

# T COOPER

## Details Inside

The sight of a handsome girl in too tight cut-offs sent the reels in Travis's slot machine brain scrambling. He spotted her over the shoulder of the long-haul trucker standing in front of him in the chip aisle, where Travis was attempting to impart to the gentleman the word of God. At once Travis lost his place in the scripture in his mind. (It was some combination of remaining steadfast down the road to victory, and step four, making a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.) "Those legs," he thought and might've even said aloud, the mulling over of which made him further blank on whether the bloodshot-eyed, dandruffy gentleman standing before him palming an unbelievably loud bag of French Onion Sun Chips struggled with methamphetamine or alcohol.

She held the glass cooler open at the end of the aisle, considering a cascade of Gatorade flavors and sizes, the frosty air whooshing in and around her dirty blonde hair, which was up in what, Travis observed from a recent scan of the tabloids, was being called a "mussy bun," and was being sported by women and men alike in Hollywood these days—though he didn't love when you'd see some of these leading men types flipping their heads in that girlish, mindless way women did sometimes.

Travis' eyes tumbled down her body and noticed that her right bare leg was twisted around the back of her other leg, toe vaguely scratching a spot on the top of her foot that probably didn't even itch. She wore some sort of pilled, tiger-print ballet slippers with flexible soles. Hardly a shoe at all.

"I think maybe I'm past where Heavenly Father will forgive," the trucker said, staring into Travis' eyes, the intimacy snapping Travis' attention out of his pants, where an erection was just starting to consider onto what side of eighteen the Gatorade girl fell.

"My friend," Travis began, wiggling (hopefully) imperceptibly to adjust his member, "Jesus died so that you can always find forgiveness. But could you excuse me for a few minutes, and we'll continue this back in your cab?" Here

Travis rested a steadying hand on one of his beefy shoulders. "I have some minor business to attend to, and I'll be right out, son."

It seemed like the trucker might be wondering how he came to a place in life where a man likely half his age and considerably more than twice as good-looking was calling him "son." But if it bothered him, he didn't betray it, instead just dutifully headed over to pay for his chips, where Travis saw Omar behind the counter, verging on irate on account of the pretty girl holding the cooler door open so long.

"Wasted energy!" Omar said to no one.

Travis waited until the trucker was mid-transaction with Omar before turning his full attention toward the girl, who by now had a 20-ounce purple Gatorade in one hand while the other still propped the door, her head poking into the case trying to soak up any remaining cold she hadn't already allowed to escape.

Travis placed a hand just above the girl's. She flinched slightly, and glanced up at him. "Oh, sorry, miss," he said, as though just noticing her.

She released the door then, switching the Gatorade from one hand to the other. "Quite alright," she replied. He could taste the oily scent of her skin in his mouth. It was not unpleasant.

"Fierce Grape," he began, smiling at her. He shut the freezer door, vacuum seal back in tact, the glass completely fogged. "Actually..." he trailed off.

"Cute," the girl said, turning on one of those slippers and walking slowly back down the chip aisle toward the register.

Travis hesitated until she glanced back over a shoulder, and then followed. She paused, almost precisely where the trucker Travis had been ministering to stood a few moments earlier, deciding upon his poison. She surveyed the bags too, but Travis knew she wasn't interested in buying any.

"What's your name?" he asked. "I don't make a habit of giving my name to strangers at the Pilot."

"What about the Flying J?" Travis suggested, nodding toward the truck stop across the street.

She looked out the front window of the shop. Closer now to that perfect skin, Travis realized this was the precise kind of girl his father declared

would never again be within his purview. It was the last time his father said anything to him (albeit through marred, grafitti-covered plexiglas and a feedbacky intercom phone).

"Well, is anything stopping you from receiving handsome strangers' names at the Pilot?" Travis asked the girl.

"I never said 'handsome.' Jalapeno, or Harvest Cheddar?"

"Neither seems adequate." When she remained silent, he volunteered, "Travis," and held out his right hand, more palm up *come with me* than vertical *nice to meet you*. She looked at it, possibly surprised (delighted?) by how soft it looked. Travis was glad he moisturized no less than three times a day. He was also glad that he never felt ashamed to say that name aloud; it was a solid, undeniably attractive name, unlike the one his parents put on his birth certificate. Travis couldn't think of a Travis he'd ever come across who wasn't appealing in some compelling way, like being ruggedly good-looking, a hard worker, or having a thick head of hair. Always showing up on time. Keeping promises.

Travis saw the girl's eyes pause on the shiny gold cross pinned to his shirt collar, and then she rested her hand atop his outstretched one. He closed his fingers around it, squeezing harder than he'd intended. But she didn't seem to mind, didn't pull away. They stood there joined like that for an easy ten seconds, Travis assuming the girl was debating whether to share her name. Or give a false one. Their hands swayed side to side. Two strangers touching under the fluorescents, not a flicker of awkwardness.

Both glass doors into the shop swung open then, and Travis felt the pressure change as outside heat bumped up against the conditioned air indoors. The *ding-dong* Omar insisted on installing despite the truck stop being occupied practically 24 hours a day, 7 days a week on this busy strip of middle Tennessee, jarred Travis and the girl, causing them to release their grip on one another. Her eyes trained on the door, and Travis discerned a fine crack in her porcelain as she saw who'd just entered. The girl beelined for the counter and handed the Gatorade over to Omar, who was arguing with another trucker over a refund. "Tell me what kind of a person wants a hot shower

now?" Omar shouted, whipping an arm in the air beside his head before popping the register and surrendering a five.

The girl waited, allowing enough time for Travis to arrive at her right side, just as the man who had come through the door appeared at her left.

"Jolene, what's *taking* so long?"

"Just paying, Daddy," she said in a different voice from the one she'd been using with Travis. She turned her back to him.

"Well, hurry *up*." Her father was bothered, possibly chronically. He was also: shorter than Travis by a few inches, and many more inches around. Still, well-preserved. He sported Transitions lenses that had yet to clear completely as he stood beside his daughter and rolled down the cuff of her shorts. He was also, Travis noticed, wearing a clerical collar beneath a rather whimsical light blue clergy shirt—a nod toward the 90-degrees plus on the thermometer, though Travis always preferred the more traditional black, no matter what the temperature. "Appointment's in fifteen minutes."

"*Okaay*," she said, the way girls do to their fathers. Omar finally rang her up. She reached down and grabbed the first pack of chewing gum her fingers landed on beneath the counter, and pushed it toward him. "Be out in a sec."

"Now."

"I have to go to the bathroom."

Her father hesitated, inventoried Travis and a couple other nearby male customers, at which point Travis took a respectful step back from the girl and read a cigarette warning sign. The father turned and pushed through the glass doors into the blazing sun, where his Transitions lenses would presumably fade to black. *Smoking can cause a slow and painful death.*

"Jolene, Jolene, Jolene, Jo-lee-e-eeen," it occurred to Travis to sing the Dolly Parton number quietly behind the girl as she collected her change.

"Yeah, I've never heard that one before," she said.

"How old are you?"

She didn't answer.

"I'm 28," he added.

"Is this the part where you tell me you'll escort me to my senior prom if I don't have a fella when the time comes?"

"Well," he stuttered.

"Okay, so I know your vital stats now, thank you," she said then.

"I just thought sharing something about myself might make you feel comfortable doing the same." *Soften face, relax shoulders, inhale*, he thought, adding an awkward gesticulation for emphasis well after he finished the sentence.

"I have to go," she said, noticing her father pull up in front, at the helm of a large silver SUV—a Yukon, Navigator, something American—with an attractive if plump middle-aged woman who was presumably his wife, mother of Jolene, in the front seat. The windows were darkly tinted, but they were mostly rolled down until the air conditioning could kick in. The mother's bangs blew off her forehead when she adjusted a vent in the dash.

"*Footloose*," Travis suggested, but couldn't complete the thought.

"Oh no, he allows me to dance," Jolene said, but something had shifted. Travis figured she was already thinking about being back in the cool, plush leather backseat of that car, where her iPod and headphones presumably awaited her return. A cup holder for the Gatorade.

"Well," Travis said, wondering what kind of music she listened to in her room with friends—whether girls even did that any more, or was it all just downloaded singles. "God bless..."

At this Jolene grabbed Travis' hand, the same one that held hers earlier in the chip aisle, and pressed the gum into it, folding his fingers around the pack. "This changes flavors in your mouth once you chew it for a while."

Travis went to the window and watched her climb into the back seat, her right tiger-striped slipper the last to go. The truck pulled away, bearing Tennessee "Choose Life" license plates. And one of those stick figure family decals in the rear window, with a father, mother, a cheerleader, and a football player, two dogs and a cat. Next to that a "Follow me to Living Faith Victory Fellowship Church" bumper sticker.

Travis cut a wake through the currents of heat rising off the asphalt and diesel engines. It had to be more than a hundred. "Hard work if you can get it,"

he said to himself. But even if a couple seeds of inspiration took root in just one of these gentlemen, it would be a good day, Travis reasoned. Just because it's a calling doesn't mean the trust develops overnight, that you get it right with every new relationship. These things take time. Travis pulled a soft cotton handkerchief out of his back pocket and patted his forehead in a few spots he knew would forestall any rivulets breaching the hairline. He continued down the alley of tractor trailers, most of which were idling loud and empty, feeding the A/C for nobody.

He saw the burgundy Volvo rig about a half dozen spots ahead, and inhaled deeply, though it didn't feel like he would ever fill his lungs. Travis noticed a short Mexican man slipping out from between the burgundy rig and the one after it, but he couldn't tell which truck he was coming from. The guy moved quickly considering the heat, traversing the row while shielding his eyes from the sun, and then Travis couldn't tell where he got off to.

When Travis reached the rig, he noticed it was connected to a Mayflower load, based in Phoenix. The gentleman inside spotted him at once and smiled wide through the windshield, leaving the cigarette between his lips and rising to push open the passenger side door for Travis, who grabbed a scalding chrome rail and hoisted himself up into the cab.

"Now where were we?" Travis asked when seated, genuinely trying to remember as he split his Bible on his lap to the page a navy ribbon had marked.

The hauler turned and stared at Travis. Took a deep drag off his cigarette. His eyes were a different kind of glassy now, and then Travis noticed the other odor (besides cigarette), which he always thought smelled like the periodic table, if it had a scent. That and French onion chips. Travis spotted a sooty glass pipe tucked above the sun visor.

*Round one goes to the devil*, he thought, and tried not to blame himself.

The man stubbed his cigarette in an ashtray in the door and whistled softly, reaching into Travis' lap and taking hold of his Bible. He looked at the page for a few seconds through unfocused eyes, then pulled a folded hundred

dollar bill from a side pocket, flattened it, and slipped it inside the book before handing it back to Travis. He lifted his hips and started unbuckling his belt, *jingle jingle*, and as Travis' head slowly descended into the long-hauler's lap he noticed a pile of empties scattered at the bottom of the driver's side well, some Dixies and Coors, a Lite can crushed under the clutch, and thought, *That's right: it was both the meth and the alcohol.*

Back at the Cub Inn down the road from the Pilot, Travis washed his hands and face, moisturized, and then paid for the week he owed, talking the chubby Monday-Wednesday-Friday clerk Irene into letting him hop on the Internet. She was afraid she'd get busted, like she had the last time Travis talked her into something motel residents weren't customarily permitted. While Travis launched the browser and set about googling, he could sense Irene clocking him every handful of seconds from the front desk, where she played solitaire on her phone and sipped Fresca from a go-cup.

Bingo. Travis read:

*Living Faith Victory Fellowship is looking for a new home! Until further notice, Wednesday evening and Sunday morning services will still be held at the regular facility on 2452 Hambright Rd., but rest assured that Pastor Derwin James Waggoner has been pounding the pavement in search of a new, improved House of the Lord in which we will continue spreading the good word of Jesus' death and resurrection to take the punishment of God for we sinful men and women. So stay tuned! And please be patient while we perform maintenance on this "home" in cyberspace too! In the meantime, if you or somebody you know is a budding "webmaster" interested in supporting this community of believers to help each other grow to love Jesus more and to be increasingly like Him. Please bring resume and sunny disposition to rectory during regular business hours, M-F 9-5 (closed for lunch 12-1). May*

*His grace be with you! —All of us at LFVF*

Travis opened Facebook and logged in. Three new messages: he could see his mother's tiny, pinched face in her icon in the first, plus some spam beneath it. He typed "Jolene Waggoner" into the search field. There were five, but just one in Tennessee. He clicked on the profile, private to all but friends. He could, however, view a larger profile photo of her in a green, yellow and white cheerleading outfit. He clicked "send a friend request," but immediately canceled it in the next window. He scanned the public parts of her profile, didn't find much. But there was a date of birth. Travis quickly did the math; she was sixteen. There was also a brother in a football jersey—James Jr.—with the same birthday. Twins.

"Hon', you got to get out of here," Irene pleaded from the front.

"Two more minutes."

"He's coming back any minute, and I can't get fired from this job. I can't." She slid off her stool and walked behind Travis, rubbernecking the screen to try to force a log-off.

"I promise," he said, wrapping an arm around her back and patting the generous shelf of her rump.

"Two minutes," she insisted. But he knew she would give him more.

He absorbed as much information as possible. Jolene's favorite quotes:

*"These things I command you, that ye love one another."  
—John 15:17*

*"We should live our lives as though Christ was coming this afternoon."  
—Jimmy Carter*

*"I wanna roll with him, a hard pair we will be. A little gambling is fun when you're with me. Russian Roulette is not the same without a gun. And baby when it's love, if it's not rough it isn't fun."  
—Lady Gaga*

"Travis!" Ilene squawked, a spook in her timbre. They could hear the boss' car rolling up out back, bass rattling the rusty chassis. Travis quickly clicked on the note from his mother, skipping over a handful of paragraphs, but just

managing to catch a fragment of the last:

*... work this out, your father will come around. Please honey come home or at least just write back and we'll get you with a professional, not in-patient, I promise, and then work on this broken family. Andy, honey, what's with this religious rhetoric on your wall, you're jewish. I love you—*

Travis clicked back onto Jolene's page and fired off a friend request after all. What was age but a number, especially considering eternity? This girl needed him, Travis was certain of it. In the message field of the request he typed FLYING J, because he couldn't think of anything else, what with Ilene hovering over him and her fat hand forcing down the laptop screen before he even had a chance to sign out.

After a week Travis could tell Jolene was thinking of him at least as much as he thought about her. By the week after that, she was texting him throughout her school day on the burner phone Omar sold him at a steep discount.

"Just wanted you to know: this A.M. I woke with a swelling of love for you in my heart, like the deep, deep love of Jesus," Travis texted one afternoon before her cheerleading practice was to start, and that's when Jolene wrote back, "Time we meet up, doncha think? Ditching practice, meet me at Sbx in 45."

Travis believed this was only a test, which is why he begged Ilene's car and drove it no more than five miles over the speed limit directly to the coffee shop located dead center between the Cub Inn and Jolene's regional high school. He knew she wasn't there yet—no red Ford Fiesta in the parking lot. He knew things about her now.

He went in and looked around, just to be sure she hadn't been dropped off by a friend. Travis thought he should maybe order a coffee, but didn't have any money, so he asked the fellow in the green apron and visor for a cup of water.

"Ice?" the guy asked.

"What?"

"Do you want ice in your water?" he repeated, slowly.

"Oh, sure," Travis said, surprised by the kindness. When the guy handed Travis the plastic cup, he smiled wider than seemed fit for the interaction. And then Travis felt cool air on the back of his neck, and two hands covered his eyes from behind.

"Guess who?" said the voice from the Pilot.

Travis wondered whether he would even recognize her—the image in his head fed more by photos online (cheer-leading away games, making peace sign/rabbit ears behind a girlfriend's head beside a row of lockers, toasting with a red plastic cup of keg beer at a house party), than the five minutes they shared at the truck stop a couple weeks before. He turned around.

Could not enunciate. She threw her arms around his neck and he reflexively opened his to receive her, sloshing a little ice water down her back, which only made her push into him more.

"You feel nice," she murmured into his neck, though he could feel the words vibrating more in his chest than eardrums.

*No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man*, he thought. Corinthians 10:13.

She pulled back. "Say something."

"Uh—"

"That's not something. Iced grande soy latte, s'il vous plait," she said toward the guy in the apron. "And my friend will have a..."

"I'm fine," he said.

She paid with a credit card and then came back to him. "You don't seem fine."

*My friend will have*, he thought. And: *God will not let you be tempted beyond your ability.*

Steady, trusting himself, Travis took her by the hand and led her to a corner of the shop with two empty overstuffed chairs, a disordered sports section folded over one of the arms. They stared at one another, knees brushing, the afternoon sun irradiating dust in the air between them.

"Ice soy latte on the bar for Jolene!" the barista called, and Travis hopped up to retrieve it, hitting the condiment station before returning.

"Two sugars, right?" he asked, handing over the drink. But it wasn't really a question, since he already knew how she liked it.

"We moved into the new place," she

said. "Daddy still needs a web guy."

"I don't know," he hedged. "I still don't think it would be right."

"You're so stubborn!"

"I wouldn't want to impose—"

"At least come worship with us next week." She sipped her drink, left a little lip gloss on the straw. He could discern an almost-summer smell coming off her skin.

"Although it's true, truck stop preachers aren't exactly wallowing in money baths," he added, not wanting her to drop the subject.

"Let me put in a good word for you. We'd see each other all the time!" she said, more excited than seemed possible.

"Maybe. But I think I'd just go in alone—don't mention me."

"Come on," she said, collecting her drink and keys off the glass table in front of them. Travis stood to allow her to step out, bumping his shin.

"Drive," she said once outside, handing over an abnormally large set of keys with at least half a dozen whimsical key chains on there, (mini pom-poms, a lucite tennis racket, stuffed Hello Kitty), and sashaying around to the passenger side of the Fiesta. Travis slid behind the wheel, adjusted the seat, and put it in gear. Realized he had not been in such a new car since his parents presented him with a silver Jetta after being accepted to Dartmouth early decision.

She pushed play on her iPod, and Eminem blasted through the speakers (he could've predicted). *Too weak, two weeks I've been having ups and downs going through peaks and valleys, dilly dallying around with the idea of ending this shit right here.* She mouthed along with the lyrics mindlessly, watching him shift. Travis didn't know where he was, so after a dozen or so blocks, he pulled into the parking lot of a busted discount furniture outlet at the edge of the sprawl, weeds pushing pavement. He parked in the only available shade, to the side of the warehouse, traffic muttering away on the raised two-lane above them. He rolled down all the windows, then turned the engine off, leaving enough juice in the ignition to keep the music going.

*I ain't placing any blame, I ain't pointing fingers, heaven knows I've never been a saint . . .* Jolene wrapped a hand behind Travis' neck and pulled him toward her—the iced

latte sweating in the console between them—and kissed him. Quite hard. His pants suddenly felt way too tight, and he kissed back. For a while he surveyed her warm mouth with his tongue, and at some point she sucked on it a little. At first she tasted like coffee, he realized, but after a while it was more buttermilk biscuit. Her palm let go of the nape of his neck, and she bit his lip, forcing eye contact before releasing him, and in that instant Travis noticed two things he hadn't felt in a long time: a perfect, unmitigated hard-on, and a warm, tinny drop of blood forming on the inside of his bottom lip.

*But with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape . . .* "I cannot touch you," Travis blurted. *That you may be able to endure it . . .* "It wouldn't be right. Not to mention legal."

This seemed to make her want him to touch her more.

She smiled. "Is it legal for me to touch you?" she asked, grabbing his joint through his jeans. "You can just sit there." She was palming everything he had, seemed to know what she was doing.

Travis counted to seven (five seemed too short, as her hand felt good, while ten was likely too indulgent), then grabbed her wrist. He might've hurt her a little when he twisted her arm up and away from his crotch. She looked sad then—or he thought it was sad, and that made him a little sad, too, to see her go from so happy to so sad, and so quickly.

"I can't," he said.

She sat back in her seat. Took a couple pulls from the green straw sticking out of the coffee at a sharp angle.

He turned to her, took her hand, which was wet from the plastic cup. "I'm going to see your father about that job," he began, flat. "So that I might be a part of your community."

This seemed to make her less sad. This was one of those times, Travis remembered, they told him he should try to form an open expression with his face and speak in varying tones. To right something that was about to go wrong, because the edges of things were starting to blur and disappear like they sometimes did. He fired the ignition and put the car in gear, Jolene killing the stereo as soon as he pulled out of the desolate lot.

"A little time," Travis said after a

few minutes. They were stopped at a red light beside a Chick-Fil-A. "I just need some time."

Back at Starbucks, he left the Fiesta running, set the emergency brake and exited the driver's seat. Jolene climbed over the console and reached beneath her legs to slide the seat a little closer to the steering wheel. Travis shut her in and leaned into the open window. "God bless," he said while she connected her seatbelt, but he did not think she heard. "I'll call you tomorrow."

She drove off. He watched.

"I feel like we've met somewhere," Jolene's father said to Travis. His Transitions glasses rested on the floor beside a loafered foot; where the reverend was wrestling with some electrical wires under a desk.

"I don't think so, no," Travis said. He was sweating into his best blazer, which was really more of a fall style, he realized while standing there in it.

"Well, do you know anything about wiring the internet and phones, equipment of that nature?" Jolene's father asked, ever bothered.

"Certainly."

The pastor collected his glasses and jammed them onto his face as he struggled to get up from the new, grasshopper-hued industrial carpet. Travis wondered whether he should help, as the poor fellow was perspiring considerably, despite the air conditioning being on blast. Once on his feet, he stuck out his hand toward Travis, "Reverend James."

"Travis," and here Travis hesitated. "Travis Grainger. Nice to meet you." They shook.

"Well, do you have a resumé or something we can take a look at?"

"I do," Travis said. "But I have to be honest, I've been on the road, and I don't have all of my usual files and documentation with me. But I can certainly phone home and have it forwarded as soon as possible."

The reverend studied Travis.

"And to be further honest," Travis continued, "when I came across your listing for the position, I felt immediately you were truly anointed, and I would be blessed with the clearest word from God in this community."

The reverend half-sat against the desk.

## *God will not let you be tempted beyond your ability.*

Travis focused on his delivery, slowing down some. "And I've started to do some ministering of my own here and there over the last couple years, and this may be premature, but I could learn a lot from you."

"We have to get the internet up and running today," Reverend James said.

"Let me have a go at it," Travis suggested, and as soon as he sensed an opening, shrugged off his wool-blend coat with elbow patches and folded it over the back of one of the brand-new ergonomic desk chairs in the office, then knelt beside the desk.

"Let's see how today goes," the reverend said, and crossed to another area of the office, where a grey-haired lady was transferring paperwork from moving boxes into tall file cabinets. She eyed Travis while questioning the reverend about a thick, overflowing file. The carpet smelled of formaldehyde, Travis noted, and got to work.

A few hours later both the high speed internet and five telephone lines were fully-functional throughout the building, and the remainder of the new furniture delivery was assembled and waiting to be arranged. Travis sat down in front of the main computer terminal and took the opportunity to text Jolene: "Come by LFVF and meet the new employee."

He swiveled the chair and noticed on the desk a thick instructional booklet, which he flipped through. It explained the massive, fully-animated LED sign they'd recently had installed on the street in front of the church. Travis palmed the mouse and launched the software that controlled the sign. It took just about ten minutes to decipher the system, and Travis wondered what information the reverend might want scrolling up there during the week — their first service in the new auditorium was to be held in just six days, he'd gathered.

Reverend James was finishing up a phone conversation about the new facility with one of the (seemingly skeptical) elders of the church. He held up a finger to Travis to indicate he'd be just a while longer, so Travis took it

upon himself to enter in some sample text: *Join Us for our Inaugural Sunday Worship! 11 AM | Sunday School 10 AM | Sunday Evening Worship at 6 PM | All welcome.*

He then scrolled through a list of animated graphics and selected a US flag waving in the wind, since Memorial Day was coming up. He inserted it after the Sunday schedule, followed by more text: *Remember: One Nation Under God this Memorial Day.* After that he found in the graphics library a dove with a branch in its beak flying over a three-dimensional cross. He wanted something special to scroll after that, and he looked back at the reverend for possible guidance, but saw that he was still occupied on the phone.

Travis thought for a moment. Then typed: *Free trip to Heaven: Details Inside*, and pressed enter, sending the message to the sign to begin its nonstop rotation of imagery and text. Travis leaned back in the comfortable chair, but tried not to make it look like he needed anything. He felt a buzz in his pocket. Jolene had texted back: "WTF? SO happy! "

After a few minutes, Josie the grey-haired church lady entered the office from the street. "You're a saint, aren't you? A veritable *angel*," she cooed at Travis in an Appalachian drawl, resting a warm hand on his arm. "I don't know what we would've done without you today."

Travis stood and tucked his phone back into the pocket of his khakis. "It's my pleasure, Ma'am."

"Reverend, did you see the magic this young man worked on our new sign?" she said as he hung up the phone. "We've been wrestling with that darned thing for weeks."

The reverend stepped outside and returned after a couple minutes.

"That was just a test-run, I can—" Travis began.

"Don't change a thing," the reverend said, and clapped Travis on the back. "Now if you could get Miss Josie a copy of your driver's license and social security card, we'll make this official."

Travis had set the church sign automatically to switch messages on the Monday after the first service. Instead of *Free Trip To Heaven: Details Inside*, it now read: *We Might Not Be Dairy*

*Queen, But We Have Great Sundays.*

Reverend James had been out fundraising all day, but he swung by the office before five to check in with Josie and drop off a few files. Travis was in his cubicle, logging overtime on the beta website. "We're not Dairy Queen, I love it," the reverend chuckled.

"Travis hon', I never did get that envelope from your folks," Josie hollered from her cubicle. She swung her purse over a shoulder, car keys at the ready. "You might want to double-check that got sent."

"Yes, ma'am," Travis said. "I don't know what could've happened."

"Okay, well, I'm off," Josie said. "Oh hi, baby!"

Jolene had just walked in with a couple school friends. "Hi Miss Josie, hi Daddy," she said in her other voice, Travis noticed, the one she seemed to use for everybody else—her father, friends, the Starbucks barista—except him.

"You remember Travis, who's helping out with the website?" Miss Josie asked Jolene.

"I do," Jolene said, plopping on the couch outside her father's office.

"Hi Travis," one of Jolene's friends said, perhaps a little too saucily, Travis thought.

Jolene had stopped by the church a few times during the week Travis worked, once with this same girlfriend (Brittany or Brandy or some such), and another time with her brother, James Jr.. The reverend had "introduced" them that first time, the brother smart-eyeing him for no good reason, but Travis pretended to ignore them both, burying his head in piles of website source material.

"Hello there, ladies!" Reverend James called from his office. Travis glanced back and caught a sliver of the reverend locking the wall safe and replacing the framed print of El Greco's "Flagellation of Christ" on a hook over it. "Can I take you girls out for some Blizzards to celebrate the end of another successful school year?"

"No thanks, Daddy," Jolene said, bouncing a leg over the couch arm. The black leather squeaked against her skin. "I told you, we need to print out resumes for our summer jobs."

He exited his office, locked the door behind him, then twisted off a single key and handed it to Jolene. "Lock

up behind you, and don't forget to set the alarm," he instructed. "Travis, get on home now, we'll see you in the morning."

"Yes sir," Travis said, waving a hand above his head. It was the first time in perhaps a decade that somebody expected something of him.

"Don't work too hard, girls." He picked up his briefcase and left. Jolene's two friends giggled soon as the door slammed behind the reverend. And then they, too, left.

Jolene strode systematically to each window and peered outside. She pulled the blinds down on each, bolted the office door, and then went back to the couch, indicating a spot next to her for Travis to join. He felt confident God would not let either of them be tempted beyond their abilities, so he came right to her, sitting close enough that their shoulders and hips touched. What he really wanted to do was talk to Jolene about Corinthians, and that was his intention, but straightaway she was straddling him, and a button from his only nice shirt popped off and bounced onto the formaldehyde carpet, and then her mini-skirt bunched up, her panties wadded around a knee, and he was unbuttoning his khakis quick as possible while she hovered, lowering herself slowly, slowly, and then suddenly lurched down on him.

"Choke me a little," Jolene whispered after a while, Travis staring at the door around her, and when he didn't respond she grabbed his hand and placed it around her throat and either he or she squeezed, he couldn't tell which. He wanted to get out of her, he really tried to do so in time, but she was all over him, wheezing and crying a little into his left ear, and before he knew it he was done and she rolled off him completely, the two panting there side by side on the leather couch in the almost-dark. On her right thigh was an alarmingly bright smear of blood.

"Oh no," he said, pulling his boxers up, followed by pants. He could not look at her. "Oh no, oh no, oh no," he kept saying in that monotone of his. Travis paced the office, over to his cubicle, then to Miss Josie's, and circling back again.

"What?" she chirped.

He was hyperventilating. He had been here before. This was where it all went pear-shaped in his brain.

"This is the first time," she said.

He was supposed to have saved her.

"I think we should pray," he announced, trying to tether himself to something, anything, and knelt before her, planting his elbows in her lap, palms pressed together. "Heavenly father—"

"That was exactly what I wanted," she interrupted, pulling his clammy hands apart. He was between her knees, and he thought to pluck a tissue out of a decorative box on the end table, then wiped the blood from her thigh, still unable to make eye contact. "Since the minute I saw you."

*Please let me take up the armor of God, that I may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil.*

"I would go anywhere with you," she said.

"My name's not Travis."

"What is it?"

He was silent.

"I don't care," she said.

And then, *Snap*.

At the Cub Inn the next morning, Travis awoke to the Tuesday-Thursday girl banging on his door. Jolene did not stir, but he extracted his arm from beneath her smooth neck and pulled on some sweatpants, tossing a sheet over Jolene's torso and head to conceal her, just in case. The Tuesday-Thursday girl—what's her name—did not look right when he opened the door.

Travis tried to determine what might be amiss. The red Fiesta was unmolested, parked nose-in directly in front of his room. He glanced back at the analog clock beside the bed—still had almost an hour to get to work at Living Faith. "What?" he asked.

"This kid, I don't know what he wants," she said, fearful. "He's really pissed off."

A mud-splattered F-150 pick-up screeched to a stop behind the Fiesta then, and Travis slammed the door, throwing the bolt before jumping into bed and waking Jolene. "Baby, you have to wake up, Jolene. Baby-doll." He rushed her into the bathroom with a sheet around her, told her to lock the door, not to come out for anything.

"What is it, what is it?" she kept asking, still mostly asleep.

Travis peered through the curtains and saw two dudes in backwards

baseball caps approaching his door clutching bats. One he recognized as James Jr., who quickly scanned through the windows of the Fiesta like a cop would, and then started banging on the door.

"Come out, you little faggot, I know you've got her in there."

"She's not here, man," Travis hollered through the door. He looked around the room for a heavy lamp or something, but there was nothing. "Can we talk about this later?"

"We're not going anywhere, and I think you know that," James Jr. said in a sing-songy voice, tapping the door with the bat. "Gig's up, man, and my dad is going to have you fucken *killed*."

"She just let me borrow her car last night," Travis tried. "Mine broke down after work."

"*Bullshit*. Open this door." *Tap-tap*.

"I'm going to call the cops," the Tuesday-Thursday girl said.

"Good, do it. That girl he's got in there just turned sixteen." More tapping.

---

Or, there were no baseball bats nor backward caps, and it was the police at the door all along, the Tuesday-Thursday girl saying they just wanted to ask the itinerant preacher living in room seven some questions.

He peeked through the curtains again, and one of the officers was pointing his flashlight down into the red Fiesta, even though it was broad daylight. In search of evidence. Against *him*. The other officer came to the door, rapped three times. "Hello, sir? I'm looking for Mr. Andrew Steiner?"

"Nobody here by that name," Travis called out, rousing Jolene and pulling on some sweatpants, the ones with the name of the college he never earned a degree from running down the left leg. He whispered, "Lock yourself in the bathroom, and don't come out until I tell you it's okay."

"Sir?" *Tap tap*. "We just have a few questions for you. About a suspicious death that occurred down the road from here?"

"I don't know anything about that," Travis said.

"Well, no harm in talking to us about it then."

Jolene had not obeyed. She'd rolled off the bed and was standing beside

him, wrapped in a sheet. "You've got the wrong guy, I swear," she testified through the door. "My father is the pastor at Living Faith, and we can all vouch for this man."

"Well, his fingerprints were found on a truck in which a Phoenix man was found dead a couple weeks ago, and hopefully this isn't a newsflash, but not too long ago, your guy served a couple years with the New Hampshire Department of Corrections —"

"He is a man of *faith*," she insisted.

"Even so, I'm hoping you can impress upon him the importance of at least talking to us and telling us what he might've seen," the officer hollered.

"There was a suspicious Mexican guy skulking around that day!" Travis blurted. "He was short, I think he was a dealer." Jolene held him tight, wrapping both her arms around one of his.

They kept tapping on the door, probably with the barrels of their guns.

---

Or, there was no deceased long-haul trucker from Phoenix, no police rapping on his hotel room door with the butts of Glockes, and the Tuesday-Thursday girl was actually saying something along the lines of, "These people out here insist they're your parents."

"My parents are dead," Travis hollered through the door, throwing the bolt and hooking the security chain.

"Honey," his mother began to say, but then just sobbing.

"Andy, open this door right now!" his father yelled.

Travis jumped into bed and fished around for his sweatpants, pulled them on and leaned into Jolene's ear. "Baby, sweet girl. I need you to wake up for me." She stirred and he stroked her messy hair and soft cheek and wrapped the top-sheet around her and ushered her into the bathroom. "These crazy people are out there, and I need you to stay in here while I get rid of them, okay?"

He closed the bathroom door and returned to the front one.

"Andy, please let us in," his mother pleaded. "We just want to help."

Jolene had disobeyed again, and was by Travis' side. "Sir, Ma'am?" she called through the door. "No disrespect, but Andy doesn't need you, and besides, he isn't Andy anymore

anyway."

"Young lady, I don't think you know what you're dealing with in there," his father said, and Travis knew that muffled rage like he was still living in his dad's house, absorbing it from two flights up.

"He didn't rape that girl," Jolene screamed then. "He served all that time, and she was just a vindictive little you-know-what, and he is sincerely sorry you had to pay all that money, but blame the legal system, not your son."

It was Travis now who held onto Jolene's arm with both of his. Nobody had stood for him before.

"This is what happens when he goes off his meds," his mother wailed, and by now Travis was flat on his back in bed, crying bare-chested in nothing but his college team sweatpants, the ones he used to row crew in every spring morning at 5:30.

"Just let him go," Jolene said, and there was no response, so she went to him and threw one of those long legs over the saddle of his hips, the white sheet draped over her shoulders, a laser of sunlight cutting through the curtains and bisecting her perfect profile, and for a few rapturous minutes Travis heard no voices surging on the other side of the door—nor on this side of it—and he wondered whether maybe he'd had it wrong all along, and it was in fact through the silence that God spoke to him loudest.

---

Or, she was just a pretty girl he glimpsed through a rolled down window, wearing headphones and drinking a Gatorade in the back seat of her father's SUV, filling up at a truck stop somewhere between Nashville and Memphis.

---

Or, his parents' private investigator had not tracked Travis all the way down to Tennessee, Jolene had spent the night, and it was just the Tuesday-Thursday girl knocking on his door, bearing a secret.

He rolled off the bed, a spear of pain between his sinuses, and hopped into his favorite sweatpants—the grey ones he'd had since freshman year, with a hole in the right knee—and peeked through a slit in the curtains. It wasn't a trap; she was indeed alone, but the

brightness was going to be a problem.

"Just a second," he hollered through the door, then went over to the bed and tossed the top sheet over a sprawled out Jolene, concealing her body entirely, with a pillow balanced against the backboard covering half her head, plus the purple marks on her neck. She did not stir. He unlatched the door for the Tuesday-Thursday girl, putting his entire self into the foot-wide opening between them.

"Boss needs last two weeks rent, plus a week in advance," she said, peering over his shoulder toward the bed. Travis tried to stand a little taller. "Or I heard him saying he's gonna get the cops in here to move you and your stuff out by noon."

"Okay, thanks for the heads up," he said, backing out of the doorway and throwing the deadbolt behind him. Jolene's purse sat on the table by the door, and Travis reached a hand in and fished around until he felt a small plush creature and yanked out the jingly set of keys connected to it.

---

Or maybe Travis' tab at the Cub Inn was in fact all squared up, and it was only Jolene tapping on the door, having just rolled up in her Fiesta. He stepped into the musty pile of sweat-pants bunched on the carpet and tied the drawstring, and soon as he opened the door, she announced, "I think my dad is a crook," and indicated a briefcase full of hundreds in the trunk of the Fiesta—enough to make it to Mexico for at least the summer. Maybe more.

Maybe Travis told Jolene to get back into her car, muttering something about temptation illuminating the path to escape, and how he finally knew his way out now, but that she had yet to learn hers, but that it had something to do with those yellow and green cheerleading outfits, boys wanting to take her to the prom, and flat keg beer. Maybe Travis placed his palms on her shoulders and spun her around, marching her to the Fiesta and pushing her down into it as though it were the back of a cop car, and then he watched through the split curtains as she eventually pulled out. When she shifted into first, hip hop beats pounded through her open windows, and the Fiesta vanished for good.

And then the silence returned—but for a few final taps at the door.

Travis opened it and leaned into the light: "Father?"

---

*T Cooper's most recent book is Real Man Adventures (McSweeney's), a sort of literary collage on the general subject of masculinity. Cooper is also the author of four other books, including the novels Lipshitz Six, or Two Angry Blondes and The Beaufort Diaries. His work has appeared in a variety of publications, including the New Yorker, the New York Times, The Believer, One Story, Poets & Writers, Electric Literature, and several others.*