Chapter 1

CAUGHT IN THE ACT!

“Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of adultery.”

(John 8:4, NIV)

Caught in the act! From the moment the church elders burst into her home, Mary knew she was a dead woman. There would be no defense attorney pleading her case, no evidence of extenuating circumstances submitted, no tender mercy extended to soften the hard-edge of justice. The Law of Moses left no room for negotiation or interpretation. She’d been caught in the act of adultery. She knew her fate.

Caught in the act! The woman searched for a hint of compassion in the cold, harsh faces surrounding her adulterous bed. No one moved to come to her defense. Instead, her accusers - many her former customers - tried to outshout each other to camouflage their own complicity. For courage, she reached out to grasp the hand of the “john” lying on the bed beside her. All she found was a rumpled sheet. Her partner in passion had fled, vanishing just after the “morality swat team” arrived.

Caught in the act. As the truth of her situation unfolded in her brain, terror welled up within her. It was a setup. She should have known. From the unusual early morning encounter by the village well to the impatient pawing to the sudden intrusion - a setup. But for what purpose? It didn’t make sense to her.

Mary had always been fair in her dealings. She’d never cheated her customers of her favors or snatched their coin purses when they weren’t looking as some whores on the strip did. She’d earned every shekel they’d paid her. Questions swam in her befuddled brain. Why? Why would they betray her now?
One of the men grabbed the frightened woman’s hair and yanked her from the bed. Another tossed her a robe and the command, “Cover yourself, slut!”

She cast a jaundiced eye at her dubious benefactor; a slight curl forming at one corner of her lips. What a radical change in tone from the promises of pleasure he’d panted in her ear a few evenings ago. Their eyes met for an instant. His face reddened; then he turned toward the leader of the pack. “We’re wasting time. Let’s get out of here.”

Helpless, she fumbled to fasten the belt of the robe about her waist. Hands like bone-crushing tentacles groped her, squeezed and bruised her arms and body. They dragged her from the room. Trapped between two of the men, Mary stumbled down the stone staircase. At one point, she lost her balance and fell to one knee.

“Get to your feet, woman!” The town’s leading Pharisee yanked her forward by her hair. She struggled to break free, but the brown muscular hands gripping her upper arms tightened their grasp. Someone slapped her face, bruising her left cheek and blackening her eye. Another slap across the face and blood spurted from her broken lip.

Caught in the act. Where were they taking her? To the town square? To the temple courtyard? Were her executioners already gathering the stones that would end her life? Her head throbbed with a thousand unanswered questions.

Bruising her bare feet on the pebbles in the road, she again fell to her knees. “Please, help me. Please,” she cried, calling out the name of one of the men whom she’d known for many years. The man on her left yanked her by the arm, nearly wrenching it out of its socket. She screamed in pain. They ignored her cries and continued dragging her through the dust like a limp rag doll. Tears ran down her cheeks while blood and dirt filled her mouth. She bit down on something hard then spit out a piece of a tooth.

The Law of Moses demanded that both of the guilty parties caught in adultery be stoned. But that detail of the law her accusers had conveniently ignored.
The law also required that it be the adulterer’s husband’s
duty to bring charges against his philandering wife. The actions
of the accusers were totally unauthorized. But these men were
in no mood to quibble over detail. Their agenda didn’t include
justice or adherence to the law.

At one point, when she raised her head begging for mercy,
she caught a glimpse of her morning’s customer, haunting the
peripheral of the crowd. She understood the difference
between the letter of the law and the reality of the law. She
didn’t try to deceive herself regarding society’s double standard
for men and for women. She would die, and he would go free
to proposition again.

Caught in the act. All along she’d known the end result of
the lifestyle she lived. Family members and friends lost no
opportunity to regularly remind her of her fate - that is, those
family members and friends who hadn’t long since deserted
her. Now the day had come. Now she could expect the worst -
death by stoning according to the Law of Moses. Now she
would face her executioners: helpless … hopeless …
defenseless … friendless … alone.

Being alone when in trouble is truly being alone. Though
the crowd was peppered with guilt, no one stepped forward to
share her fate. When sympathy was needed most, it was not
there. The world is no different today than it was in Jesus’ day.
When a worker is being censured for a real or imagined “sin,”
others steer clear of their compatriot, often adding painful
barbs and suspicions to the original accusations in order to
fend off any doubts of their own loyalty. And Mary? What
could she say? How could she deny her guilt? She’d been
cought in the act.

Caught in the act. A few minutes before the end of my
classroom’s lunch hour play time, I returned to my classroom
for the whistle I’d accidentally left behind. That’s when I
noticed that the lock on the storage-room door had been rifled.
Someone had torn open one of the fund-raising boxes and
stolen several of the candy bars.
I was horrified! As a twenty-something-year-old teacher, I couldn’t imagine any of my young charges doing such a thing.

I marched to the playground and blew the whistle, announcing the end of recess. The children scrambled to fall into line. The younger ones jostled one another to be at the head of the line. As I counted heads, I realized that three of my bigger boys - Mike, Gary, and Andy - were missing. I gazed across the empty playground. The three boys were nowhere to be seen. I turned to Mike’s younger sister.

“Where’s your brother?” I asked. She shrugged, her eyes widened in claimed ignorance.

I turned to another child. “Jerry, have you seen Andy or Gary?” The boy shrugged as well.

I gazed at the upturned faces before me. “No one knows where Mike, Gary, or Andy have gone?”

I got the same reaction from the rest of my class shrugs and a bevy of denials. Like the character in Shakespeare’s Romeo and Juliet, I mumbled under my breath, “Me thinks thou dost protest too much.”

I felt a tug on my skirt. I looked down to find Linda, the tiniest of my first graders, trying to get my attention. “Teacher, teacher,” she whispered. “I saw them out behind the storage shed.”

Several of the children nearest Linda growled their displeasure. “Tattletale!” someone hissed.

I straightened my shoulders and faced the group. Apparently, the expression on my face betrayed my feelings. The students were suddenly silent. “Listen carefully,” I said. “While I search for Mike, Gary, and Andy, I want you to stand right where you are. In line! No talking. No pushing. Don’t move! Do you understand?”

The solemn faces nodded. What else could they do with that look on my face?

“I mean it. Don’t move an inch,” I repeated.

Pulling my jangled nerves into line, I marched behind the metal equipment shed, where I found my three errant boys, their faces and hands stained with guilt and melted chocolate.
The foil from the discarded candy wrappers glinted in the sun beside them.

My hands on my hips, I towered over their frightened forms. “What is the big idea?”

Before either of the others could reply, Andy leapt to his feet. “I didn’t do nothin’, Mrs. Kay, I didn’t do nothin’. Gary and Mike gave me some of their chocolate, and I ate it, that’s all. I didn’t want to eat it, but they made me.

Caught in the act. Andy had been caught in the act, chocolate stains on his shirt, fingers and face, almonds shards between his teeth, a half-eaten bar resting in his lap.

“Andy! What am I going to do with you?” I turned my back for a moment, fighting to swallow my grin. He reminded me of a cartoon I’d once seen. In the “Garfield” strip, Jon had caught Garfield with one paw in the fishbowl and a goldfish tail sticking out of his mouth. Garfield’s response was, “Jon, it’s not what you think.”

Caught in the act. We live in a world of excuses, an atmosphere of denial of responsibility for our own actions. We blame the other guy. If my child fails math, it’s the teacher’s fault. If a thief breaks his leg while trying to burglarize my home, he sues me for the damage. If a murderer is found with a smoking gun in his hand and standing over a fresh corpse, his lawyer blames the culprit’s abusive parents. Even when caught in the act, from stolen candy bars to murder, the guilty deny their guilt.

But Mary didn’t deny her guilt. She knew better than to blame the “johns” for her sin. What was the use? She’d been caught in the act. It had become evident that none of her lovers would defend her. No one would utter a word of comfort. No man would step forward. No woman would wrap a warm blanket of compassion about her shoulders to cover her shivering, body.

The prostitute found herself on that fateful afternoon shivering … exposed … alone.