

CHRIS FABRY

FROM THE BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *Dogwood*

NOT IN THE HEART



PRAISE FOR CHRIS FABRY

“A mesmerizing tale . . . [*Almost Heaven*] will surprise readers in the best possible way; plot twists unfold and unexpected character transformations occur throughout this tender story.”

PUBLISHERS WEEKLY

“Fabry has a true gift for prose, and [*Almost Heaven*] is amazing. You’ll most definitely want to move this to the top of your ‘to buy’ list.”

***ROMANTIC TIMES*, 4½-STAR TOP PICK REVIEW**

“Fabry is a talented writer with a lilting flow to his words.”

CROSSWALK.COM

“[*June Bug*] is a stunning success, and readers will find themselves responding with enthusiastic inner applause.”

PUBLISHERS WEEKLY

“An involving novel with enough plot twists and dramatic tension to keep readers turning the pages.”

BOOKLIST

“Engrossing and entertaining . . . [an] unforgettable tale.”

ROMANTIC TIMES

“A captivating story. . . .”

CHRISTIANBOOKPREVIEWS.COM

“Precise details of places and experiences immediately set you in the story, and the complex, likable characters give *June Bug* the enduring quality of a classic.”

TITLETRAKK.COM

“I haven’t read anything so riveting and unforgettable since *Redeeming Love* by Francine Rivers. Fabry has penned a remarkable love story, one that’s filled with sacrifice, hope, and forgiveness!”

NOVEL REVIEWS

“Few authors can weave such unique stories with such perfect language. . . . Fabry is an artist with words. All I can say is: Read his novels.”

EXAMINER.COM

“Once the story starts cooking, [*Dogwood*] is difficult to put down, what with Fabry’s surprising plot resolution and themes of forgiveness, sacrificial love, and suffering.”

PUBLISHERS WEEKLY

“Ultimately a story of love and forgiveness, [*Dogwood*] should appeal to a wide audience.”

CBA RETAILERS + RESOURCES

“A book about deep secrets, the effort it takes to heal catastrophic hurts, and a thriller with an excellent plot climax.”

1340MAGBOOKS.COM

“Solidly literary fiction with deep, flawed characters and beautiful prose, *Dogwood* also contains a mystery within the story that adds tension and a deepening plot.”

NOVEL REVIEWS

“*Dogwood* will captivate you from cover to cover.”

READERVIEWS.COM

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Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.
Carol Stream, Illinois

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Designed by Jacqueline L. Nuñez

Edited by Sarah Mason

Published in association with Creative Trust Literary Group, 5141 Virginia Way, Suite 320, Brentwood, Tennessee 37027, www.creativetrust.com.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Fabry, Chris, date.

Not in the heart / Chris Fabry.

p. cm.

ISBN 978-1-4143-4861-2 (sc)

1. Fatherhood—Fiction. 2. Heart—Transplantation—Fiction. I. Title.

PS3556.A26N68 2012

813'.54—dc23

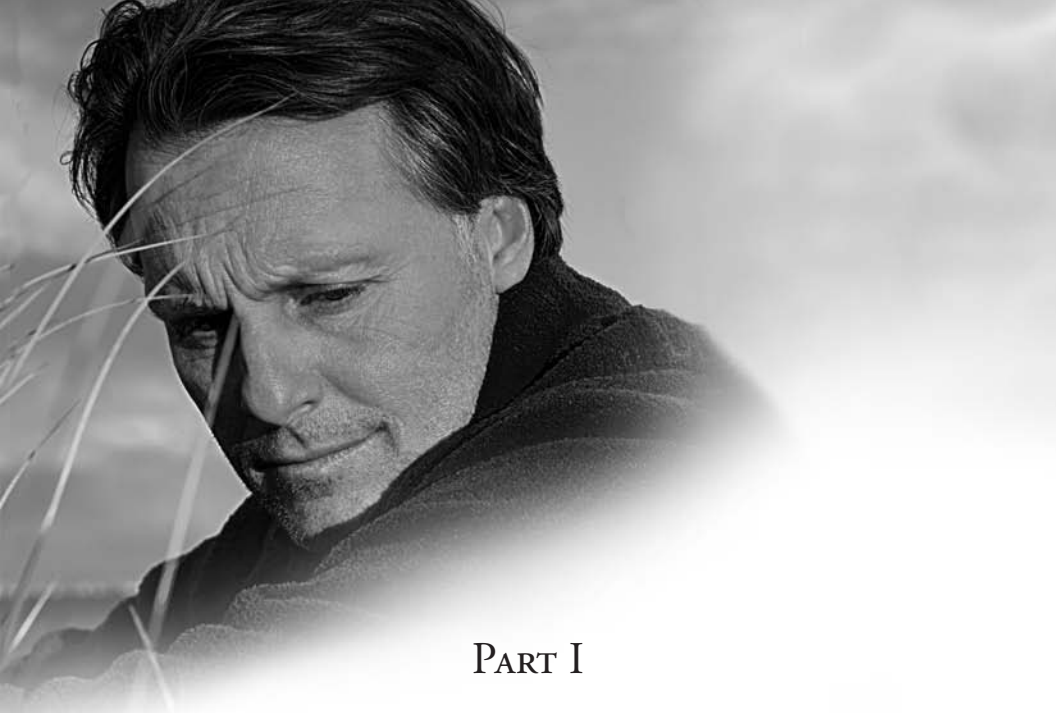
2011031337

Printed in the United States of America

18 17 16 15 14 13 12

7 6 5 4 3 2 1

For the addicted and those who love them.



PART I

Life is a gamble, at terrible odds—if it was a bet,
you wouldn't take it.

TOM STOPPARD



CHAPTER I

30 DAYS BEFORE EXECUTION

The trouble with my wife began when she needed Jesus and I needed a cat. Life can be that way. That's part of the reason I was on Sanibel Island in the cottage I had always dreamed of owning and she was in Tallahassee tending to the sick son of our youth. But it's more complicated. There was more troubling me than religion or people who think problems can be solved with a leap of faith.

Said cottage was a tiny house that seems to be the rage among those who believe we are warming the planet with each exhale. I didn't buy it because of that, but I recycle my Coors Light cans. My little contribution to the cause. Lately it's been a hefty contribution. There was one bedroom in the back and a little bathroom, a walk-through kitchen, and a living area that I used as an office.

Murrow usually sat in the window looking out at the beach with as much interest as I have in paying both of my mortgages. It's not that I don't want to pay. I can't.

I was on the bed, surfing news sites, fueling the ache about my lack of direction and lack of a job. The satellite TV company disconnected me a few months ago, so I got my news online from the unprotected network of a neighbor who can't encrypt his wireless router.

I could see the downsizing coming in every area of the conglomerate media company. I knew it would hit the newsroom, but I always thought when the music stopped, I would have a chair. What I got was severance, a pat on the back, and a shelf full of awards I stuffed into a suitcase that sat in the attic of a cottage I couldn't afford.

I closed my laptop and told Murrow I'd be back, as if she cared, and walked barefoot out the front door and down the long, wooden stairway to the beach. I bought this cottage for these long, head-clearing walks. The sound of the waves crashing against doubts and fears. The smell of the ocean and its salty cycle of life and death.

A mom and a dad dressed in white strolled along the beach with two kids who squealed every time the water came close.

I walked the other way.

The phone rang as I passed a dead seagull. Not a good omen.

"Tru, it's me."

The woman of my dreams. The woman of my nightmares. Everything good and bad about my life. The "I do" that "I didn't."

"Ellen. What's up?"

"How are you?" She said it with a measure of compassion, as if she weren't holding back years of boiling anger. As if she didn't

have something else she wanted to ask me and wasn't just setting the stage for the coup de grâce.

"I'm good. Just taking a walk on the beach."

Wish you weren't here. Wish you weren't still in my head. Wish you hadn't called. Wish the last twenty years were something I could bury in the sand. What were you thinking marrying a guy like me? My life is a sand castle and my days are wind and water.

"Hear anything back yet? Any offers?"

"There's nothing plural about my job prospects. Not even singular. I did hear from the Fox station in Des Moines yesterday. They went with somebody with longer hair and bigger lungs."

She spoke with a wry smile. "It's only a matter of time; you know that."

"Right. It's always been a matter of time, hasn't it?"

She let the irony hang there between us, and I could picture her in her wedding dress and without it. Then the first time we met in the university newsroom, big glasses and frilly blouse. Hair that smelled like the ocean and felt like silk. A sharp wit, infectious laugh, and the tenacity of a bloodhound on every story she covered. I thought we were always going to be on the same page, but somehow I kept chasing headlines and she moved to the Life section.

"I have something that might interest you," she said.

"How old is she?" I'm not always a smart aleck with the people I love. When I'm asleep, they tell me I don't say much of anything.

"It's not a she. It's a he with a pretty good story. A great story. A life changer."

"Not into guys."

She sighed and plowed ahead. "Have you heard of Terrelle Conley?"

That was like asking a history major if she'd ever heard of Alexis de Tocqueville. "I know he's facing the needle."

"Right. Next month."

"Wonder what his last meal will be. How do they choose that anyway? Shrimp and steak or lobster bisque? Macaroni and cheese? How can you enjoy a meal knowing you only have hours left? Or what movie to watch? What would you choose?"

"I know his wife, Oleta. She wants somebody to write the story from his perspective. The whole family does."

I laughed. "In thirty days or less."

"They've scraped up some money. Not much, but it could probably help."

"How much is 'probably'?"

"I don't know exactly, but I was thinking you could call Gina and find out if—"

"I'm not with Gina or the agency anymore. She dropped me. Said it was a hard decision on their part. I guess they took a vote."

"I'm sorry."

"Just another bump in the literary highway. I don't think writing is my thing, anyway." I said it halfheartedly, coaxing some kind of compliment.

"You're a great writer," she obliged. "You haven't had as many opportunities lately, but . . ."

"I haven't had any politicians who want to be president or sports stars who've been accused of steroids approach me in a few years. That's what you mean," I said. "Where did you meet Oleta?"

"Oleta. I met her at church."

Groan. How did I know that was coming?

I paused at a sand castle that had been constructed with several five-gallon buckets. Towels and chairs had been abandoned for

the moment. Water filled the moat, and I heard laughter from a bungalow perched like a lighthouse above. A couple in love.

“You must have some idea of how much.”

“A few thousand. We didn’t talk about that. The important thing . . . it’s not just an opportunity for you. It’s for Aiden.”

“Now you’re really getting cryptic. You want to back up?”

“Terrelle’s wife is in a study group with me. She’s known about Aiden’s condition for years. Always asks for updates. Terrelle came up with the idea—he wants to be a donor. A second chance for Aiden.”

I should have been doing cartwheels. Our eighteen-year-old son could get a new lease on life? Instead, I was skeptical, like any good journalist. “Ellen, there’s no chance. Do you know how long something like that would take?”

“It’s been in process for a while.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“You haven’t exactly been available.”

“The prison system, the authorities, they’ll never let this—”

“The governor is taking it seriously. I’ve heard he’s working with the legislature. It’s not a done deal, but there’s a chance.”

The governor. The hair rose on the back of my neck.

“Ellen, there’s some law firm in Tallahassee salivating at all the appeals and counterappeals that are going to happen. This is less than a long shot.”

“Yeah, but right now it’s looking like a pretty good long shot.” There was emotion in her voice and for the first time I noticed noise in the background.

“Where are you?”

She swallowed hard and I imagined her wiping away a tear. My wife has had plenty of practice.

“At the hospital again,” she said. “ICU.”

I cursed under my breath and away from the phone. Not just because of all the hospital bills I knew were coming my way, but also because this was my son. I’ll be honest—the bills were the first thing I thought of, but picturing him hooked up to tubes and needles again crushed me.

“How is he?”

“Not good. They’re monitoring him. Same story.”

“How long have you been there?”

“Since late last night. He was having trouble breathing. Lots of pain. He asks about you.”

Guilt. She had to get that in there, didn’t she?

“Tell him to hang in there, okay?”

“Come see him. It would mean so much.”

“Yeah. I will.” I said it fast, though I knew I’d have to launder all the cat hair from my clothes because Aiden’s deathly allergic to cats just like I’m allergic to the inside of the death chamber.

Someone spoke over the intercom near her and the sound took me back to those first days when I wasn’t as scared of hospitals. Back then I could watch a movie or a TV show with a medical setting. Now I can’t even watch the TV promos. My chest gets tight and the smell of alcohol and Betadine and the shape of needles invades, mingling with the cries of a young child in pain and another memory of a man on a gurney.

We discovered Aiden’s heart malady by accident. Ellen was into natural food, natural medicine, whole-grain seaweed sandwiches and eggs that came from free-range chickens who had bedtime stories read to them each night before they settled into their nests. Natural childbirth with a midwife. All that stuff. She was convinced antibiotics were the forbidden fruit, so she didn’t run to

the HMO every time our kids were sick. But something told her to take Abby in for some chest congestion she couldn't get rid of. Aiden was with her, and on a lark the doctor placed the stethoscope on his chest.

Ellen cried when she tried to explain the look on the woman's face. They'd missed it when he was born.

That sent us on a crash course of congenital heart defects and a series of surgeries and treatments that would change our lives. Ellen hates hospitals as much as I do, but you do what you must for your kids.

"Terrelle has the same blood type," Ellen said. "He's about the same size as Aiden, maybe a little smaller, which is good."

"Ellen, you know this is not going to happen, right? There are so many hoops and holes. They don't let doctors execute people."

"There are guidelines, but they don't have a problem harvesting organs from an already-deceased donor."

"Anybody who's pro-life will howl. I thought you were pro-life."

"I am, but this is something Terrelle wants."

"Doesn't matter. They harvest organs from prisoners in China, but we're not in China." Though you wouldn't know it by shopping at Walmart.

"I know all that. But I also know my son is going to die. And Terrelle and his wife want something good to come out of their tragedy. They asked if you would write his story. I got to thinking that maybe . . ."

She broke a little and hearing her cry felt like some lonely prayer drifting away and hitting the empty shores of heaven. Not that I believe there is one, but you know, metaphorically speaking.

"You were thinking what?" I said.

"Maybe all of this is not really for Aiden. Maybe all we've been

through in the last eighteen years is for somebody else. If they deny Terrelle's request and Aiden doesn't make it, maybe writing this story will make a difference for someone down the road."

Her altruism was more than I could handle. "Look, I don't care about all the people with sick kids. I don't care about prisoners who want to make up for their crimes. I don't care about protesters or the politicians who've found a wedge issue. I just want my son to live. Is that asking too much?"

The emotion surprised me and I noticed the family in white had changed direction but now quickly herded their children away from me.

It was Ellen's turn to sound collected. "Do you have time to work on something like that in the next thirty days? It would at least pay a few bills."

"If they're trying to get a stay of execution, they need to go straight to the press. Forget a book deal, forget a magazine exposé—it's already too late. Get somebody at one of the local stations to pick it up and run with it—"

"Tru, they don't want a stay. He wants to give his heart to Aiden. And somebody has to get the story down before it's over. No matter how it goes, this will make a great story."

I was already mulling titles in my head. *A Heart from Death Row. Change of Heart. Pitter-Pat. Life in Vein. Aorta Made a Better Choice.*

She continued, "They know your history. What you've seen. How you're against the death penalty and why. For all your faults, Tru, you're the best reporter I've ever known. You get to the heart of the story like nobody else. I think you should consider it."

The Heart of the Story. Another good title. I could tell she was

buttering me up. I love being buttered up by lovely women. But I hate the complications of life with beautiful women.

“I don’t write evangelical tracts.”

“Why are you so stubborn?” she whisper-screamed at me. Her voice had an echo like she had moved into the bathroom or stairwell. “Why do you have to look at this as some kind of spiritual conspiracy against you instead of a gift? This is being handed to you on a platter. Don’t push it away. I don’t care if you agree with them about God. You didn’t agree with every sports figure or politician.”

“The only way I know how to do this job is to ferret out the truth and tell it. Flat out. The way I see it. And if you’re expecting me to throw in the third verse of a hymn every other chapter and quote the Gospel of Terrelle, I can’t do that. Call somebody from the Christian right.”

“Tru, it’s because of who you are and how you tell the story that they want you. Just talk with her. Let her explain. If you don’t like the situation, they’ll go somewhere else. But they have to act quickly.”

The sun was coming down behind me and the wind picked up off the water. I could smell the first hint of an impending storm. Or maybe I forgot my deodorant.

“I’ll think about it.”

I hadn’t been gone that long, but as I walked up the stairs, I heard a vehicle pulling away from the house. The taillights had disappeared into the distance by the time I made it to my front door.

Murrow was still in the window, looking down on me with that superior look. *Humans are such a waste of oxygen*, she seemed to say. Maybe she was right. Maybe we are a waste of oxygen and the best thing would be for us to be wiped from the planet. But something

inside said that wasn't true. Something inside pushed me to keep moving, like an ant dragging a piece of grass along the sidewalk until a strong wind blows it away. The ant picks up another and starts over. I get exhausted just watching them.

On the front door was a legal document stating that whereby and forthwith said mortgage company had begun said process with an intent to foreclose and otherwise vacate said occupant's tail onto the street to wit and wheretofore so help them God, amen. I had received several such letters in the mail, filing them carefully, hoping the rising tide of foreclosures would save my little cottage until I got a new job.

I ripped the notice down and used it to wipe the sand from my feet. And then a thought struck. A horrible, no-good, bad thought. The newspaper. They published my name with each intent to foreclose. That meant others would know where I was. Others, as in people I owed. Bad people.

Another car passed, slowly. Tinted windows. A low rumble of expensive metal and fuel.

I hurried to the back of the little house and pulled out every suitcase I could find and stowed everything of value. Books. Pictures of me with newsmakers. Cloudy memories of trips abroad, war zones, interviews with generals and dignitaries who went on to fame or perished in motorcades that didn't make it through IEDs.

It was hard not to sit and absorb the memories, but the passing car gave urgency. I jammed every journal and notebook in with the pictures, then put one suitcase with clothes in the trunk of my car and took the rest on my shoulder down the sandy path to the Grahams' house. Sweet people. He retired from the Air Force and they moved for the sun and salty air. Both should have died long

ago from arthritis and other maladies, but they were out walking the beach every day like two faithful dogs, paw in paw.

Jack and Millie were on the front porch, and I asked if I could borrow some space in their garage for a suitcase or two. “I need to take a trip. Someone new will be living in my house.”

“Relatives coming?”

“No, someone from the Bank of America wants it.”

Millie struggled to get out of her rocker and stood by a white column near the front door. “If you need help, Truman, we’d be glad to.”

Jack nodded and the gesture almost brought tears to my eyes. “How much are you short?” he said.

“Just a spot in the garage is all I need.”

“What about your cat?” Millie said.

“Murrow’s going with me.”

“If we can do anything at all . . .,” Jack’s voice trailed.

“I appreciate it. I appreciate both of you. Thanks for your kindness.”

“We pray for Aiden every day,” Millie said.

The garage was spotless. Everything hanging up or neatly placed on shelves. I should have joined the Air Force. In the back I found an empty space near some gardening tools. I shook Jack’s hand gently and gave Millie a hug. I only turned and looked at them once as I walked back to the house. They stood like sentinels, the fading light of the sun casting a golden glow around them and their house.

When Murrow saw the cat carrier, she bolted under the sofa and I threatened to sell her to the local Chinese restaurant. An open can of StarKist and my tender, compassionate voice helped coax her into the carrier, and we were off.

I texted my wife: Will call your friend tomorrow. Can I use Abby's room?

The phone buzzed in my shirt pocket as I drove along the causeway into darkening clouds. Key under frog. No cats. The next text gave Oleta's number and a short message. You were made for this story.

Maybe she was right. Maybe I was the one for this job. One loser telling the story of his kindred spirit. I sure didn't have anything better to do. But with the window down and my hand out, being pushed back by the cool air, it felt less like the start of a new chapter and more like the end of one.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

CHRIS FABRY is a 1982 graduate of the W. Page Pitt School of Journalism at Marshall University and a native of West Virginia. He is heard on Moody Radio's *Chris Fabry Live!*, *Love Worth Finding*, and *Building Relationships with Dr. Gary Chapman*. He and his wife, Andrea, are the parents of nine children. Chris has published more than seventy books for adults and children. His novel *Dogwood* won a Christy Award in 2009. In 2011 *Almost Heaven* won a Christy Award and the ECPA Christian Book Award for fiction. You can visit his website at www.chrisfabry.com.



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