

# The Martyr

by Andrew Bowen

Zoe's wet sneakers slosh with each step along the red brick sidewalk. She looks up at the sky. Gray clouds tumble and boil. She shrugs off a chill and adjusts the bulge beneath the front of her green hoodie.

A brass bell chimes as she walks into the bakery. Warm air, dressed in cinnamon, settles on her skin and buffs away the goose bumps.

Blake, the baker's part-time assistant, looks up from the oven—first with a casual smile, then his eyes brighten. “Hey!” He stands, wipes his hands more than he needs to on a damp white towel and points. “What's under your shirt?”

Zoe looks down, says, “Nothing. Hands are just cold,” and strolls by the row of fresh pastries. She brushes the fingertips of her right hand along the warm glass counter. Each finger leaves a streak through the condensation.

The oven buzzes.

“Just a sec,” he says and turns. “Making your favorite...” He looks over his shoulder toward the office where the owner is busy with paperwork. He whispers to Zoe with a wink, “On the house.”

She grins. Her nostrils flare as she takes in the scent of fresh baked apples. She walks by the breads...then stops in front of the cookies: A gingerbread man, lined in red icing. For a moment, she allows memory to breathe.

Her mother, eyes bloodshot and cheeks chapped by tears, cupped Zoe's face in her hands. “Your father can't know. It would ruin his ministry. Promise me you'll keep it secret.”

“What do I tell Blake?”

Her mother rubbed a tear from Zoe's cheek with her thumb and said, “You don't.”

Zoe backed away. "That's not fair." She looked down at the plus sign on the pregnancy test. "It's because he's black, isn't it?"

Her mother looked away and stared at a family portrait on the nightstand: herself, Zoe, and her husband. Calm and steady with her gaze fixed, she said, "Pregnant at 16 and with a--well, you can imagine what people would think. And your father...we have to take care of this." She looked back at Zoe. "I'll take you myself. We'll go out of town so no one will recognize us." She tucked a lock of red hair behind Zoe's ear and smiled. "You've got your whole life ahead of you. We'll get through this together."

A paper bag crinkles as Blake pushes it across the glass top. "Here you go. Hot and fresh out the oven."

Zoe sniffs back a knot growing in her throat and looks up at him from the gingerbread man. She tilts her head and squints at Blake's dimples. She imagines them as pock marks, left behind from God's fingertips after he'd tested Blake's smile in the mold from which he was designed. She wonders if the baby would have had them too.

"What?"

She blinks, and with a Mona Lisa smile says, "Thanks."

"Uh, sure. See ya at school."

Zoe digs through the change in her pocket from the hardware store and drops a twenty, the last of her savings, in the tip jar as she leaves.

Soft, baked chunks of apple warm her body as she swallows the pastry. She focuses on a mother sitting on a bench across from her, reading a paperback while she absently rubs her pregnant belly.

Zoe looks down and rubs her own bulge beneath her hoodie. She imagines it soft, curved, and warm under the skin of her shirt in spite of its hard, duct-taped and wire-tangled surface. She closes her eyes, cradles the bulge, and sighs.

She sees her mother the Sunday after Zoe discovered her seven-week-old creation, like a chewed gingerbread man with red icing, in the toilet bowl beneath her. Among a congregation of “amen’s” and cheers, their eyes met. A tear rolled down Zoe’s cheek as the secret burned a hole inside her chest where her heart should have been.

A prayer churns. She steadies her breath. “Lord, help me remember that you are in control. Let my actions speak for the words and feelings I’ve been sworn to keep—words and feelings that are rotting inside of me. Only then will I be free, and my mother forced to tell the truth.” She opens her eyes.

Sunlight washes her vision as she squints across the street at the Westfield First Baptist Church where her father serves as pastor. She whispers, “Amen,” and as if the Lord himself had taken hold of a tool, stands and walks forward, each step hardly bending the grass.

