

*Happy are those who reject the advice of evil people  
But evil people are not like this at all;  
Do not follow the example of sinners  
They are like straw that the wind blows away  
The righteous are guided and protected by the Lord  
But the evil are on the way to their doom.*  
*(Psalm 1)*

## **Chapter I**

The mountain was looking its best, sharp against the blue sky. A few buzzards winged their saturnine way around in the foreground, foraging aerially for their breakfast. There in the stand of pines by the fort a foal skipped playfully watched with pride by her mare. It was one of those cool, crisp, invigorating, Montana scenes, barely witnessed by any human this day but the town's newest resident, Bryan Creet.

Creet drank from a glass with a petroleum corporation logo, enjoying the daily first of his many bourbon interludes. He lit a cigarette and sat down on the wooden bench which ran the length of the frontage of his shack. It was seven a.m. He would go down into town soon and order up a flurry of pancakes with maple syrup and strong coffee to wash them down.

It was only the fourth week Creet had been in Moonstone and yet he had settled into an unbending routine. He enjoyed the last gulp of his rich libation then trod out his cigarette butt on the decking. He put his hip-flask into his pocket and walked towards town. As he

strolled down the rather disingenuously named *Main Street*, hands gently linked in the small of his back, he felt happy – perhaps for the first time truly in ten long, terrible years.

“Hiya man,” acknowledged the sheriff thru an iridescent fug of cheroot smoke.

“Nice mornin’, ain’t it?” replied Creet, taking his customary seat by the window.

“Sure as hell is!” exclaimed Baker, smiling his gap-toothed grin.

Creet took the proffered coffee, absent-mindedly warming his fingers on the white cup.

“How ya doin’. There’re ya pancakes, Bryan.”

“Thanks. I sure need these today,” said Creet politely.

He had the same thing every day, requiring minimal verbal contact now in order to maintain the proprieties with his new acquaintances.

Kim, a brunette, returned from the bathroom and poured herself a milky coffee. Creet’s eyes casually met hers and she smiled. He wolfed down the second of his pancakes and tuned into the radio station that was currently playing a Beach Boys song. Fleetinglly it occurred to him how incongruous the epitome of sixties West Coast cool seemed in the environs of down-home Moonstone.

“Whatdya think o’ this business then, sheriff?” asked Baker, pointing to the front page of yesterday’s newspaper showing the cataclysmic scenes at the World Trade Center.

“Gotta nuke ’em back – that’s the only goddamn language these terrorists understand,” he replied. “Things will never be the same again!” he added, shaking his head.

“Sure. Right you are, sheriff,” averred Baker bashing the page.

Creet was sure too that the retired lawman was speaking the truth. He had watched the whole unbelievable event unfold on television. He and billions of others could not believe that this assault on the citadels would not be comprehensively answered by Bush and the Pentagon. If anything in the history of the last fifty years demanded nuclear action then positively this heinous crime did.

He finished the last of his breakfast, bade everyone farewell in his usual understated way and made for the door. Creet looked up at the frosted alp and smiled. With beauty like that what right had he to feel anything but joyful at his new life. He halted outside the general store and got himself some cigarettes and a loaf of bread. He went home, his mind full of the vastness of the evil just perpetrated against his country, yet still a semblance of individual contentment channeling thru the endorphin process centers in his brain. It was hardly inexplicable considering the fact that the natural world, which he had so craved whilst in jail, was now liberally all around him.

Creet walked up the dirt track to his ramshackle abode, the home that (for all its domestic privations) he had dreamed of, to the point of obsession. No one locked their doors in the magnificent wilderness around here except of course for the Yuppies who frequented the weekend cabins on the southern edge of town.

He went in and, as was his wont, went to the bathroom and the chemical toilet that due to the isolation of the shack had been deemed too costly to upgrade by his predecessor. There would be no way he either would be able to link up to the town's system in the foreseeable future, but the inconvenience of the arrangements was to

his mind not a burning issue after a decade of penal insantiation.

Having completed his ablutions Creet went out onto the veranda and took a slug of liquor. He lit a cigarette and, looking at the awesome view of the mountain, he started ruminating on what he was to do with the day. He had spent the time since he had arrived on the bus doing nothing in particular. 'Acclimatizing to the freedom' he called it when catching himself yet again wasting his days reading his Raymond Chandler collection, supine on his divan.

Thus the weeks since liberating his lungs from the fetid atmosphere in his cell had passed in a hazy blur of whisky, smokes, hardboiled P.I.'s and natural beauty. Whenever a translucent moment of perspicacity dawned on him between books or when a bottle prematurely was exhausted at night, Creet did question himself thru a miasma of guilt about what he was to do next with his life – guilt which not only reflected his short-term self-indulgence but deep regret in regard to his whole life.

All of a sudden his peaceful reverie on the rickety decking was interrupted by the footfall of another person approaching. He had received no visitors until now – either because of his demeanor or by local custom, his solitude had not thus far been intruded upon.

"How're you doing," she said, her voice a blend of Midwest and possibly metropolitan influences.

"How're you," he answered noncommittally, not even a trace of a smile lighting his granite-set features – the safe straightjacket of routine that he had acquired in prison and persevered with since his release now compromised.

“I’ve been camping in these woods for the last three days,” she went on by way of introduction, sensing that his lack of hospitableness might be the instinctive reaction of a preternaturally cautious man.

“Hhhum,” Creet mouthed softly, his eyes taking in the woman’s backpack and dirty jeans, her khaki cap and hiking boots.

“Thing is – I had a kinda accident with my car about five miles back.”

She pointed in the vague direction of the road that ran thru the forest.

“I was driving along fine and then a mink or a stoat or something suddenly ran out into the road and I automatically slammed on my brakes. I must have skidded on the wet leaves and I ended up wrapped around a tree.”

“I get ya okay,” commiserated Creet in his singular way. “You’re all right though?”

“Yeah, thanks. I think so,” she said. “I was lucky I was wearing my seatbelt.”

She un-strapped her rucksack and settled down unbidden on the steps. Creet saw that she was slightly older than he had first appraised and also far better looking. She took her headgear off and shook her hair, which fell in lovely mahogany tresses over her shapely shoulders.

“I’ll make some coffee,” he offered, retreating into the cabin and flicking the switch on the electric kettle.

“I sure could do with a cup,” she responded smiling, fidgeting in her flak jacket for her cigarettes and a lighter. She shouted thru the semi-open door, “Do you smoke?”

Creet demurred and went about getting the coffee things together. She seems friendly he thought, peeking a look at her in profile, sitting there on his stoop, taking in

the sharp line of her cheekbones, the almost architectural ski-slope nose. She had obviously had quite a shock, an adventure, which he somehow deduced, was totally alien to her normal existence. Not so much the accident, he mused – although, patently, she had been fortunate – no, the story of her sojourn in the woods he felt sure, with some intuition which all human beings possess when surmising other people, had not yet yielded up to him all of its transforming detail.

“There you go – a nice hot coffee for you. You look like you need it,” he said, handing her the cup.

“Thanks,” she replied, Creet noticing for the first time her fine ivory-varnished fingertips, ladylike and sophisticated, reminding him with an internal jolt of a lover he had once had in San Diego.

“My name’s Desdemona,” she said after a couple of sips. “But mostly people call me Desi.”

She downed the beverage insatiably.

“Bryan Creet. Pleased to meet you, Miss,” he responded, allowing himself a smile as he held out his hand.

He suddenly realized that it was the first woman’s skin he had consciously touched in ten years.

Silence took its insidious toll for the next twenty seconds whilst she devoured the reviving dose of caffeine. Creet could see that she felt uncomfortable, as he himself did, neither knowing what to say next to fill the void.

“Are you hungry?” he enquired at length. “I’ve got eggs and beans and it’ll only take me a minute to fix you something.”

“That’s really kinda sweet of you,” she replied, her face visibly relaxing at the way the situation had suddenly lost its slightly sinister air – real or imagined.

“Well, in that case, I’ll go and start up.”

He ambled into the kitchen and began busying himself with the can-opener.

“Thanks again, but I couldn’t use your bathroom could I?” she called after him. “I haven’t had a proper wash for days!”

Creet invited her in and led her there, explaining the inadequacies of the toilet but also that there was copious hot water and soap.

“I’ll leave you to it and I’ll go fetch those towels,” he said, having shown her lastly the idiosyncrasies of the faucet above the tub.

Creet presently returned and gave two cotton squares to her. He went back to his cooking, wondering at this turn of events when only twenty minutes previously he had been debating with himself how he was going to fill his day. This was more excitement than he had had since moving in: a highly desirable lady naked in his bathroom.

Soon he completed the basic cuisine and lowered the gas. He strained to hear the state of progress in the bathroom and could just make out some watery sounds thru the wall. He would have a cigarette outside, he thought. It was by now nine-twenty a.m. and the lumberjacks with their chain saws were dimly audible. The air had a keen edge and he could see an osprey rising above a fir-covered knoll on a warm air column. He drew deep on his tobacco, inhaling the rich Virginian notes. Creet felt that he could do with a slug and as he savored the heat of the bourbon, there was the click of the bathroom lock.

She had dressed in fresh clothes. Her hair was damp and covered partially by an informal turban of white terry-cotton, her face flushed like a ripening apple. She looked beautiful, pristine like no woman had looked to him in probably two decades. He went inside and started doling out her meal.

“Why don’t you sit down over there,” he instructed kindly, motioning with his left hand.

There was a table that had seen better days on which he put down the plate.

“This is damn good,” she complimented him. “Any ketchup?”

“No, sorry.”

“Don’t worry. I think I kinda prefer to taste my eggs plain anyhow.”

While she ate her fill, Creet eyed her up surreptitiously from his vantage in the kitchen. She sure was a very attractive woman. Her eyes were almond in shape, cobalt blue in color, her facial skin a newly moisturized porcelain peach of feminine grace. She was wearing black leggings now and blue kitten heels, her white blouse not quite buttoned-up revealing a “V” of glowing skin.

“Do you want a bourbon to finish with?” Creet asked at length.

He had enjoyed watching the spectacle of her eating, was pleased that she had consumed his humble offering so ravenously.

She nodded her assent and he poured a finger of whisky into a glass.

“Cheers!” she ventured and downed the ochre liquid in one hit.

“I must ring my husband,” she said. “I couldn’t get a signal from the woods. He’ll be really worried about me. I’ll just go outside.”

“I’ll wash the dishes,” announced Creet, watching her elegant legs stride onto the veranda.

She had stirred a long-latent sexual response in him. All those years in jail he had dreamt intermittently of a woman like Desi, but now that she was finally here he could hardly bear it. The theoretical lady of his daydreams had been a fictive device only to get him thru each dark day and night. Desi here, sexy and real was a different proposition altogether. He could feel the sexual force of her presence welling up within him, however. The drugs that they had given him had precluded the kind of physical interregnum which he was now experiencing. The last time he had had a woman must have been twelve years before. His eyes narrowed against the bright sunlight as he strained to admire the gorgeous visitor so sensually silhouetted against the backdrop of the mountain.

“That’s mighty strange!” she said, her face a vision of perplexity. “There’s no answer. Trip never turns his cell off, not ever.”

“Maybe he’s in an area with no reception then,” pondered Creet, although, he, thru his long absence from the 1990’s, had been left completely cast adrift by advances in telephonic technology.

“No, I think something’s wrong. I can feel it,” Desi responded, striding inside once more.

“There’s no point getting all worked up at this stage,” Creet advised. “Give him fifteen minutes and try again.”

“Yes, you’re right Bryan,” she murmured. “It could be something so trivial, like the phone not charged properly or something.”

“Exactly,” agreed Creet. “It could be anything.”

“How about I make us some more coffee,” she volunteered with mock high spirits.

“Yep! Why don’t you do that,” answered her host, smiling. “I think I’ve got some chocolate chip cookies in that tin over there.”

“Okay. You go out and enjoy your smoke whilst I get on with this,” she almost commanded him. “And then I’ll try Trip again in ten minutes’ time.”

She was, he thought, rather domineering and yet her innate vulnerability had snuck out when she was first concerned about her husband. Creet wanted to put his arms around her, kiss her passionately and lead her to the bedroom. That was his fantasy but he contented himself with one prosaic question.

“Where is your husband, Desi?” he asked conversationally.

“New York. He works in New York,” she said, collecting the two cups from the sink before running some hot water over them.

Creet felt a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach all of a sudden.

“Did you have a radio with you in the woods, Desi?” he enquired gently.

“Why’d you ask that?” she retorted, looking at him askance.

“Er, no reason,” Creet backtracked.

He realized that asking the question had seemed to alarm his guest.

Creet put his unlikely, pessimistic thoughts to the back of his mind and accepted the coffee newly served. He reached for the half-full bottle of Kentucky and offered her a tot as if by way of apology for giving her what he could only discern were the heebie-jeebies.

In silence he poured the liquor, smiling that lopsided rictus of his as he did so, eloquent testament to his anxiety and sorrow at upsetting her.

“What’s happening with the car?” he asked as he fortified his own drink with the spirit.

“Oh yeah,” she responded, as if she had forgotten all about it. “I suppose I had better ring a local auto repair shop. Do you know of any?”

“Sure there’s one in town. It’s run by a father and son, the Dempseys. I ain’t got the number though.”

“That’s okay,” she said. “I’ll take a walk into town when I’ve finished this.”

She raised her cup slightly and smiled at him weakly.

“Thanks for all your help,” she commented. “I really appreciate it, you know.”

“No problem. I sure do hope everything works out for you.”

Creet spoke the words in a distant way like one whose mind is not really connected to the autopilot of his mouth.

He offered a delaying cigarette and motioned outside. He lit her up à la Bogart with his trusty Zippo, a relic from his old days in Tucson, and they sat down a couple of feet apart.

Sometimes people are in such perfect symphony that words merely befuddle the relationship between them. It happens sometimes merely by default, each person sensing the inadequacy of their own lexicon to convey their inner

voice and thereby at risk of despoiling the moment by ill-considered words. Symmetry of silence is thus the prevailing result. It was so here. Totally without the tension of the previous silence between the protagonists, for an elegiac seven minutes the mood was set fair, the only sounds a woodpecker and the distant spluttering of the chain saws. They saw a bald eagle swoop across the superb vista and a flock of Canada geese fly above the sphagnum moss-like treetops to and fro the lake.

At last she rose, shook his hand and, nodding to Creet, picked up her backpack and walked off in the direction of the town. Neither party felt a requirement to verbalize a 'farewell' – it was as if they both somehow inexplicably knew that they would meet anon.

