

# PHILIP GULLEY

Author of the Bestselling *Home to Harmony*



# ALMOST FRIENDS

*A Harmony Novel*

**Almost Friends**

By Philip Gulley

## Chapter 1

## How It All Started

For a one-legged man, Brother Lester the Evangelist was remarkably nimble, pacing back and forth across the front of the meeting room, stopping occasionally to pick up his Bible and wave it in the air like a sword, as if he were decapitating the infidels.

"You could be hit by a truck on your way home tonight," he bellowed. "You could be lying in your bed just as pretty as you please, and the Lord could raise up a tornado and knock your house flat." He paused for a moment, letting those horrific visions sink in. "You could be ate up with cancer and not even know it. Gone in the blink of an eye." He snapped his fingers. The sound reverberated across the room like a gunshot, causing Miriam Hodge, seated in the fourth row, to flinch.

"And don't think for a moment that your pretty clothes and your fancy homes and your college educations and big bank accounts will help you on the Day of Judgment. No siree, bob."

Bob Miles, jolted from slumber by the mention of his name, looked wildly about as Brother Lester continued. "Now is the day of decision. Right now, while you're still able."

Pastor Sam Gardner sat behind the pulpit, gripping the armrests of his chair, his eyes closed, praying fervently for Brother Lester to wind down. In lieu of that, he would settle for the meetinghouse to be flattened by a tornado; anything to bring Brother Lester's dreadful preachments to an end.

Sam's wife, Barbara, sat with their two sons in the fifth row, a glazed look on her face. This was the last night of the revival, and she'd begged to stay home. She'd only relented when Sam had reminded her that it was healing night, and Brother Lester had promised to make the lame walk and the blind see.

Regrettably, when a healing service is advertised in the newspaper, blind -people are left out of the loop. Brother Lester took a stab at healing Asa Peacock of his nearsightedness, but apparently Asa's heart wasn't in it, and he left the healing service still wearing his glasses. Brother Lester had modest success healing Bea Majors's bunion. She skipped up and down the aisle and pronounced herself cured, but people had come expecting a more flamboyant miracle and were clearly disenchanted.

The revival concluded with a Sunday morning service. Brother Lester recounted the loss of his leg a near escape involving cannibals in the heart of Africa. They'd gnawed his right calf down to the bone before he'd managed to get away. Gangrene had set in, and he'd lost his leg below his knee. His artificial leg was a bit short, causing him to list to the side.

Otherwise, Brother Lester was in fine form. He took a swipe at the Supreme Court, counseled the women to forsake pants, and said Hindus wouldn't be starving if they'd eat some of their cows. "The problem is, they think a cow might be their uncle in another life, and who wants to eat their uncle? Not me, that's for sure. So now they're starving, and their false religion is to blame."

Sam's head began to throb. What this had to do with the Christian faith, he wasn't sure.

Brother Lester paused from his sermonizing and cocked his head, as if listening to a voice only he could hear. "The Lord wants to know how come this church has a Furnace Committee and a Chicken Noodle Committee, but doesn't have an Evangelism Committee."

Dale Hinshaw, who had invited Brother Lester to revive them over the objections of the church's elders, reddened, clearly embarrassed at being affiliated with such indifferent believers, and even though it was a rhetorical question, he blurted out from the front row, "Tell the Lord it's not my fault. I've been telling 'em for years we need an Evangelism Committee. I even offered to head it up myself."

Brother Lester turned to glare at Sam. "Woe to the church that's lost its heart for helping the lost."

Sam was genuinely fond of the lost. It was the folks who were found who taxed his patience. He sat in his chair, his head resting in his hands, willing Brother Lester's rant to come to an end. He prayed for a bolt of lightning to strike Brother Lester. It wouldn't kill him. A man with a wooden leg is safely grounded, after all, an overlooked benefit of amputation. And as long as the Lord was throwing down lightning bolts, maybe He could singe Dale's eyebrows. That would set the two men back a notch or two. Sam smiled at the thought.

Fortunately, after a few pointed warnings about the fast-approaching apocalypse, Brother Lester took his seat next to Sam. They sat in silence. Sam studied him with sideways glances. Brother Lester was dressed to the nines, sporting a gold ring big enough to gag a camel. He was the kind of guy who preached about the end times, then took up an offering, which he invested in twenty-year bonds.

Sam sat quietly, thinking of Brother Lester, trying not to resent him. This frantic, hyper man with his private demons driving him from one place to another. Sam felt blessed that his brokenness was not quite as visible, that he was able to hide his imperfections-his nagging fears of worthlessness-under a veneer of religious duty.

Sam heard a rustle of noise, then the clearing of a throat. He looked up just as Dale Hinshaw rose to his feet to speak in the Quaker silence.

"I want to thank Brother Lester for coming here all the way from the deep jungles of Africa to bring us the Word. I think the Lord's anointed him mightily. I've said it before and I'll say it again, this church needs an Evangelism Committee, and I'm volunteering right here and now to be in charge of it, even if I got to do all the work myself."

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