

# SON OF A PREACHER MAN- EXCERPT

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KAREN M COX



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SUMMER, 1959

SOUTHERN VIRGINIA

*T*he 1949 Oldsmobile rumbled up the gravel road, red dust flying out behind us. I looked over at my father, who was humming “Nearer My God to Thee” in an absent-minded way as he fanned himself with his fedora. It was ninety degrees and humid as the steam from a tea kettle, but Dad still wore a suit and tie. Dad always wore a suit and tie. It was the first Friday in June, and we were heading into Orchard Hill, the next stop on Dad’s traveling ministry. More than a few small-town Methodist churches couldn’t afford a full-time preacher, so after Mama died some years back, my father deposited me with my aunt Catherine and took on the mission of serving the rural areas of the state. He made it around to each church every few weeks, performing christenings, a wedding or two, and evangelizing to the salt of the earth.

In the summers, instead of staying with my aunt, I accompanied

him. Dad said it was good for me to take time away from the carefully orchestrated elegance of his sister's home and see how the other half lived. That summer I'd really see the other half up close because I was spending almost twelve weeks with his friend Alvin Miller, M.D. before starting medical school in the fall. After his Sunday sermon, Dad planned to move to the next town on his circuit, leaving me in Orchard Hill to shadow Dr. Miller and learn about the life of a country doctor.

Dad had been driving for four hours. His circuit was a remote one, and we had almost forty more miles to go. On backcountry roads, it might take another hour and a half, putting us in Orchard Hill at almost six forty-five. I was in awe of my father's stamina. But then, his endurance had always been inspiring. For a middle-aged man with gray at his temples, he was spry and energetic, and his sermons lit up the congregation with bursts of fire and brimstone to make the most resolute sinner tremble in his boots.

What a lot of people didn't understand about Dad was, even though his sermons gave the impression he was a hard, judgmental man, underneath, I knew he wasn't. He had a strong calling to minister to the flock in ways they could understand. So, in addition to leading hymns, he also helped arbitrate disputes, raise barns, and fix leaky roofs—anything that needed doing. He often said we are called to bring the sinners to the Lord—and the Lord to the sinners—in any way possible. The two of us had no idea how that conviction was about to be tested.

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I'D ALWAYS LIKED DR. MILLER. HE WAS KIND, AND HE TALKED TO ME like I was a man instead of a boy. A couple of years before, when I decided I wanted to be a doctor like him, he told me all about what I would need to learn and the schooling I'd have to take. Mrs. Miller was a quiet woman who kept a well-run household, and the food from her table was some of the best on the circuit. They had three grown children: Louise was the oldest, Marlene the youngest, and Charles

was in the middle. He was just a year younger than me, and we hung around together whenever Dad and I came to town.

We pulled up to the Miller house on Cavanaugh Street right around suppertime. It was a stately, two-story Victorian with a rose arbor over the front sidewalk and gingerbread trim on the eaves. Dr. Miller's practice was in the little shotgun house next door, and that's where I would be staying—in one of the patient rooms in the back.

The doctor and his younger daughter, Marlene, were sitting on the front porch waiting for us, and they both descended on the car as soon as we pulled in and turned off the engine.

“Alvin!” my father boomed, “How are you, my brother?”

Dr. Miller stuck out his hand and gave my dad a broad grin. “I’m well, Reverend. Doing very well. And yourself?”

“It’s a hot one today, but the Lord saw fit to give us good weather for our travels, so I can’t complain.”

“Well, come in and kick the dust off your boots. Martha’s got supper almost ready.”

I walked around to the trunk to get our travel bags and almost jumped out of my skin when Marlene Miller appeared right at my elbow.

“Hi, Billy Ray Davenport—long time, no see.”

“Hi yourself.”

Her hair was pulled back in a sleek blonde ponytail, and she smelled of some kind of cloying, flowery perfume. She wore a polka-dot dress that tied around her neck, leaving her shoulders bare. The skirt stood out all around her like a moat around a castle. A belt cinched her tiny waist and emphasized her chest. I knew a lot of the guys at my college would think Marlene Miller was the cat’s meow. She was pretty, no doubt, but although she looked like a nice girl on the outside, I hadn’t seen any evidence she was nice on the inside.

She batted her eyelashes at me. “Here, let me get one of those bags for you.”

I lifted the suitcases, setting each one on the ground beside me, and slammed the trunk shut. “Now, whaddya think my dad would say

if I let a girl carry my suitcase?" I shook my head and grinned at her as I leaned over and picked up one bag then the other.

She stood stock-still, blinking and staring at me for a second. Then she seemed to come around, shrugging her bare shoulders. As I started toward the house, she slipped her arm in mine, making me lean over awkwardly to keep from bumping her with the suitcase.

"It's really cool that you're staying all summer. I've told all my friends you're here, so we'll get invites to all the big bashes in the county."

"I'm here to work, Marlene, not play around."

She pouted and pulled away from me, hands on her hips. "College hasn't changed you a bit, has it? You're as square as you ever were."

"That I am." I left her standing there and hurried up the front porch steps. As I set our bags just inside the hallway, Charlie came hurtling down the stairs, grinning from ear to ear. He reminded me of the Cheshire cat in *Alice in Wonderland*, a story my mother used to read to me. I couldn't help smiling back at him.

"Billy Ray!" He shook my hand and clapped my shoulder. "How you doin'?"

"Right as rain, and you?"

"Never better. Come on in. Supper's almost ready, and I'm half-starved."

I followed him into the dining room, and we sat at the sleek mahogany table set with china plates. I liked how the Millers' formal, sit-down dinners were generously sprinkled with conversation. Dad and I conversed over meals at times, but Aunt Catherine hardly ever said a word at the table.

About ten minutes later, the rest of the family gathered for the evening meal. The rumbling sound of Dad's voice saying grace washed over me in a familiar, comforting wave—that is, until his words mashed together in an abrupt pile-up because somewhere in the middle of the blessing, Marlene's hand found its way to my thigh and gave it a firm squeeze. She was lucky I didn't leap right out of my chair with a yelp. Last summer, the flirtatious smiles and batting eyelashes were bad enough, but now it was apparent that the girl was

on a serious mission to get my attention. After Dad declared “amen,” I glared at her, but she just responded with a smug, little smile. Trying my best to ignore her, I tucked into country-fried steak, mashed potatoes, and green beans, listening closely to Dr. Miller as he told my father the plight of one of the families in the Orchard Hill community.

“Quinlan had some wind damage to his barn during that awful storm last month.”

“He hasn’t fixed it yet?” Dad asked as he passed me the butter for my cornbread.

“He bought the lumber but has no one to help him do the repairs. He’s got all those girls, you know—no sons to help him out, and no other family around these parts.”

Dad frowned, and I remembered that he didn’t care much for Tom Quinlan. Tom himself never attended church, and Dad thought he was too lax with his parenting responsibilities and impractical with his money. But in spite of all that, I knew what the next words out of Dad’s mouth would be.

“Well, what better way to lead a man to the river of salvation than to help him pull his ox from the ditch? I’ll drive over there tomorrow and offer to help. Will you come with me?”

Dr. Miller smiled behind his napkin. “I thought I might be able to talk you into it. I’m already scheduled to make a little trip out that way. I have to check on Mrs. Quinlan because she’s just had another baby.”

“How many does this make?”

“It’s her seventh delivery, although only the four girls have lived to see their first birthday.” He took a sip of his coffee.

I tried to conjure up an image of the Quinlan family, but only a vague recollection of hand-me-down clothes and solemn faces swam before my mind’s eye. They rarely attended worship services, and because we typically blew in and out of town over a weekend, I’d had little opportunity to socialize much around Orchard Hill outside of church.

Dr. Miller went on. “I imagine we can get some of the other men

in town to pitch in as well, being as tomorrow's Saturday. I'll make some calls after supper."

"I'll go, Pop," Charles said through a mouth full of green beans.

"Thank you, son." Dr. Miller nodded in approval.

"Charlie, please, chew with your mouth closed," Mrs. Miller admonished him.

"Sorry, Ma." He grinned at me with a "there-she-goes-again" expression that indicated an affectionate forbearance. His mother was a stickler for propriety and manners.

"He just wants to go out and get a look at that Lizzie Quinlan." I turned to Marlene and saw her sneer. I was struck by the vehemence in her tone.

"That's not true," Charles said, indignant as he threw his napkin across the table at his sister.

"He'd rather get an eyeful of Jeannie." Louise nodded her head as if she knew everything about it.

Charles blushed.

"Now, Jeannie Quinlan is a nice girl," Mrs. Miller said.

"But Lizzie..." Louise stopped cold at a stern look from her father.

Mrs. Miller sighed and said no more.

"She's a slut!" Marlene blurted out.

"That's enough!" Dr. Miller said in a sharp tone.

"Marlene, your language! And in front of Reverend Davenport and his son." Mrs. Miller turned crimson with embarrassment.

"Well, it's true," Marlene muttered under her breath.

I watched the whole interchange in fascination. Family squabbles were always interesting to me because I'd never had one.

Dad spoke up, ready to smooth the waters in that decisive way of his, like King Solomon might have all those years ago. "I believe this is when the preacher is supposed to say, 'He who is without sin should cast the first stone,' but you all know that story already, and this kind of sordid talk is hardly an appropriate topic for the dinner table. So, I'll just leave it there, shall I?"

"I think you owe the reverend an apology." Mrs. Miller put down

her fork. Apparently, her daughter's lack of decorum had stolen her appetite.

"I'm sorry, sir."

"You don't owe me an apology, Marlene." Dad wiped his mouth with his napkin and laid it beside his plate. "But you might look into your heart and see if you can genuinely repent and request forgiveness from your Lord." He looked up at our hostess and smiled. "Excellent dinner, Mrs. Miller. You bless us with your hospitality, and we humbly extend our gratitude."

Mrs. Miller looked a bit uncomfortable still, but she told Dad he was very welcome and offered us some warm cherry cobbler. Then, thankfully, the conversation turned to more pleasant topics.

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