

## THE FIRST STONE

The first stone to fall was Aaron's. A businessman from the south, he was successful, self-made. Just two years before he'd had to send his mother to a nursing home because his schedule kept him too busy to care for her. He had not visited her even once. He remained a very busy man. His mother's letters, none of which he'd answered and few of which he'd read had come weekly begging for visits. But something always came up. Finally, last week he buried her in a brief but tasteful service. Of course, he'd left the service early because the state was auctioning off a piece of property he dearly wanted. In fact during most of the service he occupied his mind thinking about how he would develop it.

It was only this morning that he felt the unmistakable twinge of loss. Bringing in the mail it suddenly struck him as odd that he had not gotten one of those jasmine scented envelopes from his mother that he had grown so accustomed to. Normally he would leave them on the table by the window in his study. By late afternoon the breeze would have blown a hint of jasmine into every corner of the room. Returning from his morning appointments he would open the doors of his study and be swallowed up by an invisible spring garden of cool jasmine breezes. But now he pushed the thought aside and hurried out the door. He had an appointment with the contractor at ten and he didn't want to be late.

It was after that meeting, about eleven thirty, that Aaron sat sipping a cup of coffee in the town square. Suddenly he heard Eli Abrams' booming voice come out of nowhere shouting, "brazen whore!" The crowd in the square, which up till then had been gathered around a somewhat ragged street preacher, now turned as one. Eli entered the square. His shirt was torn and his face and arms bore several bloody scratches. But all eyes were on the young woman he and several other men were dragging behind them. She was half-naked and terribly bruised. Cursing them through her tears, she kicked and squirmed for any chance at escape.

Aaron knew her. A high-strung girl named Meg who had a tendency to bare her shoulders, toss her long hair and give men looks that said they had nothing to offer that hadn't already put her to sleep. Meg had even put Aaron in his place a time or two. This time it was Meg who was being taken down. She had been caught seducing a married man. And in the garden behind the church no less. Breakin' one of the holy Ten and practically in God's own house! This kind of thing would not be tolerated! Shouts of "whip her" and "stone her" were already rising from the growing crowd. Before Aaron knew it the words had found the rage within him and he shouted "Yeah das right, stone dat brazen hussy!"

They threw her at the feet of a group of stern faced church bishops and Eli asked them, "reverends, what you-all want us ta do wit 'er?" The bishops had been listening to the street preacher with disdain and now they conferred amongst themselves casting sideways glances at him from time to time. Finally one of them turned to the preacher and said "Brother, the Good Book is very clear about this here kinda thing. But being as you seems ta got the ear of Almighty, what you think we oughta do with 'er?"

The preacher answered without a trace of irony, sarcasm or innuendo. And then like a child he stooped and began drawing shapes in the dirt.

Aaron heard the words but with Eli's bulky frame before him he had not seen the preachers face. So he stepped around Eli and moved to the girl raising a stone in his hand. He halted at the scent of fear mingled with Jasmine that rose from her body. In her face he saw both

the loneliness of his mother's final hours and the empty futility of a life spent denying itself of beauty and love. A life very much like his own. The strength of his arm failed him and the stone fell from his hand. The preacher raised his head and looked at Aaron. Seeing his eyes Aaron was overwhelmed with shame. He turned from the man's gaze and ran.

He ran to the gates of his home and flung himself against its iron bars weeping. His butler came running out believing that his employer had been robbed. "Go away! Git!" Aaron shouted at the man "let me be." The shame was too great. He sobbed bitterly, his body shuddering with anguish and self-pity. He cried long and hard until he was utterly spent. Finally he just sat with his head in hands saying over and over "God, forgive me."

"You alright," a tiny voice said. He lifted his head and saw an old beggar woman bent with age and weathered by poverty. "You been robbed, brother?" she asked. "You want, I should call the police?"

"I's fine ," he said. He used the silk sleeve of his shirt to dry his eyes. "I been robbed alright," he said bitterly, "dey got every last ounce o' my pride."

"Heh, heh, heh, das funny!" she laughed.

Her laughter took him off guard and he smiled at his own unintended humor. He looked her over. He had never met her, but he was sure he had seen her before.

"You live 'round here?" he asked suddenly forgetting himself.

"Yep! Right over dere," she said and pointed across the way to four wooden planks leaning up against a crumbling stone wall.

"We neighbors, you an' me," she said, and beamed at him with a five-tooth smile. He paled at the sight of her home. Instantly he made a decision.

"You know," he said, "I's jus' thinkin' I'd build some low-income housin' for the poor on some land I just bought."

"Das nice," she said quietly and looked him over, "I don't suppose you gonna build some no-income housin', is ya?"

Aaron didn't miss the shadow of pain behind her smile this time.

"I'm sure I could manage somethin'," he said and held out his hand to her. She placed her tiny hand in his and he was awed by how much sweeter it was to hold compassion than to hold a stone. He stood up. And as he moved to embrace the woman he saw the street preacher watching him from the other side of the road. The preacher sat eating a fig amongst a dozen or so friends who were laughing and talking and enjoying the warmth of the afternoon. Aaron looked at him and was sure he saw an almost imperceptible nod of the head and a fleeting smile cross the man's lips. Suddenly Aaron didn't feel guilty anymore. He felt cleansed and it was then that the last stone fell.