

They found each other again that summer.

Then everything changed.

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BEST-SELLING AUTHOR

A MOMENT *of* WEAKNESS



FOREVER FAITHFUL SERIES — BOOK TWO

B O O K T W O
F O R E V E R F A I T H F U L

A Moment *of* Weakness

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PART I

*“For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the LORD,
“plans to prosper you and not to harm you,
plans to give you hope and a future.
Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me,
and I will listen to you.”*

JEREMIAH 29:11–12

One

May 1977

THE OLD BIDDIES SAT IN A CIRCLE, THEIR TIGHTLY KNOTTED HEADS turning this way and that like vultures eyeing a kill. Only this time the carcass was the Conner family, and no one was quite dead yet.

Hap Eastman watched from a corner of the Williamsburg Community Church fellowship hall. He'd done his part. Started the coffee, laid out the pastries, set up the chairs. It was something he did every Saturday morning for the Women's Aid Society, and every time it was the same. The old girls started with a list of needs and prayer requests and ended with a full-blown gossip session.

Hap's wife, Doris, was president, and at forty-five the youngest of the group. So Hap hung around tinkering with fix-it jobs in the kitchen or perched on a cold metal folding chair in the corner, a cup of fresh brewed French Roast in one hand and a Louis L'Amour novel in the other. Four days a week he was a jurist laden with a heavy workload and weighty decision making. Saturdays were his day to relax.

Hap had already heard the story from Doris and generally when the birds got going, he tried not to listen. But days like this it was nearly impossible.

"I don't care what anyone says. We need to talk about it." Geraldine Rivers had the floor, and Hap eyed her suspiciously from a distance. Geraldine was a talker from way back and in

charge of the social committee. Generally when the gossip got going, Doris and Geraldine fanned the fires and battled for position. Especially in the heated sessions, and Hap figured this was about as hot as they'd ever get.

"We haven't read the minutes yet." Louella tilted her face in Geraldine's direction. The minutes were still tucked in her unopened Bible, so her comment was more for appearances than anything else.

"Minutes mean nothing at a time like this!" Geraldine nodded toward Doris. "Tell us what you know, will you, Dorie? Several of the ladies here haven't heard what happened."

The vultures nodded in unison, and Doris took her cue.

"It's really very tragic, very sundry. I almost hate to talk about it at church." She paused for effect, smoothing the wrinkles in her polyester dress. "You all know the Conner family, Angela and her husband, Buddy—"

"Buddy's been drinking alcohol at the tavern lately. Louella's husband saw his truck there last week, isn't that true?" Geraldine knew this to be true but enjoyed her own voice too much to be silent for long.

Doris frowned. "Right. He's become a regular drunkard. Now, Angela...well, she's another story. A flirtatious type, not given to things of the Lord." She looked around the circle. "Nearly everyone in Williamsburg has suspected her of cheating on Buddy."

The old birds nodded again.

"Well, yesterday I got a call from Betty Jean Stevens...you've probably noticed she's not here today." Doris's face bunched up like it did when Hap forgot to take out the trash. "Seems all those rumors were true. Betty Jean found out last week that her husband's been seeing Angela Conner on the side. And I don't mean at the Piggly Wiggly."

A collective gasp rose from the circle, and six of the girls started talking at once.

“Bill Stevens and that loose woman?”

“Why, that hypocrite!”

“A deacon at Williamsburg Community has committed adultery?”

“He’ll need to make a public apology before I forgive him!”

“I knew something was happening between those two!”

The cacophony of accusations grew until Geraldine rapped her fist on the table. “Quiet, all of you! Quiet!”

They had obviously forgotten about Hap and his novel, and he gazed at them over the top of his book. The biddies fell silent again, and Geraldine lowered her gaze, trying to look appropriately indignant. “There’s more....”

Doris brought her hands together in a neat fold. “Yes.” She drew a deep breath. “For the past few weeks Bill’s been...taking a motel room with the Conner woman. Apparently she set about trying to seduce him for some time. And...well...”

“There’s a temptress in every town!” Geraldine obviously intended to maintain her presence even if it was Doris’s story.

“Betty Jean says Bill tried to ward off her advances. But last month...he gave in.”

“I do declare, Angela Conner’s a harlot. She’s always been a whore!” Geraldine snapped at a lemon pastry and dabbed fiercely at the filling it left on her lips.

“Yes, I believe she is.” Doris looked glad that Geraldine had said it first. Hap sighed. “But the worst part happened last night.”

The birds were nodding their interest, waiting breathlessly for the rest of the story.

Doris sipped her coffee, and Hap knew she was enjoying the way she held her audience captive. “Last night...Bill

Stevens ran off with her. The two of them. Just like that, they up and left town.”

Several of the women were on their feet firing questions.

“Where did they go?”

“Does anyone else know?”

Doris kept her back stiff, her nose in the air. Hap hated it when she got uppity, and this was one of those times. She answered their questions with all the condemnation she could muster.

“D.C.”

“The capital?”

“Yes. Betty Jean says Bill sat her down last night and told her they were through. Told her he’s in love with Angela, and they’re starting a new life in Washington, D.C.”

“Dear heaven, how’s Betty Jean handling it?”

“She’s ashamed, broken. But she saw it coming. About a year ago, Bill began meeting with Angela to talk about a business venture.”

“Business venture?”

“I guess we all know what type *business*—” Geraldine spat the word the way boys spit watermelon seeds on a summer day—“that was, don’t we?”

Doris hesitated. “Betty Jean’s just thankful the children are grown and out of the house.”

“Angela Conner was bad blood from the get-go. Last year, I think she was seeing that attorney in town. You know, the divorce lawyer.”

“I’m sure you’re right. Everyone this side of Richmond knows the Conner woman and how she was always sniffing around for a man to bed.”

Hap raised an eyebrow. *A man to bed?*

“What about Buddy?” Again Geraldine was determined to keep the discussion alive.

“Buddy’s disgraced, as well he should be. Any man who can’t keep his wife at home *should* be ashamed of himself.” Doris looked at Geraldine for approval. “And I have it on good word that he won’t be back to Williamsburg Community Church.”

“I certainly hope not.” Geraldine finished the pastry and wadded her napkin into a tight ball of crumbs and sticky paper. “The man’s a drunkard.”

There were several nods of approval, then one of the vultures gasped. “Oh, dear heaven. What’s going to happen to little Jade?”

Jade. Hap felt his heart sink. He’d forgotten about the sweet ten-year-old, Buddy and Angela’s only child.

Geraldine did nothing to hide her righteous indignation. “Isn’t she the one who pals around with your Tanner?”

A deep crimson fanned across Doris’s face. “The Conners live in our neighborhood, in Buddy’s mother’s house. Tanner is about the same age as the Conner girl, so it’s only natural that the two play together. It doesn’t happen often.”

Doris wasn’t telling the entire story, and Hap knew why. The reason was an ugly one. He and Dorie had two boys: Harry was twenty and worked for the city dump—a detail Dorie never told the girls at the Women’s Aid Society. Then there was Tanner. Even at twelve years old, Tanner was everything Harry hadn’t been. He was bright and handsome and the finest athlete in primary school. Doris thought he was going to be president of the United States one day. How would it look if he had already made the social mistake of befriending the child of a woman like Angela Conner?

Of course, there were other reasons Doris detested the children’s friendship. More complicated reasons. But Hap didn’t want to think about those on a sunny Saturday in May when

he was supposed to be relaxing. He shifted positions, but the biddies were too caught up to notice him.

“Didn’t you say something about Buddy leaving town?” Geraldine was working on another Danish.

Doris lowered her voice. “Buddy’s moving. Taking the child and getting as far away from Virginia as he can.”

“He must’ve been planning it,” one of the girls chimed in.

“Certainly he saw it coming.”

Doris nodded. “I assume. Either way, Angela and Bill are gone, and by next week, Buddy and the girl will be gone, too.”

“I feel sorry for the child.” Louella fingered the pages of her Bible and the minutes, which remained unread.

Doris huffed. “Daughter of a woman like that! I say good riddance to bad rubbish....”

Hap knew his wife was thinking about their son. He and Jade were more than casual neighborhood pals. They were best friends, and for the past year, Tanner had insisted he was going to marry Jade when they grew up.

Doris was wagging her finger. “You know what the Bible says. Bad company corrupts good character.”

Geraldine raised an eyebrow. “Tanner?”

Doris nodded, her cheeks flushed again. “My boy doesn’t need a girl like Jade around to tempt him. He’ll wind up a father before he’s sixteen.”

“Doris!” Louella seemed genuinely shocked.

“Well, it’s true. I’m glad they’re leaving. Especially after what they did to Betty Jean. She’s my best friend, after all.”

Geraldine clucked her tongue against the roof of her mouth. “Doris is right. Williamsburg is a place filled with old money, old family ties, and old-fashioned values. The Connors are trouble, pure and simple. The girl is sweet now, but with a mother like hers we all know how she’ll wind up. Where are they moving?”

Doris cleared her throat. "Washington state somewhere. Buddy has a brother in a small town. . . . Kelso, I think it is."

"Pity the good folks of Kelso, Washington, when a family like the Conners moves to town." Geraldine nodded her head decisively.

"Now, now. . ." Doris's tone was friendly again, and Hap saw she was making an effort to look the part of a righteous Christian leader. "Let's not be vicious. We need to concern ourselves with Betty Jean. After all, the Conners will be gone soon, out of our lives for good."

Hap knew Doris's last comment was more for his benefit than for anyone else's, and as she said it she looked right at him. None of the biddies knew the real reason Doris felt so strongly about Angela Conner, but Hap did. Her comment hit its mark, and Hap lowered his gaze back to his novel. What had happened between him and Angela Conner was decades old, but that didn't matter. No matter how many years passed, there was one thing Doris Eastman would never forget.

The sins of Angela Conner.

The children rode their bicycles into Tanner's driveway, laid them on the pavement and flopped down on a grassy spot in the center of his neatly manicured front lawn. The discussion had been going on for several minutes.

"I still don't get it. Where'd she go?" Tanner plucked a blade of grass and meticulously tore it into tiny sections.

Jade shrugged and gazed across the street toward the two-story house where she had lived for the past three years. "Daddy says she's gonna meet us in Washington. That's all I know."

Tanner chewed on that for a moment. The whole thing

sounded fishy to him. Mamas didn't leave for no reason. And people didn't move without making plans first. "Do you think she's mad at you?"

"Of course she's not mad. She loves me. I know it." Jade tossed her dark head, and her eyes flashed light green. Tanner had never seen eyes like Jade's. Green like the water of Chesapeake Bay.

"Why doesn't she just come back? Then you wouldn't have to move."

"I told you, they already decided. We're moving to Washington. Mama went on ahead of us, and Daddy says she'll meet us there."

"In Washington?"

"Yes, Tanner. I told you she didn't *leave* me. She just needed some time alone."

Tanner plucked another piece of grass and twisted it between his thumb and forefinger. "But she didn't say good-bye, right?"

Jade sighed, and Tanner saw tears form in her eyes. "I *told* you, Tanner. She left early in the morning. Daddy said she probably knew I would be sad so she left before I woke up. 'Cause she loves me."

"Did she leave a note or anything?"

"Daddy said he didn't need a note." Jade swiped at a tear, and her voice was angrier than before. "He knows where she's going, and that's why we have to move. We need to get there so we can be with Mama again. She would never wanna be alone that long."

Tanner still didn't understand, but he saw that his questions were bothering Jade. He sat up and crossed his legs, studying her curiously. The only time he'd ever seen her cry was two years ago when she jumped a curb on her bike and flew over

the handlebars. But that was different. Now Tanner wasn't sure what to do. He decided to change the subject. "How far away is Washington?"

"Daddy says"—she leaned back on her elbows and stared at the cloudless sky—"it's about as far away as heaven is from hell."

Tanner thought about that for a moment. "But you're coming back, right?"

Jade nodded. "Of course. We'll meet up with Mama, and then Daddy's gotta do a job there. He said it could take all summer. After that we'll come home."

Tanner relaxed. That sounded all right. Even if the whole thing still seemed kind of weird.

"I gotta go." Jade rose and climbed back on her bike. "Daddy needs help packing."

Tanner stood and pushed his hands deep into the worn pockets of his jeans. "You leavin' tomorrow?"

She nodded and worked her toe in tiny circles on the pavement. For a moment Tanner thought she was going to hug him, then at the last second she pushed him in the arm like she always did when she didn't know what to say.

Tanner pushed her back, but not hard enough to move her. "Hey, I'm still going to marry you."

Jade huffed. "Shut up, Tanner. You're a smelly old boy and I'm not going to marry anyone."

"One day you'll think I'm Prince Charming," Tanner teased.

Jade couldn't keep a straight face, and she began giggling. "Oh, okay. Right. Sure... whatever you say." She shook her head dramatically. "I would never marry you, Tanner. Sometimes I think you're crazy."

"Got you smiling, though, didn't I?"

They grinned at each other for a beat and then Jade's smile faded. "I'll see ya later."

Tanner kicked at a patch of grass and sighed. “You better come back when summer’s over.”

Jade’s eyes got watery again. “I *said* I’ll be back.” She began pedaling down his driveway. Halfway home she turned once and waved. Tanner raised one of his palms toward her. He’d heard his parents whispering about Jade and her daddy the other day. Tanner didn’t catch all the details, but it was obvious his mother didn’t think the Conner family was ever coming back.

It was good to know she was wrong.

As Jade disappeared into her house, Tanner felt a subtle reassurance that somehow, someday soon, the two of them would be together again.

Two

June, 1988

DORIS EASTMAN WATCHED THE 727 ANGLE ACROSS THE COLUMBIA River and make its final approach toward the runway. Seated somewhere inside the plane, Tanner would be waiting, excited to see her, anxious to be back in the Northwest.

The thought frustrated her. She would have done anything to keep him at Princeton where he belonged.

Hap must have been crazy to move here in the first place, and now that he was gone, Doris had every intention of getting back to Virginia. Poor old Hap. Retired from the bar two years earlier with dreams of being a lawyer again in Portland. For a tennis shoe company of all things. And despite his history of heart problems.

No matter how many times she thought about his decision, she'd never understand. They had had plenty of money in Virginia and a reputation Hap had earned after twenty years of serving as a superior court judge. Countless social invitations, the best seats at their favorite restaurants, season tickets to the opera...they'd had everything they'd ever wanted. And of course, in Virginia they were closer to Tanner.

Hap hadn't been concerned with any of that. His buddy Mark Westfall, another attorney, had moved to Portland three years before. Mark had played professional basketball after college and eventually took a job in the legal department of the

shoe company. It wasn't long until Mark had convinced Hap that Portland was the place to retire. No snow, no heat, no smog. Only beautiful greenery and endless opportunities.

Doris watched the plane taxi toward the gate and sighed. Good old Mark had forgotten that greenery comes at a price. The rain had been incessant and besides, what kind of retirement was it to take on a second career? And with Hap nearly sixty years old? She'd seen the heart attack coming, even if Hap hadn't. Too many fast-food lunches and too little exercise all heaped on a workload that seemed to grow every month.

They'd moved to Portland in November—to beat the cold Virginia winter, Hap had said. That year Williamsburg hadn't had an inch of snow all season. Oregon, meanwhile, had record-breaking rain.

Even now, with June already here, the cursed Northwest was shrouded in clouds and drizzle. Who could jog or even walk in such a dreadful place? Hap tried it for a while, jogging in the rain. But that lasted only a month. His heart attack came just after Easter.

Now she was still in the process of settling the estate, handling Hap's affairs and packing up the condominium. She planned to be back in Williamsburg by fall, and if she'd had anything to do with it, Tanner could have waited and seen her then. For the life of her, Doris couldn't imagine why her son would want to spend a summer in the Northwest.

He'd explained it a dozen times. Some sort of internship program with the Kelso board of supervisors. If it were anywhere else, Doris would have been pleased with the assignment. But Kelso? Of all the places in the world, her son had chosen to take an internship in Kelso, Washington?

Of course, Kelso was still big enough that the odds of them running into each other were slim. Even if they did, Doris

doubted they'd recognize each other. Jade had moved away eleven years ago, after all.

Still...it worried her.

She remembered talking with Tanner about it last week. "Son, I don't understand. Why Kelso?" Doris was not about to mention the fact that Jade might still live there. Tanner hadn't brought up the girl's name in years; certainly he had no idea that she had moved to Kelso way back when.

"I told you, Mom. I want to spend weekends with you, going through Dad's stuff, helping you pack for the move. The board of supervisors had an internship available in Kelso. It's near Portland. I had all the qualifications. Seemed like a perfect match to me."

Doris tried to detect anything false in her son's voice, but there was nothing. He didn't remember Jade; wouldn't look her up. The whole thing was just a coincidence.

She moved closer to the window and wondered again why she was so worried. There were thousands of loose girls prowling about for a man like Tanner—and Jade Conner would certainly be a loose girl. Just like her dreadful mother. Poor Betty Jean had never been the same after Angela Conner ran off with Bill.

But Doris had her own reasons for hating the Conner woman. Reasons no one knew anything about. Doris felt the sting of angry tears, and she banished the memories from her mind.

She would hate Angela Conner until the day she died.

Five years ago Doris got word from one of the women at the Aid's Society that Buddy and Jade were still living in Kelso. Someone knew someone whose brother maintained contact with the family. Apparently Buddy was an unemployed drunkard, and Jade ran the streets. If that were true—and Doris was

sure it was—then there was no need to worry about Tanner. He'd never be interested in a girl who ran the streets, a girl who probably slept around, a girl with a scandalous past.

A girl whose mother had very nearly ruined their lives.

The college girls Tanner dated were virginal types, clean-cut and wholesome. Even then there had never been anyone serious. His faith wouldn't allow it.

That was another irksome thing. Tanner's incessant faith.

She and Hap had brought him up in the church and left it at that. A modest faith could have been an asset to his political future. Instead he'd taken to reading the Bible and quoting Scripture. He attended some crazy nondenominational church on campus and talked about God's will this and God's will that.

Doris hoped it was only a stage, something he'd outgrow. There was no room in public office for religious fanaticism. Especially in one who leaned as heavily to the right as Tanner did.

His obsession with religion would pass, Doris was certain about it. Just like his fascination with Jade. For three years after she moved he had asked about her and when she was coming back. Doris remembered the time when Tanner was nearly fifteen and he'd wandered into the backyard where she was weeding.

"Mama, tell me the truth. Jade isn't coming back, is she? Not ever." Tanner was gangly in those days, all knobby knees and giant blue eyes.

Doris had leaned back on her heels and shook the soil from her work gloves. "Why must you persist in asking such questions, Tanner? What is it about Jade? She's been gone nearly three years."

"I'm going to marry her one day, Mama. How can I marry her if she doesn't come back?"

Doris remembered feeling lightheaded at the suggestion of Tanner and Jade wedded in matrimony. She had forced herself to take deep breaths. The daughter of a harlot? Doris had to stifle the anger that rose within her. “Son, you’re too young to know who you want to marry.”

“I’m not too young, Mama. I know what I want, and I want to marry Jade Conner. I decided a long time ago.”

Doris wanted to tell him the girl was worthless, trash. A weed in a garden chock full of roses. Instead she smiled warmly at the boy before her. “Well, dear, first she’ll have to move back to Virginia. And honestly I don’t see that happening.”

“I can’t remember where she moved. Where was it, Mama? Was it Washington, D.C.? Maybe I can get her address and write to her.”

Doris stopped herself before spurning out the city and state. “I’m not really sure, actually. Out west somewhere, I think.” She had resumed her gardening, loosening a weed and then pulling it out from the root.

Tanner had crossed his arms angrily. “I’m going to marry her one day, Mama. Even if I have to search the whole country and find her myself.”

An attendant announced the arrival of Tanner’s flight, and Doris blinked back her son’s words, shuddering at the memory. If anything had been an act of God, it was the fact that Jade Conner never came back to Williamsburg, Virginia.

Doris folded her hands and noticed her palms were sweaty. Her fears about the girl were irrational, weren’t they? Tanner couldn’t possibly know Jade lived in Kelso. It was coincidence, pure and simple. What could go wrong when he would only be in town a single summer? The weeks would dissolve in an instant, and then he’d fly back to New Jersey, back to Princeton where he could prepare for his senior year.

Doris didn't know what his first assignment would be when he graduated, but she knew it would be political in nature. He had been groomed for public office since he was a small boy. Every friendship, every activity, every article of clothing, every class, each student government office, even his role as an award-winning athlete was a line on what had become a stellar resume. She'd designed a packet on Tanner's accomplishments midway through his junior year and touted it to all the Ivy League schools. Scholarship offers had been plentiful.

He and Hap had complained for a while, thinking Tanner would be better off at a West Coast school where he could play sports. But finally she'd convinced them. A Princeton education would be priceless. Besides, the time had come to stop playing games. Tanner had a brilliant future at hand and not a moment to waste. Now he was nearly ready. He would graduate next summer, and the climb would begin, one rung at a time.

People were streaming through the gate with that bewildered look travelers wore. She moved closer, and there at the back of the pack she saw him. He was nearly a head taller than the masses, and he drew the stares of several women in the crowd. People had always noticed Tanner. He had a magnetic quality that couldn't be taught or trained. It was more of a birthright. As he drew closer, she saw his skin had lost the paleness of three months ago when he'd flown out for Hap's memorial service. He had some color now, and he was taking on a more pronounced jawline. *Perfect. The public loves a good-looking politician with a strong jawline.*

He was going to look wonderful in the White House.

"Mother, you look lovely as always." Tanner strode toward her, wrapped her in a hug, and grinned.

They made small talk, and he kept one arm around her