

# CROSS ROADS



*a novel by*

WM. PAUL YOUNG



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# 1

## A CONGREGATION OF STORM

*The most pitiable among men is he who turns his  
dreams into silver and gold.*

—Khalil Gibran

Some years in Portland, Oregon, winter is a bully, spitting sleet and spewing snow in fits and starts as it violently wrestles days from spring, claiming some archaic right to remain king of the seasons—ultimately the vain attempt of another pretender. This year was not like that. Winter simply bowed out like a beaten woman, leaving head down in tattered garments of dirty whites and browns with barely a whimper or promise of return. The difference between her presence and absence was scarcely discernible.

Anthony Spencer didn't care either way. Winter was a nuisance and spring not much better. Given the power, he would remove both from the calendar along with the wet and rainy part of autumn. A five-month year would be just about right, certainly preferable to lingering periods of uncertainty. Every cusp of spring he wondered why he stayed in the Northwest, but each year found him again

asking the same question. Maybe disappointing familiarity had its own comforts. The idea of actual change was daunting. The more entrenched in his habits and securities, the less inclined he was to believe that anything else was worth the effort if even possible. Known routines, even though painful at times, at least had their own predictability.

He leaned back in his chair and looked up from the desk cluttered with papers and into his computer screen. With each tap of a key he could watch the monitoring feed from his personal properties; the condo in the building adjacent to where he sat, his central workplace situated strategically in downtown Portland midway up a midsized office scraper, his getaway house at the coast and larger home in the West Hills. He watched and restlessly tapped his right index finger on his knee. All was quiet as if the world was holding her breath. There are many ways to be alone.

Although people who interacted with Tony in business or social situations would have thought otherwise, he was not a cheerful man. He was determined and ever in search of the next advantage. That often required an outgoing and gregarious presence, broad smiles, eye contact, and firm handshakes, not because of any true consideration, but because everyone potentially held information that would be valuable in positioning for success. His many questions created the aura of genuine interest, leaving others with both a sense of significance but also a lingering emptiness. Known for gestures of philanthropy, he understood the value of compassion as a means to more important objectives. Caring made people that much easier to manipulate. After a few halting attempts he has concluded that friends of any depth were a bad investment. So little return. Actual caring was inconvenient and a luxury for which he had no time or energy.

Instead he defined success in real estate property man-

agement and development, diverse business ventures, and a growing investment portfolio, where he was respected and feared as a severe negotiator and master deal maker. For Tony, happiness was a silly and transient sentiment, a vapor compared to the smell of a potential deal and the addicting aftertaste of the win. Like Scrooge of old, he took delight in wresting the last vestiges of dignity from those around him, especially employees who toiled from fear if not respect. Surely such a man is worthy of neither love nor compassion.

When he smiled, Tony could almost be mistaken for handsome. Genetics had gifted him with a six-foot-plus frame and good hair, which even now in his mid-forties showed no evidence of leaving even though the lawyer's gray had started to salt his temples. Obviously Anglo-Saxon, a hint of something darker and finer softened his features, especially noticeable during rare moments when he was transported out of his customary business demeanor by some fancy or unhinged laughter.

By most standards he was wealthy, successful, and an eligible bachelor. A bit of a womanizer, he exercised enough to stay competitive, sporting only a barely sagging belly that could be sucked in appropriately. And the women came and went, the wiser the sooner, and each feeling less valuable for the experience.

He had married twice, to the same woman. The first union, while both were in their early twenties, had produced a son and a daughter, the latter now an angry young adult living across the country near her mother. Their son was another story. That marriage had ended in divorce for irreconcilable differences, a poster story of calculated disaffection and a callous lack of consideration. In only a few short years Tony had battered Loree's sense of worth and value into barely recognizable bits and pieces.

The problem was she bowed out gracefully, and this could not be counted as a proper win. So Tony spent the next two years wooing her back, throwing a magnificent remarriage celebration, and then two weeks later serving her divorce papers for a second time. Rumor was these had been prepared even before the signatures were inked on the second set of marriage certificates. But this time she came at him with all the fury of a woman scorned, and he had financially, legally, and psychologically crushed her. This certainly could be chalked up as a win. It had been a ruthless game, but only to him.

The price he paid was losing his daughter in the process, something that rose like a specter in the shadows of a little too much Scotch, a little haunting that could soon be buried in the busyness of work and winning. Their son was a significant reason for the Scotch in the first place; over-the-counter medicine that softened the ragged edges of memory and regret and tempered the painful migraines that had become an occasional companion.

If freedom is an incremental process, so, too, is the encroachment of evil. Small adjustments to truth and minor justifications over time build an edifice that would never have been predicted. True for any Hitler or Stalin or common person. The inside house of the soul is magnificent but fragile; any betrayals and lies embedded in its walls and foundation shift its construction in directions unimagined.

The mystery of every human soul, even Anthony Spencer, is profound. He had been birthed in an explosion of life, an inner expanding universe coalescing its own internal solar systems and galaxies with unimagined symmetry and elegance. Here even chaos played her part and order emerged as a by-product. Places of substance entered the dance of competing gravitational forces, each adding their

own rotation to the mix, shifting the members of the cosmic waltz and spreading them out in a constant give-and-take of space and time and music. Along this road, pain and loss came crushing, causing this depth to lose its profoundly delicate structure and begin to collapse in on itself. The deterioration rippled on the surface in self-protective fear, selfish ambition, and the hardening of anything tender. What had been a living entity, a heart of flesh, became stone; a small hardened rock lived in the husk, the shell of the body. Once the form was an expression of inward wonder and magnificence. Now it must find its way with no support, a facade in search of a heart, a dying star ravenous in its own emptiness.

Pain, loss, and finally abandonment are each a hard taskmaster, but combined they become a desolation almost unendurable. These had weaponized Tony's existence, equipping him with the ability to hide knives inside words, erect walls protecting the within from any approach, and keeping him locked in an imagination of safety while isolated and solitary. Little true music now existed in Tony's life; scraps of creativity barely audible. The sound track of his subsistence didn't even qualify as Muzak—unsurprising elevator melodies accompanying his predictable elevator pitches.

Those who recognized him on the streets nodded their greetings, the more perceptive spitting their disdain onto the sidewalk once he passed. But plenty of others were taken in; fawning sycophants awaited his next directive, desperate to win a scrap of approval or perceived affection. In the wake of alleged success, others are carried along by a need to secure their own significance, identity, and agenda. Perception is reality, even if the perception is a lie.

Tony owned an expansive house on acreage in the upper

West Hills, and unless he was hosting a party for some advantage, kept only one small portion heated. Though he rarely bothered to stay there, he retained the place as a monument to vanquishing his wife. Loree won it as part of their first divorce settlement but had sold it to pay her mounting legal bills relating to their second. Through a third party he bought it from her for pennies on the dollar and then threw a surprise eviction party, complete with police to escort a stunned ex-wife off the premises on the day the sale closed.

He leaned forward again and switched off his computer, reaching for his Scotch, and rotated his chair so he could stare at a list of names he had written on a whiteboard. He got up, erased four names and added one, and then slumped back into his chair, the horses in his fingers again tapping their cadence onto his desk. Today he was in a fouler mood than usual. Business obligations had required attending a conference in Boston that held little interest for him, and then a minor crisis in personnel management meant he was returning a day earlier than planned. While it was annoying that he had to deal with a situation easily handled by subordinates in the company, he was grateful for the excuse to withdraw from the barely tolerable seminars and return to the barely tolerable routines over which he had more control.

But something had changed. What began as a hint of a shadow of uneasiness had grown to a conscious voice. For a few weeks Tony had felt a nagging sense he was being followed. At first he dismissed it as stress overreaching itself, the fabrications of an overworked mind. But once implanted, the thought had found fertile soil; and what began as a seed easily washed away by serious consideration spread roots that soon expressed itself in nervous hypervigilance, sapping even more energy from a mind constantly alert.



He began noticing details in minor events, which individually would draw barely a wonder. But together they became in his consciousness a chorus of warning. The black SUV he sometimes spotted shadowing him on his way to the main office, the gas attendant who forgot to return his credit card for minutes, the alarm company that notified him about three power failures at his home that seemed to affect only his property while his neighbors' remained undimmed, each outage lasting exactly twenty-two minutes at the same time three days in a row. Tony began to pay more attention to trivial discrepancies and even how others looked at him—the barista at Stumptown Coffee, the security guard on the first-floor entry, and even the personnel manning the desks at work. He noted how they glanced away when he would turn in their direction, averting their eyes and quickly changing their body language to indicate they were busy and involved elsewhere.

There was an unnerving similarity in the responses of these disparate people, as if by collusion. Theirs was a secret to which he was not privy. The more he looked, the more he noticed, so the more he looked. He had always been a little paranoid, but it now escalated to constant considerations of conspiracy, and he lived agitated and unnerved.

Tony kept this small private office complete with a bedroom, kitchen, and bathroom, its whereabouts not even known to his personal lawyer. This was his retreat down by the river just off Macadam Avenue for the times when he simply wanted to disappear for a few hours or spend the night off the grid.

The larger property that housed this hidden hidey-hole he also owned, but had years before transferred the title to a nondescript shell company. He had then renovated a portion of its basement, equipping it with state-of-the-art

surveillance and security technology. Other than the original contractors, who had all been hired at arm's length, no one had seen these rooms. Even the building blueprints did not disclose their existence, thanks to construction payoffs and well-placed donations to local governmental chains of command. When the proper code was entered in what appeared to be a rusty telephone junction box keypad at the back of an unused janitorial closet, a wall slid sideways to reveal a steel fire door and modern camera and keypad entry system.

The place was almost completely self-contained, tied to power and Internet sources independent from the rest of the complex. Additionally, if his monitoring security software discovered any attempt to backtrace the location, it would shut and lock the system down until reset by entering a new and automatically generated code. This could be done from only one of two places: his downtown office desk or inside the secret lair itself. As a habit, before he entered he would turn off his mobile phone and remove its SIM card and battery. He had an unlisted landline that could be activated should there ever be the need.

There was no show here. The furnishings and art were simple, almost spartan. No one else would ever see this place, so everything in these rooms meant something to him. Books lined the walls, many he had never opened but had belonged to his father. Others, especially classics, his mother had read to him and his brother. The works of C. S. Lewis and George MacDonald were among the most prominent of these, childhood favorites. An early edition of Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* was prominently displayed, for his eyes alone. Crammed into one end of the bookshelf were a plethora of business books, well read and marked, an arsenal of mentors. A few works by Escher and

Doolittle haphazardly hung on the walls and an old phonograph player sat in one corner. He kept a collection of vinyl records whose scratches were like comforting reminders of times long gone.

It was in this hidden office that he also kept his critically important items and documents: deeds, titles, and especially his official Last Will and Testament. This he frequently reviewed and changed, adding or subtracting people as they intersected his life and their actions angered or pleased him. He imagined the impact of a gift or the lack thereof on those who would care about his wealth once he had joined the ranks of the “dearly departed.”

His own personal lawyer, different from his general counsel, had a key to a safety-deposit box secured in the downtown main branch of Wells Fargo. This could be accessed only with his death certificate. Inside were instructions revealing the location of the private apartment and office, how to gain entry, and where to find the codes for opening the concealed safe buried in the foundation floor. Should anyone ever attempt to gain access to the box without a certified death certificate, the bank was required to notify Tony immediately; and as he had warned the attorney, if such ever occurred, their relationship would terminate without consideration, along with the healthy retainer that arrived promptly the first business day of every month.

Tony kept an older Last Will and Testament, for show, in the safe at the main office. A few of his partners and colleagues had access for business purposes, and he secretly hoped that curiosity would overtake one or the other, imagining their initial pleasure at knowing its contents followed by the sobering event of the reading of his actual will.

It was public information that Tony owned and managed the property adjacent to the building that housed his

secret place. It was a similar structure with storefronts on the first floor and condos above. The two buildings shared underground parking, with strategically placed cameras that seemed to blanket the area completely but actually left a corridor that one could invisibly pass through. Tony could quickly access his hidden refuge unnoticed.

In order to justify his regular presence on this side of town, he publicly purchased a two-bedroom condominium on the second floor of the building next to his hidden office. The apartment was complete and lavishly appointed, a perfect front, and he spent more nights here than at either his West Hills house or his getaway at the coast near Depoe Bay.

Tony had timed the walking distance between the condo and his secret sanctuary through the parking garage, and knew he could be sequestered away in his special sanctuary in less than three minutes. From the security of this enclosed and protected asylum he was connected to the outside world through recordable video feeds that monitored his personal properties and downtown office. The extensive electronic hardware was more for self-protection than it was for advantage. But nowhere had he hidden cameras in bedrooms or bathrooms, knowing that others would occasionally use them with his permission. He might have been many things distasteful, but a voyeur was not one of them.

Anyone recognizing his car driving into the garage would simply assume, and usually correctly, that he was coming to spend the night in his condo unit. He had become a routine fixture, part of the background noise of everyday activity, and his presence or absence sent no signal, drew no attention, which was just the way he wanted it. Even so, in his heightened state of anxiety, Tony was more cautious than usual. He altered his routines just enough

that it would allow him to catch a glimpse of someone who might be tailing him, but not enough to create suspicion.

What he couldn't understand was why anyone would be following him in the first place, or what might be their motivations and intentions. He had burned bridges, most bridges actually, and he supposed that therein he would find the answers. *It has to be about money*, he surmised. Wasn't everything about money? Maybe it was his ex-wife? Perhaps his partners were preparing a coup to wrest his portion from him, or maybe a competitor? Tony spent hours, days, poring over the financial data of every transaction past and current, every merger and acquisition, looking for a pattern that was out of place, but found nothing. He then buried himself in the operations processes of the multiple holdings, again looking for... what? Something unusual, some hint or clue that would explain what was happening? He found some anomalies, but when he subtly raised them as issues with his partners, they were either swiftly corrected or explained in a manner that was consistent with the standard operating procedures he himself had created.

Even in a struggling economy, business was steady. It was Tony who had convinced his partners to maintain a strong liquid-asset base, and now they were carefully purchasing property and diversifying into enterprises at better than liquidation values, independent of the banks that had withdrawn themselves into self-protective credit hoarding. He was currently the office hero, but this did not give him much peace. Any respite would be short-lived, and every success simply raised the bar of performance expectations. It was an exhausting way to live, but he resisted other options as irresponsible and lazy.

He spent less and less time at the main office. Not that anyone looked for opportunities to be around him anyway.

His heightened paranoia made him more testy than normal and the slightest irregularity set him off. Even his partners preferred that he work off-site, and when his office remained dark, everyone sighed in collective relief and actually worked harder and in more creatively focused ways. Such is the debilitating power of micromanagement, a strategy that Tony often took great pride in wielding.

But it was into this space, this momentary reprieve, that his fears had surfaced, his sense of being a target, the object of someone's or something's attention, unwanted and unwelcome. To make matters worse, his headaches had come back with a vengeance. These migraines were usually precipitated by vision loss, followed closely by slurred speech as he struggled to complete sentences. It all warned of an impending slam of an invisible spike through his skull into the space behind his right eye. Light and sound sensitive, he would notify his personal assistant before crawling into the darkened recesses of his condo. Armed with painkillers and white noise, he slept until it hurt only when he laughed or shook his head. Tony convinced himself that Scotch helped the recovery process, but he looked for any excuse to pour himself another.

*So why now?* After months without a single migraine, they were happening almost weekly. He began watching what he consumed, concerned that someone might be trying to slip poison into his food or drink. Increasingly he was desperately tired, and even with prescription-enhanced sleep felt exhausted. Finally, he set an appointment for a physical with his doctor, which he failed to keep because an unexpected meeting required his presence to resolve issues pertinent to an important acquisition that had gone sideways. He rescheduled the appointment for two weeks later.

When uncertainty impinges upon routine, one begins to think about one's life as a whole, about who matters and why. Overall, Tony was not displeased with his. He was prosperous, better than most, which was not bad for a foster child whom the system had failed, and who had quit crying about it. He had made mistakes and hurt people, but who hadn't? He was alone, but most of the time preferred it that way. He had a house in the West Hills, a beach retreat at Depoe Bay, his condo by the Willamette River, strong investments, and the freedom to do almost anything he wanted. He was alone, but most of the time preferred it... He had reached every objective he had set, at least every realistic goal, and now in his forties he survived with a brooding sense of emptiness and percolating regrets. These he quickly stuffed down inside, into that invisible vault that human beings create to protect themselves from themselves. Sure he was alone, but most of the time...

Upon landing in Portland from Boston, Tony had driven directly to the main office and initiated a particularly volatile argument with two of his partners. It was then that the idea occurred to create a list of those he trusted. Not of people he would *say* he trusted, but those he actually did trust. Those he would tell secrets to, share dreams with, and with whom he would expose his weaknesses. For this reason he had cloistered himself away in his hidden office, pulled out a whiteboard and Scotch, and began writing down and erasing names. The list was never long, and originally included business partners, a few others who worked for him, one or two he had encountered outside of the job, and a couple of people he had met through private clubs and travel. But after an hour's contemplation he whittled even that down to six people. He sat back and shook his head. It had turned

into an exercise in futility. The only people he truly trusted were all dead, although there was some question about the last name.

His father and particularly his mother topped the six. He knew rationally that much of his memory of them was idealized by time and trauma, their negative attributes swallowed up by his ache for them. He treasured the faded photograph, the last one taken before a teenage partyer lost control and turned glory into rubble. He opened the safe and pulled it out, now protected inside a laminated sheet, but he tried to smooth out its wrinkles anyway, as if caressing it could somehow let them know. His father had talked some stranger into taking their picture outside the now-extinct Farrell's Ice Cream shop, he a gangly eleven-year-old with his seven-year-old kid brother, Jacob, standing in front of him. They had been laughing about something, his mother's face upturned with the joy of the moment written large upon her beautiful features, his father grinning wryly, the best he could do. It was enough, his father's grin. He remembered it clearly. An engineer not given to much emotional expression, it would unexpectedly slip out anyway and almost meant more because it was not easily accessible. Tony had tried to recall what they had all been laughing about, staring his question into the photograph for hours as if it might yield the secret, but try as he might, it lay just outside his grasp, tantalizing and maddening.

Next on his list came Mother Teresa, followed closely by Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. All great, all idealized, each very human, vulnerable, wonderful, and now dead. Pulling out a small notepad he wrote down the names, tore off the single sheet, and then toyed with it between his right forefinger and thumb. Why had he written down the names of these people? It had been almost



without thought, this final list, perhaps a true reflection of a source very deep and maybe even real, perhaps even a *longing*. He detested that word, but loved it somewhere. It sounded weak on the surface, but it had sure staying power, outlasting most other things that had come and gone in his life. These three iconic personages represented, along with the last name on the list, something larger than himself, a hint of a song never sung but still calling, the possibility of someone he might have been, an invitation, a belonging, a tender *yearning*.

The last name was the most difficult and yet the easiest: Jesus. Jesus, Bethlehem's gift to the world, the woodworker who supposedly was God joining our humanity, who might not be dead, according to the religious rumors. Tony knew why Jesus was on the list. The name bridged to the strongest memories he had of his mother. She loved this carpenter and anything and everything to do with him. Sure, his dad loved Jesus, too, but not like his mom. The last gift she had ever given him lay inside his safe, in the foundation of the building that housed his secret place, and it was the single most precious thing he possessed.

Not two days before his parents were so forcefully stolen from his life, she had inexplicably come to his bedroom. The memory was etched into his soul. He was eleven years old, working on homework, and there she stood, leaning against the door, a slip of a woman in a floral apron, flour highlighting one cheek where she had brushed away hair that escaped the tie holding her tresses up and away from activity. It was because of the flour that he knew she had been crying, the trail of tears running a jagged course down her face.

"Mom, are you okay? What's wrong?" he had asked, getting up from his books.

“Oh,” she exclaimed, wiping her face with the backs of her closed hands, “nothing at all. You know me, I sometimes start thinking about things, things that I am so grateful for, like you and your brother, and I just get all emotional.” She paused. “I don’t know why, my dearest, but I was thinking about how big you’re getting, a teenager in a couple years; then you will be driving and off to college and then you’ll get married, and as I thought about all this, do you know what I felt?” She paused. “I felt joy. I felt like my heart was about to burst out of my chest. Tony, I am so thankful to God for you. So I decided to make you your favorite dessert, Marion-berry Cobbler, and some caramel rolls. But as I was standing there, looking out the window at everything we have been given, all the gifts, and especially about you and Jake, I suddenly wanted to give you something, something that’s especially precious to me.”

It was then that Tony noticed her clenched fist; she was holding something. Whatever it was fit in the small grasp of this woman already shorter than he. She held out her hand and slowly opened it. Curled up on her palm was a flour-anointed necklace with a gold cross at the end, fragile and feminine.

“Here.” She held it out. “I want you to have this. Your grandmother gave it to me, and her mother to her. I thought I would one day give it to a daughter, but I don’t think that’s going to happen and I don’t know why, but as I was thinking and praying for you, today seemed to be the right day to give it to you.”

Tony had not known what else to do so he opened his hand, allowing his mother to drop the finely woven thread onto his palm, adorned with the small delicate gold cross.

“Someday, I want you to give this to the woman you

love, and I want you to tell her where it came from.” The tears were now rolling down her face.

“But Mom, you can give it to her.”

“No, Anthony, I feel this strongly. I don’t exactly understand why, but it is for you to give, not me. Now don’t get me wrong, I plan to be there, but just like my mother gave it to me to give, I now give it to you, for you to give.”

“But how will I know—”

“You will,” she interrupted. “Trust me, you will!” She wrapped her arms around him and hugged him long, unconcerned for the flour that might be transferred. He had not cared either. None of it had made any sense to him, but he knew it was important.

“Hold on to Jesus, Anthony. You can never go wrong by holding on to Jesus. And know this,” she said as she pulled back and looked up into his eyes. “He will never stop holding on to you.”

Two days later she was gone, swallowed up in the selfish choice of another barely older than he. The necklace still lay in his safe. He had never given it away. Had she known? He had often wondered if this had been a premonition, some warning or gesture by God to give him a remembrance. Her loss had destroyed his life, sending it careering down a path that had made him who he was, strong, tough, and able to withstand things that others struggled with. But there were moments, fleeting and intangible, when the tender longing would slip in between the rocks of his presentation and sing to him, or begin to sing as he would quickly shut such music away.

Was Jesus still holding him? Tony didn’t know, but probably not. He wasn’t much like his mother anymore, but because of her, he had read the Bible along with some

of her favorite books, trying to find in the pages of Lewis, MacDonald, Williams, and Tolkien a hint of her presence. He even joined, for a short time, the Young Life group in his high school where he tried to learn more about Jesus, but the foster system in which he and his brother landed shuttled them from home to home and school to school, and when every hello is just a good-bye waiting to happen, social clubs and affiliations become painful. He felt that Jesus had said good-bye like everyone else.

So the fact that he had kept Jesus on the list was a bit of a surprise. He hadn't given him much thought in years. In college he had briefly renewed the quest, but after a season of conversation and study had quickly relegated Jesus to the list of great dead teachers.

Even so, he could understand why his mother had been so enamored. What wasn't there to like about him? A man's man, yet good with children, kind to those unacceptable to religion and culture, a person full of infectious compassion, someone who challenged the status quo and yet loved those he challenged. He was everything that Tony sometimes wished he was, but knew he wasn't. Perhaps Jesus was an example of that bigger-than-yourself life, but it was too late to change. The older he got, the thought of transformation seemed increasingly remote.

And it was the God-thing that he couldn't understand, especially as it related to Jesus. Tony had long decided that if there was a God, he or she or it was something or someone terrible and malevolent, capricious and untrustworthy, at best some form of cold dark matter, impersonal and uncaring, and at worst a monster taking pleasure in devastating the hearts of children.

"It's all wishful thinking," he mumbled as he crumpled up the paper and indignantly tossed it at the garbage can

across the room. Living people couldn't be trusted. Reaching for a fresh bottle of Balvenie Portwood, he poured himself a triple and turned back toward his computer, switching it back on.

He brought up his official Last Will and Testament and spent the next hour expressing his suspicion and antipathy by making major revisions and printing off a new copy, which he signed, dated, and tossed with the old back onto a pile of others already in the safe, locking and resetting the alarms and turning off his desk lights. As he sat in the darkness thinking about his existence and who might be pursuing him, little did he know he was drinking his last Scotch.