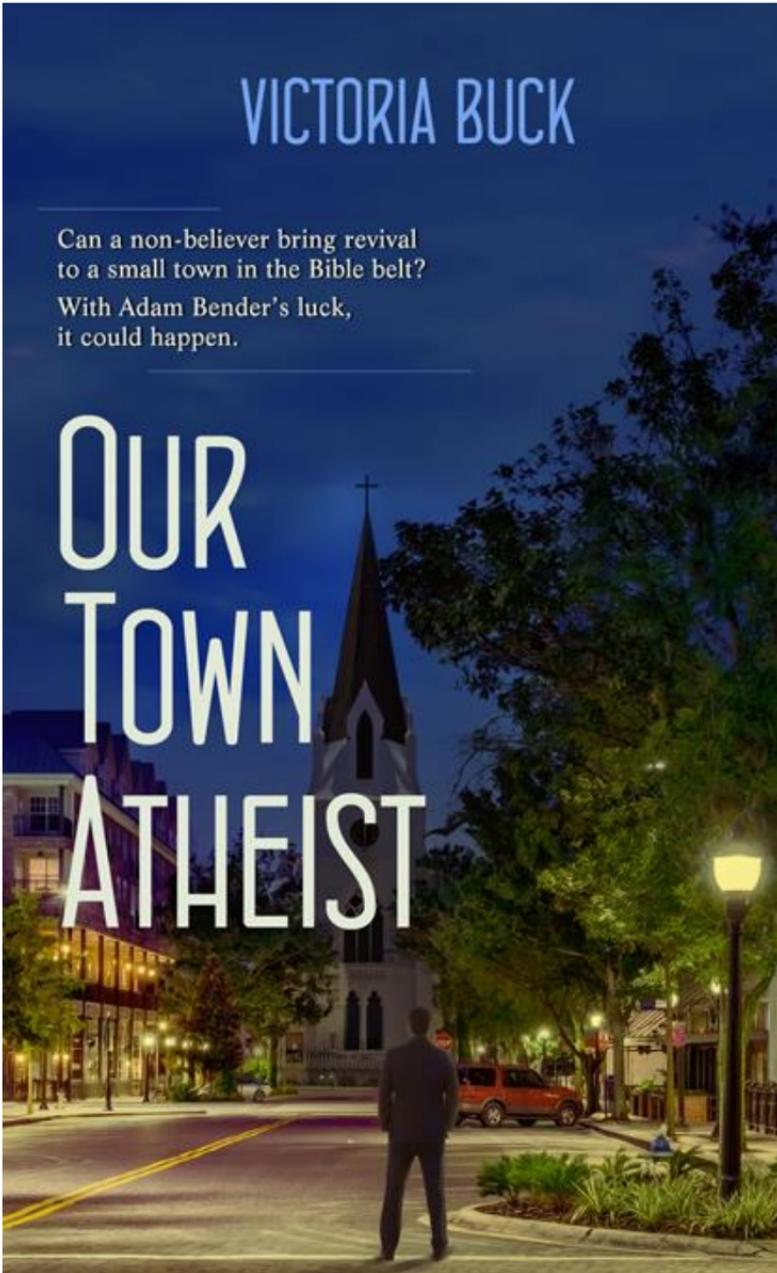


VICTORIA BUCK

Can a non-believer bring revival
to a small town in the Bible belt?

With Adam Bender's luck,
it could happen.

OUR TOWN ATHEIST



Our Town
Atheist

Victoria Buck

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales, is entirely coincidental.

Our Town Atheist
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Dedication

To Word Weavers International, Volusia Group

*The only credible entities are time and money. Even then,
one slips away. The other, if handled properly, does not.
That's something to believe in. ~ Adam Bender*

1

Adam's routine allotted a seven-minute walk from the café to the bank he managed in the small town of Crossroads, Georgia. Only today, the minutes stretched to twelve while his loan officer idled on the sidewalk exchanging compliments with a paralegal. Not wanting to appear rude, Adam deferred until the long-legged woman ascended the steps to her office.

"Blake, can we get back to work now?" Adam asked over his shoulder as he hurried toward the corner. "We're late."

"So, we took a long lunch." Blake caught up with him. "Who's going to complain—those dull girls you hired? I'm telling you we'd draw in more customers if the tellers were hot."

"They're qualified for the job." Adam swung the bank's glass door open and charged into the lobby.

“You, on the other hand...”

He first noted the crunch of broken glass beneath his oxfords. The next oddity to strike him was the absence of tellers behind the counter. Where were the dull girls?

The door thumped shut behind him.

The most disturbing abnormality to grip Adam’s attention, and his throat, was a masked man fingering the trigger of a gun.

The gloved hand threatened to cut off his air supply, but Adam couldn’t panic. He shifted his eyes upward. The shattered security camera dangled from a wire.

Footsteps scuttled behind him.

“Get away from the door,” the man shouted. The handgun tendered a pop, and Blake yelped.

With a flinch, Adam angled his vision to the right but resolved not to move.

The man dug into the arteries on either side of Adam’s neck. “Get back there with the women.” He jerked Adam to the middle of the small reception area and shoved him backward. Then he leveled the gun at Blake. “You—in the corner. Both of you, toss your cell phones.”

Adam tumbled to the floor, gave up his phone, and crawled to the open side of the counter. The tellers lay flat on their stomachs. Belinda lifted her head, and her terrified gaze met Adam’s. Mattie trembled, her face planted on the rubber mat where her feet should be.

Adam peered back into the lobby. Blake huddled in the corner six feet from the door, his knees drawn tight. Blood seeped down his left shin through a hole in his camel-colored trousers.

“On your belly now,” the gunman demanded.

Adam dropped to the cold beige floor.

The thief shoved a pointed-toe boot into Adam’s ribs before stepping over him. “Don’t move.”

Adam grunted and rolled his head in the direction of the tellers. And the tills. The thief had already gotten past the maglocks and now both drawers accepted his greedy fingers. He emptied the contents of one drawer and then the other into a green sack with writing on it, a crowbar protruding out of the top.

Somebody should have been here by now. Unless the girls forgot protocol and failed to trip the silent alarm. Adam stole another glance at Blake.

The crook poked his boot into Adam’s other side. “Head down.”

Adam turned back and let his cheek meet the floor. In seconds, the guy faced the lobby with the green bag in one hand and the gun in the other.

A subtle tapping urged Adam to face the door. Old Mr. Pemberton, his cane bumping against the threshold, reached for the handle. One of the tellers sobbed quietly. Blake groaned.

And Adam reached a decision. Nobody was robbing his bank. One scuffed boot stepped over him. Then the other.

Adam hoisted up on his side and grabbed the guy’s leg.

The door swung open. The gun discharged as the thief lost his grasp on it, and the crowbar clanked against the floor when he let go of the green bag. Both tellers screamed. And Mr. Pemberton walked right in.

The robber struggled in Adam’s hold and flopped onto his back. Adam latched on tighter, pulled his knees to his waist, and lifted himself into a squat over

his captive.

The man's ski mask twisted in the scuffle, and his mouth peeked out of one of the eyeholes. He fought blind. Adam had him pinned, and the crook slung his head about like a trapped animal. He wriggled his right arm free and yanked off the crooked, sight-stealing mask.

A young man, round face, pale skin. Close-shaved hair. Brows up, brown eyes wide. Terrified. An amateur. Must be the kid's first attempt at a felony.

"Say your prayers, banker man." The snared robber offered tough words, but his voice quivered.

"Not a praying man," Adam countered.

In an instant, the thief grabbed the crowbar from the bag of cash. It slipped in his grip, but he managed to hang on to it, his grip more toward the top. He walloped Adam on the back of the head.

And that was the last Adam Bender witnessed of the man who robbed his bank.

2

His left eye cracked open, but the light caused Adam to squeeze his eyelid shut. The right eye wouldn't budge. Sounds echoed in his throbbing head. Beeping. Footsteps. He lifted the left lid again and then forced the unwilling right eye open.

And there she was. A vision. White draped her. Gold spun through her hair. A halo encircled her lovely face.

Adam pried his dry lips open. "Are you an angel?"

"Rest, Mr. Bender. Your angel is not taking you today." Her melodious voice met his ears.

More footsteps. And darkness.

The next time he opened his eyes, a big gray-haired woman jabbed a needle into the tube that snaked from Adam's arm to a plastic bag filled with clear liquid. The woman in pink-flowered scrubs bent near, her hot breath invading his personal space. "How are we feeling, Mr. Bender?"

"Where am I? Hightower Memorial?"

"That's right. Got a nasty gash on your head, but you'll recover."

"I saw someone before. Like an angel. Or a Greek

goddess. Not that I believe in—”

“You saw an angel? Don’t think you were that close to death, Mr. Bender.”

“No, I saw a woman. Long hair. Beautiful with a halo around her. I must have been dreaming.”

The woman smirked. “You hold on a minute.” She stepped to the door and stuck her head into the hallway. “Excuse me, Dr. Steph. Could you come here for a moment?”

The nurse folded her arms and chuckled, her attention on somebody outside the room. “Poor man thinks he saw an angel. I’m guessing it was you.”

A soft laugh ensued. “I’m surprised he remembers.”

The angel’s voice. Adam pushed up on his elbows. His head swam, the pain unbearable. He dropped to his pillow.

“Well, you better come in here and tell him the truth,” the nurse said.

The vision entered the room. White doctor’s coat. A white band holding back golden-brown hair that fell in waves over her shoulders. Striking features carved in ivory like a statue in front of an ancient temple. The most beautiful lips Adam had ever seen. This was no angel. But maybe she was a Greek goddess after all.

“I’m Dr. Stephanou,” she said. “We spoke briefly about an hour ago. I hate to disappoint you, but I’m not an angel. Just a doctor.”

“Not at all disappointed.” The shade of her eyes reminded Adam of the topaz ring his mother had worn—a mix of sea-green and amber.

“You suffered a concussion, and you have some stitches.”

Adam breathed in an odd blend of flowery

cologne and squeaky-clean hospital. And then he remembered.

Robber. Gun. Crowbar.

He tried to lift himself in the bed, and his brain cells took another lap in the pool. "My bank. Filthy punk tried to rob my bank. He didn't get away with it. Did he?"

With a soft hand, she touched his arm. "Now, Mr. Bender, I need for you to stay calm."

The nurse still filling the doorway said, "Oooh, boy," before she disappeared.

"That sorry son of a..." Adam said. "I want to talk to somebody."

"There's a detective waiting to take your statement." The doctor backed away. "If you'd like to know, the others involved in the robbery have all been checked. The man who was shot in the leg is in a room down the hall. Police escorted the two women home from the bank. And the older gentleman was checked over and released. He was a little shaken, but he's fine."

Adam slumped. "I'm glad to know everyone is OK. You can send the detective in."

"Are you sure you feel up to it?"

"I need to know what's going on."

She nodded and left him, her lovely presence gone from the plain room. He touched the bandage on the back of his head. No time for ogling over an angel doctor. If the slime who knocked him out left the bank with a load of cash, Adam had more important things to consider.

3

A man in gray trousers and a plain white shirt entered the room. "Adam Bender?"

"Did the thief get away?"

The man flashed a badge. "Detective Lamont." He eased into a blue chair next to the bed and began tapping a tablet with a stylus. "Yes, I'm afraid he did. Along with an amount of cash that, according to your two employees, was in excess of thirty thousand dollars." The officer tapped again. "I understand you're the branch manager at Farmers Federal. How long have you worked there?"

"We don't keep that kind of cash in the drawers."

"Please answer the question."

"Yes, I'm the manager. Look, I can give you a description of the thief. You're wasting time."

"A large cash deposit was made by Ms. Andrea Whitehouse. Do you know her?"

"Of course, I know her. It's a small town. I know all my customers."

"Do you have any reason to suspect the perpetrator might have been tipped off that she was coming in with a sizable deposit?"

"Tipped off?"

"How long have you worked at the bank?" the detective asked again. "Do you live in Crossroads, or do you commute?"

"My address is public record. Ask me about the punk who robbed my bank."

"We just need for you to make a statement." More tap-tap with the stylus.

Adam huffed. "I've worked at the bank for thirteen months. I own a house in Crossroads."

"Blake Sutton. He's a friend of yours—you knew him before you made the hire. Is that correct?"

"Yes."

"You and Mr. Sutton were eating at Mac's café when the robber entered the bank. Is that correct?"

"Can I just tell you what the guy looked like? If you think Blake Sutton and I are in on this, you don't have to go looking for us. But the guy with the cash"—Adam rubbed his head—"is on the run."

The man's eyes met Adam's. "Did you ever see him before today?"

"No, but I think he had seen me before. He called me banker man, as if he knew I was in charge. Did anyone else get a look at him?"

"Not his face. But you did?"

Adam nodded, a painful task he'd reconsider if the need arose again. Then he described the thief in detail. "I don't understand why nobody else saw the kid. He pulled off his mask."

"The women never got up off the floor until the perpetrator was gone. Mr. Pemberton dropped to his knees and covered his head. Didn't see a thing. As for Mr. Sutton, we'll find out what he saw when he makes his statement. Until then, you two will not discuss the matter. Do you understand?"

“Are you going to get me an artist or something?”

“Mr. Bender, did you know Ms. Whitehouse would make a large cash deposit today?”

Adam clenched his teeth. “Yes. She sold a piece of property. As usual, she insisted on being paid in cash. I’ve told her that’s a bad idea, but she’s stubborn. I thought she was coming in later. That was the plan.”

“So, when you went to lunch, you had no idea the deposit would be made while you were away. Is that correct?”

“That’s what I said.”

“Any other detail you’d like to share? Vehicles parked nearby?”

Adam drew his brows tight. “He had a green sack—like a shopping bag. Miller’s Produce was printed on it.”

The detective showed no expression as he rose. “You’ll remain in town while this investigation moves forward.”

“I have no reason to leave.”

“We’ll be in touch.” The man tapped his pad again as he walked out the door.

Adam rose slowly to sit on the edge of the bed. His bare feet met the cold floor. He had to talk to Blake. No matter what the small-town detective said.

4

Essa dropped Adam Bender's chart at the nurse's station as the detective stepped out from Mr. Bender's room. He looked up and smiled. "Good evening, Dr. Stephanou. Thanks for your help." He walked backward, keeping his gaze on her.

"You're welcome," she said. The man disappeared around the corner. What had she done besides make him wait two hours to talk to her patient?

Mr. Bender stumbled into the hallway, and Essa hurried to his side. "Oh no, you don't," she said. "What did I tell you? You've got to rest. No wandering the halls."

"Look, Dr. Stepha..."

"Stephanou." With her hands on his shoulders, she guided him back to the bed.

"Is that a Greek name?" He fell onto the white sheets and groaned as she lifted his legs and covered them.

"Yes. My grandparents moved to the states from Greece." She tucked him in as if he were a kid. Some patients brought the nurturer out in her. He closed his big brown eyes. Dark hair complemented his olive skin tone and thick eyelashes.

She couldn't just stand here and look at the man while he fell asleep. She grinned, and he opened his eyes.

She darted her attention to the bedside monitor. "Well, now that you're where you should be, I'll leave you. No more getting out of bed without assistance."

"I wanted to see the man who got shot in the leg. We're friends. I was just going to check on him."

"He's asleep, but he's going to be fine. Tomorrow. OK?"

"Will you be here tomorrow?"

She cocked her head. He really was sweet. "Probably not before your release."

"Oh. What's your name? I mean, you're first name."

"Essa."

His eyes fell shut. "Pretty. Your name, I mean. Not that you aren't...Um..."

She smiled. "Sleep well."

Heading back for the nurses' station, her smile lingered.

Jean, the nurse who'd tend to Adam Bender after Essa went home, smiled too. "Something funny, Dr. Steph?"

"He sort of paid me a compliment, but he probably won't remember it tomorrow."

"Oh, I don't know. Once a man sees an angel, he doesn't forget."

"Is that right? Well, I think he'll..." Essa lifted her brow. "Jean, let me see his file again."

"Just got it all entered—as much as I could anyway. Mr. Sutton gave me the basics before they took him down for surgery." Jean swiveled the monitor so that it faced Essa.

"Next of kin, Dr. Joel Bender, father, Atlanta." Essa crossed her arms. "Wow."

"Who's that?"

"He's a physicist who wrote a book about the creation account in Genesis. Brilliant man."

"So, he's a Bible man?"

"Old Testament. He's an Orthodox Jew." Essa swung the screen back around.

"Our Mr. Bender is Jewish," Jean said. "Guess he can forget about his angel after all."

Essa pursed her lips and shook her head. "Were you about to do some matchmaking? Because you know I'm not looking for that. Not right now."

"Don't worry, sweetheart, I know better than to hook up a missionary's daughter with an Orthodox Jew. But there's a real nice intern who just started down in pediatrics. Good Christian man. And handsome? Oh, my goodness."

Essa huffed, but her smile returned.

She headed for the elevator. "Good night, Jean."

"Good night, angel."

Essa headed down and then walked to the parking garage, which seemed a little darker than usual. Tonight, no moonlight filtered through to illuminate the second level where most doctors parked their luxury coupes and two-seater sports cars. Essa pushed the button on her fob, and her hatchback chirped.

Heading down to the exit ramp, she passed mostly empty spaces. Visiting hours were over. A few stragglers hadn't gotten booted out yet by good nurses like Jean.

Would Dr. Bender make the drive from Atlanta to visit his son? It'd be great to meet the man. But Adam would be released in the morning.

Essa dropped the thought when a brown van shot out in reverse and blocked her way. She jammed her foot onto the brake pedal and bounced in her seat. The van sped toward the exit, not stopping to wait for the barrier gate to swing up. The black and white wooden arm went flying as the van skidded onto the street.

Wide-eyed, Essa pulled forward, stopped at the damaged exit, and waited for the scanner to blink green even though there was no arm rising to let her through. She pulled onto the empty street. To her left, the van turned onto Fletcher Avenue. Must be headed for the highway.

Same as Essa.

She increased her speed. Turning onto Fletcher, she spotted the van ahead. At least the jerk stopped for red lights. If she could get close enough, she'd write down his plate number and report the damage to the police.

The light changed to green, and the van sped away, turning onto the southbound ramp. If she'd lived to the north, Essa would have let this go. But she pulled onto the ramp and headed south toward her condo outside of town. In two minutes, she was a hundred feet behind the van. But she'd have to get closer.

A few other cars passed by. Then a semi. The van stayed in the right lane. Essa pulled to the left. She'd get closer, wait for someone to get up to her back bumper, and then pull in behind the van to allow the other driver to pass.

In less than a minute, a truck came up fast. Essa increased her speed just enough to get close to the van when she pulled right. It would have worked if the van hadn't swerved onto the East Fort exit without a signal

or decrease in speed. Essa steered right but not in time to exit. Not that she would have followed the van off the highway. Only so much she could do. Trailing this guy into the rundown part of town after dark was not an option.

The truck blared past. Essa's hands shook as she gripped the wheel. She'd leave a report with maintenance in the morning. The police wouldn't care that she saw a nondescript brown van run through the barrier.

She took the next exit, and one more mile brought her home. She parked and climbed the stairs to the second-floor condo overlooking the pond.

Before she could unlock the door, her phone rang from somewhere in the bottom of her purse. She struggled to remove the key, pushed the door open, and slapped the switch to light the entrance before fishing out her phone.

"This is Dr. Stephanou."

"Hey, sis."

"Gabriel. Did you make it back to the mission? It's been four days. I was getting worried."

"I'm three miles out and that's as close as I can get. Essa, we have a problem."