

BUT FOR THE GRACE OF GOD

By B.V. Lawson

They stared at the rising orange-red flambé topped with a layer of black smoky icing, that was once a mobile home. By the time firefighters could make their way up the winding road in the dark through the maze of rusted wire fencing, bramble bush and downed hemlock branches, all that remained of the double-wide would be concrete block piers and a blanket of embers.

Barrow tried not to think about the body inside. Ashes to ashes, dust to dust. He'd seen his share of death before, in his line of work as a sheriff's deputy. But he doubted the woman beside him had.

"Are you all right, Sister?" he asked.

She nodded, never taking her eyes away from the flames, all the while fingering her rosary beads. He guessed it was a good thing her habit was black, but he wondered if the smoke would stain the white wimple.

"It's God's will," she said.

He almost laughed out loud at that. Was it God's will Amos Scoggins should become the largest meth producer in McDowell County, cooking up twenty-five pounds of crank each year, luring in the downtrodden and desperate looking for a little high to get them through their miserable lives?

"I said a prayer for him," Sister Theresa added.

"Too little, too late, if you ask me. What about his victims?"

She replied, softly, "I say prayers for them, too."

"They watched in silence for a few moments, as silent as two people can be standing upwind of a roaring fire full of crackling pops and the whooshing sounds of heated gas."

"Do you think he'll go to heaven or hell?" Barrow asked. He wasn't a theologian, and at this point didn't care what happened to Scoggins, as long as Amos wasn't still alive and breathing on this Earth. Still, he was curious.

"I'd like to think redemption is possible for everyone." She hesitated. "Yet I can't help but remember the Parker family. And the Marsten twins, and the Satterfield baby." She sniffed. "I held that baby the night he was born, then three days later..."

He'd been first on the scene at the Satterfield place. The young parents were stoned so far out in Methville they hadn't even noticed when they forgot and left the baby in its carrier on the front step where it was mauled by the neighbor's Rottweiler. There wasn't much left to bury, but he'd gone to the graveside service, anyway. The parents had skipped out of town to avoid arrest.

He knew about the Marsten twins, too, who had suffered strokes after delivery due to the mother's heavy meth use. The woman didn't even know she was pregnant until she saw blood in the tub when starting to give birth.

As for the Parker family, they were so typical of the majority of users, they could be the poster family for the DEA. Rotted, blackened teeth, infected sores on their faces and arms from picking at imaginary crawling insects. Before Scoggins got hold of them, they were a decent family, hardly saints, but law-abiding folks who worked at the sawmill and sang in the church choir.

Yet Scoggins never touched the stuff himself.

When Barrow had taken Sister Theresa into the mobile home an hour earlier, she'd crossed herself several times and mumbled a couple of Hail Marys. The main lab had been located in the bedroom, if you could call it that. Sister Theresa had taken in the stained threadbare mattress piled high with trash, an antique chest of drawers laden with bottles of unidentifiable pungent orange, yellow, and green liquids, and various other paraphernalia--rubber gloves, plastic tubing, a camp stove--and promptly cried out, "Jesus, Mary, and Joseph!"

They'd found Scoggins in a second bedroom, sprawled out naked on a single mattress on the floor, his eyes bulging outward as he gasped for breath. They'd stood there, watching him for a full two minutes before she'd asked, "Shouldn't we do something?"

Do what? Lecture him, arrest him, put a bullet through his head? Barrow had waited and then did what he thought the sister might approve. He'd closed Scoggins' eyes as the man breathed his last.

Out in the kitchen they found marijuana, a .45 caliber pistol, and \$5,400 in cash. He'd toyed with the idea of handing the money over to the Sister for her clinic, but thought better of it. He doubted even God wanted blood money.

Funny thing about meth labs. All those chemicals and solvents made for a rather combustible situation. It didn't take much to set them off, and a Molotov cocktail thrown inside an open door did the trick just fine.

When Barrow had thrown it, he'd thought about his little brother lying six-feet under and how meth often induced paranoia followed by suicide. He knew Sister Theresa would keep his secret and how she understood God's will sometimes needed a little human assist. After all, the poor little mauled Satterfield baby, Nicholas, had been her nephew.

Sister Theresa had breathed a prayer for the soul of Amos Scoggins, and then Sister Theresa herself had lighted the wick.

It was a cloudless night, and you could even see the Milky Way. She looked up at the stars and sighed. "The pancake breakfast for the women's shelter is tomorrow morning. They said it might rain, but I don't see any signs, do you?"

He guided her gently back toward the car. "It wouldn't dare. Besides, you've probably prayed long enough and loudly enough that God got the message and ordered up a perfect morning. Aren't you the one always saying God works in mysterious ways?"

"That He does, Bill. That he does."

Through the rearview mirror, the flames were still lighting up the darkness. He'd leave it to the firefighters now. He'd done what he had to do. Maybe even God's will, if you squinted a bit.