

# The Tinderbox Tapes

An Inspirational Novel

Brian Hicks



Nashville, Tennessee

***“If we all did the things we are capable of doing,  
we would literally astound ourselves.”***

- Thomas Edison

*For  
Tina, Carter, Evans and Bradley*

## ONE

For thirty days every year, Michael Turner was hooked on Imodium like Willy Wonka on Milk Duds. He hadn't planned it that way, which is precisely why it was that way. Giving no thought to the consequences, he first got engaged to a girl whose birthday was seven days after Christmas, then went for the trifecta and married her on January 25<sup>th</sup>. The three biggest gift-giving days of their relationship were just thirty days apart, and he was married to Julie Claus.

Julie Turner was a born gift-giver. "Some people can sing and dance," she'd say, "I give gifts." She considered it a Divine calling, and it showed.

"If the thought counts," she told him more than once, "the gift and the wrapping tell the person what you're thinking. It's always in the little things."

If his wife's assertion was correct, Michael's gifts said, "I give up." That's not to say he didn't give gifts; he just didn't give good ones. She never said she was disappointed, but he knew she was, and his self-imposed pressure stymied his already deficient creativity.

He didn't know why he was so bad at it, though it likely had something to do with *the* gift. Julie didn't know about that, and there was no reason to tell her; it didn't involve her. Still, she would make him talk about it, and what purpose would that serve? It was twenty-five years ago and he didn't lose sleep over it anymore. Besides, this anniversary was different. This year, for the first time in a decade, he had a plan.

Hoping to relax his increasingly spastic colon, he suggested that instead of buying presents, she should let him plan a weekend getaway at a surprise location. They could use their time away from the boys to reconnect; "quality time," he called it.

"The trip," he said, "is the gift." To his amazement, she agreed.

Today there were no nerves; no unrealistic expectations; no last-minute sprints to the mall, and his only anxiety was whether the resort -- a place they'd never been -- would meet expectations. If it's true that you get what you pay for, however, he felt good about his odds.

So it was with the pride of a puppy fetching a ball the first time that he turned the black Ford Explorer onto Florida's scenic highway 30-A, just east of Destin.

"Okay," she said, clapping her hands together. "I've been good for almost four hours, but I am D-I-dying! Where are we going?"

"You'll see in about thirty seconds." He smiled as he reached over and squeezed her hand three times. *I...love...you*. She squeezed four times in return. *I...love...you...too*. They'd been doing it since high school.

They arrived at the Watercolor Inn & Resort, located in the community of the same name, just before seven o'clock in the evening. Clouds veiled the moonlight as they drove into the 500-acre Gulfside community of million dollar homes. A few scattered lights from wood cottages with metal roofs and large wraparound porches cast a faint glow in the darkness; a stark contrast to the high-rise condominiums and bustling activity of Destin, and Michael was pleased with himself.

As he slowed the Ford to the posted speed of 20 miles per hour, they noticed the streetlights. Each one was capped by a metal lampshade, covered with tiny star-shaped cutouts, and looked like a child's night light. They lined both sides of the two-lane road that meandered through the resort, as if ushering the couple into a Thomas Kinkade painting.

"How cute are those." She gave his hand an approving squeeze.

"Puh-lease," he teased. "Those are no big deal. We made those when I was a kid. Ice pick and a bucket, and you're all set." When placed over a flashlight, it made for great fun on summer nights in the backyard with his dad -- his real dad. He hadn't thought of it in years.

The beachfront hotel appeared deserted as he turned into the parking lot.

"Pretty quiet," he observed; then, noticing a license plate from Ontario, "Looks like it's us and the snowbirds."

The tiny parking lot was dotted with the same lamps that had escorted them into the community, producing light that was more ambient than practical. The four-story hotel was constructed so that, from the outside, it appeared to have only two floors. It didn't so much sit on the sand as nestle in it, like it had been lowered into place by a crane, without disturbing the dunes and indigenous foliage surrounding it.

"It's perfect." She unbuckled her seatbelt, crossed one leg under the other and turned toward the door, gaping through the window like a child arriving at Disney World.

He couldn't suppress the grin that burst onto his face. He had already impressed her, and there were more surprises to come. *The trip is the gift*, he thought. *Why didn't I think of this 10 years ago?*

He slowed further, allowing her to fully experience the moment, before creeping to a halt beneath the portico extending from the front door over the drive, where they were met by a grey-haired man serving double duty as valet and bellman. He looked more like a PGA pro, in navy golf pants and matching turtleneck that peeked from the top of his moss green fleece pullover emblazoned with the inn's logo on the left breast.

"Welcome to Watercolor," he greeted them with a smile as he opened Julie's door and the cool January air rushed inside. His baritone voice was almost as soothing as the place itself. "This your first stay with us?"

“Yessir it is,” Michael answered, grabbing his phone and sliding from the driver’s seat onto the pavement. It was a welcome break after the nonstop drive. He stretched his arms high over his head, then pulled his jacket from the backseat and walked to the rear of the SUV.

“Special occasion?” The bellman waited patiently with his luggage cart as Julie collected her Diet Coke and the pillow she never left home without.

“Anniversary,” he replied, opening the rear gate.

“How many years?” The bellman joined him behind the Ford and Julie walked to the front doors of the inn, admiring the long, lean handles that were sculpted to resemble clusters of sea oats.

“Um, ten.”

“Well, congratulations. Thanks for celebrating with us. Let me get those, and if you need anything while you’re here, just call down and ask for Percy.”

“Thank you, Percy,” he replied, placing a large black suitcase on the cart while the bellman removed a red paisley Vera Bradley duffle.

“Is this one yours?” Percy asked.

Michael chuckled and decided he liked the old man.

“Leave your keys in the truck and I’ll park it for you later,” Percy continued. “Take your time checking in. Your bags will be in the room when you get there.”

Michael handed him a twenty dollar bill and thanked him. He didn’t have twenty dollars to tip a bellman, but there was something about the first impression of this place that made him feel like a millionaire and he felt compelled to play the part.

His cousin was once a valet in Atlanta, and a pro basketball player handed him a hundred dollar bill to park his Bentley. For some reason, that story had stuck with him. The Ford wasn’t a Bentley and the twenty wasn’t a hundred, but it still felt good to press the likeness of Andrew Jackson into Percy’s hand.

*It’s only this one time, he reasoned, and next time I’ll be able to just hand it to him without a thought.* He challenged himself just as he had done every time he tipped someone his entire adult life.

The room on the third floor made the impression he hoped it would. The white linens on the king-size bed were trimmed in the same pale blue that covered the walls; the furniture slip-covered in khaki.

“Beachy,” he said, making his way to the balcony.

She explored the bathroom. Its most prominent feature was a large white subway-tiled shower, with inset windows looking into the sleeping area on the other side. It was covered in white wainscoting that rose to meet the glass of the shower walls, with a row of hooks upon which hung 2 thick terry cloth robes.

“Hey Hon,” he called to Julie as he walked back into the room, “in the daylight I bet you can see the ocean from the shower!”

“Oh, look at this.” She was inspecting the silver tubes of shampoo, aloe and conditioner sitting on the black soapstone countertop. They were fashioned after small tubes of paint. “Watercolor...Very cute, babe. You did so good.”

She wrapped her arms around him and kissed him.

“It’s a long way from the Dogwood Inn,” he said.

“Don’t be picking on that bed and breakfast. We had a great honeymoon.”

She was right, but this was still an improvement over the old, cold house in the North Georgia Mountains; the kind of step up you'd expect after ten years of marriage. It was mostly make believe, of course. They couldn't afford it today any more than they could a decade ago, but he had gotten her here this weekend, and that was something.

"What time is dinner?"

He glanced at his watch. "Bout thirty minutes, but it's just down the hall."

"Oh, good." She walked over to the large black suitcase which Percy had placed on a wooden luggage stand beside the closet. "What are you wearing?"

"Just jeans and my cool dude shirt," he said, referring to the one he'd picked up on a recent trip to Nashville. It was long-sleeved and white, with a large Cross of St. James motif embroidered in steel blue on the back. There was a small label inside the collar that read, "Enough excuses. Just get it done." He considered it fate that he'd been drawn to the one shirt in the store with that specific admonition, so he bought it. Its blend of cotton and rayon felt like velvet and looked like something Billy Ray Cyrus would wear onstage. He wasn't sure he had the confidence to pull it off, so he hadn't worn it before.

Tonight, though, he was indomitable. To be sure, she would unveil a surprise of her own before the night was over, but this year he had already matched her. If the trip was indeed the gift, maybe Julie Claus had finally found her Santa.

"Okay," she said as she walked back into the bathroom, "I'll be ready in a sec." Then, pointing to the Vera Bradley bag sitting on the sofa, "Don't be nosing around."

"I don't know what you're talking about."