

Four Trails

A Quartet of Country Tales

by Anthony Roberts

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To George Washington Hardy

An Oklahoma cowboy and my great-grandfather.

He loved me even though my hands were soft
and it was clear that the Cherokee had done run out.

Four Trails

A Quartet of Country Tales

The Forgotten Trail

Sweet Kahilu

The Twisted Trail

Rattlers

The Broken Trail

The Beautiful Shore

The Blazin' Trail

Honky Tonk Gal

The Forgotten Trail

Sweet Kahilu

Keoni Yoshida sat in an old brown recliner in the shade of his garage on Spencer Road. The paniolo house had been in his family for generations. It was a simple home, single wall construction with exposed pipes, a rusting tin roof and a rat's nest of electrical wire running beneath it. In places, you could see the ground through the cracks in the floor boards. Outside of the addition of electricity, it hadn't changed much since his grandfather's days. The old place had been repaired many times over the years and there was hardly a board that Keoni had not laid hands on: three bedrooms, a small kitchen, one bathroom, a covered garage with a wash house and a dilapidated horse barn out back.

The barn had long fallen into disrepair from lack of use and maintenance. It had been many years since he had ridden, not since the time he was thrown and had broken his wrist and pelvis. That was over twenty years ago and he still felt the stiffness and pain whenever the mornings were cool and damp. After a long hospital stay his last surviving daughter, Aulani, had told him that his riding days were over, and his body sadly agreed with her. Too many years with the wild three year olds had taken its toll, but in his dreams he still rode the hills of Waimea with the cool mountain mist on his face and the confidence of a powerful animal in stride beneath him. Such were the dreams of old cowboys.

He was young and strong when he first joined the ranch, back when the horses and cattle still ran wild in the hills and the names of the Kings and Queens of Hawai'i still held their power. Now he sat on his lanai, another lonely old man who watched the cars pass by. He raised his good right hand to each one as they passed: sometimes they waved back, or tapped their horn, but mostly they drove on.

He sat far enough inside the garage to keep out of the rain in case a mauka shower suddenly swept down the mountainside and surrendered its waters to the valley below. Next to his chair was an old workbench that held his daily necessities: a radio set to Hawaiian Oldies, a box of tissues, a thermos of coffee, some crack seed and a portable telephone which he never touched. His granddaughter, Betty, would arrive soon. She worked at the hospital and checked on him every morning and again at lunch time when she could. Betty would be angry that he had left his pills inside the house again. She would lecture him, "Those pills gonna save your life but cannot less you keep 'um close. If you get one heart-attack, no way you gonna make it back into da house for those pills. How many times I gotta tell you, Grandpa, huh?"

He didn't want the pills but he wouldn't tell Betty that, it would make her sad and worry for him. He was 93 years old and his wife and five children had all passed. He raised them as best he could, loved them all, and watched them grow into adults, have families of their own, and then grow old and sick

and die. No man should have to bury his love in the cold, hard ground. No father should have to watch child after child pass before his eyes and into the solemn earth.

Sometimes he would hear a song on the radio and warm tears would flow down his wrinkled face. There were days now when his memory was so clouded that he could not remember their faces or their names, only how much he missed them. When the next heart attack came, he did not want pills. He would welcome its crushing embrace and pray to find his lost loves on the other side.

Keoni noticed a black cat jump up on a fence post next to the garage. He called the cat *Boots* as it had white fur on its two front paws. It was a stray that wandered the neighborhood and looked for mice and hand-outs. Sometimes it would come visit him and rub up against his leg for a while before it moved on. His last friend. On clear days Boots would lie in the driveway and soak up the warmth of the sun and occasionally flick his tail in indignation. Keoni saved scraps from his meals-on-wheels for the cat but today he had none.

"Eh, Boots. You going sit on da fence post all day? How come you no come ovah here see me, you?"

The stray cat looked at the old man for a second and jumped back into the alley and out of sight. He must have sensed there were no treats today and decided to look elsewhere for his meal. Keoni hoped Boots would find a nice fat mouse to eat.

It was spring, the rains fell and life renewed. The cherry trees along the front fence line were all in bloom. So much beauty wasted on an old man. A sudden gust of wind whistled across the driveway and lifted a thousand cherry blossoms gracefully into the air, swirled them around then dropped them as a blanket of tender pink blossoms on his yard. A small bit of magic for Keoni's tired eyes, but there was something else too... that cat, it was something about the cat and the wind... but he couldn't remember.

An image grew slowly in his mind and rose through the distant fog of memory, a moment from over 70 years ago of a tall slender woman in a tightly cinched riding skirt who leaned against a stone corral fence and held a black cat with white paws. The young woman's long braided hair and ebony eyes were as lovely and dark as the cat's jet-black fur. The wind suddenly swirled around her and kicked up a dust devil in the corral. The woman laughed and pulled the cat close to her bosom to calm its nerves. The wind died just as quickly as it came, and she whispered to the frightened animal, "Oh, such a pretty kitty, such a lovely little kitty". Keoni could hear the cat purr as it nestled against the comfort of the young woman's bosom. Sweet Kahilu.

Keoni saw the white Chevy Impala turn the corner and lumber down Spencer Road. The car pulled into the driveway and his granddaughter Betty got out with a bag of take-out and her phone. They all

had phones these days and wore them like paniolo used to wear knives. Always ringing, so much calls and talk, talk, talk -- too much for Keoni. He had no use for them. He preferred the quiet, to enjoy the wind and the rain, and listen to the songs that played softly on his radio.

"Eh, Grandpa. I brought you one bento roll for your lunch. How you doing today?" asked Betty as she walked up the driveway.

"Okay, same same," replied the old man but with a slight tremor in his voice.

Betty put the take-out on the bench and sat down in a white plastic chair across from her grandfather. She looked at the old man's red and swollen eyes. It was so hard to grow old, especially for men like her grandfather, tough old cowboys whom time had left broken, crippled and alone.

"You sad today, Grandpa? You been crying little bit?"

"Little bit. I was thinking of Kahilu... da kine... Elizabeth Carver," said Keoni.

"Eh, she was that Mr. Sharpe's mother? You knew her? Whoa, long time ago that, huh? What you remembering?" asked Betty.

"Yah, long time ago when I was small boy. We spoke Hawaiian back then, all the cowboys, Carvers too. I can't remember -- you speak?"

"I can understand some, Grandpa," replied Betty. "You like talk-story 'bout Elizabeth Carver in Hawaiian? I would love to hear that. We go eat some lunch and you tell me, OK?"

The words formed in Keoni's mind; the dancing language of his mother and his grandparents and of generations before stretching back a thousand years. To think and speak in Hawaiian took him back to the days his youth, back to the time of wild horses and iron men, before radio and television and computers and cell phones, back when the Big Island was still Hawai'i and the Carver family ruled the Ranch like the Ali'i of old. The old man let the language flow through him as he told the story to his granddaughter.

"Elizabeth Kahiluonapuaapiilani Carver, her name meant 'The Quiet One, Descendant of Piilani' from the line of the great Maui King. Her father died when she was a baby and left her sole heir to the ranch. She was raised by her mother as royalty, which she was, and by her legal guardian, D. W. Perkins, who taught her the ways of the ranch."

"I first met Elizabeth Carver when I was six years old, she was a few years older than me. My father was a top-hand and would get called to the Big House, the Carver Estate. Sometimes he would take me with him and I would play by the wash house while my father met with the bosses."

"One day a beautiful little girl came around the corner of the wash house. I was playing with a stick and drawing circles in the dirt, and she came and sat down beside me. I was a cowboy's son, dirty and a

little rough around the edges, but to me she was an angel, all dressed in white with long flowing hair sprinkled with silk white ribbons. Her dress had a ruffled collar and sleeves that came down her arms and ended in fancy lace around her wrists. She picked up a stick too and drew a cowboy roping a horse beside all my scribbles, and she spoke to me."

'Are you Hoshi Yoshida's little boy, Keoni?'

"I was so stunned that she knew my name that I couldn't speak. I just nodded and looked back down at the dirt again. She touched me on the shoulder and asked,"

'Are you thirsty, Keoni?'

"She took me into the Big House - my father never allowed me in there - and she gave me some juice. I think it was guava, though I am not sure, but at the time I thought it was the best juice I had ever tasted. I finally worked up the nerve to speak to her and asked her for her name. She laughed and told me, 'Kahilu'."

"For the next few years I played with my friend, Kahilu, whenever my father took me to the Big House. She was an only child and treated me like a little brother. Never made me feel that I was beneath her, that I was just a paniolo's son. When Elizabeth turned fourteen, they sent her off to school in America. She came come back to Waimea every summer, but spent most of her time with Mr. Perkins who was teaching her the business of the ranch."

"It was during Elizabeth's summer trips home that she started to call me by my English name, *Johnny*. She spent so much time with the haoles that English became her first language, or perhaps she liked to tease me as older sisters often do. I didn't mind. I was happy to be her Johnny.

Like her name, *Kahilu*, she moved gracefully through the ranch like a gentle breeze. She gave her aloha to all. All of us cowboys loved her; some as a daughter, some as a niece, or as a sister, and some of us loved her as a woman. We watched our Sweet Kahilu grow from a loving child into a beautiful and regal Princess. She was our Ali'i. My father and the older cowboys respected her and looked forward to the day when she and Mr. Perkins would run the ranch together."

"It was after Elizabeth graduated from High School that distance grew between us and we became who we always were, a dirt poor cowboy and his wealthy boss. This was also the time that William Sharpe arrived in Waimea."

"On the passage home from San Francisco, she met this William Sharpe, a wealthy haole boy from Georgia. They fell in love on the ship and three weeks later they were married at the St. James church, the same church where I married your grandmother."

"We didn't know this foreigner, this Sharpe character, but we immediately distrusted him for being haole and because he snatched our Sweet Kahilu from us, but he was a good match for Elizabeth: very handsome and an excellent horseman. He always wore the finest clothes. What they called a *Southern Gentleman* back then, which made us cowboys hate him even more."

"Elizabeth and William had baby James their first year of marriage. The baby brought new life to the ranch and acceptance for William. It was around this time that I first met your grandmother. We were young sweethearts too, but your grandmother's story is a much longer one and it comes after Elizabeth."

"I saw little of Kahilu during her marriage. It was only natural that she spent her time with her family and, of course, she now had the responsibilities of the ranch. She was nineteen and just a year away from her inheritance. On her twentieth birthday she would take her place as the Big Boss beside Mr. Perkins."

"I remember that William caused quite a stir on Elizabeth's birthday when he gave her a very fancy automobile. Automobiles were nothing new to Waimea, but William's car was different. It was a *Sportster*, which he called *The Silver Ghost*. It had a convertible top and was very fast, at least for those days. He and Elizabeth would race up and down the backroads of Waimea and scare the hell out of the horses and cattle. She loved that car, and William too, I suppose."

"The last time I saw Elizabeth, now Elizabeth Sharpe, was not long after her birthday. I was assigned to mend fences out at Punahale station. The other paniolo rode out early to sort cattle, but my father made me stay behind as punishment for something, I don't recall what. I was sixteen and a bit of a rascal, always got scoldings."

"You Grandpa? Mama told me you was always GIVING scoldings!" said Betty.

"That came later. When I was young, I got them," said Keoni.

"I dug out rotten fences posts all morning and planned to set the new ones in the afternoon. I was pulling up a post when I saw Elizabeth on one of her grandfather's prize palominos. She rode paniolo style, not like the English ladies who ride for show. Elizabeth was a true horsewoman. I waved at her, and she turned her horse and trotted over to me. I was very hot and sweaty and a little embarrassed for her to see me in such a state, after all, she was a Royal Princess and almost the Big Boss. She rode up to me with a smile on her face, the way she looked on that horse melted my heart."

'Good morning, Johnny. Are you in trouble again? Pulling posts while the rest of the men are out doing real work?'

'A little bit trouble, Kahilu, but I do more work here than all of them put together.'

'Yes, I can see that,' she said. Then she asked me to water her horse while she took a short break from

her ride. I was happy to spend time with her again. I lead the palomino to a water trough and pasture with plenty of long grass. I took off the bridle, saddle and blanket and slung them over the fence rail and cleaned myself up a little before I returned to the paniolo house to meet Elizabeth."

"She sat on the front lanai with her feet propped up on the porch railing, and said to me, 'I thought I might sit down and let you wait on me. I'll have a cup of coffee if you don't mind.'

"There was a half a pot still left in the kitchen from the morning crew. I put it back on the stove and added another chunk of wood through the feed door. I poured fresh water for both of us while we waited on the coffee. When I returned to the lanai I found Elizabeth had set up the checker board. Cowboys all like to play cards and checkers, and she was no different."

'I bet I can still beat you,' she said. 'I recall that I was always much better at checkers than you.'

I laughed and answered her, 'Maybe so, but I am not a little boy anymore, Mrs. Sharpe. You might be in for a surprise.'

"I sat down and played checkers with Elizabeth. She was so different from her mother. Mrs. Carver was a very reserved and proper woman. Like Elizabeth, she had much aloha for all of us, but there was a distance to Mrs. Carver's love. Perhaps it was because her own husband had died so young from the great fever that had swept the island. But with Elizabeth, there was no distance. From when she was a little girl she rode out to spend time with her cowboys, talk-story with us, and play checkers and cards. Sometimes she stayed so long that her mother would send one of the house staff to fetch her home. She was our friend, almost like a cousin, and to some us, she was a cousin. Small towns lead to many cousins."

Keoni stopped for a moment as a dark cloud passed before his mind.

"What...? Where was I?" asked Keoni.

"You and Elizabeth Carver were playing checkers, if that's what you were really up to," said Betty with a mischievous grin.

"Don't talk like that!" scolded the old man. "Show respect. Yes, we played checkers, talked and laughed like the old times, as a brother and sister would. She told me about a great voyage they were planning and how excited she was about it. She was going to Paris though she had been before. She wished to show off her favorite places in Europe to her husband. She said that this would be her last chance at freedom before taking over the heavy responsibility of running the ranch. Her mother did not want her to go, and neither did Mr. Perkins, but they could not talk her out of it."

'What will you do with your little boy?' I asked her.

'We'll take him with us, of course,' she said. 'James is two years old and that's old enough to travel.'

Then she leaned close to me and whispered, even though we were miles from the closest person, 'Johnny, I have other big news, but you can't tell a soul. Promise you won't speak a word to anyone. If it gets out, I'll know it was you.'

Playing along with her, I said, 'I promise, and you know I can keep a secret. I never told anyone about the time you broke the vase that the Emperor of Japan gave your grandfather.'

She laughed at me and replied, 'Oh, Johnny, I'm sure I don't know what you are talking about, but my secret is... I'm with child again! William knows, of course, and I had to tell Mother. I guess everyone will know soon enough, but it's still a great secret for now. We plan to have the baby in Paris. Isn't that exciting? To have a child born in Paris, France.'

'So far away, Kahilu,' I said, 'Everyone will be worried.'

'Don't be silly,' she told me. 'Paris has the best doctors in the world. It will be lovely.'

She swore that the next time I saw her she would be back from Europe with a little French baby. We finished the game and I went and got the coffee. Elizabeth didn't want to play any more so we sat on the lanai, looked out over the plains and watched the clouds drift down Mauna Kea and across the valley. We sat there and drank the hot coffee and enjoyed the silence between us, just like we were children when we drew pictures in the dirt."

"Out of the blue, she turned to me and said, 'You know, Keoni, if I didn't meet William I might have married you.'

"Oh, Grandpa, you could have owned all of Carver Ranch, you sly dog!" said Betty.

"No, never! She was Ali'i and I was not. It was a strange thing for her to say and I told her so. We finished the coffee and I went off to saddle her horse. I can still see her on that beautiful palomino with the mountains and sky behind her. Before she rode away, she said to me, " 'It's so beautiful here, Johnny. I shall never leave it. No matter what, this will always be my home.'

"Elizabeth and her entourage left for Europe not long after that. They arrived in Paris right before World War I. Elizabeth had her baby, Anna Jane Sharpe, but it was a difficult birth and both she and her baby were ill. The Great War started but Elizabeth and the baby were too weak to travel, still, William had no choice but to take his family away from the fighting. When they arrived in America, Elizabeth and baby went straight into the hospital. The baby died in not long after their arrival."

"Oh no, Grandpa. She lost her baby? Oh my God," said Betty, who reached for a tissue.

"It was a great tragedy. My sweet Kahilu had lost her baby girl. William took the family to his home in Georgia to grieve as Elizabeth's health continued to worsen. Little Anna Jane's casket traveled with them like a piece of luggage. It was then that the doctors told William that his wife had tuberculosis and

he became lost in his sorrows. The death of his daughter and the failing health of Elizabeth was too much for him. It fell to Mrs. Carver to go to Georgia and bring them all back home to Hawai'i."

"They made it as far as San Francisco, but Kahilu was too weak for the ocean voyage home. There was a World Trade Fair in the city and Mrs. Carver arranged for the Hawaiian delegation to come and visit with Elizabeth. They sang to her of Hawai'i, beautiful songs of her homeland to lift her spirits and give her courage. It was in San Francisco that she inherited the ranch. She was the Big Boss Lady at last, and she died in America as she listened to the songs of her homeland."

Betty reach for another tissue. Both she and Keoni wept, as the old man continued, "That was over 70 years ago. Mr. Perkins gathered all us ranch hands together to tell us the dreadful news. His tears fell as he told us of her death and the death of the baby. I remember Mrs. Carver all dressed in black at his side, so still and so strong. She did not cry, not even at the funeral when her only child and baby-granddaughter were lowered into the earth.

Elizabeth had come home to us at last. The Big House was filled with thousands of flowers piled high around two koa caskets. We loaded the caskets onto a horse drawn trailer and led the funeral procession through Waimea town and out to the family cemetery. Hundreds of people walked with us, all trailing behind Sweet Kahilu and her child. I heard the wails of the women echo off the mountainside, and saw cowboys as tough as leather, unable to hide their tears.

My own sorrow was beyond control. I wanted to scream, to drown myself, to carve the pain from my heart - but I could do nothing but endure. When the cowboys laid her and little Anna Jane to rest, I longed to jump into the grave beside them and pull the earth over me. My Elizabeth was gone. My Sweet Kahilu, gone forever."

The old man wiped his eyes, took a sip of coffee, then added, "We buried her with the baby on the plains of Mauna Kea, on the land she loved and swore never to leave."

Betty wiped her eyes, reached over and grabbed her grandfather's hand.

"She was your first love, wasn't she, Grandpa?"

"Yes, Kahilu was my first love. The first of so many I have buried, yet cannot lay to rest."

* * * * *

The Twisted Trail

Rattlers

A man in a dusty Chevy Nova pulled up to the first pump at the Balmorhea GasnGo service station, though it was unlikely he would receive any service from the employee on duty who was firmly ensconced behind the counter in the air-conditioned food mart.

Jimmy Segwick sat on his stool at the cash register and watched as the man stepped out of his car, stretched and then walked over to the pumps. He obviously wasn't a local, and a Nova being your standard rental car, Jimmy decided to throw caution to the wind and reset the pumps rather than have him come in and pay first. Company policy at the GasnGo was for all patrons to pay before they pumped, but Jimmy didn't stand on policy, in fact, he tried to stand as little as possible. He mostly sat on his stool all day long and sold gas, snacks and sodas to the occasional tourists who passed through, or beer and cigarettes to the handful of locals who could pay the inflated prices. You didn't see many tourists take the scenic loop through Balmorhea these days. Travelers tended to stay on the interstate. Balmorhea in the summer time had little to offer. It was nothin' but hot and dry, some patchy scrub grass, and a hell of a lot of scorched earth and rattlesnakes.

The man made several trips back and forth to the water bucket and methodically squeegeed all the dirt off his windows. Jimmy could tell he was business man, nobody around these parts dressed like that unless they were gettin' married or buried. The temperature was already 105 degrees and Jimmy figured the man had to be roasting in his monkey suit. The man topped off his tank and headed into the food mart.

"Hot enough for ya, Mister?" asked Jimmy, as the man entered the store.

"If it was any hotter I'd be searching for the devil himself," said the man.

"I reckon you'd find him too. If this ain't hell, it's awful damn close," said Jimmy.

The man walked up to the counter and threw down a fifty for the gas.

"Hope you don't mind, but I'm supposed to check anything over twenty for counterfeit, not that you're a suspect or nothin'. Just doin' my job," said Jimmy, and ran his detection pen over the bill.

"A man's gotta do his job," said the man.

"Well, you'll be glad to know you ain't carrying no funny money," said Jimmy, as the ink on the bill turned to a light amber color.

"Thank heavens. I'd hate to get hauled off to jail way out here."

"And it would be a haul, friend. The Governor closed down the jail last year. Budget cuts, or so they say. They'd have to take you all the way to Van Horn."

"You got no police around here anymore?" asked the man.

"Don't got 'em. Don't need 'em. Everyone 'round here takes care of themselves. Law has always been cowboy law out in these parts, and that's the way we like it. Besides, the police are too busy chasin' wetbacks and dope dealers to pay attention to much else," said Jimmy. "Here's your change, thank you for stoppin' in."

The man pocked his change then said, "I noticed some beer over in that cooler yonder. Mind if I had one or two before moving on? I've been drivin' all day and wouldn't mind stretchin' my legs before climbin' back into that matchbox."

"Policy is no alcohol consumption on the premises," said Jimmy looking the man over before handing down his verdict, "but seeing as you're my third customer all day, and there ain't no law around anyhow, I suppose there's no harm sellin' a grown man a beer."

"There ya go," said the man with a friendly smile. "Cold one's on me if you don't mind drinkin' on the job, seeing as there's no law around."

Jimmy never once had a beer while working, wasn't even tempted, but the man was offering so he thought he might as well be sociable.

"All right then, but just one. If anybody drives up I'll have to stash it behind the counter. I don't need any pissy calls from the head office in Dallas 'cause some old biddy got her panties in a bunch seein' me sippin' a Bud."

"That your flavor then, Budweiser?"

"That'll work," said Jimmy.

"Then ring me up a couple them tall boys, son."

The man popped the tops on the ice cold beers and passed one off to Jimmy, and said, "Name's Harlan, Harlan Robichaud. I work out of San Antone but spent the last couple days down in El Paso."

"Jimmy Sedgwick," said Jimmy. "Nice to meet ya and thanks for the beer. What line of business you in Harlan, salesman for the oil companies?"

"No, I'm just an glorified accountant. I had to run an audit down in El Paso and the sonsabitches overbooked my flight back to SA. Rather than wait a couple days for the next one, I said, 'Screw it, I'll get a rental.' Bad to worse, all they had was this piece-of-shit Nova. And to top it all off, the AC is on the fritz."

"Wearin' that suit in a car with no AC. Lordy, I imagine you do need a cold beer or two," said Jimmy.

"Oh, it's not *off* by a damn sight - it's stuck on full blast! I'm wearin' my jacket just to keep warm. Freezin' to death in 100 degree temperature. Can you believe that shit? This trip is one for the ages,"

said Harlan.

Jimmy took a long pull on his beer, "Whole country's goin' to hell in a bucket. Everything you buy is a piece of shit, most of it Made in China. Jews up in New York usin' the Stock Market to rob us all blind, and then that Obama - Good Lord, don't even get me started on that boy. No offense now, if you lean the other way. Everybody's got the right to their own opinion, I suppose."

"No offense taken. I grew up in Texarkana and never thought I'd see the day we'd have some Ubangi for our President. Just goes to show you how far we've sunk, in my humble opinion," said Harlan.

"You got that right, Mister. This country won't be fit for white people much longer. The niggers, wetbacks and queers have done took over. Unless we do somethin' quick we all better start learnin' to habla the espanol or dance the watusi."

"It'll be a cold day in hell before I do either of those," said Harlan, taking another drink off his beer.

"Not much traffic out here this time of day."

"No sir, most of the traffic comes through in the mornin' and slows way down in the afternoons. I'm usually closed by 5:30 if not earlier. It's a ghost town around here at night," said Jimmy.

Harlan took another large pull off his beer, burped, and took a look around the room. Dozens of pictures of rattlesnakes adorned the walls along with a pair of six foot long rattle snake hides tacked up behind the cashier station.

"Gotta lotta damn snake pictures in here. Some real monsters too. What's the deal with all this stuff?" asked Harlan.

"Well sir, one thing Balmorhea has in abundance is rattlers. Rattlesnake huntin' is big sport down here. There's an annual round up, but that's mostly for the tourists and university types. They come down here with a big milkin' crew for the venom and put on a big show for the tv crews. Most of the local boys just hunt 'em for the meat and hides, or just out of spite."

"You ever do that? Hunt the big rattlesnakes?" asked Harlan.

"Hell yeah I do! That's what brought me down here. I saw a hide on sale a couple three years ago in Fort Worth for \$120. I thought, *Hell, man, easy money*," said Jimmy.

"You came all the way down here from Fort Worth just to hunt rattlesnakes?"

"That and to get away from my crazy bitch of an ex-wife," said Jimmy.

"Runnin' from one poisonous snake to another, eh?"

"You might say that, but I tell ya what - I prefer the ones that slither on the ground to the ones that bitch and moan, that's for dang sure!"

"Not quite the easy money you imagined though, snakes I mean, you workin' in a gas station and all,"

said Harlan.

"No, not as easy as I thought," frowned Jimmy. "You gotta do a volume business to make any money with snakes. Didn't know that 'fore I got here."

"Is that you in that picture there?" asked Harlan, and pointed to a photograph of a grinning man in a confederate T-shirt holding up a large rattlesnake.

"Yeah, that's me, alright. That sumbitch was 8 feet long and weighed near 50 lbs. We found a half-eaten rabbit inside him, and not a little bunny neither, a big ol' jackrabbit 'bout the size of a house cat," said Jimmy with pride.

"How in the hell do you catch somethin' that big? I reckon he's longer than a man is tall," exclaimed Harlan.

"Very carefully, my friend. I ran across that big bastard not a mile from this store. Summer drought brings 'em in lookin' for water," said Jimmy. "Now the first thing you gotta do when approachin' a big-ass rattler is to gage how pissed off he is. If he's all coiled up and hissin', then brother, he's ready to strike and you need to back-the-hell-off."

"Jesus H. Christ, I can't even imagine," said Harlan.

"You gotta keep your eye on him all the time and move in slow like. I bought me an official snake-stick but you can use anything that puts a little distance between you and that rattler; a golf club, a piece of rebar with the tip bent over, anything that'll put his head down in the dirt. The trick is learnin' how to approach him," said Jimmy. "He don't see too well - he gets most of his information from vibrations, so you gotta come up on him slow and pick your spot. Don't be messin' around with a rattler on uneven ground. If he's up against some scrub, or half under a bunch of rocks, hook him and drag him out into the open. Take your time, line it up, and then, quickly pin his head to the ground. He ain't gonna like it and a he's strong sumbitch, so you gotta be committed - pin him and keep his head down. And be damn sure when you make your move."

"Good Lord, that calls for another beer," said Harlan. "Ring us up two more, Jimmy."

"Yes sir, two more tall boys!"

"So what do you do when you have that monster pinned to the ground? Sounds like a Mexican stand-off to me," said Harlan.

"You sure as hell don't let him go. It's you or him. Keep him pinned, and slowly, and I mean *slowly*, reach down with your free hand and grab him hard behind the head. Not close to the head, not an inch behind the head, but right where his head hits his body. Grab his ass tight and don't let go. He'll twist and fight and try to scare ya into lettin' him loose, but you gotta hold on for dear life, 'cause it's your life

or his. There ain't no hospital 'round here, and that John Wayne bullshit of suckin' the venom out don't work. You get bit out here and the poison gets in ya... well, friend, your eyes bug out, your throat swells up and you're dead meat."

"You're a braver soul than I. Now that you got a pissed-off snake by the throat - do you put him in a sack? Or beat him to death, which would be my first choice."

"You don't wanna mess up the hide so you get him in a sack, but make sure it's made of heavy canvas, don't use a pillow case that he can bite right through. A lot of folks like those five gallon plastic buckets with the lids. I just assume kill 'em right off. You can shoot 'em, kill 'em with a knife - oh yeah, you might think this is funny - but I've heard tell of people freezin' 'em to death."

"No shit? Just throw 'em in the fridge?" asked Harlan. "That might be a way of gettin' rid of the ex-wife too."

"Wish I'd thought of that, but no, you get yourself one of those cheap freezers at the Costco, bring your bucket of snakes home and dump 'em in. Before you know it, you got Rattlersicles," said Jimmy.

"Leave 'em for a few days, then thaw 'em out, skin 'em, eat the meat and treat the hides."

"Is that how you do it then?"

"Nah, freezin' 'em sounds kinda crazy to me. I like the direct approach. I cut their heads off with my knife, and I've never shed one single tear."

Jimmy reached down to his side, unbuckled his holster and pulled out a folded hunting knife. He opened the blade and snapped it into place, holding it up for Harlan to see.

"Four inch blade, Damascus steel - sharp as a razor, my friend. It'll take your finger off as easy as a snake's head if you're not careful," said Jimmy, then folded the knife back up and returned it to its holster.

"Not bad for protection either, I imagine," said Harlan.

"Slice through a man's belly as easy as a snakes, but my real back-up is under the counter here, *Old Betsy*. Twelve gage, double-barreled shotgun - sawed off for that *can't hardly miss* advantage," said Jimmy, who brought the shotgun up from beneath the counter. "This is the only security system I'll ever need."

"Between that knife and your shotgun, I'd say you're pretty well covered," said Harlan. "Can I have a look at that gun? Reminds me of one my Granddaddy use to have. He ran a little moonshine back in East Texas in the 40's and 50's, and that was his preferred security system too."

"Mister, I think you're an OK feller, but I'm not in the habit of handin' over a loaded shotgun to a stranger. No offense," said Jimmy.

"None taken, son. Perfectly reasonable. It just reminded me of my old Granddaddy's gun. I do a lot of bird huntin' and I'm always interested in lookin' over a nice shotgun."

Jimmy took another long pull on his beer then said, "Tell ya what, I'll take the shells out and you can have a quick look. My daddy gave me this shotgun when I was a boy, and his daddy gave it to him. I sawed-off the barrels when I started workin' here. It's a good gun. I wouldn't stay workin' here without it."

Jimmy pushed back the locking lever, broke open the shotgun and pulled out the two shells placing them side-by-side on the counter in front of him. He snapped the barrels closed and handed the gun over to Harlan. The accountant sat his beer down next to the shotgun shells and stepped back to admire the old weapon.

"It sure is a beauty, a *real* beauty. I can see why your father held on to it. I bet it made a great bird huntin' gun before you cut it all down," said Harlan. "Bird huntin' sure is a great sport. I love everything about it, I surely do: being on your own, gettin' out in the wild, flushin' out the birds, the thrill of knockin' them down from the sky. It's the best sport in the whole wide world."

"There's a few ranches down here that dove and quail hunt. I can put you in touch with them if you'd like," said Jimmy.

"I'd like that. Thank you, Jimmy," said Harlan. "You know another sport I really like? Football. America's national pastime. I'm crazy about some football. Do you like football, Bobby?"

"Sure, who doesn't like football? But you called me Bobby there, Mister, my name is Jimmy."

"Bobby? Did I? I apologize, *Jimmy*. I must have been thinking about this thieving redneck I heard about up in Fort Worth. He liked football too, and he loved to bet on the games, But this feller, he was a real loser, Jimmy, a natural born loser. You might not believe this, but he ran up a 40,000 dollar tab. And that's not even counting the vig! And then he just up-and-disappeared. That was about two years ago. His name was Bobby. Bobby Sellers. Now, when did you move down here again, *Jimmy*?"

Jimmy dropped his hand to his knife and replied, "Now wait just a minute, Mister. I don't know what the hell you're talkin' about, but I've lived here for the last ten years of my life, just ask anybody in this town. And I ain't no gambler neither, and I never heard of no Bobby Sellers."

"That's not what your crazy ex-wife told me," said Harlan. "Think fast, Bobby!"

Harlan tossed the 12 gauge back to Jimmy who snatched it out of the air and pointed it right back at Harlan's chest. Jimmy smiled for a second until he saw the two shotgun shells sitting on the counter next to Harlan's beer.

The accountant from San Antone gave Jimmy a friendly smile and took a step toward the counter.

"You know, Jimmy... Bobby... Jim Bob, whatever the hell your name is," said Harlan, as he pulled a .357 Colt Python out of his jacket and pointed it directly at Jimmy's head. "It occurs to me, son, that the main thing about dealing with snakes is being smarter than the snake."

* * * * *

The Broken Trail

The Beautiful Shore

Jonah Kendall watched the clouds drift across the blue sky with a sense of tranquility. He turned from the window and stared at his computer screen. There was nothing left for him here so he logged off and quietly left the office. His wife, Sarah, wouldn't be home until later that evening, which gave him plenty of time. The afternoon was his and he would take full advantage of it. There would be consequences, of course, but Sarah would understand. Of all people, she would understand.

He arrived home around 2:00. Ellie was surprised to see him home so early and wagged her tail in a fit of happiness. He walked to the kitchen, dug out a treat for her from a jar on the counter, and tossed it onto her doggy bed. The wagging stopped as she loped over to settle down for a leisurely chew.

He would start with a long, hot, relaxing shower then a shave and go the extra mile to make his hair look presentable. Left to his own devices he'd run a comb through his wet hair and let nature take its course. Under Sarah's tutelage, he learned how to properly moisturize and the benefits of a quality styling cream. At the end of his ablution he looked in the mirror and was satisfied that he had done his best.

Jonah knew he was clinically depressed, but he also knew that for better or worse, he was a good actor. Maybe it was the country boy buried deep inside of him. That ingrained ability to sojourn through adversity while putting your best face forward. If you had asked any of his co-workers about his frame of mind, none of them would have spotted how acutely estranged he was from them all. Yes, they might say that he was a little quieter, or a little more distant, but in reality he was all but gone; a brilliant mimic of the man he used to be just going through the motions for the benefit of others.

Tucked away in the Kendall's garage was a box labeled 'Storage Stuff'. Digging out the dusty box reminded Jonah of his grandfather's funeral back in Oklahoma. Standing in the blazing heat at the rickety old Cherokee cemetery; half listening to the young preacher drone on and on about a man he hardly knew. Over the next several days he and his grandmother had sorted through all the old man's keepsakes; decades of National Geographic magazines, tangles of homemade fishing lures, a box of broken tools, faded suit jackets and crates of bible study books. His grandfather, John Kendall, had been a preacher, and for a brief while in his youth, Jonah had believed every word the old man said.

As a boy, Jonah had spent many long hours on the hard pews of the Reverend Kendall's church. He remembered all the old hymns, how the old men sang bass while the women answered in high, off-key harmony. His grandfather's sermons were too long for young Jonah, and when he got bored and fidgety

his grandmother, Aida Lee, would magically produce little games from her purse to keep him occupied; little hand-held puzzles where you shifted letters around to form words or tried to balance tiny BBs into little round holes.

He remembered how his grandfather looked down at him from the pulpit and his kindly smile. Years later Jonah would reject his grandfather's religion as so much myth, bigotry, and superstition. Over the long years his grandmother would occasionally ask him if he had found a new church. Each time he would shake his head and answer, "No."

The old man never questioned his decision to leave the faith. They would talk about fishing, sports, politics, the weather, but never about religion. Two weeks after his grandfather's death, Jonah received a small package in the mail addressed from Mrs. Aida Lee Kendall. Carefully wrapped inside the package was his grandfather's Bible, a book he kept in remembrance and had stored in his garage until today.

Jonah placed the 'Storage Stuff' box in the front seat of his car and then went back into the house for a couple of beers. He placed the bottles in a small cooler reserved for his occasional fishing trips. He dumped some ice on top of them then refilled the trays for Sarah. She hated finding the empty trays that he far too often returned to the freezer. No need to add to her troubles. Ellie briefly looked up from her bed in the corner of the kitchen, but seeing no more snacks, she closed her eyes and went back to sleep. Jonah left the house, climbed into his truck and headed out. He left his fishing poles and tackle box behind. Nothing would be pulled from the muddy waters of the lake today.

Jonah put all the windows down and kept the radio off during the drive into the country. He enjoyed the force of the wind buffeting around him and monopolizing his senses with its deafening noise. The countryside passed by in a blur as Jonah made his way out to what had once been his favorite spot on earth.

He parked his truck in an empty lot, grabbed the box and cooler, and headed down to the water. It was in the middle of the day, in the middle of a working week, and the lake was all but deserted. Jonah heard muffled voices float across the water and assumed they were faint reverberations from the handful of bass boats he saw scattered in the distance. Apparently not everyone was at work today. He found an old pecan tree close to the shoreline, put down his box and cooler, and took out one of the cold beers. Alcohol was not allowed at the lake, but the lake patrol was nowhere to be seen. He drank the beer slowly and savored each swallow as he stared out over the water.

Inside the box were items Jonah had carefully tucked away over the years. On top was a well-worn, blue and white striped picnic blanket, which he spread out beneath the old pecan tree. Back in the days when his son Benny was a toddler, the three of them came here for little family picnics. He and Sarah

would lie on the blanket and entertain themselves while Benny stumbled around exploring everything in his new world. As Jonah looked over the lake now he could imagine Benny climbing trees, fishing or skipping rocks across the water.

The lake reminded Jonah of times when he was a young boy and went pecan hunting with his grandfather. Papa John would climb to the top of a heavily fruited tree and shake it until Jonah was sure it would break and his grandfather would come tumbling down. Jonah was so frightened by the violent shaking and the pelting hail-storm of pecan nuts that he once cried out to his grandfather, "Papa, PLEASE, come down! I'm scared, Papa. I don't like all that shaking! Please, Papa!"

His grandfather had laughed and shouted back down to him, "Don't worry, boy. This tree's a strong one and there's not a man can break it."

His grandfather never fell and the pecans they gathered made their way into Grandma Aida's delicious pies. Jonah and Papa John would sit on the back porch and shell countless pecans for those wonderful pies. A little portable radio softly played country music as they cracked and hulled the sweet nuts. Inside the house Jonah could hear his grandmother as she moved about her kitchen, the occasional clank of a pan on the stove or clink of plates laid to rest on a kitchen cupboard.

Jonah finished his beer and pulled the box next to him. Safely wrapped in a star-patterned baby blanket were four framed photographs. The first picture was of Sarah and Benjamin on the boy's first day home from the hospital. Mother and son were lying in bed and Sarah was kissing the baby's forehead, both of their eyes blissfully closed in loving communion. Benny was so tiny and delicate then, so much like his mother. The second picture showed Benny in his crib surrounded by all his *friends*; that's what Sarah called the little stuffed animals she had placed in the boy's crib to keep him company during the night. The third picture was Benny in his first Halloween costume dressed up as a little red devil complete with tail and plastic pitchfork, which was adorable to everyone except Jonah's grandparents. The last picture was Benny at two years old standing next to his great-grandfather, the Reverend John Kendall. Benny and Papa John both had their hands in their pockets, and stared straight into the camera with the same serious look on their faces. The resemblance was striking and a little comical. The picture was taken about six months before the old man's death and was the only picture Jonah had of the two of them together.

Jonah looked at each one of the photographs and took them to heart. He wiped his eyes and reached for the last beer. The coldness of the amber liquid eased the tightness in his throat. He looked out over the lake and watched the dance of the sparkling water. The afternoon sun reflected off a thousand small whitecaps kicked up by small gusts of wind that shifted their way, back and forth, across the water.

Jonah closed his eyes and took a deep breath of the fresh country air. He heard the wind come across the water and mingle with the trees. He felt its coolness all around him, wrapping him in a delicate blanket, softly calling to him in words that were just beyond his grasp. He opened his eyes and removed the last item from the box. Inside an old and yellowed cigar box was his grandfather's Bible.

From across the lake Jonah heard the muffled voices of fishermen. His eyes drifted to the shoreline and he watched the water lap against the bank in an endless rhythm of wap... wap... wap... wap. A swell of emotion rose up inside him in time to the waves, and then it surged into an overwhelming tsunami and swept him away. This was the moment he held in check for so long, when the mountain of water would finally rise, crest, and break, and tumble him down into the darkness of his sorrows.

It was here they found him, in this peaceful place where the muddy waters caressed the grassy banks. Jonah wasn't there when they pulled the body from the lake, but he imagined it in a thousand details. His dark vision haunted him more deeply than the reality of that dreadful day. More than the phone call, or the drive to the lake, or the brief moment when he was asked to identify the child who so perfectly resembled his son.

In his mind's eye, Jonah bore witness as the rescue diver rose from the water cradling a young boy. He saw the boy's naked, limp body nestled in the man's strong arms, his skinny arms dangled down at his sides. No movement save the sway of those tiny arms, back and forth, as the diver strode out from the water in solemn steps.

The boy's eyes were closed. His skin drained of all color. His lips blue and pursed as if he might yet wake and speak. A coarse blue blanket was laid along the grassy bank. Jonah watched in horror as the diver gently placed the small boy onto the blanket. He knelt down and arranged the boy's arms along his sides, placed his legs together and the gently wiped a lock of hair from the boy's forehead. And the wave rolled on.

Jonah surrendered to the water's icy grip. The numbness spread through his feet and hands, into his arms and legs, and finally, it reached his heart. He drifted there, lifeless and numb, in the still cold darkness of his eternal grief.

The sound of wailing voices drifted softly down to him, permeating the still waters of the abyss. Their mournful song broke the water's hold and he began to inch toward the surface; the deadening cold ebbed away as he ascended from the depths toward the warmth of the sun and sky.

He awoke to find himself on the hard pews of his grandfather's church. Grandma Aida Lee sat to his left with her purse strategically placed on her lap. He was sure that if he opened her purse he'd find the word puzzles and the BB games patiently waiting for him. He could smell her sweet perfume as she

whispered in his ear, "I'm so glad to see you, Jonah. I missed you, honey."

His eyes lifted up to the pulpit where his grandfather stood, tall and proud, his weathered hands firmly gripping the sides of the rostrum.

Searching the faces of his flock, he found Jonah and was pleased. The unquestioning love shown brightly in the old man's eyes, yet Jonah could not return it. He felt nothing but tired and weary. He looked away from his grandfather and stared at the floor in shame as the icy tears fell from his face.

A hand reached out and touched his own. He felt its warmth as it tightened around his fingers, cutting through the chill that permeated his body. He raised his swollen eyes to see a young, beautiful boy sitting next to him on the pew. The boy smiled, tearing away all that was left of Jonah's heart.

Tears became a torrent and the raging waters swept him away from the boy. Panic overtook him as he tried to fight his way back to the shore. The seas became dark and the waves rolled with malicious intent. Across the dark waters, he heard his grandfather's voice calling out, calling and calling.

"Is there anyone here in need of comfort?"

Is there anyone here in need of peace?

Is there a heart heavy and in need of solace?"

He swam desperately toward the sound, fighting the raging waters until all hope and resolve was exhausted. In his final moment of despair - he surrendered - and the waters surged forth and lifted him toward the sky, then broke and retreated, leaving his body forsaken along the muddy banks.

He lay spent on the shore, lost and broken. His grandmother knelt beside him. She reached out and gently wiped a lock of wet hair from his forehead. In the distance he could hear the Reverend Kendall imploring the faithful to turn to Page 38 of their hymnals.

A child's voice rippled across the water dispersing the darkened clouds. A tiny finger traced the worn paths on Jonah's face.

"No more tears, Daddy. No more tears."

The sky shattered and the land fell away until there was nothing left but the cries of sweet deliverance washing over them all.

"We shall sing on that beautiful shore

The melodious songs of the blessed,

And our spirits shall sorrow no more.

Not a sigh for the blessing of rest,

In the sweet bye and bye,

We shall meet on that beautiful shore."

* * * * *

The Blazin' Trail

Honky Tonk Gal

Hank Turner sat in front of the ChatnChew restaurant in his beat-up Ford pickup truck and pondered the potential for the most uncomfortable breakfast of his life. Sweatin' like the proverbial whore in church, he had half-a-mind to throw it into reverse and get the hell out of there. Breakin' bread with Reverend Greyson and the Deacons of the Church of the Living Christ was right up there with having a root canal or being branded with a hot iron. Ever since Hank opened the Lil' Bit of Country Saloon, he and the good Reverend had worked opposite sides of the spiritual fence. Hank being more affiliated with heathens and sinners while Reverend Greyson represented the good and godly folk of Dry Creek, Texas. If not for the pleas of his saintly old mother Hank would never have agreed to meet with these old windbags.

"Hells Bells," muttered Hank, as he left the truck, squared his hat and headed into the lion's den.

The three church-men sat around a large, round table at the back of the ChatnChew; a section commonly reserved for the elders of the community. Old farts who came in at the crack of dawn and drank coffee for hours on end only to leave a quarter tip for the extended service. The three old bastards grinned up at Hank like vultures ready to rip the flesh from his bones.

"Mornin' Reverend," said Hank as the elders rose to a semi-vertical posture to greet his arrival. "Sorry I'm late. I'm not usually up this early. Saloon keepers rarely work banker's hours."

Reverend Greyson extended his hand and said, "No, I imagine they don't. I hope we didn't get you up too early, Brother Henry," then turning to his fellow parishioners he continued the introductions, "You remember Brother Humphries and Brother Rodgers? I believe they were Deacons back when you still attended."

Brother Humphries reached out and gave Hank a surprisingly firm handshake for a man who looked older than electricity.

"We sure do miss you, Brother Henry. Your mother is such a strong sister of the faith. Any chance we'll see you this Sunday?"

Hank shook hands all around and replied as the four of them took their seats, "Not likely, I'm afraid. My Sundays are spent worshippin' at the altar of the Dallas Cowboys."

This response brought forth a scowl from both Deacons but a slight chuckle from the Reverend .

"As much as we all love the Boys, Henry, they're no substitute for the Lord. But we're not here to lecture you on faith, though I do hope and pray that one day you'll return to the flock. I know it would mean so much to your dear mother."

"Thank you, Reverend, I'll take all the prayers I can get. And speakin' of my mother, she said you boys wanted to talk to me about a business matter. Hold up just a minute there fellers," said Hank as he caught the eye of a bottle-blond waitress shuttling between tables and ordered a large pot of coffee with extra cream and extra sugar.

"Sorry, Rev. I gotta have my Joe first thing in the morning or I get all pissy," said Hank. "So... I'm not sure what business my mother was talkin' about but-"

Reverend Greyson leaned forward and spoke in a tone befitting one use to explaining the dictates of a proper life to the less enlightened, "Henry, you know how the Church feels about the sin of inebriation-

Now it was Hank's turn to interrupt, "Yes sir, I do, and you know I have every right to operate a legal tavern in the state of Texas. I'm fully licensed, I pay my taxes and-"

"Henry, we're not here to debate your right to operate a tavern, though we strongly object to your chosen profession, we concede that the laws of man do often conflict with the laws of God. We're here to talk to you about your Tuesday night gatherings."

"Tuesday night... *really*? You wanna talk about *Dyke Night*?"

Brother Humphries spat out his words as if to expectorate a great wad of evil from his pursed lips, "Sin and damnation, Henry Turner! The rampant promotion of public acts of lewdness and perversion!"

"Now hold on a minute, Hoss," said Hank.

Brother Rodgers chimed in with equal condescending vigor, "You are condoning the vile act of ho-mo-sex-a-ality and forcing it down the throats of this God-fearing community. This is not San Francisco, young man! People 'round here still believe in the Good Book and will not tolerate that kind of repulsive and deviant behavior."

"Now wait just a damn minute there, *Brothers*. I am not forcin' anythin' on anyone, and I'm ain't promotin' shit neither! And there sure as hell ain't no acts of pre-version goin' on in my saloon," said Hank.

"But Henry," said Reverend Grayson trying to broker the escalating mood at the table, "your establishment provides a forum for the homosexual community. A public gathering place where they can flaunt their sinful ways and lead our youth into temptation, perhaps even placing their immortal souls in jeopardy."

Hank rubbed his forehead to ease his growing headache and to give himself a moment to choose the proper words that would keep him on speaking terms with his mother. Telling his Mama's preacher to pound sand was in no one's best interest. This was a time for delicate diplomacy followed by a hasty

exit. Forcing a smile on his face, Hank proceeded with genteel caution, "With all due respect, Reverend, I ain't providin' nothin' but good times, country music, and cold beer, and it's all legal. On Tuesday night these ladies come down and fill the joint. They shoot pool, they play pinball, they listen to good ol' country music and they dance. But most of all, they drink beer. And I'm talkin' about a lot of beer, Reverend. I don't rightly care whose diddlin' who. It ain't none of my *business*. I'm in the beer *business* and on Tuesday nights, business is boomin'. These are good girls, Rev. They don't cause no trouble for me or nobody else. Hell, I wish every night was Dyke Night."

"I'm sorry you feel that way, Henry," said the Reverend shaking his head at the loss of yet another soul fallen away to the devil's temptations, "I'll pray that you see the error of your ways, son, and that you'll turn from this sinful practice."

"Excuse me, Reverend," said Brother Humphries rising to his feet. "Brother Rodgers and I will be leaving now. It's a waste of time to cast words against a stone wall," then turning to Henry, the old man puffed up and wagged his finger in most-pious castigation, "Young man, turn from your wickedness or you shall most certainly face the fires of damnation."

Brother Rodgers leaned forward too and wagged his own sausage-like finger in Hank's face along with a parting admonishment, "And the flames of hell burn hot for all eternity, son. I pray you never find that out!"

"Why thank you, gentlemen, I'll keep those kind words in mind." Hank shouted after them as the anointed elders shuffled away from the table, "And if you two ever want an ice-cold beer, come on down to the Lil' Bit. Gotta new House Speacial! Deacons drink free on Dyke Night!"

Later that evening at the Lil' Bit of Country Saloon, Katrina Johnson leaned against the bar, sipped a Bud Light and waited for her friend, Rosalie Delgado, to arrive from Dallas. Rosa was an old flame who remained a good friend even after their relationship cooled off. They ran into each other at a bar in Dallas a couple weeks before and Katrina had invited Rosie and her girlfriend, Abby, to come out to the country for some real East Texas honky-tonkin'. As Katrina stared into her beer, Hank came out of the back with a case of pork rinds and a big smile of his face.

"Well, there she is, the Big Kat. What's up, cowgirl?" asked Hank as he sat down the box of crispy fried pigskins.

"Sittin', drinkin' and thinkin'," said Kat. "You got enough beer tonight, Hank? Finals on the pool tournament. Girls are gonna be mighty thirsty."

"You don't have to tell me my business, darlin'," said Hank pulling himself a cold one from the tap. "Tonight you gals are makin' the final payment on my bass boat."

Kat tipped her beer to Hank and said, "I'll sure do my part. Hey, you seen my worthless brother around?"

"Oh, he's here all right. Out back shootin' pool with his runnin' buddies -- that Beau and Tyler. The Unholy Trinity."

"Goddamn, I don't know why he feels compelled to pull this shit," said Kat.

"They're not gonna cause trouble tonight, are they Kat?" asked Hank. "I got no problem with you and the ladies, but your brother can be a handful, to say the least."

"He can be an asshole is what he can be," said Kat. "Don't worry, I'm gonna talk to him right now."

"Thank you, darlin'," said Hank pleased to hear that Kat was gonna ride herd on her pain-in-the-ass little brother. Katrina downed her beer, shoved the bottle at Hank and headed back to the pool room to parlay with the tiny terror of Dry Creek, her little brother, Junior Johnson.

Junior was playing cut-throat with his best friends, Beau Barden and Tyler Dane, when his big sister walked up to the pool table.

"Junior, can I have a word with you?" asked Kat.

Without looking up at her as he sighted his pool cue, Junior said, "I'm shootin' pool right now if you haven't noticed."

"Don't be a prick, Junior. Come on over here for a minute so I can talk to you," said Kat.

Junior handed his cue over to his friend, Beau, with an admonishment about not cheating while he was away then followed his sister over to an empty table out of earshot of his buddies.

Obviously annoyed at being pulled away from his game, Junior cut to the chase, "What do you want, Kat? Ain't I allowed to drink beer and shoot pool with my friends."

"Of course you are, Junior. You can shoot pool and drink all the beer you want, but why do you have to do it tonight?" asked Kat.

"You don't own this place, Tina. It ain't against the law for us to be here," said Junior.

"Don't call me Tina, Junior. You know it pisses me off," said Kat. "Tonight is ladies night -- a lesbian ladies night -- you know this, Junior. Why in the world do you want to hang around with a bunch of dyke cowgirls?"

"I don't! But I do like to drink beer and shoot pool and this is the only decent bar in this shithole of a town, so here we are. You got a problem with that?"

"Yeah, I do. I think you're here to be a pain in my ass," said Kat.

"Hell, it's not all about you, Tina," said Junior.

Kat leaned in close to her brother and spoke softly but with deadly intent, "Junior, if you call me Tina

one more goddamn time I'll clean your clock right in front of all your little boyfriends."

"You don't scare me none, Kat," said Junior bracing for a punch, "And they ain't my little boyfriends. We ain't like that. Not like you and yours."

"Junior, you're my only brother and for some mistaken reason -- I do love you; but I will whup your scrawny ass if you cause any trouble tonight. Nobody cares if you boys drink beer and shoot pool. Just clear the table before the tournament, that's all I'm asking. We got all four tables reserved from 7:00 on. It's an official tournament. Don't be an asshole about it, all right?"

"I'm just sayin', we got a right to be here too," said Junior.

"And I ain't sayin' you don't, just be cool for once, OK?" She paused for a moment, then asked, "You need any money?"

"If you spot me a twenty, I'll pay ya back on Saturday," said Junior eagerly.

Kat pulled out her wallet and handed her brother a crisp twenty dollar bill, "Tell you what, here's a twenty, free and clear. Just don't embarrass me tonight."

Junior snatched the bill from his sister's hand and immediately turned to rejoin his friends. By the time Kat made it back to the bar, Rosa and Abby had arrived and ordered their first of many beers. Kat scooted up and embraced her big city amiga, "My sweet Rose of Dallas, how the hell are ya girl?"

"Doing good, Kat," said Rosa. "Abby, this is my old friend, Katrina Johnson - just call her Kat. She's the one I took those rodeo pictures of -- those crazy bull riding pictures." Turning to her girlfriend, she added, "Kat, this my lovely lady, Miss Abigail Horowitz, formerly of New York City, now residing in Dallas, Texas."

Abby tended her hand to Kat, "And you can call me Abby. Rosa has told me so much about you. You're a real cowgirl. Wow. I've never met a real cowgirl, I mean someone who actually works on cows, or cattle, I mean, on a ranch - ah, I sound like such an idiot."

"You'll have to excuse her, she's a Yankee and easily impressed by all that cowboy bullshit," said Rosa. Kat shook hands with Abby and said, "I'm just a country girl, Abby - it's a pleasure to meet you. New York City? That's a far piece from Dry Creek."

"Yes, it sure is but I'm really starting to enjoy Texas. Thanks for inviting us tonight."

"My pleasure," said Kat. "Now Rosa was a little iffy on the phone so I'm tellin' you both flat out, you're stayin' at my place tonight. We're gonna drink way too much for y'all to be drivin' back to Big D. Call whoever needs to be called before you get too hammered 'cause you ain't leavin' this town till the sun comes up and your sober."

"Sounds good to me. I've already taken the day off," said Abby.

"Me too," said Rosa. "I've scheduled tomorrow as an official recovery day."

"All right then, ladies, start your engines! It's gonna be a hell of a ride," said Kat.

"Miss Kat, is there a ladies room around here?" asked Abby.

"Girlfriend has to pee every thirty minutes," quipped Rosa.

"Yes ma'am, at end of the bar, take a left and go all the way back, past the pool tables and you'll see it. It says *Cowgirls* on the door," said Kat with a wink.

"Thank you. I'll be right back, ladies," said Abby, and gave Rosa a peck on the cheek before departing for the restroom.

"She's awful cute. Nice girl?" asked Kat.

"She's very nice, and an uptown girl to boot. Fantastic illustrator and set designer, extremely talented," said Rosa. "I'm telling you, Kat, she could be the one."

"Really? That's great. Whose parents are gonna be more upset? The Catholics or the Jews?" asked Kat.

"Don't even go there. My parents are just getting used to the whole queer thing. And now I have a nice jewish girlfriend? Madre de Dios, it might kill them," said Rosa.

"I reckon they'll survive it. How's the picture takin' business treatin' ya?" asked Kat.

"It pays the bills and keeps food on the table. Abby's a huge help. We do a lot of shoots together and the work has brought in more jobs. I'm doing so well, in fact, that I can afford a luxurious overnight vacation to fabulous Dry Creek, Texas," laughed Rosa, "What's up with you?"

"Same as ever, ridin' a razor's edge on the ranch to stay afloat. Junior's useless and I spend most of my time tryin' to keep him from killin' himself. Cattle are healthy. We got some good new foals. No use complainin', don't solve nothin'."

"What an enchanted life you lead. How about your love life?" asked Rosa.

"I swore off women after you, Rosa; it wouldn't be fair to 'em," said Kat.

"That's total bullshit," said Rosa. "You had your way with me and dumped me almost immediately, as I recall."

"I most certainly did not dump you. It was long distance thing, which never works out. Besides we're very different people, honey. You're a sophisticated city girl and I'm a shitkickin' hick. We were always meant to be ships passin' in the night."

"Hmm... good save, Kat. You are forgiven. How in the world did we ever hook-up in the first place? You are *so* not my type," said Rosa.

"I was much aided by Tequila in my pursuit of you," said Kat.

"Yees... I dimly remember a photo shoot followed by an abusive night of drinking, and then waking

up with a naked Kat in my bed. Good times, chica," said Rosa. "But you've skirted the question, cowgirl - do you have a girlfriend or not, Miss Katrina Johnson?"

"Yeah, I do, sorta," said Kat.

"Sort of?" asked Rosa.

"Well, I met this girl at a livestock auction a couple months ago in Sulphur Springs," said Kat. "We hit it off from the start and I'm crazy about her -- she's comin' tonight so you'll get a chance to meet her -- but it's a tad complicated."

"Ewww, complicated. I like the sound of that," said Rosa. "Tell me everything."

"Her name is Chrissy Greyson and she's fresh out of veterinarian school. She's a local girl and about five years younger than you and me."

"Speak for yourself."

"And she's not out of the closet yet..."

"And why not?" asked Rosa.

"Because she's a local preacher's daughter," said Kat.

"Ay, chihuahua!" said Rosa.

"I know, Lord help me," grinned Kat. "I sure know how to pick 'em."

Across town Chrissy Greyson sat at her faded yellow vanity dresser. It was one of her favorite pieces of furniture, not in small part because it was handed down to her from her great-grandmother, Elizabeth Greyson. Chrissy looked in the smoky mirror one last time, dabbed at her make-up, then grabbed her purse and headed for the door.

Tonight was a big one. Her first night out in public with her steady girl, her girlfriend. It was such a comfort to say those words -- girl friend. Finally, after all these years of being alone there was someone who loved her for who she was, truly and deeply loved her. God has blessed me in so many ways, thought Chrissy, and the biggest blessing of all is my sweet ol' cowgirl, Katrina.

In high school Chrissy had been so confused and alone. There was no way she could tell her Daddy that she was a lesbian. It would destroy their relationship; he would've sent her off to one of those horrible camps to be deprogrammed, as if such a thing were possible. Being a queer teen under her Daddy's roof was torture; the lies, the shame, the constant condemnation of men and women just like her whose only crime was that they were born of God to love what Daddy said could not be loved. So many times she just wanted to scream at him, "Daddy, can't you see what I am? Don't you even know your own flesh and blood?" But he didn't see, and if Momma saw the truth, she wasn't telling.

When Chrissy left for veterinary school it was like being released from spiritual jail. Free at last from

the constant pressure of being a small-town Preacher's daughter where meanness and gossip too often trumped the Lord's kindness. Now she'd come full-circle, back to this narrow-minded, little East Texas town, a town she couldn't wait to be free of, but this time things were different. She had her own home, a good job, but most of all she had Kat. There was a place for her after all, and strangely enough, it was back in Dry Creek in a house filled with love and acceptance, the kind of love that Jesus taught and that men like her father would never accept. Chrissy closed her eyes and said a silent prayer of thanks for the love the Lord had brought into her life then headed into town.

Chrissy's father, the Reverend Charles Greyson, was working on his Sunday sermon, "Without Christ there is no Salvation" when the phone rang breaking his concentration and causing him to make a typo on his almost clean copy. Slightly perturbed that he'd have to employ the white-out yet again, he let out a faint sigh then answered his office phone.

"Good afternoon, Church of the Living Christ. Reverend Greyson speaking."

"Reverend, this is Brother Humphries again. I'll get straight to the point as I know you're a busy man. In light of this Henry Turner situation, I've talked with the other Deacons and we've decided to go ahead with the protest tonight."

"I thought we cleared this up at the Elders meeting this morning, Brother Humphries. An act of this kind is not in the best interest of our church," said Reverend Greyson.

"There's been further discussion on the matter since this morning and a widespread change of heart - very widespread. Brother Rodgers and I have talked at length with the other Deacons and Elders, and it is our unanimous decision that we stand tall against this evil. We cannot be silent in the face of such flagrant sin, Reverend."

"Brother, please don't do this. Salvation must be sought, it cannot be forced on others. We have no business going downtown and causing a commotion, or worse yet, a confrontation. We are not the Klan who howl their hatred and bigotry from the street corners like mad dogs."

"Reverend, I understand your heart overflows with Christian kindness for these lost souls, but when there's sinnin' going on, it's everybody's business," said Brother Humphries. "Brother Rodgers is with our youth group right now creating signs and banners. The decision has been made. We'll meet at the church at 8:30 this evening and then we'll march on this house of sin at 9:00 sharp. I'm hopeful that you will lead us in a devotional at that time and join us in this crusade to save the soul of our good Christian community."

"I don't see how I can do that, James. I'm strongly opposed to this course of action and advise against it with all my heart. Please, Brother, reconsider this brash action and do not lead our youth down this

path. No good can come of it."

"Charles, as minister of our faith, you need to be a part of this endeavor, in fact, I'm surprised at your reticence. We place our faith in you to shine the light wherever it is needed. I can't be any more clear than that," said Brother Humphries.

"Then let me be clear as well; I will take no part in this, Brother Humphries, and I..." The sound of the dial-tone on the other end of the line ended the conversation and Reverend Greyson gently placed the phone back in its cradle wondering what course of action he should take next. With nothing coming to mind, he resigned himself to let the cards fall where they may and went back to working on his sermon.

Chrissy entered the Lil' Bit of Country to the sounds of laughter, Willie Nelson and the raucous clatter of pool balls. Kat was sitting at the bar chatting away with two well-dressed women who Chrissy assumed were Kat's friends from Dallas. Their fashionable leather jackets, beautiful shoes and big city hair styles made Chrissy feel like a poor country cousin, but before she could fret about it, Kat ran over and swept her up in her arms.

"Here she is, girls! This is my little honey bunny," said Kat with the enthusiasm of the slightly inebriated. "Chrissy Greyson, I would like you to meet, Rosa Delgado, and her girlfriend, Abby Horowitz. Ladies, this is my little Chrissy." Kat pulled Chrissy close and gave her a big wet kiss.

"Oh my Lord, Kat," exclaimed Chrissy, "You taste like cigarettes and alcohol."

"Imagine that? In a bar no less," said Kat. "Hank - another round of shots please."

The girls quickly said their hellos then threw back a tray of tequila with varied expressions of pain. Abby pounded her fist against the bar to beat down the bite of the rattlesnake. Rosa chased hers with salt and lime and a couple large gulps of cold beer, and Kat immediately ordered Chrissy another to help her catch up. The bar was filling up fast around them and the pool tournament was in full swing.

"Why aren't you playing, Kat? You're pretty good with a stick, aren't you," chided Rosa.

"Hardly," said Kat. "I stay as far away from those things as I can."

"Very funny," said Chrissy. "She's not playing because she had such a lousy partner, namely me. We got kicked out in the first round."

"Now seriously, girls, have ya ever heard of a lesbian who cain't shoot pool?" asked Kat.

"Never heard of it," said Rosa. "That's like never playing softball."

"Me either," said Abby. "Are you sure she's queer?"

"Stop it, y'all," said Chrissy blushing. "I'm getting better, aren't I, Kat?"

"Yes, she is gettin' better. She can hit the white ball straight into another one providing there's not too much green in-between."

"Y'all, don't listen to her. I have a good excuse - I was raised in a church, not in a pool hall like some people," said Chrissy, casting her eyes at Kat in mocking disapproval. "I'm a good girl, ladies."

"Not too good, I hope," muttered Abby.

"Oh, she's good enough," said Kat. "Her home game is way beyond reproach."

"Hush up, Kat, you make me sound like a common gutter slut," said Chrissy.

"Gutter slut? Good Lord, get a couple shots in 'er and the potty mouth comes out," said Kat. "I like it!"

"Hey Big Kat!" said Rosa punching Kat in the arm. "I thought we were going to dance tonight? You promised us some boot-scootin' if we drove all the way out here. Let's go girls, it's time to get up and shake our groove things!"

"Oh no Rosa, not to this song, seriously now," said Kat. "Not Achy Breaky Heart."

"I LOVE this song," said Abby. "I learned to line dance to it back in New York."

"See Chrissy," said Kat, as Chrissy pulled her off her barstool and toward the dance floor, "They line dance to the Achy Breaky up in New York City."

"Be quiet, you, and come dance with me," said Chrissy.

The girls spent the next hour on the dance floor. Kat was pleased that Achy Breaky Heart started and ended the line dancing phase of the evening. Line dancing had no place in a real country bar as far as Kat was concerned. If you're gonna dance country, you two-step or you polka -- you do not line dance -- ever.

Dancing with Chrissy was pure joy and it pleased Kat that her lady was so happy. She knew that life hadn't been easy for Chrissy. It was hard enough to grow up queer in East Texas, but with a crazy preacher Daddy too; that's a hard one to rise above. Kat's Daddy was no preacher, not by a long shot, and he wasn't at all happy when she came out. He and Momma fretted over it for about a week before they accepted the obvious. In the end, it was far more important to Daddy that she was a good rancher than who she slept with. Daddy had decided years ago that she would take over the ranch when he retired, leaving no part of operational ownership to Junior. She and her father made a good team and he respected her as a cattle woman, and Junior, well, as Daddy once said to her as they watched Junior trying and failing to rope a slow moving calf -- Junior needed a strong guiding hand to find his own dick.

"What are you thinking about, honey?" asked Chrissy as they shuffled across the dance floor, "You went away for a minute there."

"Oh nothin' much. Just how good you look and how lucky I am," said Kat.

"You know I love you, Kitty Kat," whispered Chrissy into her ear.

"Right back at you, darlin'" said Kat, giving her gal a quick kiss then a big twirl in time to the music. The beer was flowing, the dance floor was full, and all was right with the world. In the middle of the Dwight Yoakam's *Honky Tonk Man*, the happy crowd spontaneously burst into song. Kat sang to her baby, being a Honky Tonk gal herself, she could do no less.

Outside of the saloon a crowd had gathered armed with signs and banners. "Hate the Sin, not the Sinner", "Save our Youth", and "Steers, Not Queers in Dry Creek". Brother Humphries stepped forward with a megaphone and addressed the crowd, "Folks, tonight we're here on God's work. We cannot idly stand by while perverts take over the streets of our beloved town."

Solemn nods of agreement spread through the crowd and so he continued, "Don't be afraid to make some noise tonight. Let the Holy Spirit move you. Let His voice fill you and shout down the evil ways of the wicked like the trumpets that brought down the mighty walls of Jericho. And members of our youth group -- don't forget to take pictures of everyone who leaves that house of impropriety. Let all sinners be counted and numbered before the Lord and our righteous community."

Charlie the bouncer watched the growing spectacle from his stool at the front door of the bar then headed over to talk to his boss, "Hank, we got a problem out front."

Hank whipped around surprised to find that Charlie has deserted his post, "What the hell? C'mon Charlie, why ain't you workin' the door? People can't just walk in here! We gotta card 'em, son. TABC will close us down-

"Boss, you really need to come look at this right now," said Charlie.

Hank walked around the bar and followed Charlie outside to where the protesting flock of the Church of the Living Christ were lining the sidewalk in front of his saloon.

"Well I'll be goddamned and deep fried," said Hank. "Charlie - don't let any of these crackers through this door. Get Earl on the back door too. I don't know what these crazy bastards are up to, but I intend to find out."

Hank Turner stormed down the sidewalk and headed straight for Brother Humphries who was leading a small group of elderly women in a warbley version of *The Old Rugged Cross*.

"Now just what the hell are you doin' out here, old man?" asked Hank.

Brother Humphries was filled with the fire of the holy prophets when he turned to confront the wayward saloon keeper, "Behold the Lord's works, Henry Turner! The good people of Dry Creek demand that you close down this house of sodomy and fornication and sin no more!"

"Oh bullshit!" replied Hank. "You ain't demandin' nothin' of me, you crazy old coot. Get the hell off my property 'fore I call the Sheriff."

"We answer to a higher law than the Sheriff, sinner. We will not be turned while the light still burns bright in this den of iniquity," said Brother Humphries.

"Jesus H. Christ! Are you kiddin' me?" asked Hank.

"Do not blaspheme, Henry Turner! Your vile tongue will surely lead you down the fiery path where you will face the Lord's eternal wrath!"

"And you will face my sizable boot up your ancient ass if you don't clear off right now, old man!" retorted Hank.

Brother Humphries eyes drew down to angry slits as he appraised the devil's minion that stood before him. When he spoke again it was in a gravely voice filled with venom and defiance, "This is a public sidewalk and we shall not be moved. Ours is the higher calling. You may call the Sheriff if it pleases you, blasphemer. But I shall call on Almighty God."

Hank stared right back into the hard eyes of the old man, "Oh, I'll call the Sheriff all right, you can bet your ass."

Unmoved by Hank's threats, the old man smiled slightly and replied, "You'll find that your earthly authorities are no match for our divine might and resolve."

Hank's anger was rising fast. He'd had about enough of these Holy Rollers and certainly more than he cared for from the old babbling bastard before him, "Listen here Humphries, the sidewalk may be public property but that saloon is mine -- my private property -- and I have every right to defend it. Comprene? If you or one of these other bible-thumpin' assholes steps one foot in my place, you'll be lookin' down the barrels of a sawed-off shotgun. And I don't give a good goddamn if my Momma does go to your church. I keep my shotgun loaded!"

With that Hank turned away from Brother Humphries and his congregation and stomped back into the Lil' Bit. Shaking his head as he walked across the bar, he headed straight to the DJ booth and asked for the microphone. The DJ cut the music and Hank stepped forward to speak. Most of the crowd thought he was about to announce the pool tournament results and gathered around to listen.

"Folks, there's no need for alarm but we've got a bit of a situation outside. It seems a local church group has decided to protest us tonight."

The bar grew suddenly quiet. Hank waved his hand in the air in reassuring dismissal and continued, "I ain't lettin' any of them crazies in here and they ain't much of a threat to anyone anyhow. Hell, I've known most of these people my whole life and about half of them are as old as Methuselah. Basically they're a bunch of self-righteous busy-bodies, and I'm a-fixin' to call the Sheriff on the lot of 'em." With that pronouncement a nervous spattering of laughter rippled across the dance floor.

Hank could see the girls were calm and nobody was making a break for the door, either to bolt or kick some ass. Everything would be fine if he could just keep the cowgirls and the Jesus freaks apart until he had time to get the Sheriff to run these nuts off.

"I'd like to ask everyone to remain calm, stay inside the bar and have a good time. Can you do that for me? It don't matter what they're squawkin' 'bout out there. The party's in here! Am I right? How 'bout quarter pulls for the next half hour? Can I get a 'Hell Yeah' for cheap beer?"

This time the crowd roared back a thunderous, 'Hell Yeah'. Hank pumped his fist in the air a couple times then handed the microphone back to the DJ and headed to his office to get the law on the horn. The music started again and most folks went back to dancing while some moved toward the bar and the generous offer of quarter beers. Kat and Chrissy made their way through the crowd and up front to the plate glass window at the front of the saloon for a look-see at all the commotion.

Outside the faithful dutifully patrolled the sidewalk. Teenagers ran around taking pictures of anyone who came in or out of the bar. Old ladies sang hymns, and angry bigots shouted slogans that would make the Lord's ears burn. Chrissy took a quick glance out the window and then ducked back into the crowd and dragged Kat with her.

"Oh my God, that's my Daddy's church! I recognize all those people. I can't be caught in here, Kat."

"Hold on now, nobody knows you're in here, and Hank ain't lettin' those fools inside. We can just wait 'em out," said Kat trying to reassure her frightened girlfriend.

Chrissy didn't feel reassured at all. Kat could see the panic break across her face as she talked through the situation at hand, "And what if they don't leave? My car is parked right out front. This is such a small town, somebody's gonna notice it. One of them might sneak in here and see me."

Rosa broke in, "Honey, this might not be the way you wanted to come out, but we're all here for you. Maybe it's time. Who cares what they all think."

"Maybe... I don't know. No," said Chrissy, her mind reeling, "I want to, and I will, but not in front of my Daddy's whole congregation, not like this. I couldn't care less what they think about me, but they'll hold it against him. I just need to get out of here."

Kat put her arm around her sweetheart's shoulder and tried to bring her worries down a notch, "All right Chrissy, let's think about this for a minute. We'll go back to Hank's office, get out of sight and come up with something. Don't worry, baby. It's gonna be OK."

"But first," said Abby holding out her hand, "tell me where your car is and give me your keys. I'll move it a couple blocks away and you can get it later."

"You're not going out there alone," said Rosa, "Who knows what those freaks will do. Besides I wanna

get my camera out of the trunk. I see a spread in the Advocate - *Night of the Living Pendejos*."

"Y'all gonna be safe out there?" asked Kat.

"Honey, I'm from New York city. If any of these Nazi wannabes get's in my way, I'll run right over them," said Abby.

"Don't worry about us -- just give us your keys, Chrissy," said Rosa.

"It's the little red Subaru with the animal cage in the back. Be careful, and thanks," said Chrissy handing her car keys over to Rosa and Abby.

"Later girls, I'm going to have a little fun," said Rosa as she and Abby headed for the door.

Hank was on the phone trying to get a hold of the Sheriff when Kat and Chrissy slipped into his office. Hank motioned for them to sit down on an old broken-down couch as he continued his conversation with the Dry Creek police dispatcher.

"I understand that, Dolly, but when will the Deputy be back?"

Hank rolled his eyes as the girls heard a muffled buzzing through his receiver.

"No, they're not violent, not yet anyway. They're just singin' hymns and harassin' my patrons."

Another burst of buzzing triggered a sour expression from the saloon keeper. Kat surmised little progress was being made with the Dry Creek law.

"Well, when the Deputy gets back tell him to get his ass over here and break this shit up. I'm tellin' ya, they'll be trouble if you don't clear these folks off."

More buzzing squawked across the line and then Hank signed off, "All right then, Dolly, I'll talk to ya later. Good bye, darlin'."

Placing the receiver down he turned his full attention to the girls, "Shit fire. Sheriff's out of town deer huntin' with his brother-in-law and the Deputy's out on a call, which means he's probably home watchin' ESPN. Anyway, we have to put up with these fools fer a spell. What can I do for you ladies?"

"Hank, Chrissy is a member of the church out there and they don't know she's here. It's kind of a delicate situation," said Kat.

"Y'all can hide out in here if that's what you want," offered Hank. "The Deputy will get here eventually. And I got hold of that Reverend Greyson too. He's comin' down to see if he can't bring an end to all this bullshit. Accordin' to the good Reverend, this is a non-sanctioned church event, whatever the hell that means."

"He's my Daddy," said Chrissy.

"Who's your Daddy - Reverend Greyson?" asked Hank leaning back in his chair and giving Chrissy a closer look, "I thought you looked familiar. Yeah, I remember you when you were a little girl. You used

to wear pigtails with long pink ribbons. You were a real cutie-pie, and now you're all grown up. Damn, I'm gettin' old. Well, maybe your Daddy can sort these bastards out and send 'em packin'."

Chrissy turned to Kat and grabbed her hand giving it a hard squeeze, "Kat, I really want to leave now before my Daddy get's here. I'll take my chances and go out the back door."

"They're back there too, a whole mess of 'em," said Hank.

"I need to go -- now! Please take me home, Kat," begged Chrissy.

"All right, I will," said Kat thinking through the options for an exit strategy, "But first I need to go talk to my no-account brother. Then we'll get you out of here, I promise. Stay with Hank and I'll be right back."

Kat found Junior and his boys at a table in the back of bar three pitchers past shit-face drunk. Junior saw his big sister headed his way and chug-a-lugged a full beer then slammed the glass down on the table to the chuckling amusement of his buddies.

Kat sided-up to the table and said, "Junior, I need your help."

"What?" said Junior, who then let out a large belch eliciting more laughter from Beau and Tyler.

"I... Need... Your... Help... Junior," said Kat.

"What for?" asked Junior.

"For a fight I'm fixin' to start," said Kat.

"Oh hell yeah! I'm down for that. Which of these big ugly bitches you gonna fight? The Johnson's will kick all their muff divin' asses from here to next Sunday," said Junior.

"The only ugly bitch I want to fight is you, Junior," said Kat. "Don't worry, little brother, I'll take it easy on you."

"What?" asked Junior again, now totally confused.

"Beau, I need to borrow your hat. And Tyler, let me have your jacket too. You'll get 'em back tomorrow, boys, I promise," said Kat. "Now, Junior, listen close. Help me pull this off and I'll buy you a keg of beer. You can all sit down by the creek and drink yourselves silly."

"What do we gotta do?" asked Junior.

"First, Junior, you're gonna slip out the back door and then go around front and join the crowd. When you see me come out, let me have it -- say the meanest shit you can think of. That should be easy for you. After that, just follow my lead. Beau and Tyler, you're my escorts. You're gonna get my friend outta here, but not until Junior and I distract the crowd. It ain't much of a plan but there it is. All right gentlemen, let's cowboy up."

"Yee frickin' haw," said Junior, as he stumbled to his feet.

Junior did as his sister asked and left out the back door of the bar, circled around the building and joined the protest out front, albeit at a more vocal and fervent level than most of the participants.

"Adam is for Eve and not for Steve, you god-danged ol' queer-baits!" shouted Junior.

Several of the younger members of the church snickered at Junior's commentary, so he let loose with another one.

"Jesus may love you twat bandits, but I think you're ugly as a hat full of assholes!"

Junior's heart swelled with pride at the laughs garnered from his razor-sharp wit, but before he could compose another rip-roarin' indignity, the door to the Lil' Bit blew open and Kat stepped out. She surveyed the crowd and angrily spat down on the sidewalk in front of her.

"Y'all are the sorriest bunch of Christians I've ever seen," shouted Kat. "And each one of you can kiss my ass and go straight to hell."

Brother Humphries started to reply but Junior cut him off, "Well, lookey lookey, here comes the nookie. We got us the Queen Bitch, y'all. Take off your hat, bitch, so I can tell if you're a man or a woman. Hey! I'm talkin' to you! Are you deaf as well as ugly, Sir? Ma'am? Whatever the hell you are."

"Why don't you come over here and find out, you redneck piece of trash," said Kat.

"I ain't never hit a woman before, but I expect you don't count," said Junior, who worked his way through the crowd toward his big sister.

"I doubt that very much," said Kat. "You're just the kind of inbred trash that would beat on a woman."

Junior stepped up eye-to-eye with his sister and spoke loudly for the benefit of the congregation, "God hates faggots, so I guess he won't mind if I kick your sorry ass."

With lightning speed Kat snatched Junior by the front of his shirt and pulled him close so only he could hear her, "Make it look real, Junior. We're gonna fight our way over to that old bird with the bullhorn."

"Get your hands off me, you dyke bitch!" shouted Junior, who shoved his sister away and launched a right cross that caught her in the side of the head, rocked her back and knocked her hat to the ground.

Kat shook the stars from her eyes and went after her brother. She snapped out a hard jab that sent him sprawling through the crowd to the horrified screams of the little old ladies who abruptly dropped their hymnals and fled from the developing mayhem.

"YOU UGLY BITCH - you'll pay for that!" said Junior hopping to his feet and barreling straight at his sister. Kat braced for the impact, then grappled with her brother as the two of them crashed through crowd knocking into as many people as possible.

Junior broke free and landed another back-peddling punch that glanced off Kat's right cheek. Over Junior's shoulder Kat could see Beau and Tyler exiting the bar with Chrissy between them decked out in

a John Deere cap pulled low over her eyes and wearing Tyler's jean jacket. Nobody noticed as the three of them fled down the block and out of sight. With Chrissy safe, Kat turned her full attention to her brother. He tried to land another punch as Kat closed in, but she easily side-stepped the blow. She then threw a sinewy arm around his neck, pulled him down into a headlock like he was a calf she was fixin' to throw and whispered words into his hear that she knew would send him into a frenzy, "C'mon, Junior. You fight like a little girl." Then shoved her brother away and waited for the madness.

Kat could see the needle go red behind Junior's eyes. His IQ might be on the shallow-side but his temper was capable of shooting off-the-scale. Junior let out a blood curdling rebel yell and came in swinging like in windmill in a hurricane. One of his wild punches split Kat's bottom lip and sent blood flying down the front of her shirt. She ducked another hay-maker, then countered with a solid left upper-cut that doubled him over and sent him scuffling away gasping for breath. With a wicked grin, she hocked a mouthful of blood at her brother's feet.

"Well, c'mon then, cowboy, *brang it!*"

That was Junior's cue and for once he remembered what to do. He ran straight at Kat, who wrapped him up in her powerful arms and drove him back toward Brother Humphries. Junior slammed into the old man as Kat took half a step back to square her shoulders for the final assault. Junior dropped to the ground just in time to dodge Kat's crushing overhand right, which barely missed his head but landed squarely on the chin of the senior Deacon of the Church of the Living Christ and dropped the old man like a sack of wet dirt.

Kat stood over the dazed Deacon and slowly flexed her fist to ease the sharp pain shooting across her bare knuckles. Turning to the crowd she said, "Somebody help this old buzzard up. He shouldn't go 'round stirrin' up trouble at his age. Show's over folks, now go home. All of ya."

Kat turned her back on the stunned crowd and was temporarily blinded by the flash from Rosa's camera. "My hero," said Rosa as she led Kat away from the fallen Deacon and over to a beaming Abby, who stood hat-in-hand in front of the saloon.

"You are truly amazing, Miss Johnson," said Abby handing Kat's cowboy hat back to her. "Now get along, cowgirl. Your baby's waiting for you two blocks down and around the corner."

"Sorry about tonight, ladies, what a disaster," said Kat wiping her bloody mouth on her sleeve.

"Are you kidding me? It was awesome!" said Abby. "Shooting tequila? Polishing belt buckles? An angry lynch mob? Cowboys brawling in the streets? Screw Dallas, honey. This is Texas!"

"I reckon so," said Kat with a faint and bloodied grin. "We'll see y'all back at the house. And bring beer, lots of cold beer... and ice. I think that damn Junior broke my jaw."

"Hasta luego, vaquera. I want to get a few more pics before we head out," said Rosa.

Kat took her cowboy hat from Abby, put it on and headed south toward Chrissy and home. Rosa turned back to the dispersing crowd and spotted Brother Humphries alone on the curb clutching a "God Hates Fags" sign to shore up his balance. She quickly ran over and let the motor-drive purr.

"Que hermoso!" said Rosa as her flash lit up the battered old man. "Thank you Mister, you're going to be famous tomorrow."

Brother Humphries watched through a veil of fog as Rosa departed and Hank, Reverend Greyson and Deputy Sheriff Jennings headed his way. Pointing the old man out to the Deputy, Hank said, "That's him! That's the crazy old bastard right over there! Threatening my patrons and my place of business, blocking the streets with a bunch of ignorant yahoos. *Terroristic Threatening* - that's what they call it - *Terroristic Threatening*. And I guaran-damn-tee he don't have a permit to be doin' this kind of bullshit. Throw the book at him, Deputy. I wanna prosecute to the full extent of the law."

Reverend Greyson walked over to his fellow parishioner, reached out and helped the old man to his feet, "I told you, Brother Humphries, no good could come of this. The Lord asks only that we love one another with all our hearts. Do not judge lest you too be judged. For in the same way you judge others-

"Shut it, Reverend," said Brother Humphries. "I ain't got the time nor inclination to listen to your bullcrap."

Down the street Katrina Johnson felt the stiffness in her neck and shoulders build as her boot heels carried her away from the Lil' Bit of Country Saloon. Parked around the corner of Main and Travis, she found Chrissy pacing in front of her red Subaru with a very worried look on her face.

"Oh my God," said Chrissy running over to embrace her girlfriend. She traced her fingers gently over Kat's swollen lips and bruised face as the tears welled up in her eyes, "Are you OK? Look at you! Oh honey, you're bleeding and there's a terrible bruise on your cheek."

"Goddamn Junior. Must have been more drunk than I thought to let him catch me like that."

"I'm going to kill that boy," said Chrissy, "I can't believe he did this to you, his own sister!"

"Junior only did what I asked him to. We've had worse fights, believe me," said Kat. "He's all right... for a Junior."

"Are you sure you're OK?" asked Chrissy.

"I'm fine. This is nothin' compared to brandin' season. Wait till you see me then. Black and blue from head to toe."

"Is there anything I can do to make you feel better?" asked Chrissy pulling Kat closer.

"Well, I don't know, Miss Chrissy. Is there anything you can do to make me feel better?"

"I can think of a few things, but I need to get you home first," said Chrissy in a silken voice.

"You better take me home right now then, 'cause I'm gettin' worse by the minute," said Kat. "You got your work cut out for you, darlin'."

"Daddy told me you have to love your work to be any good at it," said Chrissy, "and I do love it so."

"Oh damn, girl, take me home right now before I die right here on the street."

Kat and Chrissy fell deeply into the grace of each other's loving arms. They kissed gently for a few tender moments, then climbed into Chrissy's little red Subaru and drove off beneath the big and bright, starry night of East Texas.

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About The Author

Thank you for reading my ebook of short stories from the country. I hope you enjoyed them as much as I enjoyed writing them. Here's a little more information about me and a link to my historical fiction

novel,

[Sons of the Great Satan](#)

Happy Trails and Warmest Aloha, y'all!

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Anthony H. Roberts graduated from Texas A&M at Commerce, deep in the heart of East Texas where all things are possible, but not all are welcome. His first novel, *Sons of the Great Satan*, is based on his experience as a teenager during the Iranian Revolution of 1979. As a child Mr. Roberts spent five years exploring the deserts of Saudi Arabia followed by three years as a teenager in Tehran, Iran until the fall of the Shah forced the evacuation of all American expatriates. Born of mixed heritage (Irish and Native American) and having experienced life in Christian, Islamic, and Buddhist communities, Mr. Roberts has always been interested in the commonality of peoples. He has worked as a Civil War archivist, a Litigation Consultant at Pearl Harbor, and as an award-winning story teller at one of the world's largest cattle ranches located on the Big Island of Hawai'i. In addition to his love of writing and story telling, he is the Executive Director of a non-profit society dedicated to preserving the Paniolo (cowboy) heritage of Hawai'i. Calling both Texas and Hawaii home, he spends most of his days on the Big Island of Hawai'i with his lovely Kiwi wife, awesome Cherokiwi son, and his faithful companion, Ziggy the

Boxador. Mr. Roberts is currently working on a sequel to SONS OF THE GREAT SATAN and a fantasy trilogy set in Hawai'i.

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