



burn

H E A T H   G I B S O N

## Copyright Information

Burn © 2012 by Heath Gibson.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any matter whatsoever, including Internet usage, without written permission from Flux, except in the form of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews.

As the purchaser of this ebook, you are granted the non-exclusive, non-transferable right to access and read the text of this ebook on screen. The text may not be otherwise reproduced, transmitted, downloaded, or recorded on any other storage device in any form or by any means.

Any unauthorized usage of the text without express written permission of the publisher is a violation of the author's copyright and is illegal and punishable by law.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either 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. Cover models used for illustrative purposes only and may not endorse or represent the book's subject.

First e-book edition © 2012

E-book ISBN: 9780738732251

Book design by Bob Gaul

Cover design by Adrienne Zimiga

Cover image © iStockphoto: Stephen Folkes

Flux is an imprint of Llewellyn Worldwide Ltd.

Flux does not participate in, endorse, or have any authority or responsibility concerning private business arrangements between our authors and the public.

Any Internet references contained in this work are current at publication time, but the publisher cannot guarantee that a specific reference will continue or be maintained. Please refer to the publisher's website for links to current author websites.

Flux  
Llewellyn Worldwide Ltd.  
2143 Wooddale Drive  
Woodbury, MN 55125  
[www.fluxnow.com](http://www.fluxnow.com)

Manufactured in the United States of America

# ONE

---

Most folks can't understand why somebody would run into burning buildings for a living. So people really don't get why I do it for free—well, almost. Busting into fireballs that used to be double-wide trailers, fighting brush fires that threaten to take a whole year's crops, breathing more smoke than air, ash and soot up your nose and in your mouth. Dragging out old ladies kicking and screaming because you wouldn't let them get their photo albums. And of course, there's that whole possibility of getting burned up and dying. But that's not going to happen, not if you pay attention. Just like Chief Griffin says, "Those caught with their head up their ass might as well kiss it goodbye." Yep, I'm going to get all that for the bargain price of twenty-five dollars a call. So you see, it's got nothing to do with the money.

Heck, my buddy Thad spends more of the money I make at D&G than I do. Can't go two days without Mr. Chunky-Butt bumming a few bucks for chili-cheese burgers or another can of Copenhagen. I keep telling him he doesn't need either one. But I give him the money anyway. Nobody tells Thad no—he's just too fat and funny to turn down.

"Come on now, Wee Wee, don't even act like you're a tight-ass or something. Just two dollars." Thad digs a couple of wadded-up dollar bills and a handful of change out of his pocket and drops them on my tailgate. The change shines under the orange lights in the parking lot of the Winn-Dixie. Yeah, Friday night in Coosa Creek, Alabama, is exciting, let me tell you.

"Thad, why don't you just eat the leftovers?"

“Wee Wee, what in the hell are you talking about?”

I point to his camouflage T-shirt that’s got crumbs and cheese stains down the front.

Thad looks down at his shirt, then picks off a piece of jalapeño and pops it in his mouth. He swallows, staring at me like, “So you going to give me the money or not?”

I reach back for my wallet. “Jesus, Thad, when you have a heart attack before we graduate, I don’t want to hear nothing about it.” I hand him a five.

“Don’t let your daddy hear you taking the Lord’s name in vain like that.” Thad slides off the tailgate. “Remember when he found that beer can in the back of your truck. Made the whole back pew come up in front, preaching how alcohol was the juice of the devil and all that.” He turns and walks toward the drive-in on the other side of the parking lot. “I can’t handle that kind of guilt, Wee Wee,” he says, shoving my money in his pocket.

Thad walks by the pick-up trucks and cars that line up in the parking lot every Friday and Saturday night. He’s got to stop and talk to everybody. He calls it making the rounds.

Every weekend is the same. We all just hang out, talking and such, until Deputy Dildo rides by and runs us off at midnight. Every now and then, somebody will do something stupid like show up drunk and fall all over the place, or drag race across the parking lot. That kind of stuff gets us gone quick.

“Hey, Wee Wee.” Mandy Pearman calls from the trunk of her Honda Civic.

I smile and wave back because it’s impossible to respond to Mandy Pearman and not smile. It doesn’t matter that she uses the nickname my sixty-three vertical inches of presence will never let me shake. When somebody who looks like Mandy acknowledges you in public, your brain and your face don’t really listen to each other.

“What y’all doing tonight?” Mandy yells. She jumps off her trunk and heads my way.

Unfortunately, I have been subjected to a lifetime of growing up with Mandy, in the same church and class ever since we needed help getting out of the sandbox. Because our families have been friends forever, I’ve had a front-row seat to the burning-hot specimen she’s grown into like a rose bush on steroid

fertilizer. It's been a torture no guy's carnal urges should have to endure.

"Oh, you know," I say back.

She steps up in front of me and flips her blond hair back over her shoulder. "You go to the game tonight?" She towers over me. Then again, almost everybody does.

I look down at my red and black D&G Grocery shirt that I have to wear to work.

"Nope."

Now Mandy knows her question didn't make any sense, but she just needed something to say. It would be hard to convince me she's talking to me for any other reason besides being polite. She knows that's what her mom expects.

"Well, it was something else." Mandy's eyes get all wide and she slaps my leg.

My brain takes a second to gather itself after the physical contact. "I'll bet." My throat catches. I quickly clear it. "So, who you here with?" My turn to ask a stupid question.

"Oh, nobody in particular. Just some of the girls who needed a ride from the game."

Mandy Pearman is never with anyone in particular. It's been a mystery of Coosa Creek since eighth grade. She has lots of friends without being in a clique. She dates without having boyfriends. She has simultaneously pulled off popularity and distance. Maybe that's what draws me and just about everybody else.

"Well, you can have a seat here if you want." I know how to be polite too.

Mandy turns around and jumps up on the tailgate next to me. She rests her hand on my shoulder. Don't get your hopes up there. It's not like that. This is just part of the torture. I'm a friend of the family, so light, utterly non-sexual gestures are normal. Guys in middle school were jealous of my special-contact status for about two months before they realized Mandy was more likely to press her lips to an electric fence than to mine. It was a nice two months, though.

"So, you getting ready for homecoming? Just a couple weeks away. I hope you've asked off from work." Mandy swings her legs back and forth with that playful air that makes most people comfortable around her. And for a second I entertain the idea that maybe she's asking me, because I could ask *her*. But it's

only a fleeting thought I should know better than to let into my head.

“Haven’t given it much thought, come to think of it.” Biggest lie I’ve told to date. “I’ll probably have to work, knowing my luck.”

“That sucks.”

“Tell me about it.” But it really doesn’t suck. Work bails me out from trying to find a date shorter than me. Guys, it matters. If you don’t believe me, watch how many girls slide those heels off before they step in front of the photographer.

“Well, Mama and me are going shopping for a dress tomorrow down in Montgomery. I’m thinking maybe red this year. What do you think?” She doesn’t wait for me to answer. “I mean, it’s our senior year, so I thought school colors and all.”

I want to tell Mandy that she’d look good in a burlap sack, and if she wants to wear one, I’d be happy to escort her. But I don’t even get a chance to get one syllable past my lips. My pager goes off. Right on cue.

I snatch the pager off my belt. No numbers or display, just a speaker for sound. We got particular tones for certain kinds of calls—house fire, car wreck, brush fire, etc. I hold the pager up to Mandy. “Sorry, gotta go.”

“Oh, yeah. No problem, Wee Wee. Time to be a hero.” That could have sounded all kind of smartass, but out of her mouth, it’s just nice. She jumps off the tailgate and I nearly take her damn arms off slamming it shut.

“My bad.”

She waves her hand at me. “Oh, get out of here.”

This is my first call, so I smack the gas a little too hard and squeal the tires in reverse. The crowd of people standing around gives a collective “Ooooooo.” When I yank the gear shift into drive, I hear Thad yell, “Wait up, Wee Wee.” Then he does his version of running across the parking lot.

I don’t even consider waiting because it will be Christmas before Thad gets to the truck. I hit the gas and squeal out of the parking lot. Flip on my wig-wag lights so folks will get out of the way. I grab the CB mike. Cell phones are useless when dispatch needs to talk to all of us as once. “This is Tuck calling in for a twenty,” I say into the mike.

Chief Griffin’s wife comes back. “Hey William, we got a house fire honey, 4301 Talledega Road. Comeback.” Mrs. Griffin used to be a dispatcher for the

sheriff's office, but now she's retired, spending her time trying to handle the chief and our calls.

Cars on Highway 231 pull to the side of the road as I speed toward downtown. Takes about all of five seconds to get through downtown because it's barely as big as a football field. And the only occupant in the downtown square on a Friday night is Leroy Toupes, our resident wino. A half-mile later I turn off 231 onto Talledega Road. Red and white lights flash up ahead.

I park my truck a safe distance from the house—about forty yards. Three other pick-up trucks pull up behind me. I jump out, open my toolbox in the back, and pull out my gear. Had the best time in training for getting dressed out. The other guys said it was because I have a whole lot less body to work around. They meant it in a good way.

Chief Griffin and Billy Parker already got a line hooked up to the tanker. Billy grabs the hose and runs toward the house. Flames shoot out the windows on the right side of the house, but the left side is dark and still. Mr. Ehlers stands out in the front yard in his underwear, screaming, "My wife, my wife!" and waving his arms like he's the one on fire.

"William," Chief Griffin yells at me.

"Yeah, Chief?"

"Get your sawed-off butt up there and help Billy with that line. We got to get ahead of this thing."

I remember in training Chief Griffin telling me there's no use in chasing a fire; you'll lose every time.

My heart beats so fast it feels like it's going to come out my ears. I run up behind Billy and pick up the line about a foot behind him. He feels me there and looks over his shoulder. "Guess you'll get initiated good this evening."

"Looks like it."

"Well, hang on to yourself," Billy says as he holds up his hand in the air and circles it around to signal for the water.

That hose comes to life like a dragon. Even with two people holding, it fights to throw us off. I might be short, but I'm strong for my size. I wrap my right arm around the hose and lean hard into Billy. I can't see nothing but his back.

Billy shuffles forward. Water crashes into the house and roars like a tuned-up

Mustang. But it's not half as loud as Mr. Ehlers screaming, "My wife, my wife!"

Seth Parker, Billy's younger brother, and Marcus Wombly run past me and Billy, going at the front door with fire axes. Seth's about the size of a wrestler on WWE, so the door might as well be toilet paper. I peek around Billy to see both of them going in. Wish it was me.

The hose starts to shove me and Billy back the closer we get to the house. "Boy, you better dig those legs in." Billy tugs forward on the hose. "Now come on."

I plant my feet and push forward. We take a few steps toward the house. The heat circles around Billy and bears into the side of my face. Skin feels like it's going peel right off. I hear Billy blow out the window with the water, and he starts filling the room. To our right Terry Brumfield and Mr. Simmons start another line on the house. Now, we can make some progress.

Seth comes out of the house carrying old Mrs. Ehlers slung over his shoulder like he's toting a deer out of the woods. She's all right though, just coughing up a storm. I turn back and try to look over Billy's shoulder to see how we're doing. Flames are gone from the roof but the room still glows so hot it's almost blue.

Me and Billy shuffle forward a couple more steps. Then there's this loud boom. Then another and another and another. Every person who has ever squeezed a trigger knows what that sound is. Shotgun.

Chief Griffin yells, "Get back. Get back now! Ammo, ammo!"

Me, Billy, Terry, and Mr. Simmons drop our lines and turn tail. About five steps away another shell goes off, and I dive, landing face-first in the grass. My helmet pops off and lands a few feet away. Three more go off. I look up. Everybody scurries behind the tanker. I crawl, stuck to the ground like a slug, as fast as I can, grabbing my helmet as I pass it.

I don't even get up. Just roll under the truck.

A few minutes go by with no more shells going off, but the fire steadily eats away at the right side of the house. Chief Griffin figures it's safe now. He gives the command to get back to work.

We get the fire under enough control from the outside to let Seth and Marcus get a line inside. Forty-five minutes later, nothing but smoke and half a house are left.



Even though Mr. and Mrs. Ehlers just lost half of their home, it doesn't keep Chief Griffin from going nuts all over Mr. Ehlers.

"Fred, what in the hell did I tell you?" The Chief can talk that way to him because they've been in the same hunting club for decades. "Get you a fire safe. That's what I said. Been telling you for years. Could have got somebody killed out here 'cause you too damn cheap."

The Chief walks away before Mr. Ehlers can say anything back. He comes up to me and hits me on the arm. "Got your adremmal going there, didn't it boy?" He laughs, so I do too. But I'm not laughing for the same reason he is. Adremmal was supposed to be adrenaline, but the chief has got his own language, and unless you want to be washing and waxing the tanker with your own underwear, you won't mention it.

"Yes, sir, it did."

"Well, I guess it's better than algebra, but not quite as good as a woman."

"Absolutely, Chief."

"Well, come on."

We check the house for hot spots to make sure the place won't go up again. And while we do, more and more neighbors gather along the street to watch. Eventually all those watchers become carriers.

A steady stream of folks go in and out of the house, carrying furniture and stuff that can be salvaged. Poor Mrs. Ehlers just sits on the grass in her nightgown, crying over burnt photographs and busted picture frames. Guess that's why they had to go in to get her. Happens all the time Chief says.

It's about two in the morning when we finally run all the neighbors home and get the lines and gear back on the truck. I take my gear off and toss it in my toolbox. The weight of the stuff we wear is like carrying around another person on your back.

Sweet relief runs down between my shoulder blades. First fire and I didn't get me or anybody else hurt—or worse. I guess that's a blessing in itself. I should be happy. But I have to go home now.

# TWO

---

I hear Mom before I see her—the ice cubes clinking in her glass. It's a song as familiar as "Amazing Grace" but the sound isn't even close to sweet. From the kitchen I see her head above the back of the couch, propped on her hand to keep it upright. The rest of the house is exactly like it's supposed to be at 2:20 a.m.

I could ignore her and go down the hall to my room. But she's not awake by accident. I'm sure she's already made it up in her mind that something needs to be said. What, I have no idea. We've been 'round and 'round this thing a thousand times.

"Come in here and let me see you." Her voice rings with the same contradiction it did when I broke my arm jumping off the roof. When I was eight, I didn't understand that sound. I get it just fine now.

I drop my keys on the kitchen table and walk into the living room. Her empty glass sits on the coffee table, no bottle in sight. We never see it.

She looks up at my face and then up and down my body a couple of times, making sure all my parts are still in the right place.

"Obviously, you heard," I say.

She nods and picks up the empty glass and tries to get one more drop. "Mrs. Whitmire called. She saw the flames from down the street."

"Well, you can see I'm fine." I take a half step away, because I figure seeing me uninjured is enough to at least let this wait until daylight.

"William, one second."

We stare at each other. Her face looks like she just finished watching the

saddest movie in the world.

“Why’re you doing this to me?” she asks.

If it was earlier in the night, I might actually have something to say, but right now, I know there’s no point in even trying to state my case all over again. “Mom, I’m really tired. Can we just talk in the morning?”

I can tell she’s tired too, or maybe her glass was filled too many times. Either way, she barely nods, letting me know it’s okay for me to go to my room.

When I get about halfway through the kitchen, she says, “I just don’t know why you don’t love your mother.” It’s the only ammunition she has left.



My body wants more sleep so bad it almost aches at the thought of pulling itself from the sheets and feather pillow. But my stomach vetoes any plans the rest of me might have. Frying bacon invades my room with that salty sweet smell dreams are made of. And I know scrambled eggs and Mom’s biscuits are not far behind. I could lay here and ignore the vibrations in my stomach, but that would mean eating silicone eggs and bacon like used tires. Breakfast is probably the only meal not worth eating when it’s left over. Not to mention how pissed Mom and Daddy get if I’m a no-show at the table. Saturday breakfast is a tradition and not something to mess with. Rest will have to come later.

I haul myself out of bed and put on the jeans I took off before falling asleep. They reek of burnt wood and rubber, but I can’t be bothered with digging another pair out of the drawer.

Steven is already at the table, looking over the music he’s supposed to play at tomorrow’s eleven o’clock service. He’s been playing the organ at the church for the past year—Ms. Inez’s arthritis finally got too bad for her to keep up with the notes on the page. He begged Daddy for a chance to prove himself.

I guess he’s always been doing that. At least it explains why my barely younger brother is good at almost everything.

I mean, he’s like three people wrapped into one. His grades are scary perfect, he plays on both the JV and varsity baseball teams, pounds on the organ like he’s possessed, and would give you his boat in a flood.

Being only thirteen months apart, it’s easy for us to be allies in this house,

committed to ignoring the obvious and avoiding arguments like they would trigger the rapture. We carry the family secrets like well-trained mules, and only sometimes unload our own stuff on each other. He knew way before anyone that I was going to join the volunteer fire department. Steven said, “William, that’s just crazy.” Then he shrugged. “But sometimes crazy is good.”

I slide into the chair next to him. He drops the music he’s looking at and fans the air. “Whoa, I see you brought home a souvenir. You smell terrible.”

“Yeah, well, the bacon should cover it up.”

“So, how was it?”

I look over at Mom standing at the stove, and then back at Steven. I shake my head, and he understands I have to tell him later.

“Guess you’re working today,” he says.

“Noon till six.”

Steven hits a button on his cell phone sitting on the table to check the time. “At least you have the morning.”

This is how we talk in front of Mom most of the time, not really revealing much of anything. It keeps everything even.

On the other side of the living room, the door to Daddy’s office opens. His Saturday ritual is to get up at five a.m., get dressed, and finish working on his sermon for Sunday. He says there’s something about the peace of early morning. And he thinks this makes us kids believe that’s why he sleeps in there on the sofa most nights.

“Good morning, gentlemen,” he booms across the room in the voice trained behind the pulpit. I think it’s funny that he always addresses Steven and me as a unit—that is, unless we’ve done something wrong.

“Morning,” we say together, like puppets.

He sets his empty coffee mug on the table. “I see you guys made it through the night in one piece.”

Daddy really just means me.

Steven nods and I say, “Yes, sir. No problem at all.”

He nods, because he knows as well as I do that talking about this in front of Mom would ruin breakfast.

Daddy is a little more supportive of the whole fire department thing. I’m sure

it's only because I tell him he saves people in his way, and I do it in mine. Really, what's he going to say to that?

He brings over the coffeepot he's already half-finished and fills his mug. Mom pulls the biscuits out of the oven and beats eggs in a bowl.

Daddy sits down, and we all wait to be served. It's like that in our house—not because we don't want to help. We're just not allowed. Cleaning, on the other hand, we get to do.

Within minutes, Mom has the table covered with plates, glasses, silverware, and a jug of orange juice. She seems a little unsteady, which means last night hasn't completely cleared her veins.

She sits at the round table between Daddy and me. He holds out his hands for us to join in the blessing.

“Our Kind Gracious Heavenly Father, we ask that you might bless this food, that it might go to the nourishment of our bodies and make us truly thankful for these and all the blessings of life. We ask these things in Jesus Christ's name, Amen.”

The blessing is fast, the words automatic and strung together into a continuous meaningless sound. It's the same way I've heard guys at school hang up with their girlfriends, a quick loveyabye.

Mom starts passing around the food, and we all settle into the routine of a nice family breakfast, pretending that none of us notice a trace of Mom's late-night beverages still hanging around.

Generally, there are unspoken rules about what we can and can't talk about. We learned these invisible commandments as kids, and have pretty much followed them ever since we could sit up straight and eat with a fork. Church and school usually take center stage.

“So, you want to give us a sneak peek of tomorrow's message, Pastor Tucker?” I say. Daddy gets a kick out of me calling him that.

“That depends on how well you know your Bible there, Mr. Wee Wee.” My nickname coming out of Daddy's mouth makes Steven laugh.

“What you got?” I challenge. This is a game we play sometimes. I've spent a lot of years memorizing scripture, partly because I like the way the words sound and partly because I've been raised by a father who believes spouting out

scripture from memory is one of the pillars of a pious life.

“Matthew 25:36.”

I look at Steven. “You wanna take this one?”

“All yours.” Steven stopped reading the Bible or even talking about it almost two years ago. Just one of his secrets I don’t mind protecting.

Daddy waits on the other side of the table while I make like I’m trying to remember. I’m just messing with him, of course.

I scratch my head and stare up at the ceiling.

“Need some help?”

“Nah, I think I got it: ‘For I was hungered, and ye gave me meat; I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink; I was a stranger, and ye took me in; naked and ye clothed me.’ ”

Daddy claps lightly in appreciation. It’s a nice moment that Mom crushes with just three words.

“Exodus 20:12.”

“Connie ... ” Daddy says, trying to stop what Mom is starting.

She ignores him. “William? Exodus 20:12?” This is how my mom operates with religion. She highlights the parts she likes.

Even though this is the Old Testament, it’s perhaps the first scripture me and Steven learned. It’s sort of a staple in the disciplinary tactics handbook in this house.

I try to make light. “Not much of a challenge there, Mom.”

“Then let’s hear it.”

“Honor thy father and mother,” I say as quickly as I can, hoping the speed of the reply will propel us off this track. But Mom won’t let me off that easily.

“And ... ” She wants me to finish the part of the scripture most people don’t bother with.

I let out a long breath. “That thy days may be long upon the land which the Lord thy God giveth thee.”

Mom loves the second part of this scripture more than the first—the suggestion that you’ll live longer if you do what Mom and Dad tell you. The guilt/fear combo is definitely her preferred weapon.

She looks at me. “So, you’re still fine with what you’re doing?”

The first time we had this discussion, I asked what exactly she thought I was doing. That really brought down the rain: *“I’m not going to be one of those mothers who has to bury her child.” “Throw your life away.” “Suffering and heartache on this family.”* She went like that for about a half hour, so now I just keep my mouth shut.

“Connie ... ” Daddy says again. He knows this talk leads to nowhere. They have nothing to hold against me. I bought my own truck and pay for my own phone with paychecks from sacking groceries and wrangling shopping carts at the D&G. And I don’t think they’ve bought me so much as a pair of socks besides at Christmas for two years. Mom did threaten to throw me out of the house, but we all knew she was bluffing. Not really something she would be able to keep a secret from the rest of the town.

Her eyes bounce from me to Daddy like she wants him to join in. But like the rest of us, he just wants to eat. His silent refusal to participate just pisses her off. She slams her hand down on the table hard enough to make the silverware jump. “You’re supposed to honor me. That’s what it says.”

I slide my chair back and pick up my plate. “Mom, I guess it all depends on your definition.”

# THREE

---

If the burglars miss a few houses on Friday nights, they can make up for it on Sunday mornings. Churches dot every highway and back road all over this county, and every parking lot is full come 10:45 a.m. It doesn't matter who you are or what you've done during the week; show up for church and most folks around here will turn a blind eye. Of course blind people still talk.

Me and Thad stand on the front steps, handing out bulletins to people looking for forgiveness for Saturday night, others just needing a good song, and some who simply need their gossip fix for the week. We got all kinds.

Daddy has been giving us this duty since we were in seventh grade. When he caught the two of us treating the fake Nativity cow like a rodeo bull, he figured the only way to keep us from tearing something apart was to keep us busy. So every week we stand at the front door greeting people.

"How you doing this morning, Ms. Mizelle?" I say and shake her cold frail hand.

"Good to see you, Mr. Franklin." Thad lightly pats his shoulder with his thick hand.

"Glad you could be with us this morning, Mr. and Mrs. Cooper," I say, while Thad hands them each a bulletin.

It's a continuous wave of smiles, handshakes, and hugs from old ladies who wrap us in a cloud of perfume and mothballs and gentlemen who didn't skimp on the Brut aftershave. Those smells are locked in my brain forever.

"Wee Wee, I'm telling you, I'm going to get carpet tunnel handing out these



things.” Thad loves to complain. And sometimes he tries to weasel out of this duty, but it never works. He gives in because the one thing we do have in common is that we both hate to disappoint.

“I think you mean carpal tunnel.”

“Carpet, carpal? Whatever. Just keep your eyes open for Mr. Thompson.”

I don’t know if Thad prays much, but if he does, he’s praying he won’t have to greet Mr. Thompson on Sunday morning. Mr. Thompson is about six-four and about four feet wide. He’s an old horse trainer with hands that feel like they’ve been carved out of the granite quarry over on the Georgia state line.

One Sunday a couple years back when Mr. Thompson started coming to Big Rock Baptist, Thad was the first one to greet him. Mr. Thompson stuck out his hand. Thad shook. And Mr. Thompson lost his mind.

“Boy, what in the heck you call that? That ain’t how you shake a hand. You better shake a man’s hand like you got a pair.”

My head darted side to side to see who’d heard. Thad’s face just turned as red as his clip-on tie. He couldn’t say anything.

Mr. Thompson stuck out his hand again. “Now let’s try that one more time.”

Thad looked like he was sticking his hand into a box full of rattlesnakes. But he grabbed anyway and squeezed so hard he nearly broke a sweat. It was good enough for old Mr. Thompson. “There you go, boy. That’s what I’m talking about.”

But I don’t see Mr. Thompson this morning. Instead, somebody just as dangerous.

Mandy and her mom come up the steps next. I hand a bulletin to Mandy, and she hugs me the way her mom has taught her to do with people they know. Thad has been known to shove me out of the way to receive this courtesy.

After all the smacks in the face with cheap perfume, Mandy’s smell is as fine as a baby’s hair. When she pulls back, the only thing I can think to say is, “So, did you get that dress yesterday?”

She glances over at her mom. “We did. Mom is happier about it than I am. But if I’d tried on one more, I think she would’ve had a coronary.”

I laugh. “I’m sure whoever you go with will like it.”

“Yeah, whoever that will be,” she says and steps in to the church.

Her mom comes up behind her. “Hey, Wee Wee.” She leans over and hugs my neck before I can give her a bulletin.

“Hey, Mrs. Pearman.”

She steps back and takes the baby-blue paper from my hand. “How’s your mom?” She asks the same question every time she sees me. Mom hasn’t come to church much lately unless there’s something special going on. Daddy doesn’t say much about it, I guess because he’s just as scared as me and Steven about which Mom will show up.

“Oh, she’s fine.”

“That’s good to hear. You need to tell her to call me.”

“Yes, ma’am, I will.”

“And you let her know we miss her.” She reaches out, pats my cheek like she’s sorry for something, then gives the same smile Mandy did. This is all part of the Sunday morning pre-sermon show where some folks act like they really care because, hey, it’s church and they still have to live with themselves.

As soon as they pass through the front door, Thad looks over at me and says, “Wee Wee, I don’t know why you don’t just go ahead and ask that girl to homecoming. You know you been dying to go out with her for forever.”

“You don’t know that.”

“Good Jesus, it’s written all over your face.”

One of the ladies in the foyer clears her throat at Thad’s use of Jesus. He turns and tells her sorry.

He turns back to me. “I mean, she couldn’t have given you a bigger hint.”

“Huh?”

“Oh, come on. She said, ‘whoever that will be.’ I know as much about girls as heart surgery and I even caught that one.”

“Whatever.” I could say more, but Mr. Thompson can handle this better than me.

“How you boys doing this morning?” His gravelly voice produces something between panic and resignation on Thad’s face. Thad snaps his head over toward the steps and knows it’s too late to run.

Mr. Thompson steps up to Thad like he always does and sticks out his hand.

Thad takes a deep breath and grabs his hand. He tries to look like he’s not

straining but the vein in his temple says otherwise.

Mr. Thompson lets go and slaps Thad on the shoulder hard enough to make his stomach jiggle. “You gettin’ there, son.”

He looks over at me. “Hey there boy, heard ya’ll did a heck of job for the Ehlers the other night.”

“You did?”

“Yeah, had to go into the feed store yesterday, and big boy’s daddy here told me all about it.”

Mr. Thompson is talking about the feed store Thad’s dad has owned my whole life. The place serves as the hub for swapping stories for all the farmers and cattle folks around here.

“Yes, sir, I guess we did. Just wish we could have gotten there a little sooner.”

“Well, don’t drive yourself crazy ’bout what can’t be undone.” He pats my shoulder instead of shaking my hand, then steps across the threshold and takes off his cowboy hat.

Thad looks down at his crumpled hand. “That man ain’t got no idea how important this thing is to my sex life.”

I just laugh back at him. “Serves you right.”

Steven starts up the organ inside, signaling me and Thad to shut the doors. We flip up the stoppers, shut the doors, and set the rest of the bulletins on the table at the back of the sanctuary.

We slide into our places in the back pew where just about every other kid over the age of thirteen plants for the eleven o’clock service. Daddy would like for me to get more involved with the services, but I don’t have anything to offer the way Steven does.

From the first lesson Steven had when he was in second grade, he just absolutely consumed himself with practicing. He never said it, but I’m sure he did it because Mom left him alone as long as he was sitting on that bench. He would rather play the piano at church, but that’s not going to happen anytime soon. Ms. Gale isn’t going to let that job go until they put her in the ground.

Thad deliberately steps around Mandy so I have to sit next to her. I think he likes to torture me as much as she does. I sit down next to her even though it’s not good for my soul. But what can I do?

The music fades, and Daddy's voice speaks into the mike.

"It is a beautiful morning God has given us. Amen?"

"Amen," the congregation replies in chorus.

I lift my head toward the pulpit.

"This is the perfect opportunity for all of us to take a moment and give thanks for the greatest blessing God has given us—each other."

This is different than the way he usually starts. Ms. Gale usually plays something on the piano while we all greet the people sitting around us. Guess not today.

Daddy continues. "This morning, as I look out over this congregation, I am reminded of a scripture. Matthew 25:36: 'For I was hungered, and ye gave me meat; I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink; I was a stranger, and ye took me in; naked and ye clothed me.'"

The whole sanctuary is quiet.

"Brothers and sisters, that is our calling this morning." He pauses to straighten his tie and smooth out his coat. Neither one needs it. It's one of those things Daddy does when he wants to pause to let things sink in. I've sat through hundreds of sermons and after a while, I started noticing things like that.

"As many of you know, Fred and Joy Ehlers' home nearly burned down Friday night. They lost quite a bit, and they truly need our help." He nods toward the back of the church, signaling the ushers. "Now the ushers are going to pass the plates. Give what you can. All of the proceeds will go to a fund to help Fred and Joy get back on their feet. Thank the Lord it isn't often we have to come to the aid of our brothers and sisters like this, so let's make the most of it."

He steps away from the pulpit, and right on cue, Ms. Gale strikes up "My Redeemer Lives." She always knows how to pick the song for the occasion.

Across the sanctuary I see men leaning over to get their wallets and old ladies digging in their purses. I lean over too and pull out my wallet. Grab a five and fold it once.

When the plate finally makes it to me, it's all the usher can do to keep bills from falling out on the floor.

I drop the bill into the plate. The usher presses down the pile of cash and turns to walk back to the front of the church.

Ms. Gale finishes the last verse, and Daddy steps back up to the pulpit.

“Before I ask God’s blessing upon this money, I feel it necessary to recognize a few men we have here in our congregation this morning. These men sacrifice their time and even sometimes their health for all of us here in this community and they deserve our deepest gratitude. Could the men of the Coosa Creek Volunteer Fire Department please stand?”

Chief Griffin stands near the front. Then Billy Parker and, two rows behind him, Marcus Wombly and Billy’s brother Seth stand. Thad reaches behind Mandy and shoves me forward. “Go on, boy.”

I stand with the others. Not sure if anybody notices.

“Brothers and sisters, let’s give these brave men our applause.”

The sanctuary fills with hands clapping. Such a weird sound in church. Almost out of place, which is kind of the way I feel. Can’t explain it. Maybe ’cause it’s the first time anybody in this church has recognized me for anything other than being Pastor Tucker’s son.

The congregation stops clapping, and we sit. Daddy instructs all of us to bow our heads.

I don’t hear a word of his prayer. Too busy going over Friday night at the fire, trying to find something I did that would be worthy of applause. Can’t think of a single thing.

I spend the entire hour with my thoughts ping-pong-ing back and forth between the job I did Friday night and wondering if maybe Thad is right and Mandy was giving me a hint. By the end of the service, I’ve come to two conclusions: no other guy in the school could have done my job at the fire, and this is my senior year so I might as well ask Mandy, because it’s not likely I’ll ever get a better chance.

Daddy finishes the service exactly at noon. He knows if he goes one minute over, people start to get all antsy in their seats. I get out before anyone else to get the doors open. I nod and tell everyone to have a nice day. Luckily, people are more worried about getting home to eat lunch than talking, so the place empties out pretty quick.

As I get the doors closed, Mandy comes up behind me and pats my back. “See you at school.”

“Yeah, see you.”

She gets down the steps and glides down the sidewalk. I can't help but stare.

Thad nearly knocks me down the steps. “Go on now. I know what you're thinking.”

I know I have to be insane to chase her down the sidewalk, but I do it anyway.

“Hey, Mandy, I uh ... ”

She turns around. I look up at her. “I uh, I was just wondering. You know, since you said, that uh, well, you have a dress, but that, you know, I kind of got the impression that you don't have a date.”

Her face just kind of goes blank at my rambling. But I'm in this thing now. No way of getting away from it.

“So maybe, I was thinking ... well, see, would you like to go with me?” I try to say it with the same confidence I felt sitting in that pew thinking about the fire.

Mandy smiles down at me. “Oh, Wee Wee, that's so nice.”

I smile back at her.

“But, really, how would we look?” She pats my arm. “Thanks anyway. You're so sweet.”

I think her feet barely touch the ground as she trots her way to the car, fleeing the embarrassment I've pulled down on both of us. I just stand there looking at the ground in an attempt to locate the heart that just fell out of my ass.

*Sweet sucks.*

**You've Just Finished your Free Sample**

**Enjoyed the preview?**

**Buy: <http://www.ebooks2go.com>**