

*The
Miracle
Man*

by
Buck Storm

HERITAGE  BEACON
F I C T I O N

THE MIRACLE MAN BY BUCK STORM

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PRAISE FOR *THE MIRACLE MAN*

There is a friendly ease to Buck's writing that immediately draws the reader into the story. The rhythm and colorful imagery that so richly inhabit his craft as a song lyricist make an effortless transition here to his broader vision as a novelist.

~ **Randy Stonehill**

National recording artist, Christian Music Hall of Fame

The Miracle Man had me from the first paragraph! The warm Arizona setting and quirky characters are a delight, and surprises roll across the pages as unpredictably as the desert wind. Buck Storm is a seasoned storyteller -- and his dialogue is a hoot!

~ **Ray Blackston**

Author of *Flabbergasted*

Buck Storm's command of prose is as clever and as clear as his poetry. Here is a story of morals pitting good against evil. A story of love, loss, mystery, James Bond-like villains, and the goodness of the ordinary. What do I do with the rope I've been given? I won't spoil the end but it should be an epiphany to others as it was to me.

~ **Ray Ware**

Ray Ware Artist Management

I know Buck Storm as a consummate singer-songwriter. I couldn't be happier and more enthusiastic to add "talented and imaginative author" to the list of things he does so well. His eye for detail, love for his characters, and a true gift for storytelling are evident on every single page of *The Miracle Man*. A few pages in, you'll want to happily go where he takes you ... and you will be glad you did!

~ **Bob Bennett**

International Award-winning CCM Recording Artist

This well-crafted novel draws you in from the first paragraph and does not let you go until the end. All the characters are fleshed out in first-rate fashion. I have not enjoyed a book like this since Frank Peretti's *This Present Darkness*. It is hard to believe this is Storm's first book. Good luck putting it down!

~ **Michael Bloodgood**

Founder/songwriter/bass player of BLOODGOOD and senior pastor of Calvary Chapel, Redmond, WA

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First, close your eyes and try to spell *acknowledgments*. See? This writing business is harder than it looks...

Michelle, you've mastered the art of looking beautiful in a sleep-mask. Sorry about the endless nights of laptop glow. You never complain and you *always* have my back. You're more than my wife. You're my fellow dreamer and best friend. Someday I hope we step into the next life holding hands.

Ransom and Willow, either your mother and I are the greatest parents in the history of the world or the beneficiaries of a merciful God. I think you know which.

To the rest of my family and friends who wonder what the heck I do. This is pretty much it... I love you so much and I know you love me... I'm a wealthy man.

Jim Hart, Literary Agent. You took me on without hesitation. Thanks for your advice, friendship, dogged persistence, and for not blocking my calls.

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Randy and Leslie Stonehill (Rudolph and Lester Stonehenge). You're the real thing.

DEDICATION

If you've been kind enough to open this book then it is
dedicated to you.

I hope it makes you smile.

PROLOGUE

The Sunflowers

The truck drove south, always south, staying to the back roads. South. Out of the San Joaquin Valley of California with its huge blue sky and puffy white clouds. With its English-speaking Mexicans and gringo farmers. With its shiny pickup trucks and tractors.

South. Away from the canals and almond orchards. South toward the desert where his mother lay in a shallow grave somewhere in the great vastness. How long had it been since he had seen her face? Since the snake? Since he and the men had thrown sand over her lifeless form? A whole summer. A lifetime. The journey had been northward then, and his mother's soul hadn't been the only one taken by the dream of America.

But now, south. Mile after endless mile the rust-covered truck bounced. South toward the river. South back toward Mexico. Nothing remained for him there, but where else could he go? The other men went back to their families, carrying money for the coming year. He too carried money, though no one waited for him there.

He would have liked to stay on at the farm, but the boss had been clear, pointing to the truck. The other men had grabbed him with rough hands and pulled him aboard. No welcome remained in America, at least until next harvest season.

He'd had long hours to think as the truck bounced south, to ponder the future. Mexico City seemed the obvious answer. The men on the truck talked of it. They spoke of jobs there. He'd never seen a real city. So be it. What choice did he have? If America would not have him, Mexico City would have to do.

The truck stopped, and the engine turned off, interrupting his reverie. Silence rushed in with a flood. It felt heavy.

"*Una hora*," the driver said. "Stay in the truck."

One hour. Paco didn't know the driver's name.

"Why are we stopping?" someone asked.

"The driver has family here," another answered.

“More likely a woman.” This from a third and the comment elicited a laugh all around.

Paco stretched and felt the need to relieve himself. It wouldn't take more than a few seconds. The other passengers grumbled as he climbed over, but he ignored them. Dust puffed beneath his feet as he hit the ground with a thud. He found himself in an alley with fences on both sides, some of adobe and some wood. He blinked in the bright light.

A patch of sunflowers drew him. A green forest topped with yellow faces, full of promise. The stalks were as thick as his wrist. The sun beat bright and hot, but the ground beneath the flowers looked shaded and cool. An hour the driver had said? An hour was a long time. And the back of the truck, packed tight with sweating people, sweltered even with the canvas cover.

Yes, an hour was a long time. Into the flower forest he went to rest, his body pressed against the cool earth.

Staring at the sky, he thought of the movie man. Had it really been more than a year since the man's long car rumbled into the village and skidded to a stop with a cloud of dust and cigarette smoke? Paco could still picture the moment perfectly. Hatband ringed with sweat and white suit turned grey with travel grime, the man had stepped from the car and opened his arms to the townspeople in a grand gesture. The movies had come! Never had Paco seen such excitement in the village. Into the church went the huge projector. It took four men to carry it! Not a soul stayed away that evening and the building filled to overflowing. The movies! Wonder of wonders! Paco and his mother watched as the projector rattled and clicked and sent its magical beam of light through the thick cigar and cigarette smoke that filled the chapel. On the whitewashed wall, a handsome man and beautiful woman—an angel really—danced in front of tall buildings and massive ships.

Paco loved the movie, but it went far beyond that for his mother. In the days that followed a light came to her eyes along with something Paco had not seen there in a very long time—hope. And when she spoke one word came more than any other.

America. They would go to America.

The warm day and the cool earth—Paco's eyes closed. He dreamed of buildings and ships.

He woke with a jolt, his heart pounding. How long had he slept?

There was no mistaking the familiar grinding of gears. He'd heard the sound for a thousand miles.

Would they miss him? The answer came almost as fast as the question. Of course not. Who was he to them? Just a boy. He belonged to no one.

No one had to tell him the truck wouldn't be back.

He didn't know what to do, so he did nothing. His eyes teared. He blinked the water away. He stared at the sky. The same sky he'd seen all his life now felt unfamiliar and frightening.

"Crying? This is no way to behave," the blue emptiness seemed to scold. "This is not how a man conducts himself."

Ten years old. Alone in the world. A man.

Hunger touched him, and remembering the money he reached for his pocket. His hand closed on nothing. His stomach sank.

Mateo.

Paco had never trusted the man. With his pockmarked face and his scarred hands. The smile always a little too ready. Mateo had insisted on sitting next to Paco in the truck. How blind could a person be? The man must have taken the money while Paco slept. An entire summer's worth of work, sunrise to sunset. A handful of bills and two coins. The value of a mother's life. All gone.

Paco ground his palms into his eyes because blinking didn't work. Above him, blurry through the tears, the sunflowers framed the bright sky like great, shaggy lions' heads.

Paco hated tears. Tears summoned the memories. A murder of crows to peck and pluck. With them, as always and by far the worst, came the Priest. The Priest, king of the crows, hiding in the shadows of Paco's brain waiting for any opportunity to press and prod and hurt.

In the village, the Priest's word was law. Paco had fought the tears back then as well, the days the Priest came to visit his mother. Like a black-robed god, the man would chase Paco from the small adobe. Then the sound of blows through the open window. His mother's protests and quiet sobs. The Priest always found Paco as he left, warning him without words. Warning him with those eyes that looked but never seemed to see, and fear would crawl down Paco's legs. Once, to his horror, urine soaked through his pants.

But the Priest was the Priest. The Priest was God. Who are a woman and a young boy to God?

With effort Paco pushed the memories back where they had come from. Still he didn't move. Eventually the bright sky faded to indigo. The sunflowers closed. Then the blackness came, rich with stars.

For two full days this cycle of light and color moved around him.

How long could he hide here? Hunger, thirst, and fear pressed hard. Paco squeezed his eyes shut tight. He must be brave.

He was a man.

CHAPTER I

*The Miracle**Paradise, Arizona**1951*

The miracle happened on a Wednesday and, as is the case with any miracle worth its salt, not a soul saw it coming.

Luke Hollis sat by a half-open window, but the night outside refused to offer a cooling breeze. The sanctuary clung to the heat of the long, Arizona day, and fans served only to blow hot air from one place to another. Luke sighed and shifted in his seat in an unsuccessful attempt to peel his back off the wooden pew.

He didn't have anything against church in general. He believed in God; he'd seen too much on the battlefields of Germany and France to deny Him. He had no doubt about a devil either, not after Hitler's death camps. But the war ended, and Luke wanted nothing but smooth water and gentle winds. If the great Spiritual-Power-That-Be had any inclination to delve into the day-to-day goings-on in Paradise, Arizona, which was doubtful, then Luke preferred to be left out of the proposition altogether.

For the hundredth time that night, he asked himself why on God's green earth he was there. A glance at Ruby Brooks as she fanned herself with a piece of sheet music gave him the same answer as the last ninety-nine times he'd asked. Who was he kidding? He tore his gaze from her perch behind the organ with effort. Ruby seemed to be the answer to every question he asked himself lately.

Oh man, he needed to get it together.

The Holy Mount Moriah United Pentecostal Church of God suffered a lack of attendance, probably due to the heat, but that fact seemed to be lost on the Reverend Whitey Hicks. The little man strutted around the stage like a bantam rooster.

Deep into his diatribe, the Reverend laid it on thick, working an imaginary multitude. Tie loosened and top button undone, sweat poured down his face and

dripped off his chin onto his already soaked shirt. Leaning back a little, with one leg extended in front of him, he shuffled and hopped across the platform. When he'd gone as far as the stage would allow, he did a robotic hip swivel into a one-eighty degree turn and brought it home to the other side. Somehow, through it all, he kept one hand pointed toward the ceiling holding up a Bible he never seemed to open.

Luke leaned forward and rubbed his eyes, trying to stave off a Wednesday evening Whitey inspired headache.

Hicks and Hollis. Same age, same grade in school. Alphabetically attached at the hip on the seating chart. Truth be told, Whitey wasn't a bad guy. In fact, as much as Luke hated to admit it, most people liked him. But that didn't alter the fact that every time the little man took the stage, he bounced up and down on Luke's last nerve.

Luke occupied his mind for a minute by counting empty pews. There were plenty.

Empty count complete, he started on the occupied ones. Most of the people sat in the back half of the room. Some sort of unspoken church rule. Hot breath filled the place. Bulletins fanned red faces like Parisian fans. He rubbed his temples again, daydreaming of his front porch and a cold drink.

Whitey went on, apparently oblivious to the tedium he inspired in Luke. One part prison warden and two parts carnival barker, he squawked and strutted. He showed no signs of winding down. Hop shuffle hop. "Hallelujah!" Shuffle shuffle. "Glory to God!"

Luke fidgeted on the hard pew, trying to find a comfortable position. Had anyone ever succeeded in settling comfortably on one of these things?

Whitey was a shouter, and tonight was no exception. Who knew if it was a love affair with his own voice or if he just wanted the world to know he occupied the stage? Most likely both. The man had always been his own little kingdom.

Whitey the golden boy.

Luke the troublemaker.

No matter the reason, the shouting continued. "Glory to God" had to be a favorite. It popped up every third sentence or so. He rolled it out slow, one staccato syllable at a time, and lifted his voice a little with the word "God" so the whole thing landed somewhere between a statement and a question.

"Glory to God!"

In response, a parishioner rewarded him with a dutiful, "Um-hmm."

The affirmation, lackadaisical as it was, appeared to encourage the preacher, and he shouted again with a little burst of extra passion and a quickened hop-shuffle.

It had been a long day. Luke's patience and energy dropped to empty as his tolerance threshold threatened to breach the dam. He'd had it. He gave up any sort of pretense and watched Ruby, doubting he fooled anyone anyway, Ruby especially. She knew him too well. Sometimes he thought she'd like him to just come clean. The opportunity had presented itself more than once, and he'd come close. What was it his war buddies said? Close only counts in horseshoes and hand grenades. There was a lot of truth in good old foxhole philosophy.

Ruby, her chin resting in one hand, traced the black and white keys with the other. Luke couldn't blame her for being bored. Ruby's job was to sit behind the big, shiny Hammond B-3 organ and add little musical exclamation points to the end of the Reverend's sentences. Whitey had been going on so long she'd given up on her musical duty. This fact didn't seem to matter to Whitey. The man was so enraptured by his Pentecostal two-step, he'd obviously forgotten she was even there.

Green eyes shifted in Luke's direction, and his face flushed. Chin still in hand, Ruby held his gaze for a moment, one eyebrow raised in mock consternation, then shifted back toward the preacher.

Catch and release.

Luke always made it a practice to occupy a side aisle seat. Access to the window offered mental escape when needed. He turned toward it now. What did she see when she looked at him? He wasn't a particularly handsome man. Not like her husband had been. David had possessed that Aryan, Ivy League flair. Luke's ghosted reflection in the windowpane eyed him like a judge. Tonight, the image showed more of his mother's Apache than his father's Irish. The dark hair needed a cut, and he could use a shave. The nose was crooked from a bad break that had never quite healed right. Once, a few years ago, he'd considered growing a mustache to try to offset it. The look was all the rage for the movie actors, but he'd bailed out after a couple of weeks, feeling more like he was wearing a Halloween costume than helping himself. In the end, he figured he was probably more of the Hollywood heavy than the leading man type anyway.

Another quick glance at Ruby and again she met his eyes. Did the woman have some sort of radar?

Back to the window.

Grow a spine, he thought, mentally kicking himself.

Out past the reflection, an orange cat sat licking his front paw under a streetlight. As if sensing he was being watched, the cat met Luke's eyes. The game of stare-down lasted awhile then, startled by some unseen nocturnal threat, the big tom scampered away into the shadows.

Lucky you, Buddy.

Luke's attention shifted upward where insects swarmed the streetlight in meaningless patterns. The stars pulled him higher. Squinting, he tried to pick out familiar patterns and was able to put a few names to them. Pinholes in the floor of Heaven. That's what his Pop had liked to say. How many years now since he'd heard that comfortable rasp? Dropping his eyes back down to the dim island of light on the street, he stared, unfocused, and allowed his mind to wander.

A shadow moved, or at least he thought it did. More of an undefined movement than anything else. Something seemed to linger beyond the light's edge. He tried to focus on the spot but could see nothing in the black stillness. He dismissed the sensation as the product of a long day and tired eyes. Still, it left him a little uneasy, and for a brief second, he felt a chill in the sweltering room. He turned his attention back to the stage.

"Gonna tell you a little story tonight, saints!" Whitey shouted. "A little story 'bout a fella name of Samson. Glory to God!"

A muted murmur of amens and hallelujahs rippled through the sanctuary.

Luke realized with dismay that the minister was only now working himself into his actual sermon. The rest had all been the warm-up act. Rubbing the throb in his forehead, he glanced at the long stretch of pew beside him. Sitting as far away from Luke as they could, two teenagers held hands, faces flushed with something more than the heat in the room. They'd never notice him leave. Small consolation. Bored as the rest of the congregation appeared to be, every eye would be riveted on him if he tried to make a break for it. Oh well. Ruby or no Ruby, he couldn't take another minute of this. He slipped out of the pew feeling, real or imagined, a hundred eyes on him. Ducking a little, as if it would help, he began to make his way toward the double door exit in the back of the room and probably straight to fiery judgment.

Story of his life.

Chancing a glance, Luke scanned the sanctuary. Children slept sprawled across their parents' laps. Mothers, too hot and spent to make them sit up, fanned them with bulletins. Fathers stifled yawns, most likely thinking of the work the

morning would bring. Behind him, Whitey went on shuffling, hopping, and preaching.

Halfway to freedom, a pair of eyes met his. They were wide-set in a handsome, good-natured face belonging to a man in the back row, a stranger to Luke. The man raised his eyebrows, clearly enjoying Luke's unsuccessful attempt at clandestine retreat. Luke shrugged with a grin and kept moving.

It happened then, as Luke reached the crowded back row where the stranger sat between Eudora Phelps and Beauty Graham. There wasn't any mighty rushing wind. Luke didn't see any tongues of fire. There was a slight crackling sound in the air. He felt a tingle, then a small jolt. The hair on his arms stood up. His feet stopped of their own volition.

Beauty Graham gave a startled, muted yelp. Beauty, as had been her custom for as long as Luke had known her, sat at the end of the pew next to the side aisle, down which she would inevitably make her quick break out of the hot sanctuary and hurry home to a cold martini and swamp cooler as soon as the service ended.

Luke had heard Beauty's complaints more times than he cared to remember.

Plump and pretty at just past 40, Beauty retained the peaches-and-cream complexion of a blushing 20-year-old bride. Pride in the gift nature had bestowed on her was apparent to all through her ever-vocal thoughts on the matter. She loved her skin and made sure everyone noticed. But the gift came with an Achilles heel: sensitivity to the heat. When the dreaded first warm days of summer rolled around, Beauty would start to scratch. When she appeared outdoors decked out in an array of huge hats, scarves, sunglasses, and long sleeves it was a sure harbinger the dog-days had begun. With the heat came the bumps and, brother, the bumps weren't pretty. No amount of the lotion or ointment supply she carried with her everywhere could stave them off. The way Beauty told it, the heat was a spiteful thief, and it stole from her everything good and right in the world.

It seemed to be the jolt following the crackle that brought the startled yelp from Beauty. It happened to pop out at the exact moment Whitey was pausing for breath. Beauty stared at her hands and arms in wide-eyed wonder. Then she lifted a hand to her face; her fingertips traced her skin as though trying to read Braille, but there were no bumps there to read.

"It's gone ... they're ... they're gone! They're GONE!" She rose to her feet.

Luke felt glued to the floor. What was happening?

At first, silence greeted Beauty's outburst. Then a cautious few began to gather around. Esperanza Morales was the first one to reach her. Esperanza's bulletin

slipped from her hand and floated to the floor like a dry leaf. The look of shock on her face as she stared down at Beauty's skin drew Luke's full attention there as well. Covered with angry red blotches moments before, it was now smooth and flawless.

The silence gave way to murmuring. More people slipped from the pews and inched closer to Beauty, craning to catch a glimpse.

Luke watched as Whitey, looking confused and irritated by the interruption, pushed his way through the excited crowd until he was standing in front of his stunned parishioner. But as the preacher gazed at Beauty's clear, blemish-free face, a look of wonder came over his.

For Luke, thoughts of escape receded like a waning tide. He crossed his arms and leaned back against the wall, watching with interest and not a little unease. The air hung thick not only with heat and breath but with some intangible thing. Excited faces registered awe. Something tremendous had happened here, something unbelievable.

Whitey's voice rose above the chatter. He crowed a Hallelujah, followed by some Praise the Lords and a whole string of Glory to Gods. Then, apparently feeling his groove, he offered a rousing round of shouting in tongues. One by one, the people around him took up the litany until the walls shook with their excitement. Bible raised, Whitey began another hop-shuffle around the room. Behind him, a few followed his lead and tried out their own versions of the dance. In the middle of the fray sat Beauty, looking bewildered but beaming.

Something tugged at the edge of Luke's brain. He looked around for the stranger, but the man was nowhere to be seen. Where had he gone?

The vice already clamped around his temples cranked a notch tighter. He decided to leave the congregants to their impromptu party and inched his way back up the aisle through the press of bodies. The rear of the sanctuary was too crowded to navigate, so he made his exit by ducking out the side door. The service, true to form, had gone long, and the grassy side yard was dark. Someone had forgotten to change the porch light bulb and the yard lay in shadow. He stood, breathing in the night air, disconcerted by what had transpired.

Hearing a step, he turned.

"Leaving early?" It was Ruby's voice. He could hear the smile in it, but it was too dark to see anything but her vague outline.

"You must double as a Sunday school teacher along with being the organ lady. You gonna report me?"

“What do you make of all that in there? And every Sunday school teacher I ever had was nice, by the way.”

Luke loved the sound of her laugh. “Well, I’m not making anything of it except maybe Whitey’s a few nuts short of a pecan pie. And you never met Mrs. Judge. She was six feet tall with a mustache. Mean as a bull.”

“Judge as in Judgment?”

“God’s honest truth.”

“So you don’t believe in miracles? C’mon, Chief, quit being a cynic. Even you have to admit something incredible just happened.”

“I don’t think the Maker of the Universe is all that concerned with Beauty’s heat rash, if that’s what you mean.”

“Pretty sure there’s a church full of people in there that would disagree.”

Luke wanted to see her face in the worst way. “Probably right. They’ll dance around and shout for a while, then settle down. I’m sure there’s a reasonable explanation, but nobody will care because a miracle is more interesting. That’s the way it goes. Human nature.”

“Wow, I’d better leave before I get struck by lightning standing next to you.”

He smiled at her, and he wished she could see it. “Can I give you a ride home?”

She hesitated and for a hopeful instant he thought she’d accept. “No thanks. I came with Esperanza. Told her I’d meet her at her car.” She started for the front of the building. “*Adios*, Boss. See you in the morning, huh?”

“Yup. Bright and early,” he said to her. “Coward,” he mumbled to himself.

The night cooled with a soft breeze.

He hadn’t been completely honest with Ruby. The evening rattled him more than he wanted to admit. And the sound of celebrants spilling out through the open windows of the church into the still night didn’t ease his discomfort.

Luke started toward his car, but a movement across the street drew his gaze. Under the same streetlight he’d watched earlier, the orange cat was back. But that’s not what caught his attention. The animal circled, back arched, rubbing his sides against the legs of a man.

The stranger.

He stood at the edge of the pool of light. If he saw Luke, he gave no indication. After a long moment, he squatted and scratched the big tom behind the ears, his face intent and thoughtful as he stared in the direction of the church.

CHAPTER 2

Habaneros and Hank Williams

The sun broke the eastern sky as Luke stepped out onto the front porch of the ranch house. The place was too big for him, he knew, but his Pop left it to him, and he couldn't bring himself to let it go. Besides, he liked living outside of town. He could breathe out here. Breathe and think.

Luke's father had built the house as a young man and built it well. It was a single story, rambling U-shaped adobe with a partially covered courtyard in the middle. The open end looked out over the distant town. Hollis Senior had planned on a big family and gotten part of the way there, Luke being the third of three boys, the youngest by eight years. Luke's mother died shortly after he was born and his father, a true romantic, never remarried. Instead, he'd spent most of his remaining years on the wide patio, surrounded by stacks of books. Luke often remembered the warm, star-filled nights he'd spent there, listening as his Pop read Robert Burns, Yeats or Steinbeck, dime westerns and whatever else struck his mood by the dim glow of the porch light.

What would his Pop have thought of last night's events?

He scratched his arm and studied the gravel yard and the old bunkhouse beyond, although his mind didn't track with his eyes. What in the heck had happened last night? Had he really seen what he thought he'd seen?

The early morning air hung still and light around him, like it held its breath. A rustle in the sagebrush that rimmed the circular driveway pulled his attention. A huge jack rabbit stepped out into the ranch yard and sniffed the air. Eyes the size of quarters gave Luke the once over.

Luke nodded his head. "Mornin', Chester. You're up early."

The animal turned and hopped away, giving Luke the distinct feeling he'd been dismissed.

"Yeah, you're right. Time for some breakfast." Luke took the four porch steps two at a time. His boots crunched gravel as he crossed to the driveway where he'd

parked his squad car. He climbed in, turned the engine over with a rev and headed down the dirt road toward town.

A few minutes later, he let the door bang shut behind him as he walked into Shorty's Café and Restaurant. Who Shorty had been, or why he'd decided to call his establishment both a café *and* a restaurant, let alone paint it on a sign, had been lost in the dim recesses of time. Locals called the place Shorty's, and that was good enough for Luke. It was a good spot to hear the latest and watch the town wake up and shake out its boots. The smell of coffee and chiles was familiar and comfortable perfection.

"Hey'a Chief!" Miguel, Shorty's fourth-generation owner, had to shout over the breakfast din.

Luke waved a greeting.

Conchita, Miguel's wife, flipped her table rag towards Luke's usual stool. Her normal welcome. With staccato Spanish and a pointed finger she directed today's regiment of workers, an endless supply of brothers, sisters, cousins, aunts, uncles, and other assorted relatives Luke could never quite keep straight.

If Shorty's was a hive of activity, then Miguel's grandmother, Lucy, was the queen bee. She was attached to a tall stool behind the cash register, and Luke gauged her to be somewhere around 160 years old.

Holding to their usual custom, he winked at her as he walked by. "Morning, Lucy. New dress?"

She was silent and unblinking as a post.

"Listen, what d'you have going Saturday night? Why don't you and I hit the drive-in? Make it a date."

Still no answer, but her eyes drilled a hole through him.

Luke scratched his chin. "You know, when I was in London during the war, I saw these guys out in front of Buckingham Palace. They wear tall, fuzzy hats. You ever seen them? You can wave your hand in front of their face, yell fire, yell anything, and they won't budge. You got any relatives over there?"

One dark eye narrowed.

Luke grinned. "You like me but won't admit it. That shell's gonna crack someday."

It was an old dance. He whistled as he navigated the crowded room to the counter and his empty stool.

Luke was the chief of police in the thriving metropolis of Paradise, Arizona, population 3,006. He knew some thought him young for the job at 34, but that

fact didn't bother him. He'd seen his share of the evil the world could dish out during his three-year vacation on the front lines of the European theater, an all-expenses paid trip courtesy of good old Uncle Sam. He never worried about any hanging curveballs small-town America might throw his way, and other than an occasional scrap between cowboys from rival ranches or a Saturday night drunk, Paradise lived up to its name. It was a sleepy, backwater sort of place on the eastern side of the state, hidden away among the pines and scrub oak, dozing under an eternal Arizona sun. Just the way Luke liked it.

Luke sipped his coffee and tuned his ears to the local chatter. Preventive crime fighting at its best. Not surprisingly, Beauty's name rose to the top as the buzzword of the hour. The year 1951 had its own challenges, but compared to the headlines of the previous decade, local news had become a bit stale. This made Beauty's miracle front-page stuff.

The prattle went on around him, but Luke stayed out of it, preferring to keep his own two cents shoved deep in his pocket. During the war he'd seen death. He'd also seen survival, sometimes inexplicable, a few times even what many would consider miraculous. Letting his mind go there made him uncomfortable. Things he could see and touch, those were manageable. Feet planted on solid ground—yes, please. In the end, he figured there was a logical explanation for everything—including the mysterious case of Beauty Graham's disappearing sun bumps. God bless her.

Beauty, Beauty, Beauty ...

Luke put down his cup. The woman was ruining a good cup of coffee. A miracle. And Beauty of all people. A flirtatious, walking menagerie of wide-brimmed hats, cat-eye sunglasses and pastel. He could imagine there wasn't anybody behind those dark lenses at all. Like an Invisible Man movie. She took fleshly form in autumn, her sunless existence leaving her face free of any hint of smile line or wrinkle, giving the impression she'd never had any experiences, like a diary with nothing in it. If there was one thing Luke liked it was a good story. Well, she could fill in some pages now.

Conchita stopped in front of him, raising an eyebrow. "Usual?"

"Creature of habit." Luke set his cup down, and she filled it.

"Chief's here, chile verde!" She yelled towards the kitchen.

The door banged again and Luke turned. Mort Fisher shuffled in.

There weren't a whole lot of black people living in Paradise, but even had there been, Mort Fisher would have stood out. He was a tall, broad-shouldered

man, somewhere in his late 70s, with thin hair and dark, smooth skin pulled tight over his features. He invariably wore a brown suit and a pair of dark glasses that hid his sightless eyes.

Luke watched as Mort navigated through the tables of the small café like a ship through a sea filled with icebergs. He leaned his white and red cane against the counter and docked his long frame on a stool.

“Morning, Reverend,” Luke said. “Why d’you carry the cane anyway? You never use it.”

“Good for beating off nosy police chiefs. And I don’t aim to be revered by nobody so keep your Reverend calling to yourself. I’m no clergy.”

This last statement was true. In fact, old Mort had spent most of his life training horses. Watching the 1,500-pound animal, equivalent of a petulant two-year-old, become putty in the hands of a blind man was an incredible display. Still, Luke loved to rib the old man.

Mort spooned sugar into his coffee, his face impassive. It amazed Luke to watch this procedure. Not because the blind man found the spoon, sugar, and the cup with no visible effort, but because of the sheer volume of the stuff he dumped in. Spoon after spoon after spoon. Luke’s eyes watered watching it.

“How can you drink that syrup, Mort? Someday you’re gonna put Miguel out of business with your sugar usage alone.”

“Oh, he’ll make out all right, Lukeollis. A body’s got to enjoy the small things in life.”

Luke liked the way Mort said his name in his deep comfortable baritone, kind of all run together into one long word: Lukeollis.

Conchita slid a plate in front of Luke, a large chile verde omelet and fried potatoes. Nirvana.

“*Habanero?*” She put a small bowl of salsa next to his plate.

“Amen and hallelujah.” Picking it up, Luke emptied it across the food.

She shook her head. “How can you do that? Even Miguel doesn’t eat that much, and his taste buds were dead 30 years ago.”

“It’s a gift.”

“I don’t eat it,” Mort said of the salsa. “Ruins my coffee. Coffee makes it burn more.”

“That is a problem,” Luke agreed, taking a bite.

“Lukeollis, you got to find some balance in life. *Habaneros* for breakfast ruining your coffee ain’t balance.”

A drop of sweat made its way down the back of Luke's neck. "That, Reverend, is one of the great tragedies of my life." He paused and chewed a moment before saying, "So I imagine you're giddy as a schoolgirl with a crush, what with Beauty's bona fide miracle blowing around town."

"Lukeollis, let me tell you something. I'm of the opinion that there are miracles, and then there are miracles, and then there's the fruit of miracles, good and bad, and they're all as far apart as the east is from the west is from the north is from the south."

Luke considered. "You know something, I'm amazed to find I actually understood what you just said. That may be a miracle right there."

"Don't share it with Beauty. She might not appreciate my perspective."

"Probably not."

Luke took a few more bites of fried potatoes drowned in hot lava and listened to Hank Williams sing about trains and loneliness on the radio behind the counter. Another drop of sweat rolled down the back of his neck, and he eyed his coffee warily.

"You don't believe in miracles, Lukeollis?"

Luke shrugged. "I think people believe in them. So from their perspective, I guess, who's to say?"

"That ain't no answer, and you know it."

"I haven't finished my coffee. That's the best you're gonna get out of this sinner. At least for now."

"Well, I suggest you think on it a bit. You been squarely in the middle of my prayers. There's something blowin' in, Brother Chief. If I was you, I'd be keeping my head down and my eyes open."

"The eyes of the law are always open, Mort. You know me. I don't buy into all your mumbo jumbo. Why can't you just tell me what's on your mind? It drives me crazy the way you always have to be so cryptic."

This last statement wasn't necessarily true. Luke enjoyed the verbal dance with Mort, but *cryptic* was his calendar word of the day, and he was dying to get it into a sentence.

Mort turned his face to him, Luke seeing his own dual reflection in the lenses of the man's dark glasses.

"No atheists in a foxhole, Lukeollis. That's a true story."

On the radio, Hank Williams saw the light.

More than Luke could say.

Uneasiness continued to press. He'd been there last night. As much as he hated the fact, Ruby had been right. Something he couldn't explain had happened, and it nagged like a bad tooth. Maybe the whole thing would fade away and become one of life's strange little footnotes. Something told him that wasn't going to be the case.

Strange how little moments, those experiences that seem to change everything, can come on a person so fast. And when they're least expected. They could be as sweet and perfect as a pretty girl's smile, or they could feel like a rusty blade. On rare occasions, both. One of those options knocked, and Luke didn't want to open the door. Every instinct in him pointed to a devil with a dull blade on the other side.

He stared at his half-empty coffee cup but it offered no answer. A tingle, a jolt, and everything changed.

Conchita stopped in front of him with a warm-up. "What'cha think about Beauty?"

Of course she would ask. Shrugging, he said, "Question of the hour. Maybe one of those lotions of hers actually worked."

"Way I hear it, it was a miracle. Heard a reporter is coming up from Tucson to interview her."

"Not everything you can't explain is a miracle. People are bored. They need something to cogitate on." *Cogitate* was one of last week's calendar words. "Besides, a reporter's not gonna drive up from Tucson to write a story about Beauty's rash clearing up, not that quick. It happened last night."

"I guess Whitey called them, told them it was the real thing."

She moved on down the counter, and Luke scratched the back of his neck. Why the heck did Whitey have to go and call the paper? The whole thing felt wrong.

Oh well, stay out of it. It wasn't in his job description anyway. Let Whitey and Beauty have their moment in the sun, no pun intended.

Mort read his mind. "Whitey now, he might have his hands full."

The idea irked. "Know what I like, Reverend? Good, grounded reality. Especially in my town."

"Reality don't always serve up what you want, Lukeollis. But it always has a purpose."

"A reporter ... you think Whitey's gonna set himself up in the faith healer business?"

“I think he might be pulled in a lot of directions. There’s a lot of voices out there. Some can get pretty loud. Give Whitey a break.”

Luke finished off a last bite of eggs and wiped his mouth with a napkin. “Can’t help it. I don’t like the guy.”

“Don’t be judging till you’ve walked in somebody’s shoes, Lukeollis.”

“That in the Bible?”

Mort grinned. “Not in so many words, but it won’t kill you to listen to an old man.”

“Whitey’s shoes wouldn’t fit. I’m just worried he’ll run this thing into the ground and bark at the hole. It’d be like him. I need to do something. I’ll have a talk with Beauty, see if I can’t find a logical explanation. Be best to head it all off at the pass.”

“Don’t be too hard on Whitey. He struggles like everybody, you included, but he’s a good boy. And like I told you, keep your head down but your eyes open. Explanations ain’t always logical.”

Luke would go see Beauty. It felt good to make a decision, and the uneasiness lifted a little. He finished the coffee with a gulp. “*Adios*, Reverend. Try not to bump into anything on your way home.”

Mort raised his cup in a mock toast. “There’s the Lukeollis I know and love.”

At the register, Lucy’s stare lost none of its stoniness. But even her indifference lent an increased sense of normalcy.

“There’s a spider on your blouse,” Luke said.

Not a blink from the ancient brown eyes. She handed him change.

Everything would work out fine.

CHAPTER 3

*God's Chosen Vessel in
Uncharted Waters*

Whitey squinted at the business card in his hand, feeling the walls of the hot church office close in around him. The card was riddled with important sounding titles. They made him feel tired. “Bishop Simon Frank? What church did you say you were with? And how did you hear about the miracle already?”

The guy must have left Phoenix at four in the morning to be here now. He looked fresh as a daisy.

The Bishop patted his head with a handkerchief. “Friend at the paper told me. Soon as you called it in last night, in fact. I have a finger on these things. Lots of lines in the water. Let’s say I’m sort of an adviser to people in your particular situation. An angel from above, Reverend, that’s me. Sent here to help you navigate dangerous and uncharted waters. Let me tell you, big things ahead.”

“I see,” Whitey said. He didn’t see at all. “What waters are those exactly?”

Whitey hadn’t offered the man a chair, which now seemed a mistake. The Bishop looked down at him from what seemed like an impossible height. As he talked, he occasionally sucked big, squared-off dentures back into place, giving Whitey the uneasy feeling the man might eat him at any second.

Even so, the Bishop’s smile came easily, an offering of comfort. “I’m not sure you realize the importance of what’s happened here. You’ve been given a gift, Reverend. You’ve performed a miracle. Everyone saw it. This woman—Beauty Graham—she experienced a healing of the highest order right in your church. This is big, Reverend! You’re going to need help. The kind of help I can give.”

Whitey’s gaze was pulled to the man’s companions. Two rough-looking men with bad suits. But hey, never judge a book by its cover. That was Whitey’s motto, or at least it was at the moment.

“You really think it was me? That did the miracle, I mean?”

The Bishop's eyebrows arched. He sucked his teeth and ran a tongue across their expanse. "You're the Reverend, aren't you? You're the leader? The shepherd? Who else? Look at it this way, Whitey—may I call you Whitey?"

Whitey fought the urge to ask if he could call the man Choppers. Instead, he nodded in the affirmative. No need to be rude.

The Bishop walked around the desk and leaned back against it. He put a meaty hand on Whitey's shoulder. "Look at it this way. People are needy. Can't blame them, this world isn't easy. And they trust you. Why shouldn't they? I've asked around. You're a well-liked man here in Paradise. Maybe you don't realize it but that gives you power. They're gonna come. And when they do you need to answer. You need to be there for them. You're an important and powerful man, Whitey. This thing's gonna explode. Don't deny your duty."

Important and powerful? Him? Whitey Hicks? Something stirred deep in Whitey's soul. An imperative, pressing something he couldn't quite put his finger on. In his mind's eye, he saw his father. The great Atticus Hicks, king of all he surveyed, condescending with his taunts and making it no secret that Whitey would never be anything but a short, little disappointment. A nobody. Well, maybe he wasn't a nobody, after all. Maybe he was a somebody. An important somebody. Why not? God's chosen vessel. Chosen to help. Right in the center of everything. That sounded good. What would Atticus think about that?

Maybe Bishop Frank had something here.

"You think I could do it again? Another miracle, I mean?" Whitey said.

"Of course. And you will. Get it in your head, Whitey. You've been chosen! And even if it doesn't happen again, so what? People just want a little hope. Something to believe in." The big man's voice dropped to half volume. "And listen, that's something they'll pay for."

That stopped Whitey. "Pay for?"

"Of course. You think God wants you to do this for nothing? Not the way He works. A workman's worthy of his hire. Says so in the Book, right in black and white. You're going to need support, Whitey. This deal is going to be big. Maybe even worldwide. Ministry costs something. You have to have a financial base, you know what I mean? Now, don't get me wrong. I know you're an honorable man. God wouldn't choose you otherwise. I'm not talking about exploiting people. You're giving them hope, remember?"

Whitey shoved his suspicion deep down in his pocket and tossed a mental pillow over the alarm bells going off in his head. “No doubt. We want to do the right thing.”

The Bishop’s face lit up. “Excellent! Now, first things first.” He opened a huge, leather satchel and pulled out a brown paper bag. From the bag, he extracted a printed poster. “Strike while the iron’s hot, boy. We got to put these up. Another meeting. There’s bound to be a buzz out there, and we need to ride it before it fizzles, know what I mean?”

Whitey nodded, not knowing at all. “When did you make these?”

“The man upstairs is mysterious, my friend,” the Bishop said. “Moves in ways we don’t always understand. You just do what I tell you and this big old world’s gonna be lying at your feet. Calling your name. I promise.”

Whitey saw his dad’s face again. What would it be like to be important? Maybe even a little rich? Just a little? If that was in the cards, who was he to argue? Besides, the Bishop didn’t look like anyone he wanted to disagree with.

“All right, Bishop. Let’s see how it goes. Kind of lay a fleece out there, if you know what I mean.”

His father’s face floated through Whitey’s brain again and winked.

Atta boy, kid.

Whitey could almost hear him.

CHAPTER 4

Pirates and Princesses

Closing her eyes, Ruby turned her face toward the morning sun and watched the light dance through her eyelids. The scent of clean laundry filled the air, soft and wonderful. The warmth on her face and the feel of grass beneath her bare feet brought back sweet memories. She hummed to herself. “Scrapple from the Apple.” Anyone could see it was a Duke Ellington sort of day.

“How can you be enjoying yourself? I hate doing laundry.” Esperanza’s words broke the spell, and Ruby opened her eyes and smiled at her friend. Esperanza sat in a lawn chair, the glass of iced tea in her hand dripping with condensation.

“I can tell. Feel free to jump in and help any time you like.”

“Hey, it’s my day off. Besides, I don’t want to steal your joy.”

Ruby laughed. “With friends like these ...” She stuck a clothespin in her mouth as she tossed a skirt over the line. Securing it with the pin, she shrugged. “I guess laundry reminds me of being a kid.”

Back then she could be anything. Sometimes the shirts and trousers and dresses were brilliantly colored flags hanging from the turrets of a castle. Her mother, the queen, and Ruby, the princess, beloved by all the people of the land. Handsome princes lined up to win her hand. Other days the flags flew from the mast of a pirate ship. There were a hundred ways to outsmart the evil captain and take control of the ship. Tyrant defeated, she never failed to win the undying loyalty of the crew. Ruby Brooks, the most daring pirate queen ever to sail the seven seas.

“You miss New York?” Esperanza leaned back, eyes closed.

Ruby drew in a long breath and released it. Back to the real world. “A lot. In New York all your friends help with the laundry.”

“Sounds horrible.”

It had been her husband's idea to come west. After the war, David had it in his head to try his hand at mining. Ruby much preferred the rush of New York to the idea of spending her days in a dull western town remembering excitement rather than living it, but her husband had been a dreamer. Nothing would dissuade him once his mind was made up. That was one of the things she had loved most about him.

"Sometimes I miss the factory. I was a heck of a lathe operator," Ruby said. "I was the first of my friends to sign up. I liked the independence. Plus, it made me feel like I was helping David."

"Where was he stationed?"

"England. Rode a desk, never saw action."

"Was it hard to quit? The factory, I mean?"

"The guys needed jobs when it was over. We all knew it would happen. I never expected Arizona though."

"Too bad for you. Sentenced to life in Paradise without laundry help. The New York Jonah, gobbled up and spit out here."

"Yeah, well, joke's on me. I love it here. And what would I do without you?"

"Get more laundry done." Esperanza put a hand behind her head. "I'm glad you're here too. You have a nice garden and you make good tea."

Ruby loved the west. It was true. The place was her constant, happy surprise. The people were tough and independent. Here, something of the pioneering spirit still stirred. That was a language she spoke.

The light breeze blew a wayward curl across her face. Reaching up, Ruby pulled her thick, dark hair back and secured it in a knot. A perfect, sunny day. On a day like this, happiness loomed close. Bees buzzed in the sunflowers that ringed the yard. The sunflowers grew against a low, slatted wooden fence, creating a thick hedge around her stone, craftsman-style house. The hedge offered privacy from both the neighbors to the sides as well as the alleyway behind.

Color surrounded her. Paradise was a gardener's wonderland, and Ruby made the most of it. Stone walkways crisscrossed the yard through beds of flowers, shrubs and vegetables.

But the sunflowers were her very favorite. Sitting on the patio, she sometimes watched for hours as the tall plants followed the sun with their great shaggy faces. It was magical.

Returning to her work, she hung a white cotton blouse on the line to bleach in the afternoon sun. The last of the laundry. She picked up her empty wicker basket. “Okay, Esp. You can take a break now. You want some more tea or anything? Foot stool?”

“Maybe you could peel me some grapes?”

Ruby gave her a mock kick. “C’mon. I have to get down to the station soon but before I leave let’s make some coffee and talk about Beauty’s miracle.”

“Or the Chief?”

“Ugh. Let’s stick to Beauty. That man is an exercise in frustration.”

“Still hasn’t talked to you?”

“Oh, he talks, all right. About everything but. You know Luke.”

“That’s true. I’ve known him all my life. He’ll get around to it. Trust me.”

“He’s worried about propriety, I think. It has to be hard. He was the one who responded to the wreck when David was killed.”

“Okay. That was five years ago. What’s the next excuse?”

“We work together?” Ruby said.

“Give me a break. He’s scared out of his gourd.”

“Yeah, you’re right. Some mighty lawman.”

Halfway to the door, a movement on her left caught Ruby’s attention. “Did you see that?”

“See what?”

“Something in the sunflowers, probably Marvin’s cat.” She stepped closer. “Beat it, Oscar!”

Two sunflowers wiggled, bowed, and then slowly righted themselves.

“That cat makes me crazy.” Ruby gave a tall flower a shake. “He digs things up like a dog.”

She expected to see the neighbor’s huge tom bolt from the plants, but nothing happened. Kneeling, she peered into the hedge. Her heart caught. Looking back at her from deep within the stalks was a pair of large, chocolate brown eyes.

“You’re definitely not Oscar. Hey Esp, come over here!”

She focused. The eyes belonged to a small brown boy, frozen in place and obviously trying not to be seen.

She smiled at him. “Jig’s up, buddy, what’s the game? Come on out. No one’s going to bite you.”

Rising, she stepped back. After a long pause, a few of the great flowers danced and dipped once more, and a boy stepped out of the shaded stand.

He was barefoot and wore a calico patterned men's shirt that was much too large for him tucked into threadbare, canvas pants. He blinked in the bright sunlight and gazed up at Ruby. He was gaunt, his eyes sunken. He pulled himself up to full height. An attempt at bravery? A vein pulsed in his neck. He opened his mouth as if to speak but no words came out. A visible shaking started in his legs. Scrambling, Ruby reached for him as his knees buckled.