

Showers of Blessings, Chapter One

“It’s me again, Lord,” Andrew Gooden said, lowering his forehead to rest against the steering wheel of his leased burgundy 5 Series BMW, which was parked in front of a run-down Bankhead convenience store. He’d chosen this neighborhood and this store because of their distance from his home and stomping ground in the decidedly more upscale suburb of Alpharetta. There was no chance he’d run into anyone he knew here. “I know I said I wouldn’t end up in this situation again, but here I am. I don’t know how it happened, really. I had been so good for so long and then I just fell off the wagon.”

Andrew lifted his head and stared out the window at what appeared to be two homeless men ingesting their beverages from brown paper bags. He felt as destitute as they looked. He leaned forward and picked up the two completed lottery forms resting on the passenger-side dash. “I need your help, Lord. I don’t have to tell you how much. The repo guys are looking for my cars. The house is teetering on foreclosure. My bank account is overdrawn. Things have been bad before, but never this bad. Sandra’s threatening to leave me if I don’t do something fast.” He held the lottery forms up and double-checked the numbers. “All I’m asking, Lord, is that you bless these forms and these numbers. I’m counting on you for a miracle.”

Andrew closed his eyes and bowed his head. “Please, Lord.” With those final words, he picked up the hat and sunglasses he’d brought with him and put them on. Though the possibility was slim that he’d run into someone he knew, he couldn’t take the chance. He was an assistant pastor at Praise City, a well-known megachurch in metro Atlanta. As much as his senior pastor raged on the sins of gambling and playing the lottery, he’d be put on blast if someone caught him purchasing lottery tickets.

Andrew got out of his car and headed for the store entrance, careful to keep his head down. So as not to be obvious, he went to the soda case and picked up a liter bottle of orange soda, his kids’ favorite. To give the current customer at the counter time to complete his transaction, Andrew stopped and browsed the snacks. He picked up a family-sized bag of chips. When the checkout counter was clear, he made a beeline for it. “Two lottery tickets,” he said, handing the forms to the cashier as he put his two items on the counter.

“Hope these are winners for you,” the cashier said.

From your mouth to God's ears, Andrew thought. "Thanks," he said, not wanting to get into a conversation that would extend his time in the store or give the clerk any reason to remember him. He wanted his lottery tickets and he wanted to get home. As the clerk ran the lottery forms and rang up his purchases, Andrew opened his wallet and pulled out the last of his credit cards that wasn't charged to the limit. At least, he hoped it wasn't. He and Sandra had been living on credit for months. This card had to be pretty close to the limit by now. When the clerk took the card, Andrew silently prayed that his purchase would be authorized.

He released a breath when the clerk asked for his signature. He quickly signed the receipt, took his purchases without waiting for them to be bagged, and rushed out of the store. He slid into his car, took off his hat and glasses, and breathed deeply again. "Thank you, Lord," he whispered. He put the key in the ignition and was about to turn it, when someone knocked on the driver-side window.

"Pastor? Is that you, Pastor Gooden?"

Andrew couldn't believe it. He'd gotten so close to making a clean getaway. He turned toward the window and saw one of his male parishioners grinning at him. Though he couldn't come up with a name, he knew the face. He pressed the button to lower the window.

"I thought that was you," the man said, still grinning. "What are you doing in my neck of the woods? It's Wednesday night. I figured you'd be in Bible class. Don't you teach on Wednesday nights?"

Andrew forced a smile. "I'm on my way to church now, brother," he said, wondering if the man had seen him coming out of the store with his hat and glasses. "Are you going to make it?"

The man shook his head. "Not tonight. The wife has already gone. She doesn't like to be late."

Andrew looked at his watch. "I'm going to be late myself if I don't get moving."

The man stepped back from the car. "Don't let me hold you up," he said. "I'll see you on Sunday."

“I’ll look for you,” Andrew said, starting the car. He nodded to the man and pressed the button to raise the window. It was then he realized he still had the lottery tickets in his hand. He glanced back up at the man, whose grin had settled into a smile. Had the man seen the lottery tickets? Andrew wondered.

Shaking his head in answer to his question, Andrew guided the car toward the main street. He didn’t breathe again until he was on the interstate, far away from that Bankhead convenience store and his unnamed parishioner.