

Chapter 1

Cooper Wayne, the Old Preacher, celebrated his 84th birthday by committing mass murder. Standing on a four foot high wooden stage and backed by a gospel trio, he killed. His victims surrounded the stage, some screaming, others with their eyes pressed shut.

Elderly women trembled, stoop shouldered, beneath their Sunday-Go-to-Meeting hats. Anxious girls were dangerously close to tap dancing in their Mary Janes. Awkward boys shifted about while sporting identical “My Daddy fought the Krauts” buzz cuts.

The children’s mothers were the Church Ladies; women whose hair swirled and rose like State Fair cotton candy. When these women stood, they looked like they were racing to heaven: follicles first. All the women under the tent, almost all, wore dresses whose colors represented the truly breathtaking scope of their Lord’s creation. Shades that ran the gamut from black to navy blue to exceedingly dark navy blue. Their husbands provided contrast. Waves of white dress shirts accented with dark ties and sweaty faces.

Clumps of darker faces peppered the crowd. There were enough Pentecostals, the Old Preacher included, to keep the meeting integrated. Numerically speaking, the integration was marginal, maybe one black face for every twenty beneath the tent. However, given the location of the revival (just shy of thirty miles east of Dallas), and the time (six weeks before the election of John F. Kennedy), the integration was remarkable.

Many of the men sat with their arms draped over their wives’ shoulders. Other couples sat with fingers interlaced. Amongst the hand holders were housewives whose back doors swung

wide open at eleven on some weekday mornings, and husbands who took late meetings at the Yellow Rose Motor Inn in nearby Groveton.

Revival meetings are a place of great temptation. An invitation to repent being the lone acceptable form of seduction. A Siren's song calling every backslider, every lost soul, to leap over the side, and drown your old self. To die, then arise. Baptized. Saved.

But a Siren's song has many verses. Calls to repentance conjured images in every mind. Impure was another word for naked, or, as the wise asses might say, nekkid. Naked meant you were undressed. Nekkid meant you were undressed and up to something. The words shamed some, and left them mourning dimly remembered lusts. Those some words led other people to scan the crowd for someone they wanted to see nekkid.

Elsewhere in the congregation, secret drinkers repeated patterns of muted taps. More than one tormented Baptist ached to unscrew the cap of a pint flask stashed in a coat pocket, or buried in a purse. Temptations dueled in their minds: empty out the waves of fermented amber grain onto the sawdust beneath their feet, or declare open war on their liver function; the Christian Women's Temperance Society (and Crucifixion Committee) be damned.

Regardless of how each individual in the crowd differed, they were dying together. The drunk and the sober, young and old, sinners and hypocrites, white, black, and in between, every one of them was slain by the words of an 84 year old preacher.

Cooper Wayne's sermon passed the half hour mark. The Old Preacher was born in 1876, and preached his first sermon the same day Teddy Roosevelt topped San Juan Hill. Still his only hesitations were occasional cries in my direction. I sat along the back edge of the platform, opposite the gospel trio.

“Should I tell it all, Brother?” shouted the Old Preacher.

I volleyed without pause. “Tell it all, Brother, tell it all!”

Chocolates were forgotten and they melted in the pockets of boys and girls who had never before survived a church service without a cuff to the back of the head. Teenage girls dabbed Kleenex at their cheeks, while teenage boys stopped looking, for a time, at teenage girls.

Then the Old Preacher stopped still. His machine gun delivery of words and phrases fell silent. The crowd returned fire. Vocal exclamations burst from the crowd like mortar shells.

“Yes, Lord!”

“Praise Jesus!”

“Come on now.”

“Glory!”

I could almost see the smoke rising from vocal guns. Pastor Wayne stood motionless. The congregation awaited his next salvo.

“The older I grow, brothers and sisters, the more I think of Abraham. Father Abraham. Seventy-five years old at the beginning of his travels, at the moment of the Lord’s promise to him. *‘Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father’s house, unto a land that I will show thee. And I will make thee a great nation, and I will bless thee, and make thy name great; and thou shalt be a blessing.’* Abram believed and ten years passed. God blessed the herds, the bottom line, but Sarai, Abram’s beautiful, his beloved, his precious bride, Sarai could not conceive.”

“They lived at a time when barrenness was called a curse from God, a punishment for sin. A cruel lie made more vicious by the gossip, the accusatory glances, and the suddenly hushed

whispers. Backbiters and vipers. No amount of material blessing could assuage Sarai's shame. Anguish made all the more cruel by her husband's name. Abram means exalted father. God had made them a promise, but Sarai remained barren."

"Sarai, sensible but desperate, offered up a sacrifice to aid a slow moving God. She placed another woman in her husband's bed to fulfill the promise. It's so ridiculous; it's almost comic. There stands Sarai." The Old Preacher shifted into a country fried, red clay rural, Georgia accent. "*Look a here, Abe. I know God done made us this here promise. But I'm so old, I went to high school in the Garden of Eden. We was old when he made this promise, and it's been ten years, and nothin'.*"

"Abram replied, *'Well, what you want me to do about it, woman? I'm on the rough side of ninety, and still trying to get you pregnant. I should be sittin' on my porch, playin' checkers, and sippin' sweet tea, cuz this baby makin's liable to kill me.'* Sarai said, *'Tell you what, let's just help things out a bit. I got me this new servin' girl, Hagar. I reckon you ought to just go make a baby with her, what you think of that?'*"

"Abram *pondered* this in his heart."

The Old Preacher lifted his eyes so that everyone got a look at his interpretation of Abram's expression. The look of a man who was simultaneously confused, bemused, and lecherous. Throughout the congregation, men and older boys laughed; some of them earned elbows from their wives or mothers. Many people shook their heads, but their smiles and giggles undid any notion of disapproval. Cooper Wayne remained motionless as he delivered his punch line.

“And Abram took Sarai’s hand, looked deep into her eyes, and said, *‘Darlin’, I just want you to know . . . I’m a doin’ this for you.’*”

The Old Preacher let the laughter fade into silence. He waited too long to ride the congregation’s amusement. A crowd’s energy is like a train gradually accelerating out of a station. There is a limited span of time to catch up, grab on, and ride. Wait too long and the train, the crowd, passes beyond your grasp. One of the many lessons I had learned over my five years preaching solo in smaller tent meetings. There had been time for the Old Preacher to ride this congregation’s laughter; time for their energy to carry us to a marvelous, not to mention lucrative, destination. But the Old Preacher stood silent, and the train passed beyond us.

Shouts of decreasing enthusiasm popped out of the crowd.

“Tell it, Brother.”

“Preach.”

Still Cooper Wayne waited. A husky cough rattled amongst the congregation, then another, and a wet sneeze. I watched two brothers, one half a head taller than the other, as they escalated a war of pokes. Hidden in the crowd, a child said, “Mama, I want-“ That cry was cut short by a sound like a single hand clap.

For over half an hour Cooper Wayne had preached. He paused only for oxygen, and that, infrequently. His shift to silence caused time to stretch like panty hose on a plump girl’s fanny. From my corner of the platform, I could see Cooper Wayne’s profile. His lips moved, but, in that elongated quiet, the only noise under the revival tent came from creaking wood and bunching fabric as the brothers and sisters fidgeted on the benches. Cooper Wayne’s lips stopped their silent movements, he inhaled sharply, and began to speak.

“Imagine. Your husband, your wife, your beloved, disappears inside a tent where your replacement waits. You hear the rustling and the gasps. You walk away, as far as you can, but all you can see is that tent and the clumsy, beautiful act inside it. Imagine arranging your own betrayal. The agony, oh the agony, brothers and sisters, of feeble faith. Of only trusting God to fulfill his promises in our ways. Imagine Sarai’s torment as Hagar’s belly expands. As Ishmael plays the role of heir.”

“The greatest evidence of the grace of God is this: whatever evil this world does to us; whatever evil we do to each other and to ourselves; the Lord still gives us better than we deserve. Abram returned to Sarai, and God renewed his promise. Thirteen more years passed. This old couple laughed when they imagined themselves as new, and arthritic, parents. They laughed while God fulfilled his promise, gave them new lives and new names. Abram became Abraham. The exalted father became the father of many nations. And Sarai became Sarah, now called princess. Ultimately, the queen mother of God’s people. Sarah gave birth to laughter for that is what Isaac means. God looked upon an ancient man, ragged, wrinkled, balding, and said to himself, *‘Yep, that there’s the stud to father my people.’* God looked upon a barren womb and saw laughter.”

“Picture it, brothers and sisters. Our pilgrimage travels back four thousand years. Place yourself in that dry and dusty landscape. Like Lubbock, only not as ugly. Sand and rock and coarse brown grass. In the distance, almost three days walk, cliffs and high hills. Imagine that day recorded in the 22nd chapter of Genesis.”

“The Lord said unto him, ‘Abraham!’”

“Here I am”

“What anticipation and excitement in those words. Here I am. And what could be next? Already God had made a covenant with Abraham. Promised him all the lands of his wanderings. God named Abraham the father of the children of God. Children in numbers beyond counting. Two thousand years before the cross, the Lord gave Abraham the assurance that his faith would be credited as righteousness. These promises confirmed by the twelve year old body of Isaac, the impossible boy, his father’s face, his mother’s laughter, the image of God’s faithfulness. Standing in the distance, young Isaac was tending the sheep.”

“Abraham take now thy son, thine only son Isaac, whom thou lovest, and get thee into the land of Moriah; and offer him there for a burnt offering upon one of the mountains which I will tell thee of.”

“Could you do it? Turn to Isaac and say, *‘Get a knife. Some rope and wood. We must go and make a sacrifice.’* I have eight grandchildren and three children. I couldn’t bear to scratch their hands with a knife. Abraham’s aim was Isaac’s throat. Could any of us have walked up that mountain as Abraham did?”

“Abraham walked into his tent, and told Sarah to prepare food. He bore the weight of God’s terrible demand alone. Why burden Sarah? Then Abraham walked for three days, side by side, with Isaac. Each step, each step, a razor drawn across this father’s heart. His mind was dizzy, drunk with shock and horror. What will I tell Sarah? What will I say after? What hope? No hope. Save that God, perhaps, will raise the dead.”

“Abraham takes Laughter by the hand, and steels himself for the climb. In the distance, rising up toward heaven, stands the mountain of Moriah. The altar. The killing floor.”

“Abraham hears a faint slap, barely audible, as the leather scabbard falls lightly against his hip. Abraham tightens his grip on Isaac’s shoulder. Until this point, Abraham had been like a fish mouthing a piece of bait. The hook was inside his mouth, but not embedded.”

“‘Papa,’ says Isaac.”

“‘Yes, son?’”

“‘We have wood and rope and the knife, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?’”

“The hook sunk deep. Abraham, pierced, could only attempt a desperate, futile struggle to remain outwardly calm. *‘God will provide a lamb for the burnt offering.’ So they went up the mountain. Together.*”

“We do not know if Isaac struggled. The Bible does not tell us if he climbed atop the altar in obedience to his father, or was overwhelmed and bound by Abraham’s still formidable strength. Regardless, imagine Isaac, imagine yourself in Isaac’s place, stretched out upon the altar. Your eyes skip back and forth between the knife’s edge and your father’s haunted stare. You see your father flex his arm, and the knife point tears through the air.”

“Thunder. In Isaac’s ears, in your ears. Thunder. And your father speaks to the storm. *‘Here I am.’* The biting grip of the rope slackens. You sit up and see your father. His face is shining. His beard is matted and soaked with tears. Together you bind a trapped ram. Now the ram lies where you were, bound as you were. Your father offers you the knife. You can’t even look at it. After the fire exhausts itself, burns down to embers and smoke, you and your father walk down the mountain. He is overjoyed and exhausted. You are staggered and confused. You rub your thumb and forefinger against your throat.”

Chapter 2

I have spent the past five years on the camp meeting circuit. I have preached the gospel of ordained prosperity and divine healing from Lawrence, Kansas to San Diego to Calgary. I've seen people toss wallets, purses, watches, wedding rings, antique brooches, and, on two separate occasions, their youngest child into the collection plate; all in an attempt to birth God's blessing. I've seen old women dance out of wheelchairs, despite doctrines that called dancing sinful by definition. After a camp meeting in Fort Collins, Dinah and Diane, formerly Siamese twins, approached me. They claimed to have been received spontaneous separation while listening to my preaching on the radio. They then asked me if I would like to join them at their home, bless their radio, and inspect their scars.

I have seen things as a preacher. But this early evening service was unprecedented, and not just because it was my first time sharing a stage with the Old Preacher. After lifting the dead eyed farmers and merchants of the greater Groveton Metro area to the gates of religious hyperactivity, if not ecstasy, Cooper Wayne surrendered that hard earned control. The Old Preacher had the hook sunk, the net ready, and the fish splashing against the side of the boat.

Then he tossed his rod in the water.

The quiet congregation kept staring as Cooper Wayne sat down beside me. On the opposite side of the Old Preacher, our three member praise band, the Wandering McCombs, silently fingered their instruments. Guitarist Wallace “W.L.” McComb mouthed, “What in the hell was that?”

Eight members of the revival’s support staff gathered at the back of the tent with empty, woven baskets. I sprang to the front of the stage, faster than a cheetah on Benzadrine.

“Cooper Wayne! Brothers and sisters, please! Cooper Wayne!”

The sporadic applause was pathetic, far short of what would be required to *tip the boulder*. That phrase a description taught to me by my mentor in religious fundraising, the Right Reverend Thaddeus L. Cadwalleder. To *tip the boulder* meant to create frenzy in a crowd. As the phrase suggests, it is a matter of a slight amount of properly applied force, and a whole lot of gravity. Thaddeus taught me that a crowd wants to go wild, to stomp, scream and holler, because a crowd is made up of individuals whose entire lives are held in orbit by conformity. They do what is expected, not what is desired. Whether at a concert, sporting event, or camp meeting, being part of a crowd allows the individual to disappear in public anonymity. They feel set free. Free to unleash every howl domestication strangles in their throats. It only takes a few to howl.

They snap the bonds of inertia; they give the others permission to howl along. Then conformity, camaraderie's weak-willed cousin, reasserts itself. Conformity draws the crowd down into frenzy with all the inevitable strength of gravity. People become as loud, wild and vulgar in a crowd as they are mild, uncertain and hypocritical when there is no crowd to hide them. And in both cases, the reason is the same: Everybody is doing it.

But first, I had to get the boulder tipped. I lifted both arms out wide, palms facing the crowd, a gesture that was half embrace, half sign of worship.

“Brother Wayne brought it to us today, amen? Yes sir, yes ma’am! Did you hear it? The deep, deep—truth—the Lord has for us. Abraham. The father of the faith, the originator, the George Washington of our faith. Whew! God the Father called him out. Abraham. Abraham! Did Abraham say in a minute, Lord? I’m busy herding these sheep. Did he?”

Some no’s were called out from the congregation.

“Did he?!”

More no’s, somewhat louder.

“Did he say, ‘Lord, what’s in it for me? What’s it gonna *cost*?’” I hit a high, almost squawking, note on the word cost. “Did he consult the theologians? Inquire of the politicians?” More unenthusiastic no’s. This boulder would not tip. Still I kept pushing, leaning on the ends of sentences, and singing last syllables.

“What did Abraham say? Here. I. Am. Before God had a chance to say anything else. Here I am. Here I am here I am here I am! And *whatever* you ask of me!” I followed the shouts with a whisper. “Here I am.”

“Nothing. There was nothing Abraham wouldn’t do for God. Nothing he would refuse. Not even his own son. So, let me ask you brothers and sisters; what is the Lord asking *you* to put on this altar? Is it something you should never have touched in the first place? Gambling, the bottle, greed, lust? Or is it something even more tempting? More tempting because it is something that is, in and of itself, good.”

Now I was starting to catch their eyes. I shifted into an almost conversational tone. The caring friend reluctantly sharing a hard truth.

“Ask yourself, brothers and sisters, ask honestly: what is first in my heart? For where your heart is, there your treasure is also. Does the Lord sit on the throne of your heart? Does he? Or is it your job, your wallet, your family, your money: are these your gods? Not carved of wood or into stone, but idols just the same. Not evil in and of themselves, but corrupted by the misplaced priority we give them. For if the Lord is to live in us, and us in him, we must give up our idols. All of them.”

“The first four commandments are called the vertical commandments because they are about our relationship with God. The Lord above and us below, literally and otherwise. Why do these four come first? Because until you get right with God, you got no chance of being right with anybody else, not even yourself. God wants to do far better than just right by you. Are you gonna do right by him? Let us pray.”

I ducked my head, but kept my eyes open while I prayed. I used my *dignity prayer* tone as I spoke, cutting sharp consonants and elongating vowels. In essence, I was combining my impersonation of John Giulgud with a healthy dose of Father Lawton B. Chiles, a Catholic priest in my hometown. Father Chiles earned local renown for his lovely speaking voice, although his

occasionally over demonstrative, and somewhat effeminate, hand gestures led some of his parishioners to conclude that Father Chiles didn't so much suffer the vow of celibacy as seek it.

“Oh Father God, oh Jesus. We pray your anointing upon this offering, these sacrifices, and that, oh Lord, you would speak to each and every believer here, and reward their courageous generosity in the manner reserved for your mighty hand.”

The Wandering McCombs began to play an instrumental, Texas swing flavored version of “Bringing in the Sheaves,” and the baskets began to cross up and down the aisles. Dimes, nickels, quarters skipped and tripped across the reeds. As the harvest moved back, row by row, the ushers' wrists strained more and more. Before they were halfway to the back, each basket required two hands to hold it. Ominous. When the baskets sag, they are filled with coin not paper. I turned to the Wandering McCombs, and, with a slash of fingers in front of my throat, I silenced them.

“Are you ready for a miracle?!” My voice and manner imitated my high school football coach. My shouted sentence was more challenge than question. I held my arms high. “I don't believe you heard me.” I lowered and flexed my arms with my fists clenched. I looked like a boxer ready to knock out the devil. “Are you ready for a miracle? Don't let the devil rob you! Don't let that old dirty liar come whispering in your ears. Whisper that these sneaky preachers are gonna leave you broke, busted, and disgusted. Whisper that when you sow to the Lord, you never reap. Get thee behind, Devil! Shut your mouth, Liar! Jesus, never failed me yet; he ever fail you? Will you give the Lord your all? Your best? You reach out with nothing but faith. Believing not knowing. No one knew Jesus better than his hometown folks, but amongst them, he could do almost nothing. A couple of healings, set a few wrists, sealed up a cut, nothing

more. Why? Contempt with the familiar. Now, I believe ya'll *know* about Jesus, but do you *believe* him?"

From the third row, just to the left of the center aisle, a woman wearing a floppy red hat leapt up.

"I do!" she shouted, almost shrieking. "I believe Jesus!"

I lifted my right hand, palm down, fingers splayed, and pointed it toward the woman in the red hat. "Lord Jesus, let her feel your power. Reward her belief!" As I said belief, I squeezed my hand into a fist, and the woman dropped as though my words were a wrecking ball; almost imploded she fell so fast. The crowd leapt to their feet in response.

"What do you believe, brothers and sisters? Do you believe that miracles can happen today? Can happen for you?"

The amens and hallelujahs cracked and exploded throughout the crowd. I began to march back and forth atop the front lip of the stage. Staring down at the faithful, my eyes searched wildly, looking for eyes to capture with mine. Those whose smiles, or wide eyed stares told me that they were savoring each word. That they would follow any lead. That they could be tipped.

"Miracles don't just happen, brothers and sisters," I said. "They are born. You give birth to them, and, you ladies know, birth means first the pain, the sacrifice, and, only after, the joyous reward. Those that Jesus touched, first they suffered long years of pain, and only then met the Savior and were healed, Amen?"

The congregation's shouts were louder and more numerous than before.

"Amen!"

"Yes sir!"

“First, Lazarus’ family watched him sicken and die, they carried him to the tomb, and sealed him away; only after did they hear Jesus call their brother forth, Amen?”

“Preach! Preach!”

“Can Jesus bring healing where there is no hope?”

“Glory!”

“Provision where there is only lack?”

“That’s my Jesus!”

I stopped walking at the center of the stage, and raised my hands high. “Lift up to our Lord a sacrifice of praise! Praise the Lord!”

The boulder tipped.

Out sprang bills from wallet wombs. One lady, wide as the aisle, waddled forward while clutching a twenty dollar bill. Her first name I did not know, but she was called Mama Biggs. Never was a family name more appropriately given. She operated the diner connected to our motel, the Yellow Rose Motor Inn.

I stared at her hand as it choked Andrew Jackson. In a flash, I saw the hours that bought that bill. The potatoes skinned, dishes washed, and chickens fried. Then, instead of the clutched fist, I saw the commotion Mama Biggs was causing with her ludicrous backside. A cellulite metronome that clicked back and forth, tapping one side of the aisle and then the other. She rocked worshipers, and set off a string of minor collisions down each row. Human dominoes toppled five or six deep in the wake of her passing. I watched that mass of floral print femininity stuff her hand in the basket as though she expected to bring forth a fistful of chocolate creams. She spun around with the grace and destructive power of a buffalo on buttered hooves. Oblivious

to the force of her girth, the roly-poly wrecking ball hopped up and down with her hands raised. Somehow the tent stayed up.

I turned to the Old Preacher. His head nodded and his eyes were closed as he sat in his folding chair. Asleep? Maybe, but his lips were moving like they had when he took the elongated pause during his sermon. I signaled the trio, and the Wandering McCombs roared into “Victory is Mine” faster than I’d ever heard that hymn played. The crowd shouted, stomped, sung, and screamed. Men clapped; women lifted their hands high; children shimmied up onto chairs. Me? I flopped down beside the Old Preacher, and gasped like a bass on a dock.

A glance to the left showed me that Cooper Wayne had not changed. His head nodded slightly, rhythmically, and his relaxed face scarcely registered the ongoing movement of his lips. The man was a physical paradox. He readily admitted all 84 of his years, yet he had bounced and leapt about the stage as if he had been plugged into W.L. McComb’s amplifier. Cooper Wayne was a head taller than me and slender. His build suggested that a strong wind could turn him into a kite, but the Old Preacher moved without limp or hesitation. Only his face suggested his advanced years. Liver spotted and deeply wrinkled, his face had the color and texture of East California desert soil after a three year drought.

When I turned my eyes back to the congregation, a single face stood out. A face that was as arresting as a profanity blurted from a toddler’s mouth, and as starkly out of place in this sea of sun cracked farmers as a bluebonnet protruding from a tin can full of night crawlers. It was a woman’s face. A face that conjured an experience from twelve years earlier.

I remembered the eastern edge of the Rockies. Driving a ’38 Ford across Oklahoma and the panhandle of Texas before turning more North than West. The ground behind me was so flat

you could lay foundations without a level. If you could find anyone who wanted to stay and build. Ground so dull and dusty that only the exceptionally hearty and/or masochistic did.

Then, in front of me, I had seen a fuzziness. That was all at first. A fuzziness on the previously unbroken 360 degree panorama of horizon. But it was just a blur, and I forgot it. I sang “Precious Memories” and “I’m So Lonesome I Could Cry.” I imagined elaborate impossibilities. Slapping a Bob Feller fastball 425 feet. Declining dinner, dancing, and “Whatever you want, Darling,” with Jane Russell. Or perhaps Lydia Cole who had laughed like a baboon on nitrous oxide when I had offered her all the love my 13 year old heart could muster. Sorry Jane. Tough luck, Lydia. It seems Lauren Bacall has requested whistling lessons. Then a sight came that was so novel, my daydreams and off-key singing stopped dead. I hit the brakes.

I stepped out of the car, alone in Southeastern Colorado, and stared. The fuzziness on the horizon had become a mountain. My first sight of a mountain after 18 years living in Northern Oklahoma. In truth, it was a hillock compared to what I would see in the Rockies proper. But nothing that followed, not coaxing that ’38 Ford up into the Rockies, frequently on the edge of spinning backwards into a tiny mangled grave. Not hiking up a low summit north of Denver, panting like an asthmatic St. Bernard. Not my first plane ride, three weeks before this Groveton revival began; a trip to Kansas City where I met Cooper Wayne, and, twenty minutes later, had a job. Nothing had ever expressed to me the idea of sheer verticality like that first sight of the easternmost edge of the Rockies in March of 1948.

The face of this woman amongst the revival crowd was likewise stunning. Her beauty and her height drew my gaze. Even from my vantage point I could see she was tall. Taller than me I thought, and I can claim six foot. Six foot if I wear lifts, and don’t visit a barber for a year.

Her proportions were the kind God only apportions when he is showing off. Neither an Amazon nor a scarecrow, she was a visual intoxicant. As inviting as ice water after two a day football practices, or as Mama's arms to a toddler who has just scraped a knee. The woman called my name, and introduced herself with pale blue eyes. Eyes the color of Oklahoma sky in August when you can't summon a cloud with silver iodide nor prayer.

The Wandering McCombs returned to the hymn they had begun the meeting with, "I'll Fly Away." Oh glory. There was a slight curl in the red hair that poured over her shoulders and down her back, masking and unmasking her face as she swung and clapped. Her purple dress revealed enough information to ensure curiosity while withholding enough to demand further inquiry. As my glance lowered, I watched her upper body flow as though it were a snake made of silk. Then I strayed below her belly. Her right leg failed to match the liquid motion of her other limbs. It bowed in at an awkward angle, so that her toe tapping was syncopated.

I realized I'd been staring for an indecent, not to mention non-pastoral, amount of time. Perhaps she hadn't noticed. Two blue circles told me I'd been as subtle as a sheep dog making sweet love to his owner's leg. The woman continued to stare at me and dance. She made a sudden move, and, briefly, pain flashed across her face. Then her eyes were on me again. I returned her stare.

I am sorry for your pain, and would do anything to remove it. But I cannot wish your hip nor any part of you changed. As I look to the second row, I can see that you are completely beautiful. Complete and beautiful.

That was the message my eyes intended to send, though, like my mouth, my eyes have far too much confidence in their own eloquence. Perhaps she saw, you are complete and

beautiful. Perhaps you are concrete and bountiful. Perhaps she received the message, I am enamored of your hips and adjacent locales. Perhaps...well, at that moment, she became fascinated with the tops of her shoes.

I nudged the Old Preacher to call his attention to the approaching end of "I'll Fly Away." He said nothing. I turned to face the crowd. The red haired woman's smile welcomed me back, regardless of what my eyes had said.

Cooper Wayne spoke. "Brother Martin, please give the closing prayer. And make it a prayer, not a sermon."

The word sermon ended just as Wilford McComb dragged his bow across his fiddle one last time. I gazed at the Old Preacher. His eyes were still closed. Mirroring a particular smile in the second row, I advanced on the congregation.

Chapter 3

"Don't move."

"Sorry, did I?"

"Please just—*oh!* Don't move." The last two words elongated on her lips. Doon't. Mmmooove.

Don't move. As though I had a choice. A taut, warm paralysis lingered. For the first several seconds after, I was only aware of her face and my gasps for air. Her eyes were closed while her forehead creased in an image of undiluted concentration. Me? I was dizzy and sucking

wind. The air smelled of cheap hand lotion, like cream blended with bleach. Then, as I brushed my nose over her skin, I smelled vanilla behind her ears and near her throat. I kissed her throat, and smelled matted grass then ocean water then vanilla again. With delicate reverence I touched my forehead to her chest. I delight in the smell of vanilla.

My prostration completed, I saw that her face had stilled into a pleased grin. Her eyes were closed so gently that the rest of her face registered no creases. Her hand had squeezed my tie as she had lain back on the grass. She had reeled me in, and this two hundred pound catch of the day had resisted not one little bit.

“You may bite my head off now,” I said.

“What?”

About six feet beyond her hair, a spider levitated under a leaf. As the spider twirled, the edge of the leaf rippled.

“Nothing. How are you?”

“Obviously I’m miserable.”

“Me too.” I shifted my weight off of her and curled along her left side. “I didn’t hurt you, did I?”

“Hurt me? What you think you got down there, the meaning of life?”

“I meant your—“

“My?”

“Your hip.”

She let out a sigh somewhere between bemused and annoyed as she turned her gaze skyward. “My deformity.”

“No, it’s not—“

“Deformed, crippled, botched, cursed, retarded—“

“Wait—“

“Broke down, crooked gimp. I know what I am, and what I look like.”

“You look beautiful.”

“And I know what that means. Pretty little cripple. Lovely. Almost. Too bad about the—

“ She slapped her hand against her hip, and almost concealed the wince. “I’m not made of eggshells.”

“You are beauty.”

“What do you know?”

“I know my eyes are more honest than my mouth. I know Dwight Eisenhower had an affair with an Irish woman, and so did Eleanor Roosevelt. I know that the atomic weight of Nickel is 28, and that was also Hank Williams’ age when he slipped away. I know we have five senses so we can hear Louis Armstrong’s horn, see fresh snow draped on the Rockies, smell vanilla, taste pecan pie, and touch each other. I know that President Grover Cleveland, King David, and my father had one thing in common.”

“Which is?”

“An illegitimate child. And, I know that if you have to tell a story, lie; if you have to fight, cheat; and when a red haired beauty offers—OWW! Hot damn!”

To tell of the dignity and gentle grace I displayed during this interruption of my blathering would require massive deceit. A stab then burn of pain shot that “Hot Damn!” out of my mouth, and propelled me to a standing position just beyond her hair.

“Get off my hair!”

To a standing position on her hair. I high stepped like I was a drum major keeping time to Dizzy Gillespie. I lifted my hand from my wound, and caught a slight scent of iron and salt.

“What is wrong with you?” she asked.

“They shot me! Little peckers shot me in the ass.”

“Who?”

“Them! The—one of those little inbred bastards shot me with a—had to be a twenty-two.”

“Xa—vier.” A choked laugh broke up my name when she spoke.

“Yeah?” I turned. The red haired woman was sitting up, forearms resting on the outsides of her knees. Her face had gone suddenly red, and her cheeks strained like she was an over inflated balloon. One pinprick and she would explode.

She stared up at my face. The clumps of hair sweat-plastered to my forehead. My slightly damp eyes fixed with a deranged and post-coital glare. Her eyes moved down my body, and she took in my complete, statuesque glory. My tie dangled back over my shoulder. My pants clumped around my calves and ankles. My hips thrust out slightly as I clasped both hands over my bleeding left cheek. My white shirt tail almost, *almost*, covered the wrinkled, glistening, rapidly shriveling slug that had, but a few minutes earlier, been my sole connection to the sensual world.

The balloon burst. She guffawed and convulsed. She laughed without apology, reservation, or compassion. I’m not sure why.

“You look.” She took a gasping breath. “You look—your.” Her body quaked more violently without me on top of her. Perhaps she was cold. “Come here, poor baby, let me take a peek.”

Our eyes met. I joined her laughter. I turned.

“Move your hands,” she said, “or I can’t help you.”

“Well, I don’t want to disgust you.”

“You’re sticking your greasy ass in my face, and you’re worried about a little blood? I’ve treated plenty of wounds in my time. Let’s see the damage.”

I uncovered my wound. The sun was minutes away from beginning its disappearance below the—

“Holy Balls!”

Was that high pitched screech mine?

“Holy Balls!”

Yep, that was me. She had hit me with two good, air slicing, Mama caught you palming money out of the collection plate, smacks. A frank and respectful exchange of viewpoints seemed to be in order.

“Are you out of your gimp legged mind?”

“You ain’t hurt.”

“Care to trade butts?” I pulled my pants up. Grass stains, more than likely permanent ones, streaked each knee. From my left hip pocket, I withdrew a five inch polished bone handle with an ace of spades painted on it, and pressed the button. The blade leapt out and introduced itself. I offered her the handle. “Why don’t you just cut off my leg, and have done with it?”

“Why don’t you stop all that moaning and wailing before half the county finds out what kind of laying on of hands you specialize in. Ain’t nothing but a horsefly bite, barely even bleeding.”

There are many ways to impress a woman with style rather than substance; pulling a knife on her because of an insect bite is not one of them.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “Stung like witch hazel on a razor cut.”

“I bet it did. Still you could’ve pretended to be a man about it.”

“I’m not much of an actor.”

“Uh-huh.” She was now on her feet, rearranging her dress. The color of her face had whitened.

“You don’t have any freckles,” I said.

“Neither do you.”

“I don’t have red hair. I thought all red heads had freckles.”

“I thought no preachers carried switch knives.” I released the blade back into the handle, then put the handle back in my pocket. “You are the weirdest man of God I’ve ever—“

“I’m not a man of God. Just a man.”

My arms fit around her waist and lower back, fit like a tailored suit. She smiled and spoke. “You’re more than just a man.”

“Given the right motivation, I can rise to the occasion.” I leaned in and kissed her.

The following confession may cause a revocation of my membership in the male sex but, I admit it, I like kissing. I like it more than anything else about sex. Yes, including the grand finale, that gasping, eye rolling, foot flexing, moment in which all my efforts to appear

sophisticated, exciting, and desirable are exchanged for the opportunity to make a face like a possum that's been run over by a pulpwood truck. No wonder animals copulate front to back. The fact that a man and a woman can have sex, face to face, and still talk to each other afterwards remains, for me, the greatest proof that love is blind.

We continued the cartography of each other's mouths. In the midst of this mapmaking, she shoved me away.

"You can go now."

My eyes crossed up a bit as I rocked back on my heels. "I can?"

"Yes. Good-bye. Good luck saving souls, curing lepers, whatever it is you do."

"I shear sheep."

"Go."

"What are you talking about?"

"I can't say it any simpler. Go. You're gonna do it anyway, so let's just part ways now. Clean. You don't have to trouble yourself with no lies. Just go before you start thinking I care, knowing I do, because I don't. I don't and there's no sense in pretending this was anything but a moment's sin."

I smirked. "Only a moment?"

"Lust. Two animals humping. That's all, so--you don't--need to fret none. I keep--secrets, and I--don't care."

The red haired woman accelerated throughout her entire, post-kiss, tirade. Near the end the catches in her throat created odd pauses. She pressed her chin to her chest. The same spot I had previously touched my forehead to in exhausted reverence. I lifted my hand, but, with a

slight backward stumble, she dodged it. Another step back, and she was outside the reach of possible embrace.

“I’m not going anywhere.”

“Said the traveling preacher.” She lifted her head. Tears. Dammit.

“I’m not looking for an escape.”

“You already got it. Where you gonna be in a week’s time? Don’t matter. Please go now. I don’t—“ A catch in her throat. “Care. I keep secrets. I told you. Nothing to fear.”

“Don’t, don’t cry. Listen, come on back to the meeting.”

She pressed both palms together, tight as our bodies had been. Her eyes on the flattened grass. “I can’t.”

“Of course you can. Anyone asks, I was counseling you about—“

“My husband.”

My turn to take a step back. “Do what?”

“My—“

“Your husband?”

“Yes.”

“You have one?”

She held up her left hand. Gold band without a diamond. “I tried real hard to hide it.”

“Well. Well, that’s all right.”

She looked at me like I was a three year old that had remembered to use the toilet but forgotten to lift the lid. “Adultery’s all right?”

“Well, not adultery per se, but as the Lord said in Leviticus 87:41: The sins of the righteous man are sweeter than the sacrifices of the ungodly.”

A slight grin. “Leviticus, huh?”

“Come to the Miracle Service. We’ll pray for you. Lay hands on your hip.”

“You already did. Ain’t better.”

“You don’t have to worry. No one will know that we—“

She twirled during that last sentence. From upper buttocks to her shoulders, green streaks colored her purple dress. “No one will know?”

“Well--”

“Good-bye Preacher.”

“But—“

“Good-bye.”

She turned to run, paused, then spun and lunged forward. While holding my face with both hands, she gave me one firm kiss. Then she ran like her salvation depended on it. As I watched her drift in and out before disappearing completely amongst the cottonwood and pine trees, a single thought entered my mind.

I did not know her name.