before finances. At least he hoped he'd read his agent correctly. Toonby called.

"How's your little girl?" Greer asked.

"She's okay," Toonby said, looking at her byline on the biography's cover. "She's going to be in the hospital for a while. But we had an intervention and took the morphine drip away from her, so at least she's not pushing that little button every twenty minutes now."

"Ha. Sure, sure. And the little man?"

Toonby closed his eyes. "He's okay. I watch my language around him now—he imitates everything I say and do. Listen, Chuck, I want to talk to you about the book."

"Talk *to* or talk *with*?" Greer chuckled. "Writers and their word choices. All right, let's hear it. You're not quitting, I trust?"

"No. Nothing like that." *Not yet, anyway*, he thought. "I want to talk to you about what we do after it sells."

"Christ, you're getting a little ahead of yourself. We don't have offers on the table. Hell, you don't even have your revisions done to first draft yet, do you?"

"I will. Soon. And you said you thought we'd get a bidding war out of this, right?"

Greer laughed. "Yeah, that's what I said. I still think so—I've shown the first draft to a few people, and I'm getting damned good responses. I didn't make any promises, just so you know. I wouldn't do—"

"That's good. Great, even. You think it's going to be big enough for me to make some contract stipulations?" Before Greer could respond, Toonby said, "We never do a reading in Vermont. Not one. Not a reading, not a signing, no personal appearances. Can we force that issue?"

Greer was silent long enough for Toonby to hear all the unspoken questions he knew Greer was thinking. Finally, Greer said, "Yeah. We can do that. It's weird and we're putting the cart so far in front of the horse it can't even see our asses anymore, but yeah. You gonna tell me why?"

"I can't. I'm sorry. It's not about you, though, I promise."

"Come on, give me something here. What would I tell a prospective publisher?"

Toonby said, "Tell them I'm a sports nut. No baseball, football, or basketball team? Why's it even a state?"

"You're not getting cold feet, are you?"

"No. Not at all." Toonby looked first at his biography, as deadly and inviting as a loaded pistol on his desk, and then at his computer, where he'd stopped mid-paragraph in revisions on *Barnabas's Bible* to change Betsy last Sunday morning. Then he'd taken the full diaper pail out to discover that loaded gun waiting for him on the porch. "The only thing I've ever wanted to be was a writer. Nothing else, not in my whole life. Except maybe a dad."

Greer said, "Well, you finish this book, and your whole life is going to change, buddy. You can be a writer and a dad all you want. Maybe you'll explain this to me when I get you a million-dollar advance. And hey, *nobody* gets a million-dollar advance. That's an athlete's salary, those guys who don't play in Vermont. I'm just making up numbers, you know?"

They said goodnight. Tired, Toonby put his biography back in its metal box (*its coffin*, he thought morbidly) but then took it out again.

"How long does a time ripple take to reach this shore?" he asked himself as he looked at the back cover again. Nothing had changed. *The death of Toonby's son Jasper at a reading in Burlington, Vermont*, it still read.

Maybe Chuck forgets to negotiate Vermont into the contract, Toonby thought. Or maybe the publishers won't go along with it. But it doesn't matter. I will never read in Vermont. Never.

He put his biography back, stowing the box in the closet again, and then sat at his desk with his head bowed to pray. It was a self-conscious act; only since beginning work on *Barnabas's Bible* had he taken to prayer. It remained a foreign experience, a language he didn't speak. He didn't know the rituals and

the verbiage, but he understood the goals well enough. He was a pilgrim in search of a private mecca. If God were speaking to him, it behooved him to answer.

"Lord," he whispered, "don't let my kids die."

Gator, who hadn't moved during Toonby's conversation with Greer, lifted his head and grinned a sad dog's grin at him.

#

For three days, he waited for his biography to change, for Vermont to disappear from the back jacket, but nothing happened. Not to the book, anyway.

Toonby wasn't sleeping well; in the middle of each night, he got up and crept into his office to be sure the book was still in the closet. To check for magical alterations. Touching its slick glossy cover began to feel like a holy ritual, reassuring and vital to maintaining his connection to the next world. Then he would sit at his computer and look at the pictures they'd taken of Jasper over the years. It seemed like a thousand, but they weren't enough.

No amount of research on the Web, not even through a pay site that alleged "We Can Track Down Anyone!," turned up any information on Franklin Dean Whitmore, Jasper's would-be murderer. *He's probably still a child, too*, Toonby finally realized, and gave up. He wasn't entirely sure what he would have done if he'd found Whitmore anyway. This wasn't a science-fiction movie in which he could have Whitmore arrested for some future crime that he'd not yet committed. And anything else—the other ways of stopping Whitmore—made

Toonby pray for not just the safety of his children but also for the restraint and retention of his own sanity.

He couldn't write. The distraction in the closet was like the beating of the tell-tale heart, calling him to deal with it *now* while making veiled threats about what would happen if someone else found it first. Tiffany, he suspected, would think it was a joke, at least until she began to read it. If she read anything before today's date, he could spin it as an autobiography, he supposed. And that's when the idea came to him.

He took it out and opened it up at the beginning.

For Nick, the dedication line read. My dad would have liked you.

Toonby skipped the table of contents; the chapter titles were too revealing. *Why live*, he'd once heard said, *if you already know what your whole life will be?* So, he cautioned himself he could only read as far as Betsy's heart surgery. Even then, he had to watch carefully for references to things that hadn't happened yet, especially his suicide attempts, Jasper's killer Whitmore, and his own ultimate demise.

Reading the story of his own youth as told by someone else was unnerving, especially where details had been filled in that he had no personal recollection of. Summations of stories he'd written as a boy but couldn't remember writing, research into his parents' finances, quotes about his life from people he'd not spoken to in twenty years.

"I gave him his first Bible when he was about ten," his aunt Lydia had said. Or would say. Either way, she was wrong—he had received his first Bible while

trick-or-treating at Granny Willis's house when he was seven. He'd cried bitter tears that it wasn't a Marathon candy bar.

Despite the occasional factual errors, however, he found it a thrilling experience. *I'm going to be somebody. People actually give a shit about this life I've lived.* He read at a frantic speed. *We'll be financially well off. It was twenty-one books before and fourteen after I saved Betsy, but that's still a good run.* He saw the word "Vermont" on the page and squeezed his eyes shut. *So what? What would happen if I knew everything? Why am I so sure I shouldn't know? Somebody wanted me to know.* Instead, he turned the page.

"My mom," Betsy had written, "met Eugene Versace—no relation, it turns out—when she took our old dog Gator in to be put to sleep. Dad didn't go that day. I was still in the hospital recovering from surgery, and at the age of four Jasper certainly could not have understood why our sixteen-year-old dog could not go on forever. So, Dad stayed with him at the house and kissed Gator goodbye in the driveway. So, Mom was alone with her grief when she met the veterinarian who would comfort her and then break up my parents' marriage."

"Fuck!" Toonby shouted, slamming the book closed. His eyes watered.

"Gator?" he called in a gentle voice. "Come here, boy."

He could hear the golden retriever's toenails on the hardwood floor in the hallway, and for the first time he imagined he could hear old age and world-weariness in that familiar sound. Gator poked his head around the corner, tongue wagging tiredly, and came to Toonby, pushing his head into Toonby's open palm. Then he lay down at his feet as if the moment of affection were all

he could endure. Toonby reached down, and the dog raised his head slowly into the touch. They stayed that way for some time.

"With a name like Eugene, he shouldn't even be able to *talk* to a woman," Toonby finally said, "let alone steal mine. For crying out loud, the man has his hands up cats' asses all day long."

Gator lowered his head again as if embarrassed at the thought.

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All of life seems to happen at night these days, Toonby thought. The daylight hours were overcast with flurries of white coats and long stretches of relentless boredom in waiting rooms and oversized stark-bright corridors and antiseptic hospital cafeterias. The nights were composed of Tiffany and Jasper and Gator squeezing him out of the queen-sized bed in the dark master bedroom at home. It had only been a week, but he felt as if he'd not slept peacefully in months. In a lifetime, even.

In the dead of night, some things came easier. With the resolve of a man facing a firing squad, he imagined, he'd resolved to delete the draft of *Barnabas's Bible* that he'd been revising for the last two weeks. If the book did not exist, it could not harm his family. It was a dream that had to be sacrificed. So, with his eyes closed, he'd dragged the electronic manuscript to the trash on his desktop, and just like that, it was gone.

His biography didn't change at all.

Two days later, Greer sent him back the electronic copy of the first draft he'd sent the agent a month ago. *Some notes attached from a couple of publishers,* Greer wrote. *One of the editors is from Vermont. I didn't say anything, don't worry.*

So, he went back to work on it.

Now he kept his biography, sans its metal box, in the nightstand drawer when they went to bed; he didn't want it too far from reach anymore. Just in case Tiffany found it, he had put a second dust jacket over it, an NIV Bible cover. She wouldn't question it; he had dozens of Bibles around the house now, not to mention a Torah, a Koran, and a host of other holy texts.

"Are you awake?" she whispered in the darkness.

"All the time," he whispered.

"Are you okay?"

"I doubt it."

She sighed and reached out to find his hand. "Me either. But you saved her."

He thought, *But I haven't saved Jasper yet.* "Do you believe in destiny, Tiff?"

He knew she was considering the question seriously; ever since he'd begun to explore his own spirituality, she had struggled with her own perceptions of religion, and it made her both withdrawn and contemplative. Now she rubbed his knuckles in the dark.

"Why? Do you think she was destined to die? You changed that."

"Isn't that what God does? Anything we do would just be course-correcting toward that destiny anyway, isn't it? It's like driving around the block to get home from across the street. You still end up in the same place."

Before Tiffany could respond, Toonby said, "Gator doesn't look well. Have you noticed?"

She gripped his fingers tighter. He knew she'd seen Gator stumble in the kitchen at breakfast this morning. "Our little family is really struggling," she said. "Is that why you're asking me about destiny?"

He considered. "I don't think I believe in destiny anymore. I think what we mean when we say 'destiny' is something we can't change. But maybe destiny is just being surprised by what happens to us." He wished Jasper were in the bed with them. "Once we're not surprised, it's not destiny anymore. It's just life."

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Gator got so bad a few days later, even Jasper noticed, and that was when Tiffany said they should consider taking him to the vet. The old dog could barely stay on his feet anymore, and he panted almost constantly. It broke Toonby's heart, yet he knew the cost would be too high to pay if he couldn't endure Gator's passing.

"I'll take him," Toonby said.

"I know you can't do that," Tiffany said. "You were a mess when that car hit him. This is so much worse."

Toonby shook his head. *Divorce and*. "You're right. But still, I'll take him. You shouldn't have to do this. I raised him from a pup, years before we even met. I have to be the one. How can I let him go alone?"

Tiffany kissed him then, more gently than she had since they'd been trying for Betsy, so gently that he almost resisted the vision of those lips on Eugene Versace, no relation, the veterinarian.

He had to help Gator into the front seat; the old golden retriever just put his head on his paws and panted as if he couldn't breathe. His chest hitching, Toonby got behind the wheel and slid his biography under the front seat. He knew his normal vet, Brickman, wouldn't be there today. Today, he'd bring Gator to see the new vet in the office, Doctor Versace the homewrecker. He'd considered waiting another day to see if Brickman was in later, but Gator was suffering. Instead, he'd thought about going to another vet, but he couldn't explain to Tiffany why he'd changed vets at the very end. And in truth, he wanted to see Eugene Versace. He wanted to know what the man who had once been his wife's destiny looked like. He wanted to see the man he'd derailed to a different future.

He sat with one hand on his dog's soft head all the way to the Pets for Life clinic. Neither made a sound, which was how Toonby heard the biography make a flat snapping sound beneath his seat.

He locked up the brakes, and Gator barked weakly, jolting forward into the glove compartment. A car behind them honked and swerved around them. Toonby instinctively lifted his free foot off the floor so that whatever was now

alive beneath his seat couldn't grab his ankle, and he dropped his other foot back onto the accelerator, roaring into an empty lot across from the pet clinic. There, he slammed the transmission into park and barreled out of the car. Gator scrambled across the driver's side seat to fall out into the lot beside Toonby, yelping as he struck the pavement. Toonby knelt beside him, wrapping his arms around the dog's neck; he could see his biography under the seat.

It was so much thinner.

"The hardback of Dorian Gray," he whispered to Gator. Slowly—in case it might twitch out of reach—he retrieved the book. It didn't move. He slipped the NIV Bible dust jacket off and looked at his picture on the cover. Still the same. Still Betsy writing it. The title had shifted—*The Promised Lands of Timothy Toonby*, it was now called, innocuous enough to give him hope as he read the back cover blurb for what felt like the first and thousandth time.

In this richly detailed biography, Elizabeth Toonby-Fairway, his only daughter, explores the life of a father she barely knew. Like Salinger, Toonby disappeared from the public eye after one highly successful novel, and like Salinger, he wrote in secret, accumulated safety deposit boxes of manuscripts that continued to explore Barnabas's journey across every world religion in search of himself. But unlike Salinger, Toonby found no peace in isolation, and only the murder of his son Jasper, a young man he'd not seen in almost twenty years, could bring him out of his self-imposed exile—only to commit suicide. Like his alter-ego, Toonby sought answers from without, but his estranged daughter argues brilliantly that his true answers were always within.

He opened the book. There was no index entry for Eugene Versace—score one for getting rid of the other man. But *Divorce and* was still imbedded in both his and Tiffany's entries, now another seventy pages deeper into the book. He rubbed his temples.

"If she doesn't meet Versace," he said aloud, slowly, sampling the logic, "then we don't get divorced because of him. But we still get divorced later on. And somehow, I end up losing the kids because of it."

Gator whined, and Toonby shook the moment off. *Fucking time*, he thought, gently lifting Gator back into the car. *Whatever I do, you take something away from me*. He could see the Pets for Life Clinic neon sign across the street; he'd have to go around the block to get there because of the traffic flow.

"Never mind. Not today. We're going home, Gator," he said.

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The morning that Tiffany took Gator to the vet, Toonby went out ahead of her to the car. And when she came out with the old golden retriever, he met them in the driveway.

"Goodbye, boy," he whispered, fighting hard against the trembling. He knelt with Gator, who seemed so fragile that Toonby was afraid to hug him. But he did anyway.

As they drove away, Toonby wiped his eyes as he went into the garage and retrieved the NIV Bible dust jacket. He threw it away in the garbage can at the head of the drive and then went in the house to check on Jasper and wait. He'd put his biography on the passenger seat for Tiffany to find, the restored

version that he knew would give him back his kids and give her heart to their new vet. If he wanted to have a future, he had to let go of the woman he'd always assumed would be that future.

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Tiffany turned into the driveway two hours later, just after dark, and Toonby met her in the garage before she'd even got out of the car.

She'd been crying. And Gator wasn't in the backseat, but his biography was in the passenger seat.

"He's gone," she whispered.

He said, "I know."

"Because of that?" She pointed at the book, sniffing. "Where did it come from?"

"I don't know. It just appeared one morning."

"The morning you had your intuition about Betsy's heart?" she asked. When he nodded, she picked up the book and got out. As they went into the house, she handed it to him as if she could feel the twisted need in his gut to have it near him again.

"I read it," she said in the kitchen as they hunkered together on stools at the kitchen counter, the way they had in their first apartment a lifetime ago—the place where they sorted things out. Toonby knew this would be the last time they'd be here, like this. Her smell wouldn't be near him this way ever again, not after what he'd let her read. "The whole thing. You wanted me to, didn't you?"

"Yes, Tiff. I had to. You know me." He tried to smile. "I just don't have it in me to face sad moments."

She began to cry. He took her hand and kissed her fingertips. *The last time I'll do this*, he thought, a desperate need to roll back time and change his mind about leaving the book for her sweeping over him.

"I don't know what to say," she said, sobbing. "It's all so crazy. I thought it was a terrible joke, something you did, but then I knew. I just *knew*." She tried to compose herself. "I want you to know that I never met Doctor Versace before today. And I will *not* leave you for him."

"Yes, you will," he said. When she began to protest, he shushed her. "You don't understand. I tried to change things. I tried to keep you from meeting him by taking Gator myself." He realized how another part of his heart was already broken over losing the golden retriever, but there just didn't seem enough room for all his grief right now. "But the book *changed*. The story evolved. You'll meet someone else. And then, somehow, I'll lose the kids because of it. So, I put it all back the way it was. I chose the future that lets me keep the kids, even if I lose you."

She shook her head, lowered her forehead to her palm. "What if I don't believe this? Jasper *dies*, for God's sake."

"I know. I've tried to stop it. I even told Chuck Greer that I wouldn't do any readings in Vermont so Jasper wouldn't have any—"

"It's *his* reading," Tiffany said. "*His* book. He's a writer, too, just like his dad. He imitates everything you do, right up to the end."

They sat in silence after that. The kitchen clock ticked so loudly Toonby wondered why he'd never heard it before. He imagined Tiffany listening to their minutes together ticking by.

"Stop writing the book," she finally said. "Delete it."

"I tried that. Chuck has a copy. He's getting a lot of interest. I think he'd publish it even if I said not to at this point. It's become a public domain work, at least in the eyes of destiny."

Tiffany started to say something—Toonby suspected it would have been something about not believing he could give up his dream of writing, which he would have argued fruitlessly—but she changed her mind. She sat breathing hard, and then she held her breath. He knew she was listening to the clock now, too.

"All right then. Just write one book, Tim," she said. "Just one. They give you an incredible advance, more than enough for us to get by. The series makes you insanely rich, but the series is what makes you famous. If you're not famous, there's no biography. And the series costs... it costs us Jasper. He grows up to admire you so much." She looked him directly in the eyes. "I know this is all so crazy. But I'm begging you: don't be someone your son admires. He's too proud of being a Toonby. It will kill him."

The questions were on Toonby's lips—questions he hadn't felt safe enough to read for himself but ones he thought Tiffany would filter for him now, here at the tail end of their marriage. At this moment, she still loved him. No-relation Versace was no one yet. She still cared more about his heart than

anyone else's except the kids', and he knew he could ask. But he didn't know where to begin. *Will I always be alone? What happens to Betsy? How do I die?*

But it would all be irrelevant if he did as she asked.

"Tell me just one thing about the future," he said. "Do we have this conversation?"

She smiled so beautifully that he ached to go back in time, to marry her again, to tell her that she'd always been the one he loved. *Don't leave me*, he thought. *Don't give your love to someone else, Tiffany. How will I live without you?*

"Yes," she said. "But I think I tell Betsy we mourned Gator together tonight."

She kissed him the way she always did. Toonby treasured it. *Always remember this*, he told himself.

#

Toonby called his agent to tell him how he had decided to proceed with the books. Chuck Greer almost choked with disbelief.

"One book?" Greer said. Toonby could hear papers shuffling on Greer's end of the call. On his end, he sat in his office, his novel on the computer screen, his biography in his lap.

"If you're looking for our contract, it doesn't say anything about other books, Chuck." Toonby felt like choking too. "Just *Barnabas's Bible*. That's the only one I want you to sell."

"You've set it up to be a dozen or more books," Greer protested. "Why would you do that? Barnabas is going to convert to—"

"I'll do revisions. It'll stand alone. I'll keep the same ending, but I'll get rid of the foreshadowing."

Greer cleared his throat—a prelude, Toonby suspected, to a supposed rational debate. His tone was surprisingly calm. "We have offers coming in, Tim. I didn't want to tell you, but we're looking at a lot of money here."

"Great. Get the best you can for just the one book."

"They're multi-book offers."

"Then re-negotiate. That's what you do as an agent. I write, you negotiate, they publish."

"Listen to me." Greer's tone shifted to a parental one. "You're an unpublished novelist. The short stories you did? They won't matter to these guys. If you try to play hardball, they'll walk away from you. First-time novelists are a dime-a-dozen."

"They won't walk." Toonby turned his biography over to look at the front cover again. His eyes were so old, so tired. He wondered what all the future brought, but he'd not asked Tiffany. He didn't need to; he kept the biography with him, and he could open it any time he wished. But there was nothing more to be gained, he had decided. The mysteries he most needed to solve had surrendered all their relevant clues. Anything more would be a form of self-torture. "They'll pay a lot for the one book."

Greer groaned like a man feeling the first pinch of a heart attack. "Is this some sort of *To Kill a Mockingbird* thing, Tim? One and done until they magically find a sequel?"

"No," Toonby said. "It's more like *A Confederacy of Dunces*."

"That guy killed himself, you know. You're not thinking something stupid, are you? You're not, you know, suicidal or something?"

Toonby looked into his own, older face, the photographed face of a man already dead by the time the book it graced the cover of was published, and tried to keep the smile out of his voice. "Not yet."

Greer said something else, but Toonby didn't hear it: his biography moved in his hands.

It was slight, a twitch, but in that motion it was alive. It was a living, breathing entity, and Toonby felt its pages tighten the way a hand becomes a fist. It clenched in his grip, and with an unexpected cry, he let go of it, as if he'd been briefly touched by an electrical current. The book whapped on the floor where Gator used to doze. Greer asked something, but Toonby put down the phone, his agent's voice a squawking, tinny sound in the background.

His face began to disappear, seemingly younger as the lines in his face faded. The book moved as if gently pulled into the shadows beneath his desk.

I am watching God's hand, Toonby thought, his head light. He did not breathe. He did not dare to let his chest rise and fall in the presence of the future reaching out for him.

And then his biography was gone.

Toonby shuddered. *It's different now*, he thought. *I should have read it when I had the chance. What happens to me? What happens to all of us? Everything that Tiffany knows,*

it's all changed now. It'll never be the same. But I could have known the parts that won't change, couldn't I?

But in the end, Tim Toonby was content to find he was free of his biography. Scared but ultimately content.

Trembling, he picked up the phone again. Greer's voice returned to clarity. He was talking about the offer he was expecting in the very near future.

"I'm telling you, you could be a household name," Greer said. "Work with me here."

He's too proud of being a Toonby, Tiffany had said of Jasper. It'll kill him. "No," he said. "It's okay. I'm not that proud. Nobody needs to remember me. And they won't if we just publish the one book."

"Fine, you don't want to be a household name. But you want to be rich, right?" Greer hesitated, then said, "What about a pseudonym? You write as someone else, but Tim Toonby still cashes the checks. Listen, if you write more Barnabas books, they'd pay you if your name was Judas Iscariot."

Slowly, like a child peeking beneath his bed for a monster, Toonby put down the phone and looked into the shadows under his desk. There was nothing to see there but the cords for his computer. He then got up and went to his office closet. The metal box, the coffin his future had showed up in, was also gone.

Don't do it, he thought. You're kidding yourself that it's that easy. No man can serve two masters. He'll hate one and love the other. You cannot serve God and money.

He picked up the phone again and asked with some uncertainty, "How much?"