



MORIAH JOVAN

# *The Proviso*

VIGNETTES & OUTTAKES

PHOTOGRAPHY BY ERIC BOWERS © 2007

# *The Proviso: Vignettes & Outtakes*

So you read *The Proviso* and you're slightly curious  
as to what might have happened off page?  
Sebastian and Eilis's wedding?  
The murder of Tom Parley?  
The reading of Fen's will?  
The Jep Industries takeover?

You got it.

*Moriah Jovan*

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## *Elder Kenard*

JANUARY, 1985

*Bryce: barely 19*

GOOD LUCK, ELDER KENARD.”  
“Thank you, President,” Bryce mumbled. He was a missionary now, off to the Missionary Training Center in Provo. He’d been ordained and his father would be disappointed in him if he did something so worldly as calling him “Dad” instead of “President.”

Bryce was on the Lord’s time now and part of that time would be spent in airports waiting on planes. Like today.

He shook his father’s hand, firm, and looked him in the eye as he’d been taught. President Kenard’s shock of bright orange hair was losing its battle against the white and Bryce vaguely wondered if it’d be all white by the time he returned from his mission in eighteen months.

“Now, if you want, I’ll see about getting you an extension to two years, Elder,” his father said. “I don’t much care for these eighteen-month missions. When I went on *my* mission, it was almost three years.”

“William,” his mother said, tapping him on the arm. “Don’t scare the boy. Goodness, who wants to be out longer than they have to be?”

*Thank you, Mom.*

“I’ll think about it, Da— President.” He had no intention of staying out one minute past his five-hundred-and-fortieth day. He wouldn’t do this at all if he’d had his ’druthers, but he’d never had his ’druthers, so thinking about it was useless. He’d

go, he'd do a good job, he'd come home and get on with his life—

—which would include finding a nice girl to marry in the temple, getting an education, having kids, finding a good job, and getting on the fast track to bishop, then stake president, like his dad.

Oh, yes, his whole life had been scripted, and long before he was born.

He caught sight of a woman, one he knew from San Diego Mesa where he'd gone for summer and fall semesters after graduating from high school, a teacher, actually. He hadn't taken any of her classes, but he'd noticed her.

Oh, yes, he'd noticed her.

It was hard not to considering she'd twirled a ten-inch sacrificial knife in her fingers while strutting down the hall to her office in the anthropology department. Whistling.

Short skirt, double-breasted suit jacket, high heels.

Long straight black hair to her waist.

A scent that teased his nose and made him breathe deeply.

Half Japanese, half Chicana.

She'd sought him out a few days later and plopped herself down in a chair at the table in the library where he usually studied. She struck up a conversation with him, but it didn't take very long before he knew he had to get away from her.

Fast.

"Bryce!"

He suppressed a groan when she strutted toward him (she didn't walk any other way), a mischievous smile on her face that his body responded to oh, so very inappropriately.

*Please, no. Not this. Not now.*

"How are you?" she enthused and took his hand in both of hers, caressing his palm with a fingertip. He managed not to suck in a sharp breath.

"I'm fine, Ms. Yoshida. You?"

"That's Elder Kenard now, Miss," his father interjected with a bland smile.

Not in the least bit slow, she cocked an eyebrow at Bryce's father and said, "Ah, I see. Mormon missionary, very good. I get it. You must be Dad."

"Yes, I am and we prefer the term Latter-day Saints," said President Kenard with a trace of disapproval and laying his hand over the knot comprised of her two hands and Bryce's one. The grip broke and Bryce felt the brush of cool air on his skin where hers had been and missed it.

"I know," she returned. "I say tomato, you say tomahto." She turned back to Bryce, dismissing Bryce's father as if he were nothing more than a lazy student. Amazing. Bryce had never seen anyone simply dismiss him out of hand. "Whereya headed?"

"Scotland," Bryce muttered.

Her eyebrows shot up. "Oh, really! I'd spend more time there but *shit*, it's cold and wet, especially up there in the highlands. No place for a San Diegan—at least not without a naked body to snuggle up with at night. Can you request a reassignment?"

"Ah, no."

His father cleared his throat, which prompted her to glance back at him. The corner of her mouth tucked in and up when she saw the lowering of the bushy orange-and-white eyebrows. She looked back at Bryce, reached out and took him by the lapels, straightened them a bit.

"Don't forget what we talked about, 'kay?"

Bryce gulped and she laughed before vanishing in a whirl of energy. He tracked her until she was out of sight.

"What did you talk about with her, Elder?"

"An English lit assignment," he replied vaguely, feeling both his parents watch him carefully. Feeling guilty because he'd lied. And why.

President Kenard harrumphed his disbelief, but said nothing more about it, for which Bryce was eternally grateful. Finally his boarding time was called. His mother hugged him and his father shook his hand.

"Remember to call on Mother's Day, Bryce," she called after him.

"I will, Mom," he called back, surprised at his sudden melancholy at leaving his mother, who never seemed to be disappointed in him at all. He'd never noticed that until right that moment.

Once he settled in his seat at the window, his brain began to whirl.

"Now, Son, don't be upset, but your mother and I won't be taking you to the MTC ourselves. We think it's best you go alone and begin to lean on the Lord for your strength."

"Oh, I think I'll be all right, Dad."

Yes, more than all right, thanks.

"Bryce, I saw the way you looked at me the other day. You're not my student and you aren't likely to be, so why don't you and I have dinner together?"

"Ms. Yoshida, I really don't think that would be a good idea."

"You're right and I agree. Let's skip dinner and get straight to the fucking. Here's my address and bring condoms. You're twice as big as I am, Bryce, and you are a beautiful, beautiful man. I can only imagine what you could do to me in bed."

Bryce couldn't breathe. "I'm only eighteen."

"Oh, even better! I'm thirty."

"Ms. Yoshida, I'm LDS. I don't—"

"Oh, a Mormon! Can I translate that to virgin? Please say yes."

"Um, well—"



"Oh, hallelujah and glory be. Initiation of a virgin. Don't tell me you're saving yourself for some little twit who didn't have the good sense to go get laid before saying I do—"

Bryce remained silent.

"Ah, okay. Huh. Interesting."

"I'm sorry, Ms. Yoshida."

You have no idea how sorry.

"Is there nothing I can say to get you to my house tonight? Or any night? Or day? Or my office?"

He paused. "Erm, no."

"Well, shit."

He flinched.

"I apologize. You don't like cursing, do you?"

"No."

"Oooh, I just want to take you home and eat you up. Okay, Bryce. You win."

He could smell her perfume when she arose from her chair, then swung one elegant hip around the corner of the table. Two steps and she was at his side, one hand on the back of his chair, one braced on the tabletop, her mouth brushing his ear.

"You've got a raging hard-on, Bryce," she whispered. "You want to fuck me so badly you can feel it and I do mean fuck. Like, hard. Up against a wall. Rocking the bed. I hope your God can give you whatever it is you're looking for and fast, so you can get on with what you were made to do. It'd be a damn shame for you to wake up one day and realize you'd spent your best years chasing a myth."

He sucked in a deep breath, drowning in a strange combination of lust and guilt. She pushed away from him, chuckling, then strutted back out of the library.

"Get thee behind me, Satan," he whispered halfheartedly as he watched the elegant sway of her hips.

"Get thee behind me, Satan," he whispered wholeheartedly, willing himself to put it out of his mind with the same discipline he'd practiced since before he knew what that was.

## *Jordache Jeans*

JANUARY, 1985

*Giselle: almost 15*

*Knox: barely 16*

*Sebastian: 18*

GISELLE SAT IN THE BACK OF THE ROOM IN A CORNER, HER ARMS CROSSED over her chest. The Young Women's president droned on about their goals, getting them approved, accomplishing them. For what? A medallion necklace she didn't even like?

Susan Mendenhall had set a goal of reading a two-hundred-page book. That was a goal? Giselle had two-hundred-page books for breakfast with a little left over for lunch if she stopped reading at just the right spot.

Now, lose sixty pounds? *That* was a goal. Not that she would ever make her dreams and desires known to the perky, the popular, the pretty girls who surrounded her on Sundays and looked at her with a slight curl to their carefully glossed lips.

"Today's lesson is on chastity," said Sister Bremmer with a brightness that Giselle supposed had to have come from having obeyed all the rules, having never messed up. Nobody could be that happy if they'd ever done so much as swiped a peanut from the bin at Milgram's.

As for Giselle, well, it was too late for that, what with her midnight forays with Sebastian.

"... necking and petting..."

What did *that* mean, necking and petting? Was that what she and Knox did? Just

yesterday he'd slid his tongue in her mouth and touched hers. That felt so good—and in such a *different* way—she knew it *had* to be bad and it gave her leftover shivers when she thought about it.

She raised her hand. "Sister Bremmer?"

"Yes, Giselle?"

"What is necking and petting? I mean, what happens?"

"Well, um . . ."

The other girls burst out in knowledgeable titters. Sister Bremmer stumbled over her words and blushed. Giselle thought she might just like to melt into the floor. She looked down at the carpet and blinked tears back when Susan cast her a contemptuous glance.

"If you don't know," she murmured under the laughter, "then Knox isn't a *real* boyfriend, is he?" The titters turned into peals and shrieks of laughter.

Sister Bremmer calmed the class, but never actually answered Giselle's question. If she'd caught Susan's remark, she didn't betray it in any way.

Not that she would've reprimanded her for it if she had.

Giselle picked at her hand-me-down dress, the dull brown of it making her feel as dowdy as her classmates did when she stood next to them in their pretty clothes and perfect hair that Giselle didn't know how to mimic.

Class didn't let out for another agonizing thirty minutes and Giselle tuned out most of the lesson. Meaningless words to her. If she couldn't visualize it, she couldn't avoid doing it. If no one would tell her what was what, how did she know when the line—what line? where?—had been crossed?

About the only thing she really knew was bad was when the boy put his penis in the girl's vagina.

Yeah, that was bad. Her mother had lectured her on that over and over again, so she understood the basic concept. Why anybody would want to get that close remained a mystery to Giselle and, furthermore, what happened when the boy's penis was in the girl's vagina? Romance novels were no help; the love scenes weren't actually described using any language Giselle knew. Even sneaking her Aunt Dianne's copy of *Everything You Ever Wanted to Know About Sex (But Were Afraid to Ask)* did nothing to enlighten her.

She now knew a whole lot about a whole lot of sexual things, but absolutely nothing about the mechanics, logistics, or what it felt like. Still. And she'd never seen an uglier word than "orgasm" in her life. It didn't sound any better than it looked.

Chastity must have some other components, but it definitely meant refraining from putting tab A into slot B. Then she decided that if it wasn't important enough to be explained in *Young Women's*, it must not be bad.

“ . . . self-abuse . . . ”

Yeah, and that was another one. The only thing Giselle could visualize was a person slugging himself in the face with his fist and *surely* it didn't mean that . . . ? If it had been mentioned in any book she'd ever read, it hadn't been called “self-abuse,” that was for sure.

Giselle waited until the other girls left the room, dawdling over the task of gathering her things.

“Giselle.”

She looked up, startled at the hand on her shoulder and she pulled away.

*Giselle, you fat little pig. Don't touch me; I don't want to catch your fat.*

Giselle figured if Aunt Trudy could get fat from her, then everybody else could, too. Sister Bremmer sat beside her, careful not to touch her again, which confirmed her feelings about that.

“Giselle, has your mother talked to you about—about, um, chastity?”

“Yes,” Giselle drawled warily, wondering again what chastity actually meant to Sister Bremmer and if her mother really had told her everything. “She said making love was only between a man and a woman who are married and who love each other.”

“And?”

“And . . . ” Giselle trailed off, not understanding what else Sister Bremmer expected of her, “ . . . that it was to make babies.”

Her teacher smiled then. “Right. And that's all it's for.”

Well. Her mother hadn't gone so far as all that, but Giselle could appreciate her teacher's need to put the brakes on the conversation.

“I still don't understand what necking and petting are. And self-abuse?”

She cleared her throat. “You need to ask your mother.”

No, thanks. The minute Giselle got curious and started asking questions, Knox would have to go live with Sebastian.

“Okay.”

It didn't brighten her day any to walk down the hall toward the chapel for sacrament meeting and see the same PerkyPopularPretty girls gathered like groupies around Sebastian and Knox. Susan flirted shamelessly with a miserable-looking Knox until he saw Giselle and broke away from the crowd to meet her halfway.

“Save me,” he quipped, dropping his arm around her shoulder. “Not a brain cell amongst them.”

Well, Giselle didn't know if that was true or not, but at that moment, she preened when she felt the nastiness rippling her way. She did have *one* thing the other girls did not, that they wanted, that they hated her for having:

Knox Hilliard.

Not to mention her access to Sebastian Taight. Any girl who wanted Sebastian's time or attention had to get it through Giselle, but Giselle had stopped granting that particular favor a year ago.

"Giz, they're using you to get to me and then they ridicule you behind your back. Stop feeding them. You're too good, too smart, too savvy to play their games."

Giselle remained silent.

"I know you want friends at church, Giz," he said finally, sighing. "But you're not going to get them that way. As long as you have something they want, they'll hate you for it."

"What do I have? I'm not pretty, I'm fat, I have ugly clothes and frizzy hair. I don't play the piano, I don't sing or dance. I go to East High School, Sebastian. Not Ray South. Not Truman. Not Raytown. East High School. Tell me what I have."

"Well, for a thirteen-year-old, you have a helluva bank account. You could get yourself some decent clothes."

She swallowed and looked away. "I don't know where to go or what to buy."

"Call Victoria. She'll help you."

Well, that was an idea. It wasn't as if she lacked for cousins. The trick was finding one who could drive who had time to help her.

"Okay, so I get new clothes, big deal."

Sebastian shot her a look. "You really don't know, do you?"

She stared at him until he looked down at what she held in her lap. She followed his gaze and saw the nine-millimeter in her hand.

"Power, Giz. That's what you've got. They can feel it but they don't know what it is and apparently, you're as ignorant as they are. If you want girlfriends, wait 'til you get to college, 'cuz those girls at church? Not worth having. Now, are you ready?"

Giselle got out of the truck, stuffed her gun in her waistband, and fished a flashlight out of the glove compartment. Sebastian checked his own gun and stuffed it in the back of his jeans.

"If I could fit into a pair of Jordache jeans, they'd be my friends."

"Yeah, and that's the problem, right there," Sebastian muttered as he retrieved his baseball bat from the bed of the truck.

"Oh, hey. Mom has to be up at four to get to work."

"Shit. Well, we can't be in a hurry, so if she catches you, too bad. We got money to make and I hear these fuckers have an ambush waiting for us. Whatever you do, don't aim higher than the belt buckle."

Lost in her thoughts and approaching the gauntlet of PerkyPopularPretty, she ignored whatever Knox rambled on about and concentrated on how best to navigate it.

But Knox stopped abruptly just in front of the door to the chapel's overflow annex, his ear cocked toward it. He eased closer, nudging her with his body.

"... home with us for dinner?"

"Did you ask him?" Giselle's mother's voice, razor sharp, even through the wooden door.

"Yes, but he said he had to eat with his family on Sunday."

"Then why are you asking me?"

"I thought if he had your permission to miss..."

Long silence, then Giselle heard her mother sigh. "Barbara, why do you think Knox would be interested in Susan? It's not as if he can't make up his own mind and his mind's set on Giselle."

"Well, quite frankly, Lilly," Susan's mother returned, an edge of what Giselle might think was hatefulness coming from anybody else. "That girl of yours is terrifying."

"And yours isn't. See a correlation?"

Giselle didn't feel terrifying at church and Susan seemed plenty terrifying to Giselle.

The door burst open, nearly slamming Giselle and Knox in their faces. Her mother stood in front of them, her expression ferocious—almost as ferocious as the time she'd come home early from work and caught Giselle and Knox kissing.

"Knox," she barked. "Do you or do you not want to go to Sister Mendenhall's house for dinner today?"

Knox squirmed under her mother's stern gaze, under the expectant stare of Sister Mendenhall. "Uh, not really," he finally croaked.

"Are you at all interested in asking Susan Mendenhall out?"

Giselle glanced up at him. Susan was gorgeous. Giselle was not. In Giselle's mind, it was an easy choice and she prepared herself for the blow.

"No," he said with a gulp, staring at Giselle's mother, never looking at Sister Mendenhall or Susan, who had sidled up beside her mother.

"All right. Go on into the chapel."

Knox jerked Giselle's hand and made his way to the chapel doors as if stung, pulling her two steps before she found her feet—

—then lost them again when Susan stuck her foot out and tripped her.

Down she went, on her face, the back of her dress flying up to her waist, her bottom, covered by panties and pantyhose, exposed.

She heard her mother's gasp, felt her hands smooth her dress down to cover her and make her modest again.

"You *bitch*," Knox snarled, and gasps rose into the air like a fog and lingered near the ceiling before dissipating. Giselle felt his arms around her, lifting her to her knees, helping her to her feet.

Giselle wanted nothing more than to run away, hide, cry. Away from her mother, Knox, Sebastian, Aunt Dianne and Uncle Charlie, her family.

Oh, lovely. Sebastian had seen the whole thing, if his murderous expression was any indicator.

She hated feeling—being—weak in front of her family and that only happened at church where the cult of PerkyPopularPretty reigned supreme. Her family knew it and it humiliated her that she became a completely different girl here at church where all she wanted was the acceptance she should have been able to expect.

“Well,” Sebastian finally said. “If that’s an example of Christ’s teachings, I sure as shit don’t want to see an example of Satan’s.”

“Dianne!” Sister Mendenhall gasped.

Giselle’s mother, her hand caressing Giselle’s cheek, glared at Sister Mendenhall, catching Giselle’s tears with the pad of her thumb before they spilled.

Giselle’s aunt ignored Sister Mendenhall’s outrage, rubbing Giselle’s back, between her shoulder blades the way she liked.

Giselle’s uncle stalked away to catch Brother Mendenhall to give him a piece of his mind.

Giselle’s cousin folded his arms across his chest as he stared at Susan until she squirmed.

Giselle’s boyfriend since before she could remember wrapped her in his arms.

“C’mon, Giselle,” Knox murmured. “Let’s go home.”

She got stuffed in the cab of Sebastian’s truck, squeezed between the two of them, the gear shift between her knees. With the ease of a long partnership, she shifted when Sebastian clutched. None of them said a word, but Knox draped his arm across her shoulder and pulled her to him, kissing her temple.

“I hate girls,” she whispered. “Power, my ass.”

Sebastian patted her knee.

And she *still* didn’t know what necking and petting were.

# *Atlas Shrugged*

JANUARY, 1985

*Sebastian: 18*

I WILL NOT HAVE THAT BOOK IN MY HOUSE!”  
“But, Dad—”

“I gave it to him, Charles,” came the stern voice of Sebastian’s mother, who emerged from the kitchen to find out what had set Sebastian’s father off on one of his weird kicks. He had a lot of those. “He needs to know something other than—” She gestured around at the immaculate but broken down living room. “This.”

“Oh, don’t you start with me, Dianne.”

“Don’t *you* start with *me*,” she shot back. “I want something better for my son. I want him to understand that living in poverty is not a virtue.”

Sebastian sighed and looked down at the thick paperback his father had pitched across the room. Old, dog-eared, highlighted, marked, written on, the edges with tiny teeth marks where mice had nibbled. He could go get it; his father wouldn’t slug him or anything. But there was that underlying respect there that made him hesitate.

“Having something while other people have less isn’t a virtue, either.”

“We have to take care of ourselves first!”

Sebastian didn’t know whether he was expected to stick around and hear this argument for the four hundredth time, but he certainly didn’t want to. He wondered if it was too soon to slip out of the room without being noticed or if he’d have to wait another five minutes.

“Taking care of ourselves means taking care of others.”



"The people you 'take care of' bleed us dry, Charles. They're moochers. I don't know if you're overly generous or just a mark, but there is no value in sending good money in to chase after bad. We have to eat. We have to have a good roof over our heads. We have to have dependable transportation. Giving everything away doesn't help us."

"That's not what Christ taught!"

Sebastian rolled his eyes . . . There it was. The last bastion of an indefensible stance his father knew was indefensible somewhere deep down in his soul. It always got pulled out early in the argument because he had no other support for his feelings.

"Christ didn't teach poverty for poverty's sake. He didn't teach that we should give everything away to the detriment of our own lives."

The fight turned again, as always, into a loudly-voiced theological survey of the value of having money versus not having money. His mother would win intellectually, but would lose practically and, as his mother blocked the threshold of the stairs and his father blocked the door to the outside, Sebastian plopped himself down on the couch to wait out the storm and lost himself in thought.

About what had happened to Giz Sunday at church.

The girl needed some female support, that was for sure. All the *Vogue* and *Cosmopolitan* and *Harper's Bazaar* in the world wouldn't help her get where she wanted to go. Neither would her mother, who was as ignorant of fashion as she was and, worse, ridiculed it. Sebastian's mother would be no help; she'd chastise Giselle for wanting to spend her money on anything but citrus futures.

On the other hand, once Giselle had evolved from duckling to swan, she wouldn't have a snowball's chance in hell of fending off the predators who'd take advantage of her naïveté and willingness to trust.

Just like the girls at church.

Giselle was good with a gun, good with the street crowd, good at school. Confident, poised, with just enough humor to keep situations from exploding. She made friends of her enemies and drew people to her. Give her a straight-on fight and she'd win every time—but allow the back door of her psyche to creak open and let in the mists and shadows of deception and coquetry and flattery, the hopes of acceptance and the stirrings of hormones to be used as weapons against her and she had no chance.

In Sebastian's opinion, it was best she stay ugly for a while, her sexual discovery carefully shepherded by the boy who was as invested in staying chaste until marriage as she.

"There are no poor general authorities!"

That snapped Sebastian out of his musings. That was new, fresh, and different—and he was disappointed in his mother for using it.

His mother ranted on, twisting the knife. "Tell me something, Charlie. If poverty is such a virtue, why doesn't the Lord call poor men to be general authorities? Or stake presidents? Or bishops? Poor men don't get leadership positions in the church, Charlie. Tell me why that is."

Sebastian knew why. Poor men didn't have the financial resources or the types of jobs that would allow them to fulfill such demanding positions in the church. Being a bishop was a full-time job in and of itself. No man who wasn't at least middle management could pull that off and still pay the mortgage.

He'd heard once that other protestant religions *paid* their clergy and their musicians and their secretaries and most every other position they had to fill to make their churches run, which Sebastian found utterly inconceivable. Getting *paid* to serve the Lord?

Ridiculous.

" . . . bad example, Charlie! You want to be bishop? Quit giving everything we have away. Keep some of it, invest it, make more, be smart about making more, not work so hard for so little reward. How can anyone who can't manage to pay his bills be an example to others?"

"We pay our bills," Sebastian's father growled, hurt, furious, that she'd used his greatest disappointment against him. Sebastian almost flinched.

"Barely!"

Well, in practice, "barely" was a lie, but his father didn't know that, didn't need to know it. For the purposes of the argument and his father's reality, it was the absolute truth and had always been.

"We're not in debt."

"Barely!"

Again, a lie, but his mother fought with weapons of greatest effect and didn't give away *her* secrets to be used against her.

His father said nothing for a long while, his barrel chest heaving. Finally, "I don't want him reading trash like that."

"Trash" that Sebastian had already read. Several times, which he hadn't had a chance to tell his mother before his father had intervened.

"There's nothing wrong with it."

"It goes against everything the church teaches."

Mmmm, not really. It was just a different spin on the parable of the—

"Oh, hey," his mother said, in a falsely bright tone that irked his father to no end. "Let's re-read the parable of the talents, shall we?"

His father's color dropped. Ah, so he'd forgotten—intentionally or not—Christ's financial commentary.

“Answer the question, Charlie. Why are there no poor general authorities?”

Charlie Taight coveted a bishopric; he always had and he would’ve been good at it. Sebastian certainly didn’t want to be a bishop’s son, but he didn’t have to worry about it as long as his father refused to own more than anyone else in the neighborhood.

Sebastian sighed and arose from the couch. No matter what, he was getting out of here. He had debts to collect tonight and he couldn’t stand that the only thing his parents ever fought about was having versus having not.

## *25 to Life*

JUNE 8, 1994

**O**N THE FIRST COUNT OF MURDER IN THE FIRST DEGREE, HOW DOES THE jury find?"  
"Not guilty."

I stared at the table, my vision too fuzzy to read the words on the paper in front of me. I could feel my heart pound in my chest so hard and fast I wondered if I was having a heart attack.

At twenty-five.

"... second count of murder in the first degree, how does the jury find?"

"Not guilty."

My stomach heaved, like the mass of people in the gallery behind me who stood and screamed and roared.

Rage.

Me.

Them.

All of us.

The pounding of the gavel echoed in the courtroom, echoed in my head. I felt a big hand on my shoulder. It squeezed comfort, but it wasn't enough.

"ORDER IN THE COURT! BAILIFF!"

Still I sat as the crowd surged toward the man at the table across the imaginary aisle from me. I didn't dare look at him because I knew what I'd see: Smug arrogance.

My vision focused enough for me to read one line of the list I couldn't stop staring at.

*LaVon Whittaker*

One of the defendant's lovers.

*Simone Whittaker.*

LaVon's thirteen-year-old daughter.

I suspected LaVon knew more about the defendant's hobby than she'd admitted to, but it wouldn't matter to him; it never did. He'd killed them when he was done with them, every last one. LaVon Whittaker wouldn't die tonight, but someone on this list would. Just as soon as the next seventeen verdicts were read and the defendant was released.

"CLEAR THE COURTROOM!"

I vaguely wondered if Nocek had fixed this case behind my back somehow. Sheriff Raines. He might have done it, taken the evidence, but I wasn't sure he was that smart. I also wasn't sure if Nocek was stupid enough to sabotage a case that, if won, would reflect well on him enough that he wouldn't have to stuff so many ballot boxes. I really couldn't be sure, but I would have preferred to believe Nocek had sabotaged me than to believe . . . a mistake.

Just a small, stupid mistake.

And not mine.

That big hand left my shoulder as the people in the gallery were herded outside like cows to slaughter, protesting all the way. A small, soft hand grazed across my back and then that, too, left me. *No, Sebastian, Giselle! Don't go, please don't go! I need you with me.*

The courtroom doors thudded closed.

Other than the jury and the bailiffs, there were only four people in the room: the judge, the defendant, the defendant's lawyer, and . . . me.

Alone.

Having failed to get justice for the nineteen women and girls who had spent the last year crawling out of their graves into my nightmares—if I had the audacity to sleep—to beg me to give it to them.

Having failed to keep another slew of people safe.

One of the women or girls on the list in front of me would die tonight. The rest would follow her, one by one, until he was stopped.

Again.

And it would be my fault.

" . . . third count . . . "

"Not guilty."

*Jamie McElroy.*

" . . . fourth count . . . "

"Not guilty."

*Anita Sterling*

" . . . fifth count . . . "

"Not guilty."

*Susanna Chase.*

" . . . sixth count . . . "

"Not guilty."

*Valerie Nottingham.*

" . . . seventh count . . . "

"Not guilty."

*Penny Hendricks.*

" . . . eighth count . . . "

"Not guilty."

*Christy Madison.*

" . . . ninth count . . . "

"Not guilty."

*Sharon Gentry.*

" . . . tenth count . . . "

"Not guilty."

*Charlene Lawrence.*

" . . . eleventh count . . . "

"Not guilty."

*Allison Martino.*

" . . . twelfth count . . . "

"Not guilty."

*Cindy Trusdale.*

" . . . thirteenth count . . . "

"Not guilty."

*Gabriela Jorge.*

" . . . fourteenth count . . . "

"Not guilty."

*Sandra Jenson.*

" . . . fifteenth count . . . "

"Not guilty."

*Justina Phillips.*

" . . . sixteenth count . . . "

"Not guilty."

*Octavia Mitchell.*

"... seventeenth count ..."

"Not guilty."

*Patty Davis.*

"... eighteenth count ..."

"Not guilty."

*Loretta Jones.*

"... nineteenth count ..."

"Not guilty."

*Maureen Givens.*

I still sat, numb, thinking about those nineteen women, two of whom were girls who hadn't even reached puberty and four more not even eighteen.

"All right, Mr. Parley," Judge Wilson intoned, his voice weary. "You're free to go. I'd like to thank the members of the jury for their service."

*CLAP!*

Judge Wilson heaved himself out of his seat and trudged to his chambers, his shoulders slumped, his head bowed.

The jury box emptied under armed supervision, as those people would need armed escorts to get out of the courthouse, past the reporters, and home safely.

I couldn't even react when the defendant, after clasping his attorney in a jolly bear hug, walked by me and gave me a hearty clap on the back.

"Ya did a good job, son," he said, his voice full of the merriment and charm that convinced women he was a decent man. "Just not good enough."

I swallowed. Hard.

He laughed his way down the aisle to the courtroom doors where armed deputies would escort him off the courthouse property to his car and see that *he* made it home alive, to keep him from the mob that wanted to lynch him, like it was 1840 or something.

The courtroom was empty.

I couldn't move.

The crime scene photographs flashed across my mind.

"Knox?"

I closed my eyes at the sound of that voice and breathed a sigh of almost-relief. I could barely hear her footsteps, but then she was there, that familiar perfume in my nose. She ran her fingers through my hair and I took a deep breath, the way she'd taught me. In through the nose, out through the mouth.

Focus.

Visualize.

"How can I help you?" she murmured.

*Make love with me.*

My eyes popped open. It was the first time I'd ever really thought it and *meant* it. I'd said it before, naturally, then laughed. Made her laugh. As a joke. Because, even though we slept together occasionally, the thought was just so . . . strange.

So impossible.

*Where* had it come from?

"Giselle," I whispered, unable to speak any louder; I simply wasn't capable of it. I'd spent my voice doing what prosecutors do. "What would *you* do if you were the one sitting here?"

Her hand stilled, then slowly fisted in my hair, her knuckles hard against my scalp.

She slid the list of names out from under my hand and picked it up.

"LaVon Whittaker," she read in a tone I'd never heard for myself, and I shuddered. The answer was right there, in her voice. "She's still alive, right?"

I nodded.

"Evie Winslow. Samantha Rodriguez. Donna Franklin . . ." And on and on and on she went until the last name faded into the silence of the darkening courtroom. Then she flipped the piece of paper back onto the table, retrieved her other hand from my hair, and said, "Well. I guess I'll get going."

"No."

She stopped. "No?"

"No."

I looked up at her then, into those ice blue eyes just like mine, into that pale chubby face I knew so well, surrounded by all that strawberry blonde frizz she'd never been able to tame. She pursed her lips. Took a deep breath through her nose. Held it. Stared at the table. Released it through her mouth.

"I take it you aren't going to Dallas in September after all, then?"

My chest caved in.

Dallas.

The temple.

To take out my endowment, like I should've done when I was nineteen.

She knew.

She was the only one who could have known, would've been able to see it in my face, the idea taking root the instant that irreparable hole had been shot through the heart of my case—

"I guess not."



She cleared her throat. "Do you . . . want some . . . uh, company?"

"No."

She squatted awkwardly beside my chair. "You don't have to do this, Knox," she whispered.

"What would *you* do?" I repeated, returning her look, not backing down.

"Okay, but you don't have to do it alone. Let me help you."

"What. Would. *You*. Do."

She bit her lip.

Looked away.

"There's a— Um." She cleared her throat again. "There's a man I know. At the barbershop on the corner of Belmont and Truman. He's expecting you."

I grasped her to me tight and she began to cry.

I only wished I could.



Neither of us spoke.

When I dug in my pocket for money, the barber waved it away and flashed a sign at me. I didn't know if that meant he had already been paid or if he didn't want to be paid. It was one of those things I probably would never know and didn't need to anyway.

He let me out the back door of his shop as silently as he had let me in and I walked up the alley and the six half-blocks to 17th Street, where I'd parked in the rec center lot. The merchandise hung heavy in my pocket and I realized just how long it had been since I'd owned something like it.

Held one.

Used one.

I was so out of practice.

*Empty your mind.*

I emptied my mind.

*Then think about the pictures.*

I dug a Polaroid out of my pocket, swiped from my case file long ago, when I had used it as a locus as I prayed for guidance while I prepared for trial.

*Please, Heavenly Father, guide me so I can get a conviction. Please let me get justice for these people.*

I looked at that poor woman, laid out bare, bloody, broken.

I choked.

Put it back in my pocket. Not now.

I'd failed her.

*Recite the victims' names.*

Jamie McElroy Anita Sterling Susanna Chase Valerie Nottingham Penny  
Hendricks Christy Madison Sharon Gentry Charlene Lawrence Allison Martino  
Cindy Trusdale Gabriela Jorge Sandra Jenson Justina Phillips Octavia Mitchell  
Patty Davis Loretta Jones Maureen Givens

*Think about your weapon.*

Glock nine-millimeter.

*Visualize it.*

Matte black.

*Feel it in your hand with your mind.*

My hands gripped the steering wheel as I drove west, then north across the  
Broadway Bridge, up the Broadway Extension, I-29, past KCI.

*Remember, there's no safety on a Glock like on a revolver or a rifle. The trigger will catch  
about a third of the way through the pull. You have to pull through that all the way the first  
time. Do it fast and don't hesitate.*

I pulled off I-29 in Chouteau City, like it was daylight, like I was going to work.

Like I'd go to work in a few hours, as if nothing had happened.

*There'll be a round in the chamber, so whatever you do, don't draw the slide or you'll jam it.*

I felt it in my jacket pocket, still heavy against my hip.

*Don't get fancy. Don't get arrogant. Don't go for a long-drawn-out vengeance or try to get  
some Scooby-Doo confession. Just do the job and leave.*

The light turned green and I drove slowly into the trailer park, past the Whittaker  
trailer where his car was parked, though not for long, I was sure. I didn't really know  
how long I had, but I went back to the courthouse and parked in my usual spot.

Nothing unusual about that; I'd been pulling late nights and overnights for the  
last year.

I shook out my keys, unlocked the courthouse doors, gave my usual salute to the  
usual half-asleep deputy, and jogged up the stairs as usual—

—and promptly stole through Nocek's office to his back staircase and sneaked  
out the back way, keeping to the shadows and attempting not to let the world know  
how loudly I breathed.

I ran all the way back to the trailer park, where his car sat empty, waiting for him  
to leave his lover's house.

It was an old junker, a yacht. Its locks didn't work. I slipped in the back seat and  
hunkered down on the floor, covering myself up with the blanket I knew he'd have  
there.

Because I knew his habits.

*Don't let your anger get the better of you. Keep it cold. You're just doing your job.*

One way or another.

*Breathe in your nose and out your mouth. Slowly. Relax.*

I must have relaxed myself right into a doze because the next thing I knew, the yacht was shaking slightly, the car door squeaked open, and low chuckles came my while when he got in and shoved the key in the ignition.

"Stupid cunt," he muttered.

*Track where you go in your mind.*

I'd expected him to go straight home, but he stopped to get gas—

—and was damn near assaulted by the good citizens of Chouteau City who might have done my job for me had there not been a couple of state troopers in the parking lot, on break.

Screams, obscenities, shouts, and threats.

Apparently, the troopers waded into the mêlée to break it up, but it seemed to me a half-hearted attempt on their part.

"Get lost, asshole," one of them growled low. "We're watching you."

He laughed heartily, as if the trooper had told a good joke, but he drove off without getting gas and then he hissed, "Shit" to no one.

And then we turned toward his home, down a long country gravel road, then left onto an equally long gravel driveway. I knew that because I knew everything about him.

*I hope you've thought this through.*

No.

For once.

Because if I had, I wouldn't be here right now.

The yacht shook and shuddered as first the rusty door creaked open and then he struggled to get out of the seat and then he slammed the door closed behind him, muttering all the way about his plans for the night being interrupted.

I had him.

It was possible there were others out in the woods with the same intention, but that only meant I'd know who not to charge in the morning.

He turned when I opened the car door; I don't know if he saw who I was or not, but I felt his smug arrogance turning into . . . something else.

Fear.

"Who're you?" he barked before he could see my face in the intermittent moonlight.

*Empty your mind. Focus.*

I bored the barrel of my Glock into his forehead and said, "Get on your knees."

He caught me off guard when he did exactly what I told him to do, when he began to blubber like a little kid caught stealing candy from QuikTrip.

*No theatrics. You're there to get the job done.*

"Look, Hilliard, I'm sorry, you know— I didn't mean to get all up in your face today in court, really—"

"Do you think that's why I'm here?" I asked, feeling rage swell up in me, a killing rage, a rage I had never known.

*Don't let your anger get the better of you. Anger destroys your focus and makes you do stupid shit. Just get the job done.*

I couldn't help it.

"Do you want to live?"

"Yes. Yes! I got grandkids, yanno?"

"So did half the women you killed."

"Look, I'll move away. Anything, just— Put the gun down now, son. You know what'll happen to you. You'll go to prison and won't they just love you, all young and pretty, big blond boy that you are."

*Don't let him speak. He'll rattle you. Just get the job done and get out. One shot.*

"Beg."

He paused a beat. Changed his tactic. "Ah, son, now look. If you ain't shot me yet, you ain't gonna."

I shot him in the left thigh.

He howled. The gunshot echoed around the woods and rang back at me.

I shot him in the right thigh.

He fell to the ground and rolled, curled up in a ball and began to cry.

"Get. Back. On. Your. Knees."

"Don't kill me," he sobbed as he struggled to his knees. "Please don't kill me. It ain't my time yet and I cain't—" He struggled more, the hole in his thigh gushing. "I cain't—"

"Put your hands behind your head."

"Hilliard, boy, I—"

"On your knees. Hands behind your head."

He struggled. I allowed him to struggle, to cry like a little girl.

Then he was on his knees, barely, and his hands were locked behind his head, sort of, and he looked up at me, his face filled with desperation and lit by the moon as the clouds moved, as if it had been perfectly timed for my little stage drama here.

"Don't kill me, don't kill me, don't kill me," he panted and cried, terrified.

*Empty your mind. Pull the trigger all the way through the catch. Fast, firm, once. Don't stop.*

It's a different thing to know that a shooter will end up with his victim's blood on him than to feel the warmth and smell the copper and hear the ringing in your ears yourself.

I had never felt so cold in my life as I did looking down at Tom Parley's body, the back of his head blown off, but his eyes open, his expression frozen in supplication for mercy.

*Don't think about it. Empty your mind. Keep the gun and get away as fast as you can.*

I dropped the gun back in my jacket pocket, grabbed the blanket I had hidden in, then turned and jogged back up the long driveway to the country road. I stopped short when I saw a car on the side of the road, dark, quiet, looking for all the world as if it had been abandoned.

The engine came to life. The door swung open, the interior glow the only light other than the moon.

She said nothing, but held her hand out for the blanket and helped me smooth it over her car seat that she'd already wrapped in plastic.

I got in.

Closed the door.

She remained silent as she zipped down the road in the dark, headlights off, then west with the lights on, away from town and only a mile to Kansas.

By the time we crossed the state line, I was freezing. My teeth were beginning to chatter and I drew the blanket around me. She turned off the air conditioning and rolled down the windows. In June in Missouri—well, Kansas—it was hot and humid enough that it should have warmed me up, but I knew I was going into shock.

She knew it, too.

I could never have done this on my own and I was stupid for thinking I could.

She caught I-435 south and carefully eased off the accelerator, being very careful not to attract any attention by speeding. She had her radar detector on and it seemed a very, very long time before we got to I-70 and headed back east into Missouri, then into downtown Kansas City.

She parked at the freight dock of her bookstore and got out, came around to my side, helped me out. I was still freezing, shaking.

*What have I done?*

"Shhh."

She helped me to the concrete stairs where there was a railing I could hold onto to climb them.

*I murdered a man.*

"Shut up."

*I have no hope now.*

"Let the Lord worry about that. Watch my hands. Concentrate on what I'm doing. Don't think about anything else."

I did that.

She shoved a key into the lock over the freight elevator buttons, pulled it up, then shoved another key into the button pad. The elevator whirled to life. She used a third key to open the gate, then pulled on the strap of the doors. She maneuvered me into the elevator, kept her foot on the door, closed and locked the button pad. She closed and locked the gate, then closed the elevator doors. The floor shifted, jerked, protested as it pulled us up through the shaft.

I still shivered and she wrapped her arms around me.

Riding Giselle's freight elevator had never seemed such an arduous and painstaking and long process before, and I pondered that a while. It was a good thing to ponder: Did it need repairs? Did it need replaced? I couldn't imagine why she wouldn't have taken care of the elevator the way she took care of everything else at Decadence. Surely Maisy or Coco would have noticed how slow and decrepit it was . . . ?

I don't know or remember how I got to the bathroom, all stark white with yellow tile accents, yellow towels, yellow flowers, yellow candles and I realized—

"Yellow. Your favorite color is yellow." Shouldn't I have known that?

She thunked me down hard on the toilet lid and turned to start the shower.

"Giselle, I think I'm going to hell."

"We don't believe in hell," she said shortly as she knelt at my feet and took off my Nikes.

"Well, not that burning lake of fire thing, but still—"

"Knox, be quiet. You're in shock. I'll be right back. Stay right where you are. Don't get up, don't move, don't fall over."

Silly girl.

Don't fall over while sitting on a toilet seat.

Ow! *Shit!*

"Knox!"

She helped me back up onto the toilet seat and shoved a half gallon jug of orange juice in my hand. "Oh, thank you!"

"Have you eaten today at all?"

I shook my head as I gulped. I'd forgotten to.

"All hopped up on adrenaline. Your blood sugar's in the tank, to boot."

"No shit, Sherlock," I quipped, but she slapped me upside the head and started taking the blanket away from me. "I'm cold, Giselle." I knew I was whining and I didn't care. *I was* cold, dammit.

"Knox, we have to get this off of you. You're soaked in blood. C'mon, please," she

said, pleading. "Drink your OJ and let me get this stuff taken care of."

I looked at her then, really looked. "Your face is wet."

She sniffled and ran the back of her hand across her nose. "Yeah, I know."

"Okay. Weird."

She seemed so . . . *sad* . . . and I couldn't figure out why. I had to think about that a while because it wasn't like her to not tell me why she was sad, but I figured if it would make her happy to see me shiver, then that's what I'd have to do.

'Cause it was my job to make her happy.

She stuffed the blanket in a heavy black trash bag, then threw my shoes in there after them.

"Hey, those are almost brand new."

"Buy another pair."

"Giselle, are you mad at me?"

"No! I'm not *mad* at you, Knox. Stand up for a minute."

I stood up, but when she went to unbutton my fly, I panicked and pushed her away. "Giselle! What are you trying to do? I'm going to the temple in September, remember?"

She stopped, stared at me, eyes wide and mouth open. "*Fuck!*" Then she pursed her lips and ripped my fly open, had me half naked before I could stop her.

"Giselle—"

"Shut up," she snapped. "Shut the *fuck* up and drink your juice before you end up in the emergency room. You *know* you're not supposed to go that long without eating, you shithead."

Oh, she really was mad and for the life of me, I couldn't figure out why.

She put my clothes in the same bag as the blanket and the shoes, and left with it. I just sat there on the toilet, buck naked, shivering, chugging orange juice until she came back, although if she thought she could seduce me, she had another think coming.

But *she* still had her clothes on. I bet *she* was plenty warm enough.

"Can you stand up for more than thirty seconds without falling over?"

I looked up at her, all mad and pretty. Pretty mad, anyway.

"Yes, Mother," I sneered.

"Then get in the shower. Scrub until you don't have any skin left."

That took a while because the stupid skin just would *not* come off. But I did feel better and not cold anymore and besides, there wasn't any more hot water.

I found Giselle's yellow bathrobe and put it on— "Oh, fuck you, too," I said to my smirking reflection. —walked through Giselle's bedroom to her living room-kitchenette, and stopped short when I saw Sebastian pacing frantically, running his

hands through his hair.

Giselle was sitting on the floor in front of the dishwasher, her head back, her eyes closed, her hands limp on either side of her. Her whole body shook with her sobbing.

"Knox!" Sebastian barked. I looked at him, confused. "Do you remember what happened tonight?"

"Yeah, I—" I stopped. Thought about that a minute. No, what *had* happened tonight? Why was I at Giselle's? And on a work night. I looked at Sebastian. The room started to turn a bit. "I think—" Shit, now I was dizzy. I really should've eaten something. "I think there's something wrong with me."



I woke up in Giselle's bed.

I knew that was where I was because of the perfume and because her mattress was softer than mine. I kept begging to buy it from her, but she kept refusing.

I started to get a weird feeling about it all when I saw sunlight on the floor. I never slept past sunrise, even in the summer; it was a habit since I'd started surfing because I needed to be on my board paddling out by sunrise to get the best waves. I jerked over and looked at the clock.

"Shit."

Nocek was going to tear my head off, and not figuratively, either. It was eleven o'clock in the morning—*Thursday* morning—and here I was, still sleeping. In River Market, a good twenty-five miles from Chouteau City.

I tried to clear my head, to start from the beginning, to figure out why I was where I was and when—

*Empty your mind.*

I barely made it to the bathroom before I puked.

I don't know how long I sat there on the freshly bleached bathroom floor in front of the toilet, just in case, toothbrush in my hand, before Giselle appeared in the doorway. She looked at me, then at the toilet and murmured,

"I guess you remembered."

I nodded.

"Everything?"

I nodded.

"Nocek's looking for you."

I nodded.



She sighed. "I don't know what to do, Knox. Let you hide out here or make you go back to work like nothing happened. Thing is, if you stay here, people will think you cracked up after the verdict yesterday—not that anybody'd blame you. But if you go back to work, you might actually crack up and say something you shouldn't."

I stared at her. "You mean, they're not looking for me because—"

"As far as I can tell, nobody knows anything except you're AWOL."

"My car is still at the courthouse."

She shook her head. "Sebastian and I went and got it. It's parked in front of your house like it's supposed to be."

I couldn't wrap my head around it, any of it.

What I'd done.

What I'd have to do.

What would happen to me.

What I'd lost.

"Giselle," I whispered as the enormity of it all began to drift down on me. "I murdered a man in cold blood."

Her mouth tightened. "It wasn't cold."

"It wasn't—"

"He needed to die," she snarled so viciously I shrank away from her, but she followed me, got in my face. "I wanted you to let me do it so you wouldn't have to go through this, so you could go to the temple and you could be the funny and sweet and warm Knox Hilliard I've always known. You've changed, Knox. Ever since you caught that case, you've been changing and it's not pretty. I wish you had let me do this."

I gaped at her, feeling every level of every implication of every word she said—and getting pissed off. "You wanted to *protect* me?"

"Yes! No! I don't know! I wanted you back, Knox. I wanted the boy I grew up with. My best friend. I wanted him back."

"Fuck you, Giselle!" I got to my feet, but I swayed because I still hadn't eaten. She grasped my wrist to pull me out of the bathroom but I shook her off. "Fuck you, Giselle. You think you're somehow more of a . . . *badass*—" Shit, I couldn't think. Couldn't find words. "—than I am and you need to *protect* me? Because I'm *weaker* than you are? Because you went tagging after St. Sebastian for years and then went to BYU and decided you were some kind of special super-secret ninja shit something? And that it's your job to protect—everybody—and to *hell* with *your* soul because . . . why? Oh, so we can protect poor little Knox from the world? Because he's just not as tough as you and St. Sebastian are? Because he's the Dunham tribe's cute little fuzzy golden retriever puppy? Golden retriever Knox, does exactly what

he's told, never talks back, never gets in trouble, never—"

"That's enough, Knox."

"Oh, look! It's St. Sebastian, as I live and breathe." I tried to make an elaborate bow, but it wasn't working in the small bathroom.

"Giz, you've got a customer here to pick up a special order and Coco can't find it. I'll take care of him."

"Oh, fuck you, you will not. I can take care of myself."

But I couldn't because as soon as Giselle turned away, I nearly fell over.

And St. Sebastian caught me.

"C'mon, pal," he murmured as he wrapped my arm around his shoulder and led me into the kitchen. "You need to eat."

I didn't know if I'd ever be able to eat anything ever again.

"I hate to tell you this," Sebastian said as he rummaged in the refrigerator and pulled out a casserole pan, then eyed me dubiously, "but yellow's not your color."

That made me laugh. A little. "So, what, you're going to lecture me, too? That I should've let Giselle do my dirty work, clean up after me? *As usual.*"

He pursed his mouth and dumped a huge spoonful of a potato casserole into a dish. "Nope."

That surprised me, but the casserole caught my attention. "You know what they call those in Utah, don't you?" He looked up at me, surprised, and I gestured to the pan. "Funeral potatoes. That's what they call 'em in Utah because the Relief Society serves it at all the funeral dinners. Not 'favorite potatoes' like we do. You're feeding me funeral potatoes. How freaky is that?"

Sebastian just stared at me, clearly unable to figure out how to respond to that. "You know, I don't give a fuck what they're called," he finally said, turning away from me and dumping more into the bowl. "You like 'em and Giselle made 'em for you and you're gonna eat 'em." The beeps of the microwave buttons only undercut the tense silence. "As for lecturing you," Sebastian said low as he busied himself wiping down the countertops. Fucking neat freak. "I can think of several hundred worse things than putting a serial killer in the ground. And you're right, it *wasn't* her job to do. It was yours."

I started. "You— You don't—"

"Knox, you saved at least twenty-three lives last night. Extrapolate that twenty-three to the people who loved them and what might have happened to *their* lives, having to live with that. You gave another nineteen people's families and friends justice and maybe, closure. You start adding all those numbers up and it's going to get into the mid three digits. You did the right thing. Not only was it your responsibility, it was your right. Not hers."

I stared at Sebastian, shocked.

"What she wanted to protect you from," he continued, "was this, the emotional fallout. Yeah, you are the good kid of the tribe, the perfect child. Okay, the golden retriever puppy. I see your point and it sucks. And now, going from that to . . . this. Yes, I'm proud of you, what you did, that you risked everything to do the right thing, but this is going to be a rough several years for you yet. I don't know what's going to happen to you, what the tribe will think, but Giselle and I will stand with you. I'll hire the best defense lawyers in the country if it comes to that."

*Proud. But . . .*

"I was going to go to the temple in September."

It stabbed me in the chest. I wouldn't be able to go now.

I'd murdered a man and, granted, while it wasn't exactly one of the temple recommend questions, it'd fall under "unresolved issues" and how could I explain that?

*Well, you see, Bishop Hooper, there was this serial killer who got acquitted . . .*

*Bishop Hooper, I brought in some photographs for you and a bit of the transcript of the medical examiner's testimony . . .*

*I hate to do this to you, Bishop Hooper, but this is a list of his next twenty-three victims. Read all the names very carefully . . .*

The microwave beeped and Sebastian turned, mixed up the potatoes into an unrecognizable mess and put it in front of me. Then he poured me a big mug of milk.

I opened my mouth—

"No orange juice."

—and snapped it shut again.

Sebastian lazed at the table playing solitaire while I ate and listened to the faint noises of commerce going on downstairs.

"What happened to my clothes?"

"Burned," Sebastian answered shortly.

I nodded. Didn't know where, didn't know how or when. It only mattered that it was done.

"Gun?"

"Gone."

I looked at him, all calm sitting there looking at his cards like he had to think about it. "You do know that you're just as guilty as I am now, right? I get the needle, so do you and Giselle."

Sebastian nodded and played a card. "I guess that means you better keep your remorse and any potential confessions to yourself, doesn't it?"

I stared at him, but he didn't bother to look back at me.

"The tell-tale heart," I muttered.

"That's your life now. Get used to it."



I finally called Nocek, expecting the worst—

"Good to hear from you, boy!"

—and nearly fell off the bed or dropped the phone or both.

"Sorry about what happened in court yesterday, but I'm sure you'll be back up on your game in no time, right?"

My game? He hated my game. I almost always won and winning didn't make Nocek any money. He hated me *because* of my game.

"Uh—"

"Say, why don't you go ahead and take tomorrow off, too? Come back Monday. Spend the weekend getting all relaxed and whatnot."

I actually pulled the phone away from my head to look at it. I thought people only did that in sitcoms for comic effect. "Uh—"

"You ain't been watching the news, haveya?"

"Uh, no. No, sir."

"Found Parley dead." My stomach lurched. "Execution-style murder. The press is all over it. You know, Hilliard," he said slowly, his voice suddenly dropping half a scale, "*everybody* loves a vigilante."

"Um . . . Okay?" I whispered, confused, disoriented, unable to form a coherent sentence that would contribute to the conversation.

"Even the *feds* love a vigilante."

I pinched the bridge of my nose. Yeah, I knew he was trying to tell me something but I couldn't figure out what right then.

"So why don't you stay wherever it is you're stayin', get laid or sumpin', come back Monday ready to roll out on another good-sized case, 'cause you know, boy, I always knew you'd come through and do some really good work for me one of these days."

I was lying awake in bed, looking up at the ceiling, my forearm across my forehead.

*Empty your mind.*

Yeah, I liked that. It wasn't too bad, really.

*Breathe in through your nose, out through your mouth. Slow, easy.*

Maybe there was something to that special super-secret ninja shit.

*Concentrate on relaxing one joint at a time, starting in your toes. Keep breathing.*

I don't know how long I laid there like that, but Decadence had closed two hours ago. Maisy and Coco were just leaving. I heard Giselle on the stairs, then coming through the door, locking the door behind her, walking across the living room to the bedroom, across the bedroom to the bathroom—all without saying a word to me.

I wondered if I'd lost my best friend in the world because I didn't want her to protect me.

The shower began and I listened, but really, I started to remember all the times she'd watched my back, covered for me and taken punishment for things I'd done because no one in the tribe would believe I was that obnoxious—

—or because whatever *she* did would get blamed on Sebastian and he'd just take it like it was his due.

Perhaps it was just natural for her to think she needed to protect me, and I *hated* that.

The Dunham tribe's golden retriever. *Fetch, Knox. Carry, Knox. Sit up, Knox. Roll over, Knox. Shake hands, Knox. Good boy, Knox. Here's your treat.*

With the requisite scratch on the head.

The covers whooshed and the bed shifted.

Ah, so she wasn't mad enough at me to give up a good night's sleep on her perfect mattress. I almost had to smile.

*Empty your mind.*

I wrapped my arm around her and pulled her close in to me, where she'd been half my life, and she yawned. "It's been a long day."

"I'm sorry, Giselle," I whispered, unable to figure out how I could ever express my gratitude for her help, because I'd surely be dead or behind bars right now without it.

She patted me. "Justice has a very high price," she whispered. "Some people are just more willing to pay it than others. And whether you get caught or not, you'll be paying for the rest of your life."

I sighed. "Eternity."

She said nothing for a moment. "There *is* something to that 'instrument of the Lord's vengeance' thing, yanno."

"That's your special super-secret ninja shit talking."

"Kenpo."

"Whatever."

"For what it's worth, I think Porter Rockwell would have been very proud of you."

I stopped breathing, but my heart continued to pound long after Giselle went to sleep.



I didn't make it back to Chouteau County Monday.

Or for the next two months, after Governor Carnahan suspended me with pay.

I don't know how anyone made the connection between me and the murder, considering my *golden retrieverishness*. A fiber in the back seat of his car, maybe. A hair or six. A witness to my furtive dash out the back of the courthouse.

Sheriff Raines taking a mad stab in the dark just to be ornery, possibly.

Didn't matter anyway.

Parley was dead.

Executed.

I spent weeks in and out of federal prosecutor John Riley's office being, by turns, interrogated, interviewed, and conversed with. I knew what Riley was doing; I'd done it myself a time or two. Make it look good for the bosses. He wanted nothing to do with me.

On the X axis, Riley was caught between his bosses, who wanted to send a message that vigilante justice would not be tolerated, and law enforcement, who needed the hope of vigilante justice and would protect, at all costs, any cop or officer of the court who'd taken a real bite out of crime.

On the Y axis, Riley was caught between a guilt-ridden vigilante and a county full of people that now felt safe because of him.

He knew what I wanted to do: Confess. Stand trial. Go to prison.

Because that was what I deserved. It would take the edge off my guilt a little.

Riley did *not* want that.

I knew it. He knew I knew it.

If it weren't for the fact that my family, my best friends, would go down with me, I would've anyway. *They* didn't seem to have a problem with it and I started to understand the vastness of the emotional, experiential, philosophical chasm between me and them. I'd never known just how *cold* they could be and they scared me a little, really.

It was a political nightmare for Riley and he would have rather just pretended I didn't exist. In the end, he let the *bumbling* cops and *careless* forensics people do his dirty work for him, though he never phrased it that way—and they were only too happy to take the subtextual blame.

Even if I hadn't done it, the county would have pinned it on me because, as Giselle had said, I had changed. I didn't know that. I hadn't noticed that I'd stopped

laughing and entertaining my littlest cousins, stopped hanging out with my generally happy family, stopped doing fun things with my best friends and my other cousins in our general age group.

Stopped sleeping.

Exhaustion hit me like a brick and I stayed with Giselle for the two months I was investigated. Sleeping. Helping out in the store. Maisy asked me to rearrange her stock room and take inventory; Coco had me chop about six hundred pounds of nuts and mind her ovens; Giselle made me vacuum the floor and clean the windows and sweep the sidewalk and shelve books. I liked being put to work. I didn't have to think. The girls worked me hard enough I could drop into bed and get some decent sleep.

I didn't dare turn on the TV—

—then learned that ignorance is not bliss. My stake president called to inform me that Parley's murder had made national news, and that the press never failed to mention my association to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

The Prophet and his apostles were not pleased.

I drove up to Chouteau City on a Tuesday evening in early August, parked in the church parking lot, and walked into the building I hadn't been in in two months because I'd gone to Giselle's ward with her.

Summoned.

I never knew anybody who'd been summoned.

I'd always liked my bishop, admired him greatly. He was a pragmatic gentleman, not given to displays of emotion other than cheer. He had a good job and he'd raised a good family. His wife always had intelligent things to say in Gospel Doctrine; his kids were smart and kind to their peers. I wanted a family like that, had gone to BYU to find a wife like his and build a family like his, the one I hadn't had, though my extended family tried their best. His oldest daughter, Loralee, was going to BYU early on a scholarship. A *math* scholarship. His twin sons had just earned their Eagles. At fifteen. His youngest son had a bit of a wild streak, but Sister Hooper had a gentle way with him that I had noticed and envied; would that my mother had been like that. I envied the Hooper family, their odd mix of strength and gentility and humility.

Such a good man.

I'd betrayed my bishop, betrayed my goal of somehow acquiring the kind of family he had, so I dreaded and feared his judgment.

Bishop Hooper greeted me with a lame smile and a firm handshake once he'd opened his office door and welcomed me in. I watched him carefully to see what I could read in his body language, but I didn't always do that very well. I relied too

much on my memory, Sebastian said, and I needed to start being more observant and paying attention to how people moved and what they did, not what they said.

He sat in his chair and leaned back.

His smile faded.

He didn't look at me.

"Brother Hilliard, I—" He sighed. Scratched the side of his nose. Ran his tongue over his teeth. "You're being investigated for murder."

No use denying that and my gut clenched. "Yes."

He did look at me then. "Did you do it?"

I hadn't expected a point-blank question, but of course, I hadn't expected to be summoned, either.

I wouldn't lie, but I wasn't going to admit to it, particularly since I could tell which way the wind was blowing and I then understood. He had about seven layers of priesthood to account to. He was at the bottom of the food chain. The messenger.

I sat silent, looking at Bishop Hooper trying to keep my face stone still, not give anything away.

It took a moment for him to accept the fact that I wasn't going to speak.

"All right, then." He looked down at the paper in front of him. I watched tears fall from his face to the paper and splash there. "What a waste," he whispered. "Oh, what a *shame*."

I wanted to curl up and die right then.

"I'll resign my membership," I said, but the words didn't really come out right. More of a croak than speech.

"No. Salt Lake wants you excommunicated. This has been a PR nightmare and the church needs to distance itself from you. Bishop's court— I don't even know why they're making me do this, but . . . Come back Saturday night at eight."

I slumped in my chair, sick to my stomach.

"No," I finally muttered. "Do it without me."

There was nothing left to be said, so I stood and turned. Put my hand on the doorknob.

But Bishop Hooper shot out of his chair and around his desk, jerked me around by my arm and smothered me in a bear hug. He buried his face in my shoulder and began to sob.

"Thank you," he wept. "Thank you, Knox."

He knew.

9. Loralee Hooper – 17 – Chouteau HS trk & fld Mormon HOT prob. virgin

I don't know how he knew, but he did and I embraced him tight.

"You're welcome," I whispered.



*You did the right thing.*

*I think Porter Rockwell would have been very proud of you.*

*Thank you, Knox.*

*I walked out of the church, leaving my guilt and my need to confess behind.*

*John 3:16*

APRIL 1999

**T**HE CALL CAME AT THREE O'CLOCK IN THE MORNING.

"Mama . . ."

Her grip on the telephone receiver tightened and her heart thundered. "What, baby? What's wrong?"

"I'm in a lot of trouble, Mama."

She took a deep breath and released it over a trembling lip. "Where are you?"

"Chouteau City, Missouri."

She licked her suddenly dry lips. "Give me an address."

"I don't know it. Just call the sheriff when you get here. I gotta go."

"Rachel, wait—"

But the phone only clicked and when the dial tone took the place of silence, she turned the thing off and threw it against the wall. The plastic held, but the clip that held the battery in fell off and clattered onto the hardwood floor.

Leah Wincott sat up in her bed alone, unable to cry though she knew she should. She wanted to. She took another long, shuddering breath and released it slowly.

She might as well start packing. Sleep usually eluded her and had since the day McLean died three years before.

Leah went to the bathroom first, determined not to think about it, not to deal with it until she had to, not hypothesize about what trouble Rachel was in. She brushed her teeth, made her bed, threw some clothes in a sports bag, found a map. She had no idea where Chouteau City, Missouri was.

No thoughts entered her mind as she drove north in the darkness, listening to sad country songs, crying for no reason.

At three o'clock the next afternoon, she stopped at a Phillips station on the south side of Kansas City for gas and a burrito. She didn't feel like eating, but she thought she must. Caffeine. She needed caffeine—so she bought a liter of Mountain Dew.

"Afternoon, ma'am. Gorgeous day, ain't it? Will this be all for you? You had the premium unleaded on six? On the card, okay. It'll be just a second. If you could sign right there, uh hunh. Whereya headed?"

"Chouteau City," Leah muttered as she stuffed the receipt in her jeans pocket and the food in the sack the cashier had given her. "How much farther?"

"Tops—coupla hours 'cause you gotta go all the way through town an' rush hour's started. Watcha goin' there for? It's a nothin' place—right in the middle o' farm country, y'know. Might as well be a hunnerd miles from Kansas City 'stead o' ten for all the civilization they got up there."

"Business," she muttered curtly. Giving the cashier a watery smile, she turned to go, her head down to escape the glances of the other customers.

She bumped into someone and looked up to apologize, but the words froze in her throat as she peered into the face of a very handsome man. Her stomach flipped over when the corner of his mouth turned up at her.

Shocked, ashamed, that she found a total stranger so very attractive, she mumbled, "Excuse me," and slipped past him but his voice stopped her.

"You headin' to Chouteau City?"

Leah looked over her shoulder at him. Tall, with an early afternoon blond shadow, he was quite a bit younger than she by at least a decade. His ice blue eyes made a shiver pass through her, but that didn't lessen the pang of—desire?—she felt. She swallowed a lump of shame.

"Yes," she finally said. "Why?"

He ignored her would-be rudeness and answered politely enough, "Chouteau City's a tough town, ma'am. No place for a lady. Lotsa kooks up there."

"I have business in Chouteau City," she answered coolly, her sense of fairness and decency disallowing any kind of blatant setdown.

Leah stared at him until his mouth pursed and his eyebrows rose. Finally, he tipped an imaginary hat to her and said, "Ma'am." She turned on her boot heel.

She heard the beginnings of the cashier's comments to the man about her behavior. She didn't hear the man's reply.

The radio came on when the engine did.

"... teau City today, thirty-one-year-old Joe Walker was charged with first degree murder for the brutal slaying of a gas station attendant during a robbery attempt.

Chouteau County prosecutor Knox Hilliard is expected to charge Block's accomplice, eighteen-year-old Rachel Wincott, with murder one tomorrow morning . . ."

And the only thing Leah could do was choke back a sob and lay her forehead on the steering wheel, wondering what she had done to deserve such a child and why she still loved her.



"Here's the deal, Miz Wincott. Your daughter's as good as committed. Folks around here don't put up with stuff like that and whether Rachel was helpin' or not don't make no difference."

Leah gulped at the implications of the public defender's words. His interest did not lie in defending Rachel, though Leah thought that might be sheer laziness on his part.

"But—what's going to happen to her?"

The man leaned back in his chair, his steepled fingers playing with his chin. Leah didn't like the way he looked at her and tried to ignore her disgust.

"She's going to prison, ma'am. Can't tell for how long."

"Rachel just turned eighteen last week. Surely she's—"

"Not a juvenile. It don't make no difference when her eighteenth birthday was, Miz Wincott, as long as it happened afore she helped rob that store."

"But she didn't! She was in the car, waiting for him to come back with groceries."

"Frankly, ma'am, it ain't the first gas station that good ol' boy's knocked over. An' it ain't the first one Rachel's been seen with him at." He shrugged. "Sorry. She don't have a chance. Murder one, murder two at the least."

Leah's eyes closed and hate flooded through her. Hatred for McLean for giving her such an ungrateful, wayward daughter; for Rachel for being so self-centered and manipulative; for Joe whats-his-name for taking Rachel away from her; for the man who should have defended Rachel but wouldn't.

*What would Jesus do? Think, think.*

But the question whose answers had guided Leah all her life couldn't be answered this time—at least not by her. She opened her eyes.

"Tell you what, Miz Wincott," the defense attorney finally drawled, drawing his finger across his nose as he sniffed. "I'll take you over to the prosecutor's and you can see what kind of a deal you can make, okay?"

"That's your job," Leah pointed out.

He shrugged. "Well, if you don't wanna go, ain't nothin' gonna get done."

Leah rose, angrier than she remembered ever being in her entire life. "You're

fired," she said calmly, looking down at him as he smirked, seeming for all the world like every redneck stereotype come to life.

"Okay. Go find yourself another attorney. Like to see what you can get in this town. And seein' as how the prosecutor only deals with me, well . . ." He sat up to shuffle through the papers on his desk as if she were a bothersome insect he had just smashed. "Your daughter's nothin' but a two-bit whore anyway."

Rage exploded in Leah's heart.

*What would Jesus do?*

Rebuke him, Leah decided, but she wasn't as clever as Christ, nor as strong, so she did nothing but turn and walk out.



Leah hugged Rachel tight, because she knew that was what she was supposed to do. It didn't matter that she didn't much like her daughter; what mattered was that Leah loved Rachel and would try to help her smooth out the wrinkles in the bed she had made. Leah hoped that one day, when Rachel grew up, she could come to like her.

"Oh, honey," Leah whispered, running her fingers through Rachel's chemically damaged and bone-dry hair. It was a hideous cut and a hideous color, but she was still Rachel, still the daughter made and birthed in love. "I've missed you so much." And it was true.

"Me, too, Mama. I'm sorry. So very sorry." The girl's voice broke.

"I love you, baby. Never forget that."

"What's gonna happen to me, Mama?"

"I don't know, Rachel. This is something I don't think I can rescue you from."

"All rise."

The imperious voice of the bailiff interrupted the reunion between mother and daughter. It was when the two drew apart that Leah saw the prosecutor for the first time, who instead of studying notes or watching the judge come in and settle himself, was watching her.

It was the man from the Phillips station in Grandview, the man whose cynical blue eyes had perused her from top to bottom and had made her body tingle.

She looked away from him and sat when the bailiff instructed the court to do so.

The attorney Leah had been forced to hire—because no one else would take the case—was late and created quite a stir when he came bumbling in, a confused old lush who had difficulty balancing his briefcases. Leah looked at the prosecutor, who met her gaze with a raised eyebrow and a wry grin.

She closed her eyes in despair as the judge reprimanded the man for his tardiness and the arraignment began.

"Mama, I don't wanna spend another night in jail! Cain't you post my bond?" Rachel cried through the Plexiglas that night after having waived the preliminary hearing and been held over for trial.

"Rachel, I don't have that kind of money. Don't you understand that your boyfriend could get the death sentence for what he did and that just by being there you helped murder that man?"

"No! I didn't! I didn't know he's gonna do that. I thought we's just gonna get gas and something to eat."

Leah's eyes narrowed then. Typical. "You thought he was just going to rob the store."

"No, Mama!"

"You did, because it's not the first time it's happened."

Rachel's mouth tightened and she sat back, her arms crossed over her chest.

"You're not a juvenile anymore, Rachel. Things start counting now."

Rachel looked away. "I have never robbed anybody."

"Oh, I believe you," Leah informed her with alacrity. "You just don't mind hanging out with men who do."

"Don't you think I'm bein' punished enough without gettin' a lecture too?"

"I certainly hope so. Maybe being charged with first-degree murder will teach you something. Rachel, your father and I reared you to be a God-fearing, productive citizen of this country. We took you to church every Sunday, you got saved, you were baptized, you went to revival with us, you dedicated yourself to Jesus. We did what we were supposed to do, but you dropped the ball. Why?"

"I never believed all that bullshit!"

"You're lying," Leah snapped, heartbroken. Angry. "You allowed yourself to be seduced by the wrong crowd because it was easier than standing up for what you knew was right. Now you're paying for it. All I ever wanted was for you to be happy."

"Are you happy, Mama?" Rachel asked, her voice filled with hate and ingratitude. "You go to church and to work and you do your little crafts and don't go out much. Does that make you happy?"

Leah thought about that a moment, for the picture Rachel painted of her life did indeed seem bleak. "Yes," she said finally, decisively. "Because I do what's right and I live in peace."

"Time's up," boomed a large uniformed black woman above Leah. Leah nodded and turned back to her daughter.

"I do love you, Rachel, and I'll do what I can."

As Rachel was taken away into the bowels of the jail, Leah stood and glanced at her watch. "Thank you for the extra time," she murmured to the guard.

"No problem."

Leah was watching Letterman in her motel room that night when a knock sounded on her door. She threw on her thick robe and yanked the door open.

*Oh, my God.*

"You shouldn't have opened the door like that without finding out who it was first."

She cleared her throat. "I was expecting Mr. Nocek."

The prosecutor snorted and rolled his eyes at the mention of her attorney. "You would've done better with the public defender."

"He didn't want to do his job."

His mouth pursed. "May I come in? I'd like to talk to you about Rachel."

Leah chewed on her bottom lip in indecision.

"Please," he purred ominously, the request a command.

Once inside, the door closed behind him, he sat, causing his faded jeans to tighten over the muscles of his legs and his plain white tee shirt to stretch across his chest. Leah sat across from him, but she blinked in an effort to rid herself of unbidden and unwelcome desire.

"What about Rachel?"

His gaze was speculative. "I'll let Rachel off on one condition," he said.

Leah drew back, wary. "What condition?"

"You spend a week in my bed."

Thoroughly and unabashedly shocked, Leah's hand went to her mouth and she leapt up from her chair, away from him. She backed herself against the wall, still staring wide-eyed at him.

"Get out!" she choked. "Now."

He smiled in hard, triumphant amusement as he got to his feet. Shifting his jeans down his legs, he said, "I'll let you think about that for a while, but when you decide that this is your best hope to get your daughter out of prison, you come see me." He drew a card out of his back pocket and laid it on the table before opening the door. He turned to her before exiting and said in a most conversational tone of voice, "How did you get Nocek to take your case?"

Leah stared at him, watching his emotionless face and hard eyes. She swallowed. "With difficulty," she finally whispered.

He left then, closing the door behind him, but not before Leah caught the flash of a victorious smile.



His name was Knox. Knox Hilliard. And he expected her to sacrifice her virtue for Rachel's freedom. It sickened her to her core.

The case was clearly hopeless and as the days passed until it came up on the docket, Leah wracked her brain to think of ways to help Rachel. She called McLean's law colleagues back in Houston, but they were all too busy. Three years after McLean's death was too long for their promises of "Anything we can do for you, Leah" to stay fresh.

She called a few attorneys in Kansas City, but they weren't interested, especially considering the amount of money she could pay. Or couldn't, as it were. Legal aid didn't exist in Chouteau County.

Rachel, after having been painted as a "two-bit whore" by not only the defender but Hilliard as well, was despondent.

"Mama, I didn't kill him! I didn't even wanna rob the store! Joe did that. It wa'n't me!"

"I know, baby, I know."

Two weeks passed and bruises began to appear on Rachel's face and arms.

"What's happening to you, Rachel?"

"Mama," she cried, "I cain't hold my own in here. These women—they're mean. I get beat up every single day for sumpin' stupid. They want to—" she gulped and lowered her voice. "They want to have sex with me, Mama."

Leah's breath caught in her throat and she said with as much confidence as she could muster, "Don't worry, honey. I'll think of something."

But the day came when Rachel didn't appear at the Plexiglas and Leah asked the guard where she was. The old black woman who always gave them extra time to talk looked back at her with something akin to sorrow. "She's in the infirmary, Miz Wincott. They done beat her up too bad."

Leah's stomach soured and she thought she was going to be sick on the floor. "Is she—is she going to be all right?"

The guard shook her head. "I don't know, ma'am. I surely don't know."

The trial was delayed because of Rachel's condition and Knox Hilliard looked at Leah across the courtroom, eyebrow cocked and mouth pursed.

Leah looked away, numb.

He didn't seem surprised when he opened the door and silently allowed Leah into his home that night. There was an air of triumph about him that humiliated her and she bowed her head.



"Let me have your coat, Leah."

She took it off and gave it to him; what he did with it she didn't see.

He held out his hand and she took it, allowing herself to be led into the innards of an early '60s ranch.

He pointed to the bed. "Sit."

She sat.

He flipped open his cell and dialed some numbers. Looking at Leah, he said, "Nocek. Hilliard . . . I don't give a shit what time it is, listen up. I'm dropping all the charges against Rachel Wincott. Yeah. See you in the morning." Then he put the receiver down, picked up Leah's hand, and kissed it.

Expecting to feel revulsion, she bit her lip as a thimbleful of long-forgotten sensation snaked through her.

"How can I help you?" he asked, not really caring.

"Let me go," she breathed raggedly.

"No."

"Why me?" she whispered as she looked up at him, tears rolling down her cheeks. "Why couldn't you have just let her off if it was that easy? You can see how hard this is for me."

He wiped away the wetness on her cheeks with the pads of his thumbs. "I want you."

That was it? He wanted her, so he made sure he did what he had to do to get her, including manipulating everything around her?

"What about money?"

He snorted and rolled his eyes. "Don't waste your breath. I only take money from men and ugly women and you don't have enough to make it worth my while."

Leah stared at him, then whispered, "You're corrupt."

A slow smile spread on his face and he caressed her cheek. "Thoroughly."

Guilt. It wasn't Leah's place to atone for Rachel's crimes, but she could no more allow her daughter to suffer than she could quell her shameful desire for this man's touch.

He kissed her when her tears began to abate and brought her to her feet. He didn't rely on Leah to do anything but stand there and be seduced, and Leah was glad, because she knew she wouldn't have been able to help the process along.

But Knox kissed and caressed her finally bare body until Leah was quivering with desire, her shame only a remnant. When his bare skin touched hers, Leah forgot all about Rachel.

Saying nothing, he laid her carefully on the bed, sliding in beside her, and continued his onslaught. The night was quiet, except for the lone call of cicadas, and

dark, except for the light of the full moon that shone through the window and splashed across Leah's smooth white belly.

He touched her there, his big tanned hand covering her flesh from her ribs to the apex of her thighs.

"You're beautiful," he whispered as he nuzzled her ear, though she didn't believe he meant it.

Still, the words, the atmosphere, the memory of the loneliness she had acutely suffered since her husband died worked on her until when at last he entered her, she was a willing and eager participant.



Rachel, bruised and battered, in her own clothes, hobbled down the hallway outside the courtroom to throw herself in Leah's arms.

Leah squeezed her hard, her eyes trying to dam tears that would not be dammed. "Oh, baby," she said, her lips against Rachel's cheek and her hand stroking her thinning hair. "We did it, Rachel. I love you so much."

"Oh, Mama, thank you," she cried in Leah's ear. "How'd you do it? What happened?"

Leah sniffed and laughed with no humor whatsoever. "Just a bit of luck, I guess."

"Can we go home now?"

Leah looked up and over Rachel's shoulder, and met Knox's gaze across the hall. "Not for another week or so, honey. We've got paperwork to finish up."

"But—" Rachel protested, pushing her away. "I'm done. I can go home. They said so."

"Rachel—"

"Mama!" Rachel cried, tears flowing down her cheeks. "I wanna leave here! Now! I can't stand to stay another second."

"Rachel! The prosecutor and Mr. Nocek still have things to finish up and I have to be here. A week's not going to make much difference to you one way or another."

But it made a lot of difference to Leah. She wanted to stay.

"Mama," Rachel choked and Leah's brow wrinkled at her daughter's hysteria. "They raped me, Mama. Last night. I couldn't stop 'em. Please, please, please take me home!"

Leah closed her eyes and breathed deeply. The significance of that was too vivid to contemplate. She opened her eyes, raised her hand, smoothed Rachel's hair. "We have to stay," Leah whispered. "It's important. I'm sorry I didn't do what I needed to

do earlier to get you out." Her voice quavered. "So sorry." For both of them.

"Where are you going, Mama?" Rachel cried that evening. "Please don't leave me here alone!"

"I won't be gone very long, Rachel," she said as she opened the motel room door. "Lock the door real good and don't let anybody in. You'll be all right."

"But where're you goin'?"

"Just to get something to eat and to read."

"Oh, okay."

Knox wouldn't let her go. "A week, Leah," he growled in her ear as he held onto her when she would have gotten out of bed, propelled only by guilt she knew she should feel. "That meant all night, every night. Don't forget—I can put her back in prison as fast as I got her out."

"No, you can't," Leah sighed. "You dismissed the charges without prejudice."

He released her then, his mouth hard. "Not true. I can reopen it within a year."

"You bastard," Leah whispered.

"Count on it," he snarled. "What's it gonna be, Leah? You and me, or Rachel and the prison butches? 'Cause I don't give a shit one way or another."

She stayed.

As the week progressed, it grew more difficult to think of lies to keep Rachel satisfied. But she had to, not because Knox would reopen the case against Rachel, but because she didn't want Rachel to know what she was doing.

Or that she liked it.

Her last night with Knox was bittersweet and she felt tears form in her eyes when he began to nuzzle her jaw, to start all over, to give her what she'd come to crave from him. She started at the sound of the doorbell just after midnight. Knox rolled out of Leah's arms to answer it, leaving her alone and missing his warmth. He came back and stood naked over Leah. Her eyes raked him and stopped at his arousal. She licked her lips in memory of what he had taught her to do, what she wanted to do again. He chuckled.

"Rachel's here."

Leah's shocked gaze met his coldly amused one and she bounded out of bed searching for her clothes.

Knox handed her his robe and she snatched it out of his hand without a word, covering her naked body with it as she scurried out of the bedroom. She halted at the threshold of the living room and stared at her daughter, who stood in the tiled entryway, a soft night light reflecting off her beautiful face.

Rachel stared between Leah and Knox, still nude, who leaned dispassionately against the wall, his arms crossed over his chest.

"You're fucking him?" Rachel squeaked in disbelief.

"Rachel—"

"I's worried about you. I thought you were mad at me and I wanted to talk to you so I followed you. I thought, you know, you had a friend or something you were talking to and I'd wait for you. When you didn't come out . . ."

"Rachel, I—"

She stomped her foot and pressed her fists against her cheeks. "I can't believe you're fucking him!" she screamed. "What about all that stuff about virtue and chastity you were always spouting at me? If you weren't married, you di'n't do it. That's what you said! And what about Daddy? Don't you love him anymore?" She choked on a sob and pointed at Knox. "He wanted to put me in prison and you fucked him! You are such a hypocrite! I hate you, I hate you, I hate you!"

Leah stood numbed, her whole world crashing down around her ears, unable even to react to the vile word her daughter used so liberally that Leah herself had never uttered.

*. . . gave His only begotten Son . . .*

So vain. So arrogant.

Knox brushed past Leah and captured Rachel's chin in his hand, jerking her head up to look at him.

"The only reason you're here and not behind bars is because of your mother," he snarled at her, uncaring that her eyes were wide with fear. "She put herself in your place to save your sorry ass."

Knox released her and Rachel spit in his face, but fell against the wall with the force of Knox's back-handed slap. Leah felt she should step forward and did, but Knox pointed at her. She halted. "If you'd done that fifteen years ago, Leah, you wouldn't be here right now."

Rachel held her face and glared at Leah. "Did you like it?" she hissed. "Did you like fucking this asshole?"

Leah didn't have to look at Knox to see that he was staring at her, daring her to deny what she had felt. She kept her eyes on Rachel, drew herself up. "Yes, Rachel," she finally murmured with a confidence she hadn't felt in years. "I did."

"I hope I never see you again."



"In national news today, a twenty-two-year-old woman was arrested for armed robbery. Rachel Wincott, suspected leader of a gang of female burglars, was caught

as she came out of a liquor store . . . ”

Leah sighed as she flipped the television off and went to bed.

The call came at one o'clock and was not unexpected.

“Rachel? Hi, baby. Where are you? All right, honey. Yes, I love you too. I know you're sorry. I'll be there as soon as I can.”

# *The Stone Was Rolled Away*

MAY 1999

LEAH WINCED WHEN THE DOOR SLAMMED AND TURNED AWAY SO KNOX wouldn't see her tears, her heartbreak. She bowed her head and put her face in her palm to sob quietly.

"You're free to go."

His voice came somewhere out of the darkness. Low. Lifeless.

She whirled. "Is this what you wanted?" she screamed at him. "To humiliate me?"

"No."

"What *did* you want then?"

"You."

She stared at his silhouette, dark against the vague light of the sconce behind him. His hands were propped on his naked hips and his head was bowed.

"I told you that already," he muttered after a moment, reluctant, as if it were an admission of guilt. "I couldn't have you any other way."

That thoroughly shocked her, but for which reason of several, she couldn't say.

"You're welcome to stay the rest of the night if you want, but . . . you don't have to. Our . . . bargain— I— It's done."

Leah felt herself drawn into this conversation the way she'd get drawn in by a gory traffic accident as she drove by the scene. "What do you want me to do?"

His head snapped up. Though she couldn't see him staring at her in the darkness, she could feel it. "Do you really want to know?"

For no reason Leah could fathom, she blurted, "Yes."

He hesitated. "I . . . would like you to stay." That wasn't all he'd meant to say. She didn't know how she knew that, but she did.

A normal woman would go find her clothes and flee. She would flee straight to the FBI or . . . whoever . . . could put this man away for what he'd done.

*A normal woman would have let her daughter pay for her own sins.*

"For how long?"

"As long as you want."

Leah turned without a word and walked into the bedroom. She dropped the robe she wore—his—and climbed back into the beautiful bed where she'd found sexual enlightenment. She couldn't say why that was important to her at this moment: Perhaps it was the darkness. Perhaps it was her confusion. Perhaps it was a lifetime of stasis thrown into dramatic and orgasmic chaos by a beautiful young man.

"Leah?" he said warily from the doorway.

She turned over in bed, presenting her back to him.

Yes, she was furious with him.

No, she didn't want to leave right now.

She didn't understand it, but it was late and Rachel had cut the last piece of her heart out of her body.

*I hate you. I never want to see you again.*

It wasn't the first time she'd ever said it, and it wouldn't be the last.

Funny, of all the things that angered her about this entire week, Knox's striking Rachel was not among them.

She felt the tickle of a tear running down her cheek even as the bedclothes whooshed back and the mattress depressed.

He didn't touch her in an effort to seduce her yet again, which was okay, but . . .

"Go to sleep, Leah," he murmured, gently running his fingers through her hair, stroking her, petting her.

Yes . . . sleep, something she hadn't had much of for the last two weeks, and now she didn't have to worry about getting back to her motel room as a show for Rachel.



The sun awoke her.

Her eyes opened slowly, not sure what she'd see, as she had always departed before dawn. Knox was an early riser and his definition of a full night didn't extend to sunrise.

What she actually saw shocked her so badly she began to cry again, silently, the

way she had always cried, her tears wasted into cloth as she lay beside McLean in the darkness. Lying upon Knox's pillow . . .

A white rose.

A long blue velvet box.

A key.

A note.

Leah wiped her face with the tail of the pillowcase, then haltingly reached out for the note, dreading what it might say that would humiliate her further:

I'M SORRY. FKH

She choked and the tears blurred her vision and stung her eyes.

*I'm sorry*, he said. Didn't he think about that *before* he'd blackmailed her into bed?

I want you . . . I couldn't have you any other way.

Remorse?

Not true remorse, no. Leah didn't believe it for a moment. It was the remorse of having gotten caught out. He'd had no punishment, but true remorse would have prompted him to let her go far earlier than this, after their bargain was done.

Perhaps she should be grateful he'd honored the bargain at all.

She reached out and lightly ran her fingertips over the soft jewelry box. She sat up, leaving her torso bare. It vaguely occurred to her as she picked it up that only a week before, she would have covered her breasts, even though she lived alone.

Now . . . she had no reason to.

Her breath caught in her throat at the diamonds and pearls that winked back at her once she'd opened the lid. A bracelet, with matching earrings.

Did he consider this payment for services rendered or was this a gift of appreciation, of want, of remorse?

She looked at the rose and the key. She didn't know what "white" meant in rose language, nor did she think a man would know, so perhaps it had no symbolism beyond what a rose given usually meant. The key, on the other hand . . .

It was a house key. She could tell by the three triangular holes in the head.

*As long as you want.*

It was Saturday and he was gone. He had to be; the house was too still.

Why?

No, she didn't have to ask that. He'd gone to his office, immersed as he was in the prosecution of Rachel's boyfriend, Joe, who could die and rot in hell for all Leah was concerned.



Leah trembled in anger as she looked down at the exquisite jewelry and the beautiful rose Knox had given her. Her hips were bare under the covers and her torso nude to the morning breeze that whispered through the pretty mullioned window. Before this week . . .

She'd never slept naked.

She'd never had an orgasm.

She'd never been given jewelry other than her simple gold wedding band.

"Oh, McLean," she whispered, angry. So angry now for so many reasons she couldn't begin to sort them out.

With which man, she didn't know.

McLean, for barely keeping a roof over her head and leaving her nearly penniless, with no provision for his death because it was one of those Things Polite People Don't Talk About . . .

Or Knox.

For showing her in one week what she'd missed in twenty years of marriage.

She wasn't sure, but perhaps she was more angry about that than about the way Knox went about getting her in bed.

Gritting her teeth, refusing to think about what to do with the things Knox had given her, she swept out of bed and walked naked across the room, across the hall to the restroom. She stopped short when she saw herself . . . nude . . . and forced herself to really *look* at her body without shame.

Breasts still pert— Was that normal for a woman her age? She didn't know; she had no basis for comparison. Flat stomach. Wide hips, though. She worked to keep her body looking acceptable, but it was unreasonable to compare herself to what she saw in magazines. Besides, her motive was to keep osteoporosis and heart disease away; a reasonably fit body was a side effect.

The face that stared back at her didn't seem any different than it had for years, so she didn't figure she was a good judge of how old she really looked. Her only vanity, her hair, was a light auburn naturally, and her only splurge was that she kept it that way. Her dark auburn pubic hair hadn't yet faded to gray.

Her knees nearly buckled with the weight of the desire that overcame her, staring the V between her legs, remembering what Knox had done to her this week.

He liked putting his mouth there, between her legs, licking her there, putting his tongue up inside her, making her hips buck up off the bed and screech with the power of the sensations rolling through her.

She'd never known people did that.

As she watched herself in the mirror, she put her hand flat against her stomach and slowly stroked downward.

*Touch yourself, Leah.*

*Knox, no, I . . .*

*Do it.*

*She'd done it.*

*Cautiously. Frightened.*

*Of what, she didn't know, but . . .*

He'd opened her legs for her, taken her hand, put it there, taken her middle finger and put it on that little pea-sized protrusion she had never felt until his tongue found it.

*That's right. That's your clit. Stroke it.*

She knew what it was. She hadn't become a registered dietitian without anatomy classes, but she had never known how it looked or felt. She'd never explored by sight or by touch, and McLean had certainly never done so.

McLean had never seen her naked, sex being another one of those Things Polite People Do But Don't Enjoy.

*No, no. I'm not going to help you. I want to watch you learn how to do this yourself.*

Knox had propped her up with a stack of pillows, bent her knees, spread her wide, placed her hands, then sat at the foot of the bed facing her, his knees pressing hers open. But he'd guided her hands anyway, watched her, directed her some more, talked to her low and soothingly.

*Encouraging her.*

*Teaching her.*

*Don't be shy, Leah. I'm not going to make fun of you. Relax. Think about how my tongue feels there.*

A thirty-one-year-old man teaching a forty-six-year-old woman how to masturbate.

*Unbelievable.*

She'd found her clitoris, stroked it the way he'd instructed, found herself catching her breath.

*Other hand, now. Put your fingers up inside you, the way I do.*

She'd done as instructed, half afraid of . . . something . . . she didn't understand.

*Then she came.*

*Arched her back.*

Closed her eyes and groaned as her body clenched around her own fingers and she felt Knox's big, warm hands around her inner thighs, keeping her open. She'd felt his long, hard legs under hers, supporting them.

*That's right, Leah. Let yourself go. Feel it . . .*

Leah moaned, gasped as she came right then, sitting on the bathroom floor and watching herself in the mirror, remembering Knox teaching her how to please herself.

Of all the things Knox had given her . . .

She sagged back against the wall, tired, confused, sated (for the moment), and smelling of sex. She sniffed her fingers and wondered that the acrid scent didn't really disgust her; it wasn't pleasant, but it wasn't *unpleasant*, either, and she couldn't reconcile it.

McLean had been an elder at the Lynwood, Texas Church of the Firstborn. He'd been twelve years older than Leah and had certain opinions about what a husband and wife should and should not do together—

—and Leah only just now realized it.

She couldn't help her anger that he had left her to find *this* with a man fifteen years her junior and who had gone about his seduction in a truly evil manner.

Sex with McLean was a duty, and one not that often done, either. She'd never known it could be enjoyed; no one had ever told her.

Perhaps it was best she'd never known, because surely she would have grown to resent him the way she was growing to resent him now.

Leah arose slowly, slightly sore in muscles that she hadn't known could get sore.

She showered and dressed.

Packed up what little she had kept at Knox's; Rachel would have probably stolen everything from the motel room they'd shared, but no matter. She wouldn't miss a few clothes and toiletries.

She glanced at the rose and the note, the jewels and the key that still lay on the fine linens where she'd left them, then decided to take them.

It was the only thing she'd have left of Knox, though why she wanted to remember him, she didn't know.



When she pulled into her driveway the next evening, it was to see the secretary of Lynwood, Texas Church of the Firstborn lurking about her dirty picture window and peering in one of the three small diamonds in the front door.

With new perspective, Leah studied her home, a small dingy tan brick ranch with mortar weeping "decoratively" from between each course of masonry. It needed a good sandblasting to clean it. Her yard was a mess, but she'd been gone two weeks. Not that that had made much difference; it wasn't a mess of good grass that had grown and gone to seed. It was a mess of weeds, and sparse at that, interspersed with patches of dirt. She had the worst house in an aging, rundown neighborhood.

She swallowed with shame: hers or McLean's, she didn't know.

It was all she could do to pay the mortgage, much less keep up her home or improve upon it. And now, after having finally called in to her answering machine this morning and listened to her messages, she wasn't even sure she had her job waiting for her in the morning.

"Leah!" called Noreen as Leah emerged from her rattletrap car. Her brow wrinkled when she noticed how decrepit it was. *How* had it made the round trip from Houston to Kansas City? "Where you been, honey?"

Leah looked up at Noreen as if meeting at her for the first time, and perhaps she was. Noreen had always been a very good friend to her and McLean, always around for special occasions, celebrations, and generally made herself available to them.

At Leah's age, Noreen was single, having never married, and Leah had always wondered why. She was an extremely attractive woman. She'd been the church secretary for as long as she could remember, and it seemed she'd taken McLean's death harder than Leah had.

Leah opened her mouth, and said with a calm that astounded her, "How long were you in love with McLean?"

Noreen's eyes bulged and her mouth worked up and down, soundless. Leah would never have seen it and, further, never would have had the courage to ask the question, had not Knox shown her what she was missing.

"Were you sleeping with him?"

"No!" she breathed, horrified. "McLean wasn't like that, Leah, you know that."

Not even with his wife.

Leah wondered why she hated McLean at this moment far more than she hated Knox, who had demanded her virtue yet given her more in return than it was worth.

"Did McLean know?"

Noreen gulped. Well, that could mean anything, Leah supposed, but she felt that same strange serenity she'd felt all the way from Kansas City to Houston. "I don't—I don't know."

The diamonds in Leah's bracelet flashed and she looked down at it.

So did Noreen, and an unfamiliar confidence flowed through Leah.

"That's pretty," Noreen said, but Leah couldn't tell if she wanted to weasel out of the awkward conversation or if she wanted to know how Leah could have come by something that fine. It hadn't come from Claire's, for sure, but Noreen was too polite to be that gauche. "You have— Uh, you have matching earrings."

Leah laughed, though it was more sad than funny.

"These diamonds are probably worth more than my house," Leah murmured to herself, not caring that Noreen didn't realize she was eavesdropping.

Yet another way Knox had taken care of her that McLean hadn't.

"Go home, Noreen," Leah finally said.

"You never said . . . about Rachel, I mean."

Leah took a deep breath. "Rachel is . . ." And Knox just kept on giving, doing what McLean never had. "Not my problem anymore."

"Wha—?"

She looked at Noreen then, fully, and thought she shouldn't resent the woman because she had no real reason to. So she'd been in love with Leah's husband; he hadn't had any more interest in her than he did Leah. In effect, they were in the same boat, but that didn't mean Leah wanted her around. "Please, just go home. I need to get a few things sorted out."

Noreen looked about to cry. "I'm sorry, Leah."

People had been saying that a lot to her lately, all except the one person who should've.

But, again, perhaps that was for the best.

"Can I help you with anything, at least?"

"No, thanks. I'm fine."

Or she would be as soon as she got a new life, because she certainly could not live like this anymore.

Noreen left, and Leah walked across her knee-high-weed-ridden lawn to the front door, shaking out her keys. She chose the correct key by feel and shoved it into the lock.

Which didn't turn.

*What?!*

She began to panic because . . . well, because. The last two weeks had been surreal enough, anything horrible was possible.

Lifting the keyring to make sure she had the right key, she saw that she didn't. She had tried to slide Knox's key into her lock.

She choked.

*I want you.*

One week, and she'd miss his body beside hers in bed tonight.

*You're beautiful.*

McLean had refused to tell her that, even when she'd asked. *That's a vanity, Leah; we mustn't be prideful.*

She sighed and went into her house, opened it up, collected her mail from the floor, unpacked the few belongings Rachel had left in the motel room, and went to bed.



"I'm sorry, Leah, but two weeks . . . A week was hard enough, but I understood. Another week on such short notice? No, I don't think I can let that slide."

Leah stared at her boss stonily, her jaw clenching.

One of those big tanned hands giveth, and the other taketh away: Her only way to make a living, and not likely to get a comparable job since she'd burned this bridge and her options were slim and her profession was a small community.

She looked at the bracelet around her wrist and wondered . . .

"All right," she said without another moment's hesitation, refusing to bow and scrape and beg the way her boss wanted her to. "I'm owed comp time. I have three weeks of sick time left and four of vacation. Since you don't think you can let that slide, I'll take every bit of that in cash, please."

Her boss's mouth went slack.

No, she hadn't expected that. Leah had never stood up to her in her entire history here, which was how she'd ended up with so much comp time and sick time and vacation. She couldn't say no. She wasn't *allowed* to say no.

"You're lucky I don't sue you for not compensating me properly, and I will if you don't cough it up."

Leah now understood cynicism. Her boss had never realized Leah knew that what she'd done was illegal. Comp time in lieu of overtime. Well, now or later and if it were later . . .

*As long as you want.*

"I'm leaving Houston as soon as I sell my house," Leah said calmly. "I'll come back Wednesday for my check. I know exactly how much it should be. If it's not that, I'll call my lawyer."

Whether he could practice law in Texas or not would be irrelevant to him; furthermore, she *knew* he'd come if she called.

"I promise you don't want to mess with *my* lawyer."

"Uh, Leah, you know, maybe we could reconsider . . ."

"No. Wednesday by noon."

It was possible the woman would lose her job over that, and Leah hoped she did.

Leah did what she could do herself on her house to make it presentable in the day and a half she had before she had real money to get real stuff done. She had a week-long garage sale and what she didn't sell by the time her house went on the market the next week, she carted off to Goodwill.

The house sold in two days, praise the Lord, which she took as His will. She would find a new church when she got where she was going.

As soon as she had the cash, she traded in her car for one she knew would make the eight-hundred-mile trip back. Straight out of the lot, she headed north on I-35

once again, but this time to begin her new life, not to clean up her old one.  
Her old life was as dead as her husband.



A chubby little strawberry blonde with frizzy hair, glasses, and braces opened Knox's door Friday evening, and Leah felt her world collapse.

"Hi," said the girl, who looked to be somewhere in her early twenties, a little older than Rachel. "What can I do for you?"

"Yo, Giselle!" Knox's voice from somewhere in the depths of the house, then his voice got nearer as he continued speaking. She saw past the girl, who had turned to watch him come out of the hallway that led to his bedroom, pulling a tee shirt down over his broad chest still spotted with water droplets. His hair was wet. "Would you make me some favorite potatoes? Please? A couple, three pans, throw 'em in the freez— Leah," he breathed, his eyes wide.

Leah didn't know what to say. Her original assumption probably wasn't correct, considering the girl's youth and what he'd asked her to do, but . . . "Um . . ."

The girl looked between Knox and Leah, then said, "Uh, yeah. I'm heading home. Thanks, Knox."

"Yeah," he said absently, waving her off, not breaking his stare with Leah.

The girl, Giselle, held the door for Leah, who stepped in warily. She brushed by and out the door, letting it slam closed behind her.

"Who's that?" Leah asked calmly, surprising herself with the strength of her demand.

"My cousin," he replied softly, as if it didn't occur to him that she had no right to ask, and wanted to allay her fears. "I do her taxes."

"Oh."

The diamonds flashed in the meager sunshine coming through the screen door, and caught his attention. Then it returned to her face.

"I don't know how long I want to stay," she said, faking courage.

"Okay," he said slowly. "Are you sure you want to?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"You wanted me," she said deliberately. There was only one conclusion he could draw from that, and he wasn't slow.

He watched her carefully for a moment, then said, "You want to talk about it?"

"No."

He nodded, then said, "Uh, I was on my way to the airport to pick up a friend. Would you care to join me?"

So, this was it.

She hadn't really thought about what returning to him would mean beyond being his lover, but—

"I don't want to lock you in my bedroom, Leah," he murmured. "I asked you to stay because I hoped you would want to see my life so you could make a decision as to whether you wanted to be part of it or not."

Leah chuckled up her chin. "Maybe all I want is sex."

His mouth tightened. "Well," he said brusquely, "I guess I can't blame you for thinking that's all I'd offer you."

"I didn't think much past that, to tell you the truth."

A wide smile slowly grew on his face and she caught her breath at the change that true humor made in him. "Glad to know I'm that good in bed, then." He gestured toward the door. "Shall we?"

He opened the passenger door of his SUV for her, handed her in, and closed it, then strode around to the driver's side. She watched him, feeling as out of sorts as she ever had because this was a brand new side of him she saw: A normal man, albeit more gentlemanly than most.

"Who are we picking up?" Leah asked, as much to get McLean and all the levels of meaning of their relationship out of her head as to start a conversation.

"Annie Franklin," Knox grunted as he climbed in and began the process of starting the car, backing out of the driveway, and going somewhere. "She's— Well, it's kind of hard to explain my relationship with her. I think of a lot of people in my life in terms of family, but they're not related to me in any way."

"So, Annie is . . ."

He took a deep breath. "My little sister, I guess, if I had to label her. She just graduated from Princeton."

"And you have many people like her in your life?"

"Yes. I have a daughter. She's not really. She's not even legally my ward or foster daughter or anything, but that's how I think of her. You probably won't meet her for a while. She left for college last week and she'll be going year-round so she can graduate early."

"What's her name?"

"Vanessa."

"Where does she go?"

"Notre Dame. There are a couple of other kids I take care of in some way. Eric. Dirk."



"And your cousin."

Knox shrugged that off. "Naw, more like Giselle takes care of me. She's— Ah, well, she's my best friend." That disturbed Leah a bit, but she couldn't say why. "You don't need to feel threatened by her."

Threatened? Was that that feeling? How did he know? She said nothing for a moment or two.

"Are there a lot of people in this world who love you?"

He cast her a sharp glance. "It would surprise you if there were?"

"Yes," she said flatly. "It would."

"Leah, if this is going to be a problem for you, why'd you come back?"

"I came back because I had nowhere else to go and nothing to do there anyway," she snapped.

"What were you doing before you ran up here to rescue Rachel from her stupidity?" he snapped back.

"I had a job. Which I didn't have when I got back."

He sucked in a deep breath, and rested his elbow on the ledge, rubbing his mouth while he drove. "Okay," he mumbled. "I deserved that."

She stared at him unbelievably, and the thought that had been only a vague mist in her subconscious began to gel: Was this an otherwise decent man whose unspeakably bad behavior was an anomaly?

"You're crazy," she whispered.

He barked a surprised laugh. "Yeah, Leah. That I am. The sooner you come to terms with that, the easier it'll be to live with me for however long you want to do that."

"Do you generally like older women?"

"Yes."

"Do you know how old I am?"

"No."

"Forty-six."

He glanced at her, shock written all over his face. "*Damn*," he breathed reverently.

"Knox, I have an eighteen-year-old daughter. It shouldn't have surprised you."

"I kind of figured you had her young, like, seventeen or eighteen. I thought you were only a little older than me."

"Is that going to bother you?"

"Shit, no."

Leah felt pride.

It was sinful, pride, especially in one's appearance. A few times, at work, an attractive doctor had taken a second glance at her. She'd felt it then but quashed it, guilty about attracting a man's attention, his lust.

Men were vulnerable; it was the woman's place to protect them from their lusts.

A twinge of guilt got her, but she wanted to let it go, to wallow in the pride, to cast away her old life, which included her old thoughts and habits and fears. Then again, Leah had slept with a stranger to save her daughter's miserable little life; after that, there wasn't much to salvage of her old life.

Kansas City International Airport was a series of circles, the boarding gates accessible only a few feet from the curb. Knox parked right in front of the terminal and craned his neck to look for this "sister," and then he honked the horn and got out, the engine still running. A tall, lissome blonde with glasses perched on her nose huffed up at her bangs. The rest of her hair was wound up haphazardly in a fan-like arrangement on top of her head. She dragged her suitcases toward Knox, but he jogged toward her to pick them up.

Then Leah understood the flip side of pride in one's attractiveness: Jealousy. It bit Leah.

Hard.

That girl was gorgeous, no matter how haggard she looked, no matter that she scowled at Knox and said something with a curled lip. He only laughed, which made her scowl deepen.

The back door opened and she threw herself inside. "Oh, fuck you, Knox."

"No thanks," came the amused and obviously well-worn response before she yanked the door closed. The back of the truck opened and Knox threw the girl's luggage in.

"Hi," she said, firmly inserting herself between the bucket seats. "I'm Annie. You are?"

"Leah," she responded because she couldn't not.

"How'd you get stuck with him?"

Leah stared at her. Up close and personal, she was even more beautiful.

"Don't answer that," Knox muttered as he got in. "Annie's obnoxiously nosy."

"Call it what you want, but most people will tell you anything if you ask outright and act like they have a duty to tell you."

"He blackmailed me," Leah said, just to see what she'd do.

Knox shot her a look and Annie stared at her for a moment, then began to laugh. She rolled back to lie on the seat, giggle madly, kick her feet in the air.

"She's laughing because she believes you," Knox muttered as he pulled away from the curb and drove around the terminal circle to the exit.

"Knox, you are so fucked up."

"I pay for her room and board and this is what I get."

"It's because you think I'm adorable."

"Yeah, I do."

As Leah listened to them go back and forth, she had no choice but to let go of her jealousy.

"Hey, where are we going?" Annie asked when Knox zipped past his exit. "I thought I was staying with you for the summer?"

"Change of plans," Knox said heartily, flashing a grin at Leah. "Since you're working at Decadence, maybe Giselle will let you live on her couch for the summer."

"That woman's a slave driver. I don't know why I let her boss me around."

Knox laughed out loud. "You'd pay her to work at Decadence."

"Does she know I'm suddenly homeless?"

"She might have a decent clue right about now, yes."

Giselle. Annie. Vanessa.

"Do you have any *male* friends?" Leah burst out. "Your own age?"

Knox laughed. "Yes, Leah," he drawled, "I do."

Leah watched this man, happy, trading good-natured insults with a beautiful college graduate he thought of as a sister. She compared and contrasted it to the way he'd finagled her into bed, with that hard expression and cruel sneer, and felt as if she'd dropped into an entirely different man's life.

As if she were a natural part of it and always had been.

He had no reservations about her being here, in his car, in his house, in his bed, even though he knew next to nothing about her and despised—*struck*—her only child. *In lieu of putting her in prison.* He had no reservations about including her in his life immediately, introducing her to his loved ones and being, as far as she could tell, completely natural.

As if it were normal for strange women to show up on his doorstep unannounced, uninvited (not really), and expecting to be taken to bed immediately.

"Anaïs, when do you walk?" he asked, jolting Leah out of her musings.

"Not going to," she sniffed. "I don't care about the pomp and circumstance. Show me the money."

Knox threw a hand up in the air. "Why did I even ask?"

"I do not know. And quit calling me that."

"I'll call you whatever I damn well please. Anaïs. Nin." The girl growled, but Leah caught the sly glance Knox cast her way. "Do you know who Anaïs Nin is?" he murmured.

"No."

"You're gonna find out."

Leah tingled at his purr, but she didn't know why.

"Eeww. Cut it out while I'm in the car. Not in front of the children. Geez."

"Oh ho! The Queen of the Frat Party objects."

"You do not know that for sure."

"Annie, you can't go more than two days without a man. And you better be careful with that because you know Giselle won't put up with it in her apartment."

"See, this is why I need to stay with you. You let me bring home whoever I want."

The two went on, nattering at each other and Leah suddenly felt as if she had lain on an unfamiliar mattress, stiff, tense, ready to find fault with it, then the mattress had surprised her into relaxation. She felt as if she were melting into its unexpected warmth and comfort.

This was not the same man who had blackmailed her into bed.

So who *was* he?

Soon they traversed a bridge over the Missouri River into downtown Kansas City, and only a few moments after that, Knox pulled into a parking slip in front of a charmingly renovated old building with a sign that said, "Decadence." Leah waited for Knox to open her door and hand her out, and she was hit with mouthwatering scents.

"Hot damn!" Annie crowed. "Books and chocolate all summer long." She darted into the building and out of sight.

"This is Giselle's place," Knox said softly. "In the middle, there's a bookstore. That's hers. On either side of her is a chocolatier and a patisserie. Those are her business partners'. She lives on the second floor."

Leah said nothing, staring up at him, still dazed at events she could have never predicted.

Knox bent toward her and she closed her eyes, opened her mouth, and let him work his magic on her. *That*, at least, hadn't changed.

"Oh, I missed you," he breathed into her mouth, his arms wrapping around her and pulling her close to him.

And she missed him, that big, strong young body in bed next to hers, curled around her possessively, giving her pleasure and teaching her how to return it.

"Forgive me, Leah," he whispered as he pulled away and stared into her eyes, those cold blue eyes now somewhere in the range of sapphire. "I didn't know how else to do it."

"I understand you want me," she murmured. "I even understand you think I'm attractive. But . . . how can you know that you really want me to stay? How do you know—?" She waved a hand, unsure of her question.

He shook his head. "I don't know. I just do. It's always been like that for me."

"You're so different now."

"No, no different. Just in a different context. I really am that cruel, Leah, that evil. Just not . . . right . . . now."

"Why are you?"

He pursed his lips. "When we know each other better, I might tell you, but once you get settled in and then start exploring the city, you'll hear rumors. *Believe. Them.*"

She shivered in sudden fear.

"I won't treat you badly ever again, Leah, but being my lover outside the house isn't going to be easy for you. Whatever you do in Chouteau County, wherever you go, if people know you're my lover, it may not go well for you. If you want to distance yourself from me at any time in any way, I'll understand. If that means you don't want to live with me, that's fine."

She swallowed. "I need to get a job. Will that hurt me?"

"Possibly. Depends on what you want to do."

"I'm a dietitian."

"I don't know. It's up to you if you want to tell people. You don't have to work if you don't want to, but I'd like you to have a life outside of me and my family. Spend your time however you want to."

She blinked. "Are you serious?"

He stared at her, confusion written all over his face. "Uh . . . Not sure which part of that you're asking about."

"McLean, my husband, wouldn't let—" She snapped her mouth shut with a click. McLean was no longer part of her equation.

Comprehension washed over his features and settled into a modicum of disdain. "Oh."

"How are you going to explain me to your mother?" she asked dryly, attempting some humor to get out of the suddenly awkward conversation.

Instead, the cruel young man with the cold eyes returned in a flash. "My *mother* is not part of my life," he snarled. "If you meet her—which I doubt—you'll understand a few things a little more clearly."

Leah stared at him calmly and, for no reason she could discern, she raised her hand and stroked his cheek, rough with blond stubble.

He blinked, bemused, his anger vanishing. "I don't need a mother," he said gruffly.

"I don't want to be. I'm not trying to be."

He gulped and turned his mouth into her palm. Kissed it. "I don't deserve you."

"You would do well to remember that."

*July 14, 2001*

**T**WO FIRES RAGED ACROSS TOWN FROM EACH OTHER, FLAMES SPEARING UP into the night.

In the River Market at the north end of the city, fire chewed out a confectionary-bookstore-patisserie and the offices and residences above them. The brick held while firefighters went about their work, and residents, owners, and spectators gathered as near as they could to watch. One woman sat alone on a curb away from the rest, a laptop and purse on the ground beside her, watching as her life went up in smoke.

She *was* grateful to be alive, even so, and she wondered when her business partners would arrive. She felt no fear, though she trembled in impotent rage. A man walked toward her, but she didn't look at him, even when he turned and dropped onto the curb beside her.

"Are you okay?"

"I couldn't sleep."

Pause. "That's . . . unusual."

Indeed.

She took a deep breath to calm herself. When she felt she could speak again, she did, her voice hard. "That bastard tried to kill me and he's taken away everything I own."

He shook his head and clucked his tongue. "When you lie down with dogs . . . Obviously he didn't get the memo."

He was right. She began to cry, because she had nowhere for all that anger to go right then, and he folded her in his arms.

At the south end of the city in Mission Hills, a man carrying three children struggled through the front hallway of a house to get to the door. A small child was

tucked under each arm and he shouted encouragement to the third, who clung to his neck. They screamed in pain as flames spread over all four of them. He stumbled through the gaping hole of the front entrance, fire licking up his pant legs. Firefighters ran to him and tossed wet blankets over all of them, bundling them and then dousing them before racing them to the awaiting ambulances.

“My daughter,” the man gasped as he was loaded onto a gurney. “She fell— My daughter!”

“Sir, is there anyone else in the house?”

“My wife,” he coughed, just before he passed out.

# *The Law of Unintended Consequences*

JUNE 2004

**T**AIGHT, SO HELP ME, IF YOU THROW ME OUT OF MY OWN COMPANY—"  
"It's my company now, Roger."  
"You put a gun to my head."

Sebastian slowly rose to his full height from where he bent over the CEO's desk—his, now—and stared at Roger Oth with a well-practiced stare. Satisfied when Roger squirmed, he said, "Yes, I did. Knox Hilliard makes for a particularly lethal weapon—especially since he was the one who figured it all out." Oth's color dropped only at the latter piece of information, which was exactly the reaction Sebastian had expected.

"He— Hilliard's been through my books?"

"Yeah, that's always the risk you run with me. Family ties and all that. Man's a genius with paper trails."

"Such a genius that even the FBI can't find *his* illegal operations," Oth sneered. "Unlike him, I didn't do anything illegal and you know it."

Sebastian inclined his head. "You're right. Your only crime is being stupid, but either way, I don't give a fat rat's ass. Get out." When Oth balked, Sebastian tilted his head and blinked. "Fraud is a felony, remember. Knox could very easily convince the DA here that you were the mastermind."

"Fen Hilliard was right about you, Taight," Oth snarled as he stalked toward the door of the massive office suite.

"If you're such good friends with Fen," Sebastian said blithely at his back, "why



didn't you ask him to help you? He could have found your problem as easily as Knox did." Oth stopped abruptly. "Except . . . if you *had* taken this to Fen, he would've done exactly what I just did." Oth sucked in a sharp breath, then continued toward the door, slamming it behind him.

Sebastian strode over to the window to watch Oth be escorted out of the building and off the property by two Lancaster County, Pennsylvania deputies. Sebastian sucked up a chestful of air. He dreaded what had to be done next. He'd done it too many times and it never failed to nauseate him.

As he left the office and clicked down the stairs, he called the next most important person in this entire fiasco. "Yo, Mitch. I'm getting ready to do the deed. How fast can you get your process rolling?" Sebastian sighed at the answer and pinched the bridge of his nose. "Yeah, I know I didn't give you much time. It was unavoidable." Another sigh. "All right. See you in . . ." He checked his watch. "An hour? Your office?"

By the time he clapped his phone closed, he'd walked across the parking lot between the office building of Jep Industries and its factory. Three at a time, he took the metal stairs that led to the grated catwalk that overlooked the entire assembly floor, which was a hive of activity. None of the people on that floor had a clue that life as they knew it was over.

There, at the rail looking down: Knox Hilliard, the Chouteau County, Missouri, prosecutor. Morgan Ashworth, economist. Étienne LaMontagne and his brother-in-law, Emilio Bautista, together the holders of most of the patents of Jep Industries' specialized products.

Two more Lancaster County deputies mingled around Sebastian's four cousins and all six men looked to him as he approached, all of them grim.

"Morg. You ready to front this and quash all the rumors?" Sebastian murmured. "At least until Mitch gets it done?"

"Yes," he said shortly. Morgan had his doubts about Sebastian's sanity. "I hope this works."

"It will," Knox grunted. "You just have to be able to follow it."

Sebastian and Morgan traded glances. Knox said that like it would be easy.

"Étienne. Are you satisfied now?"

"*Non!*" Étienne burst out in a tirade at Sebastian—in French.

"You shit," Knox muttered with a glare. "Thirty years and you *still* can't be pissed off in English."

Emilio laughed.

"Screw you, Knox. I said—"

"Don't bother," Sebastian snapped. "It's not worth repeating. Étienne, shut the

hell up and be grateful we got you out of those stupid licensing agreements. Next time? Let Knox do your deals for you like he offered. You're a one-trick pony and it's not contracts."

"This is going to come back to bite you in the ass, Sebastian," Morgan rumbled. "You and Mitch both."

"Probably," Sebastian returned, uneasy with the speed at which this takeover had gone down and why. He hated working blind. There would be consequences from this that he couldn't see and wouldn't be able to forestall—and probably years down the road. He could only hope Knox's elaborate scheme worked, but then, Knox was a master at elaborate schemes that worked.

Every. Damn. Time.

Sebastian swallowed, his stomach roiling. "All right, gentlemen," he muttered. "Time to put twelve hundred people out of their jobs."

## *Miss Cox & Professor Hilliard*

MAY 2005

**M**ISS COX!" The roar echoed around the lecture hall accompanied by the stirrings of students who alternately snickered and waited eagerly for the fireworks to begin.

Giselle's mouth tightened as she clipped down the stairs to the dais to collect her assignment. So help her— She snatched it out of her professor's hand with a glare and opened it only to see a big red D. Her nostrils flared and her jaw clenched as she raised her narrowed gaze to his.

"A D?" she growled and the class shifted a bit uneasily. She knew why. If Giselle could sink so low as a D in this class, everyone else could. She wasn't a class leader by a long shot, but she did solid B work consistently. Considering she did it while working full time . . .

Furious, she stared into that smirking face she knew as well as she knew her own.

"Ah, even the great ones fall from time to time," he said, his baritone voice filled with satisfaction that he'd gotten a decent response from her. She knew she shouldn't give him that, but he knew what her buttons were and exactly how to push them.

"Fuck you," she snarled. The class gasped, but she couldn't enjoy it. She crumpled her paper in one hand and threw it in his face before she whirled and took the stairs up out of the lecture hall three at a time.

"MISS COX!" he bellowed again as she picked up her books. "Come to my office for a conference this afternoon."

Her back stiffened and she looked over her shoulder. "If you think," she said slowly, each syllable perfectly enunciated, "that I'm going to drive up to ass fuck Egypt to discuss this inexplicable bullshit, you've got another think coming."

"Fine. After class, then. This is not optional."

Without a word, she picked up her things and walked out, flipping him off as she went.

Forty-five minutes later, her classmates filed out, each casting her furtive glances where she sat on the floor, her back to the wall, her arms crossed. No one wanted to get between her and the professor. He'd made her toxic. Even her study group was a bit skittish about her contributions.

"MISS COX!" Damn. That roar could be heard all the way to Gladstone.

"Good luck, Giselle."

She hid a smile as she took the hand belonging to her standing lunch date, and allowed him to haul her to her feet. "Thanks, Neal. See you at the cafeteria?"

His rather unfortunate face lit up and he said, "Sure!"

She didn't dare put his—or any of her other classmates'—unease about her professorial issues to rest. The last thing anyone needed to know—

"You're an asshole, you know that?" she grumbled at Knox's back while he erased the whiteboard.

"Your bed's closer than mine. Let's go."

"Dammit, you've had Sebastian in your ear again."

"No," he said and turned, his smug expression having melted into plain exhaustion and she felt an answering weariness in her soul, only exaggerated a hundredfold since Hank Rearden had kissed her last month. "I just want to get this over with, you and me. Obviously neither of us have any better options."

That was true, but— "Why are you slapping me with this right now? You couldn't wait until I got home from work tonight?"

Knox ran a hand down his face and sighed. "I don't know. Stress, maybe. You're here, now, convenient. I'm tired. The Den of Iniquity . . ."

"Sebastian's home today. I would never fuck you where he could point and mock." She pursed her lips and looked away, out the arrow-slit windows. "Besides," she finally said, "there's a girl walking around this campus right now with stars in her eyes about you—and you reciprocate—and I don't care to get in the middle of that for no other reason than neither of us have bed mates."

"I'm not interested in twenty-two-year-old girls."

"No, you're interested in that *particular* twenty-two-year-old girl."

He said nothing for a moment. "Well, Giselle, maybe we should try anyway."

"I hate feeling like we're each others' last-gasp options," she grumbled.

He grunted.

"I have a lunch date. What did you give me on that paper?"

"B-plus. You could do better."

"I work full time. I notice *you* got *your* education paid for."

"That dog don't hunt. Fen offered to pay for yours, too."

"Mmmm, true, but I'm morally opposed to dancing to someone else's tune."

That barb hit home and his mouth flattened.

"I'll admit I'm getting tired of toys and I damn sure am getting tired of not having a warm body in bed with me. We aren't kids anymore, Knox. We have too much history. We're like an old married couple who stopped sleeping together years ago and what's more pathetic is that we were never sleeping together to begin with."

"True, but I'd rather end up with you than no one."

She'd have been more insulted if she didn't return the sentiment. She sighed. "Let me think about it."

## *Cinderella*

DECEMBER 2006

**T**ELL ME WHERE SHE WENT.”  
“Absolutely not, Kenard,” Sebastian drawled. “You just stood down a woman who was packing, and if *she* can’t handle you, I’m not going to give you another crack at her.”

“I want her,” Kenard growled.

“No shit.”

“Where.did.she.go.”

“My house,” he said, just to see what would happen. He figured he probably oughtn’t have said that when his head exploded with the power of one well-aimed fist in his face.

He would’ve laughed if he could’ve.

“Shall I call you a taxi, Nephew?” Fen drawled from above him, smug, Trudy smirking, and a whole host of people collecting behind him with varying degrees of horrified glee on their faces. Kenard was gone.

Suddenly, he did start laughing despite the pain. “Yes, Unk, that would be much appreciated.” He gripped his chin and waggled it a little to make sure nothing was broken.

Fen flipped his cell open and called, while Sebastian sat on the cold marble floor, his back against the cold marble wall. “Damn, he packs a helluva punch. Aunt Trudy, would you get my mom’s coat from the check for me, please? The white mink bolero.”

She snorted and walked off to do as he'd asked. Family, after all, war of murder and politics notwithstanding.

Fen still chuckled and the crowd dispersed, disappointed, as it was obvious no battle between Taight and Hilliard would commence. Fen held out his hand to Sebastian and he took it.

"Damn," Sebastian muttered as he brushed off his suit.

"Was it worth it?"

"To see the look on your face? Oh, absolutely."

"She's in over her head with him."

Sebastian grinned at Fen. "Yeah. Now you can't tell me that wasn't hella entertaining."

Fen smirked, then heaved a great sigh. "You are right about that. It definitely was. Are you sure he's not going to hurt her?"

"Fen, what the hell do you care? You've tried to kill her twice."

"Oh, you know how it is with family. I can say anything I want but an outsider says something and I'll pummel him."

"I see. Only you have the right to kill her because you're family."

"Precisely. And you know, I do have a soft spot for her in my heart."

Sebastian chuckled. "You are so fucked up. And in answer to your question, yes. He will. The minute she lets him know just how rough she likes it."

"She's a virgin. She doesn't know shit from shinola."

"Two words: Hank Rearden."

Fen's eyes widened and then he threw back his head and laughed. Trudy came back with the coat and Sebastian thanked her, then went to wait outside for the taxi.

That was the funnest evening he'd had in a long time.

## *The Long Goodbye*

I KNEW IT WAS DOOMED THE MINUTE I SAW THE LOOK ON HER FACE.  
So young, so innocent.  
Deliberately so.

I knew what she'd done, ignoring the rumors, more fact than fiction; she had to have, to show up here, now, hoping to work for me, hoping to have a chance to catch my attention.

Too bad I had no way of letting her know she'd done that three years ago—  
—and to what extent.

The stench of gunpowder and blood filled the air and again I was a killer, though this time not without legal justification.

It didn't matter.

*What are you studying, Knox?*

*I'm in law school.*

*Oh. Really? How old are you?*

*Twenty-one.*

*Oh. Huh. That's— Did you graduate early or something?*

*No, just in May.*

*So . . . you didn't go on a mission?*

*Um, no . . .*

*Oh. I see.*

The future looked as suddenly bleak as it never had before, me with nothing to offer a woman, any woman, particularly the one I was looking at, the one I wanted more than I'd wanted any woman in my life.



Or anything else, for that matter.

*I had a nice time tonight, Knox. Thanks.*

Call you?

*I think we should just be friends.*

Uh, okay. Yeah. Um, sure.

I won't say I was never tempted to pull out OKH as a bargaining chip to get what I wanted.

*Um, you know, in twenty years, I'm gonna inherit this . . . company. Um, it's lots of money. I really like you; could you give me a chance?*

I could never do it.

Make love. Have children. Make a life.

Marry in the temple, covenant and bind myself for eternity to a woman who would bide her time, waiting for payment for services rendered the day after my fortieth birthday.

I'd rather have married Giselle, which prospect hadn't thrilled me, either, but I could count on her to watch my back, the loyalty of my best friend in the world. I couldn't imagine sex with Giselle; I never had been able to, but it didn't matter. I didn't even have that option now, since she'd married my other best friend, who could and would give her what I would *never* have given her.

I couldn't stop staring at the girl in front of me, the one I'd wanted to surprise in another year and a half, on December 28. I'd had it all planned in my head, down to the last detail of every variable of every conceivable scenario.

Except this one.

"Who the hell are you?"

She jumped out of her skin, horrified. Terrified. A little green around the gills. Would she puke or wouldn't she? She blinked and clutched her messenger bag to her chest, trying not to look past me at the carnage.

"Um—"

"Justice McKinley," Eric said, in that calm *Are you out of your fucking mind?* tone I knew all too well. And he was right.

As usual.

"So? Who is she? Why is she here?"

"She's the girl you told me to interview, remember?"

What to do, what to do.

The only thing I didn't want to do, but now had no choice. I needed her, that Rita Hayworth body, that red hair.

That curiously brilliant naïveté.

For as long as she'd let me keep her.

"Shit. Now I have to hire her."

Then she spoke. Well, squeaked. "No! No, that's all right. I'll go." She popped out of her chair, her briefcase still plastered to her chest and turned to escape.

Oh, no. She wasn't going anywhere.

"Sit. Down."

She did, but she wouldn't look at me.

Couldn't very well blame her for that. I terrified people; it was just part of being a vigilante, a crazy sumbitch murderer allowed to run loose in society.

"Well, Miss McKinley, welcome to the Chouteau County prosecutor's office. I'm Knox Hilliard, your new boss. May I assume you know how to keep your mouth shut?"

She closed her eyes and all I wanted to do was press away the tear that tracked down her cheek with my fingers. Hold her, let her cry in my chest.

That would never happen now.

"I asked you a question."

"Yes," she choked.

"Good. I expect to see your ass planted in that chair over there at eight o'clock tomorrow morning. If I have to come looking for you—and I will—I will be very pissed off. Got that?"

She gulped. "Yes."

"And heaven help you if you aren't a decent lawyer."

I stomped into my office and slammed the door like a teenager throwing a tantrum; I knew it. Eric knew it. I sat on the couch and slumped over, my elbows on my knees and my face in my hands.

Giselle would castrate me, but it wouldn't matter.

For however long it took Iustitia McKinley, granddaughter of legal genius Juell Pope, to find her courage to stand me down—because she would—I'd be in hell, my elaborately simple plan splattered on the wall, all mixed up with Jones's blood and brains.

Hi.

*YOU'RE hamlet?*

*Surprise. Could I interest you in dinner and perhaps the ballet? I have tickets to the Nutcracker at the Kennedy Center.*

*Professor Hilliard—*

*Knox, please. I came to Washington for a reason, Iustitia.*

*Uh— What reason?*

*You.*

The stars in her eyes were long gone.

With one precisely aimed bullet. Maybe I should've let Jones send me packing on the express train to hell. I had no hope now, and hope was the only thing I'd been running on for the last three years.

This was just the beginning of a long goodbye.

## *Tired of Being Me*

I THREW THE KEYS AT HER, BARELY ABLE TO LOOK AT HER AFTER WHAT I'D done to her the night before.

Oh, hell, what I'd done to her from the moment I got caught in my own hubris.

Murderer.

Rapist.

*Nice, Knox.*

I'd convicted rapists that had shown more class and style in their crimes than I had last night.

I stood at my window, my forearm across the window frame, and looked down on the parking lot. I watched her approach the car warily, hoping that she'd understand what I wanted her to do. She would never leave on her own; I'd thoroughly succeeded in terrifying her. Somewhere in the back of my mind I thought she'd know I was bluffing, that she would understand that nobody with a shred of sanity could act the way I did and mean it.

Of course, nobody—least of all me—could say with any certainty that I was sane.

She sat in the little Toyota for a long time, inspecting it, I was sure, for signs of a bomb or something. Then she started it, put it in gear, backed out, and drove away.

She was a brilliant woman. She'd understand the minute her asshole father let her know how I'd ensured his silence.

And *then* she would leave.

I put my head down on my arm and watched water drops plop onto the sill, my vision blurring.

I would never see her again.

*This makes you no better than Lucifer . . . The Lord might forgive you Parley, but this—*  
No.

Lucifer.

Sebastian couldn't have found a better invective.

It occurred to me to eat my gun and be done with it, because I just didn't deserve to live and quite frankly, I had nothing left to live for.

Giselle had married my best friend, who made her happy in ways far beyond my comprehension.

Sebastian wouldn't miss me, especially after I'd thoroughly humiliated him over . . . a lot less than what I was guilty of.

Vanessa would get my half of Whittaker House on my death and could do just fine on her own.

So could Eric and he was at the end of his patience with me, anyway.

My aunts Lilly and Dianne might cry, of course, but I couldn't be sure they weren't expecting it anyway.

Morgan, Étienne, my other cousins who had quietly supported me . . . they'd shake their heads, unable to understand but probably not surprised.

Fen wouldn't like it, but he'd be able to relax, his future in OKH as secure as it could be with me out of the way, but Sebastian still on the warpath.

My mother would rejoice.

The rest of the Dunham tribe would ignore me the same way they'd ignored me for the past fifteen years.

And Rachel Wincott would have the last laugh.

I don't know how long I stood there, staring down at her empty parking spot as if it would magically bring her back to me, make her love me, but it was dark by the time I went and sat at my desk.

I pulled out my Glock and studied it. Not that I could see it in the dark.

Turned it over.

Squeezed the trigger—

—just until it caught.

The doorknob turned and Eric walked in, files in his hand.

Flipped on the light.

Stopped short when he saw me.

Stared at my gun.

"Put it down," he murmured.

I pursed my lips. "Why?"

"She's not worth *that*."

I grunted. "No, but what I did to her is." I took a deep breath. "You can probably expect that annulment back some time tomorrow or Thursday. She won't waste any time getting out from under a marriage to *me*."

Eric looked at the floor, shaking his head, thoroughly exasperated with me. "You know, I don't know what it is about you that you have to do everything so fucking *stupidly*, but did it ever occur to you to just ask her out like, you know, a normal guy? Or do you not have enough drama in your life that you had to add a little more?"

"Oh, shut the fuck up. Where do you get off?"

"Uh, let's see. Stable situation. Stable girlfriend. No drama. That's where I get off."

"And that explains Simone and LaVon Whittaker and Junior how?"

"Not my doing, that's how. And notice, I don't deal with them for the most part. Repeat: No drama." He took two long steps toward my desk, snatched my gun out of my hand, stuffed it in the back of his waistband. "You're not getting it back."

"Fuck you. I'm *your* boss, remember?"

"Theoretically. So since she's gone, you can take over her case load."

"I think not. Figure out something else."

"Go to the Ozarks."

No, not that, either. Vanessa would want to know why and I sure as hell didn't want to explain—

—not when I had hoped that the next time I went, I'd be bringing my new wife, showing her off, making love with her in a bedroom that didn't look like I'd furnished it out of the Salvation Army mark-down section.

Ah, hell, I was used to celibacy and I wouldn't live long enough for it to make a difference anyway.

I sighed and glanced out the window again, across the street to the dojo that was now brightly lit. "Aren't you late for class?"

"Dirk's night to teach. I'm not going anywhere."

Shit.

He slapped his files on my desk and picked up my phone. Called his girlfriend, told her he was on suicide watch, and bring food and entertainment.

"You're a ballsy little bastard," I grumbled. "Remind me why I hired you?"

"Cause I'm a ballsy little bastard," he shot back and dropped onto the leather sofa, stretched out like he hadn't a care in the world.

Annie walked in not an hour later with Chinese, chopsticks, books, and magazines.

"There's a procedure for people like you, Knox," she said as she dumped the bags of food on my desk. I tried to stare her down, but she dealt with what she called M.D.eities all day long and she'd told me more than once a lowly prosecutor didn't

faze her. "It's called a frontal lobotomy."

Eric laughed, drug a chair over to my desk.

The three of us settled in to eat.

"By the way," Annie said, "my mother's still available."

I snarled at her. "I am not going to be your mother's boy toy and I've been telling you that for ten years. At least."

"What? You don't want to be my stepfather?"

"You need to get rid of that bitch," I muttered, hoping to shut her up, but she continued to prod and poke me about that hag she couldn't or wouldn't shake.

"It's not as easy for a daughter to divorce her mother as it is for a son," she informed me sagely as she dug her chopsticks into her noodles. "Oh, and look, if you do marry her, I promise I won't try to glom onto your exactly four dollars and fifty-two cents, which is about what OKH will be worth when King Midas gets through with it."

Annie annoyed me to no end sometimes. Her pragmatic wit and savvy business sense was occasionally the bane of my existence. Eric's inability to stop laughing didn't help.

"That'd be a funny joke on my mom, though."

"I'm already married," I snapped before I thought.

Annie looked at me sharply, surprised, but not enough to delay that quick mind or tongue. "Then why are we here with you instead of in bed?"

I waved a hand toward the door. "Don't let the door hit you in the ass on the way out. And give me my gun back."

"Nope," Eric said around a mouthful of food.

"And why aren't *you* in bed with Mrs. OKH trying for Baby OKH?"

I said nothing, unwilling to account for myself to a girl who made her living flashing her legs and tits at doctors. Gorgeous rodeo blonde with something approaching Sebastian's brain. What *was* it with all the beautiful young women around me? Vanessa, Annie, half a dozen defense attorneys I had to work to beat anymore. Youth, beauty, brilliance, and nothing short of a maniacal drive to succeed, every last one.

And Iustitia, young, beautiful, brilliant, with a maniacal drive to succeed—but who hadn't cut through enough of her naïveté to see through my bluster.

All these years teaching brand new law students. Had I simply missed how attractively energetic young women were? Or was I just hitting the first stages of a mid-life crisis and had cornered one to give me my own youth back?

She looked at Eric who pursed his lips and bent back to his food.

"Oh, I see," she drawled, then glanced back at me, sighed, did the worst thing she could've possibly done.

She patted my hand. What the fuck?!

"Go home."

"Nothin' doin', sport."

Dawn came with me working, Eric asleep on the couch, Annie curled up with him, but dozing.

Keeping me alive.

If it weren't for all the women in my life looking out for me, save my mother, I wouldn't have gotten as far as I had.

"You gonna be okay?" she asked softly, glancing out the window at the lightening sky. Eric awoke with a start, looked at Annie, then looked at me.

"I think so." I paused. "Thank you."

She smiled and arose, then pulled Eric to his feet. I sighed when they left and figured I could expect them back tonight, still on suicide watch.

I wasn't fine. I knew I couldn't bear to look at Iustitia's desk without breaking, but I had a job to do and I was only too glad to have court.

Went home.

Took a shower.

Came back.

Charmed a jury.

Yelled at my staff.

More than usual.

Worked all night, Eric and Annie sitting guard.

Repeat the day after that.

Except after lunch . . .

You know, I didn't care if the kid *had* stayed with me two nights in a row to make sure I didn't blow a hole in my head. He needed to show some respect.

"Cipriani! Pay attention! What the *fuck* is your problem?"

He looked up at me, then at her desk and jerked his head. "Look."

I looked over my shoulder. What the—?

I couldn't believe my eyes.

That perfectly carved haughty Faery Queen face dotted with that mass of freckles, the tousled red curls that looked like I'd just run my fingers through them, that gorgeous body all wrapped up in designer clothes I wanted to tear off of her—  
—feel her naked against me again, be inside her, make her come instead of cry.

*Make love to me, Knox.*

Had she really said that or had I imagined it?

"I'm sorry I'm late," she said and went through her file-stacking routine like it was any other day of the week. "It won't happen again."



I turned, still not able to credit that perhaps, just perhaps, another woman had come back to me and—worse!—one I'd mistreated more than Leah. I was never going to get over that guilt. But I stared at her, not knowing whether to laugh and kiss her, or crawl in a hole and die of shame.

"That's what you say every time you're late, McKinley." Oh, shit, if Fen found out . . . "I oughtta fire your ass."

She glanced up at me with those languid golden cat eyes that made me think she could read my mind and further, see all the way down into the darkest corners of my soul, knowing exactly who I was. "You can't. You haven't laid any paper on me and I'll sue you for wrongful termination."

No, it couldn't be. She was back and she'd finally grown a spine. I hadn't been wrong about that after all.

Or was she just suffering from Stockholm Syndrome?

I had to get away from her to figure this out.

"Thanks for the tip. I'll remember that."

I slammed the door behind me and fell back against it, bent over, nauseated at the implications of her being here. Would she stay with me as my AP *and* my wife, as just my AP, or was she taunting me?

It took some effort to breathe and my heart pounded in my chest like I was having a heart attack.

At thirty-eight.

Then I felt a strange calm go through my body.

Warmth.

Comfort.

I knew what that was even though I hadn't felt it in years—and missed it. I fell to my knees, thunked my forehead on the floor, braced my body on my elbows and clenched my hands behind my head.

"Thank you," I whispered over and over again, desperate and choking on my own spit. "Thank you so much."



*My wife.*

All I wanted to do was wrap myself around her and hold her close, smell her.

Make love to her.

The way she deserved.

I couldn't imagine why she'd come back to me after the night I'd raped her. I

didn't deserve it, didn't deserve *her*.

But there she was, getting out of her car in front of my house and preparing to unload her stuff.

I walked out to her and did exactly what I wanted—

—wrapped myself around her.

Held her close.

Kissed her.

Smelled her.

She kissed me back, wrapped *her* arm around *me* and pulled *me* tight to *her*. Did that mean—?

I needed her to know, to understand what her being with me would mean because obviously she didn't get it.

Well . . . maybe she did. At least, she *said* she did.

Then, why—?

I didn't buy her first bullshit excuse. *Want to be like Giselle*, my ass. I didn't marry Giselle for a *reason*.

Or six.

It took a while, but we finally got to the heart of it.

"I'm upset you bought me, but I'm grateful, too."

I thought I'd puke. Gratitude? *Gratitude?*!

I don't think I'd ever been so mad at her as I was right then. What was I supposed to say to that? *You're welcome, could you sleep with me now?*

"There's, um— There's a petition in the little safe that I don't know what to do with. Could you— Um, could you shred it for me, please?"

*Fuck.*

I gathered my wits enough to say, "I don't want you here if you're just grateful, Iustitia."

"Give me a little bit more credit than that," she snapped, and I knew then she'd thought it through, though I still didn't understand her motivation.

"Okay. Then why *are* you here? The *real* reason?"

She wouldn't look at me, but her words took my breath away. "I— I want to see where this, with you and me, together— Uh, out in the grass, before— I mean, um, I want to know . . . If we— If you and I can—"

She stopped.

Gulped.

"I want to try," she whispered.

She wanted me. She wanted *us*.

In spite of what I'd done to her.

I couldn't begin to make that up to her, but she was here, wanting to start over.  
With me.

A relationship.

A marriage.

I said the only thing I could think of. "I'm sorry I hurt you out in the grass, Iustitia."

What a fucking stupid thing to say.

She seemed to find that amusing. "So you said about a gazillion times."

No, *what I mean is, I'm sorry I raped you.*

I wanted her so badly I hurt, with an intensity and desperation I'd never felt in my life. There she was. Right next to my—*our*—bed.

*My wife.* Wanted me, wanted *us*.

I had to get out of there before I fucked it all up and made her leave again. I knew I would eventually anyway, because I always did.

"I won't pressure you. You come to me when you're ready."

And if I didn't fuck it up before I had to tell her about the man I'd murdered, that would certainly send her away for good.

I really would eat my gun if she left again because after that heartfelt little speech, I knew I would never be able to live without her.

## *Sexual Harassment*

JUSTICE WAS STILL STEAMING FROM HER AND KNOX'S SHOUTING MATCH THIS morning over . . . nothing, really. At least, not about her tardiness.

*Iustitia, if you want to wear my clothes, buy me some more. I don't have any white shirts this morning and I have court.*

*So wear a blue one.*

*I don't like blue ones and I have court and juries don't like me in dark colors and I'm not going to wear a blue shirt under a gray suit and my gray shirts don't match my suits right.*

*Wear your pink one then.*

*I would if you hadn't fucking worn it!*

*Does it make any difference at all that I like you in black?*

*Only after five o'clock. Iustitia, are you listening to me?*

*I can't help but listen to you. The whole neighborhood can hear you.*

*I'm yelling because I don't want to lose my fucking trial, which I frequently did when I wore dark suits. Shit, Iustitia, that's why I hire fucking jury consultants. Quit taking clothes from my fucking trial closet.*

Well, okay. It was her fault. She had run him out of white shirts—and his sole pink one—over the weekend and yes, she did know that juries didn't like him in black. He tended to roar in court and when he wore black, he came off as three-quarters deranged.

Which was the way she liked him best.

She just hadn't . . . thought about it. Didn't she get brownie points for *wanting* to wear his clothes?

Right about the time she got to work and decided to apologize to him, she walked into the courthouse and noticed the kinds of stares she hadn't garnered since

she first began working in Chouteau County. Then she heard a random snicker here and there.

She stopped cold. Her nostrils flared and she looked around, her eyes narrowed, at the various county employees, who couldn't keep their amusement to themselves.

Crap.

She saw the state trooper responsible for all of this out of the corner of her eye. Hadley smirked at her, not apologetic in the least bit. She curled her lip at him and he burst out laughing.

"Oh, I see. They got *your* memo, but not mine."

"Can't help it, Justice. News doesn't travel *that* fast. You should be thanking me because look what you got out of it."

She flipped him off, making sure he could see her wedding ring—what she'd gotten out of his gossiping. He howled again, but turned away when the radio on his shoulder blipped his name.

Yet . . . a wedding ring, a showdown with Fen, a night spent snuggling and kissing apparently didn't count when it came to Knox's trial closet.

"Harrumph."

"You're late," Knox snapped when she walked into the office.

"Am not," she snapped back. "I'm exactly on time."

"I want you in my office in five minutes."

Justice rolled her eyes when his office door slammed behind him. Everyone in the office was busy, but that didn't mean they couldn't spare a second to chuckle, especially now that the secret was out.

At least amongst the attorneys in the office. Everybody else must still think Knox and Justice were having an affair.

She dumped her things and went to Knox's office, opened the door, saw him standing behind his desk, looking down, sorting through papers.

In a black suit. Gray shirt. Ice blue tie that matched his eyes, which she'd found and bought for him.

His hair looked more pale against the black, a light gold.

God, he was hot.

She closed the door.

"What."

He looked up at her, a menacing scowl on his face. That wasn't new.

He approached her like a lion, golden, predatory, hungry. That wasn't new.

He stopped inches away from her and wrapped his hands around her hips, gathering the fabric up as he slid his hands up and over them to her waist. That wasn't exactly new, but her breath caught.

"Are you going to stop wearing my clothes or buy me new ones?" he growled as the hem of her dress collected at her waist, over his wrists.

"Neither. Not if you're forced to dress like *that* everyday," she returned, her chin rising. "I like it. If you want to dress in gray, buy your own surplus."

"Fine," he snarled. "Now that we've got that cleared up, I'm going to put you up against that wall behind us and fuck you."

*That* was new.

"You never fuck."

"I do today," he growled.

"Fine," she snapped, thoroughly, unexpectedly aroused and so glad that she'd chosen to wear stockings instead of pantyhose.

Knox grabbed the back of her head and kissed her hard, angrily. She returned it with the fire that had been burning in her all morning. He turned them around and backed her up against the wall. Lifting her, he wrapped her legs loosely around his waist and leaned her back against the wall. He undid his trousers, and she pushed her panties aside.

As an afterthought, she dipped two fingers inside herself, gathering her juices and offered them to Knox, watching him as he stared right back at her, licking her fingers slowly, savoring each drop. Then she was slammed flat against the wall as he drove inside her.

Justice moaned, her eyes closing, her head tilting back against the wall to enjoy the ride. She smiled. Knox's left hand was braced against the wall and his right hand cupped her ass as he thrust fast and hard; her fingers raked through his hair to hold him tight to her skin. He feasted on her collarbone, her throat, her neck, her—

"Knox— Oh, shit."

Justice's head snapped up and her eyes popped open. Knox's head whipped around.

Eric, his hand on the doorknob and his jaw on the floor, was being rapidly flanked by Richard, Patrick, Dirk, and a cadre of officers and attorneys, staring at them with varying degrees of shocked glee.

"WELL, GET OUT!" Knox finally bellowed when no one seemed inclined to budge.

The door slammed and all was quiet. Knox's blond head dropped down on Justice's chest.

"Knox," she whispered desperately. "Don't stop, please. I'm almost there."

His head snapped up again to look her in the eye, and his mouth twitched. She sucked in a deep breath when his cock twitched inside her, responding to her request.

"Are you going to howl like you do at home?" he asked breathlessly as he slowly worked up to his previous rhythm.

She sighed and closed her eyes. "Do you want me to?"

"It would be nice of you to throw a bone to the dogs on the other side of the door."

"You're *such* a perv."

"Yes, and I've trained you well."

She laughed and opened her eyes, staring down at his gorgeous face. "We need to have angry sex more often."

"I agree. Can you manage to be pissed off before we get home?"

"Doubt—" and she gasped as she felt herself opening and clenching, sensation blossoming between her legs and spreading up through her belly.

She moaned instead of howled—couldn't help it—but she was pretty sure it was heard through the door because the laughter of several men echoed back at her.

"You," he whispered into her mouth as he kissed her long, slow, and deep after he had emptied himself into her with a hoarse groan, "make me feel like a randy teenager messing around in the back seat of a car."

"The captain of the football team messing around with a freshman under the bleachers after the game, you mean?"

"Oh, I *like* that."

"Richard gets the credit for that."

Knox set her down and they worked on finding napkins and such to clean themselves up. In the middle of this effort, Justice started to giggle. Then Knox began to chuckle.

"Well, Iustitia, you got me in a black suit at work. Happy now?"

"Yes. And I got caught fucking my boss." He glanced at her, a question in his face. "Well, okay, I liked it. Arrest me."

"You know I don't like kink."

"You left the door unlocked. I'm thinking I could get you in handcuffs yet."

## *Beltane*

**T**HE BONFIRE BLAZED, THE FLAMES LICKING HIGH UP INTO THE STARLIT night through the wide ring of the treetops.

The carefully tended acreage around them bloomed with colorful life, strategically lit to emphasize the way the master gardener had designed them for nighttime pleasure, for the nighttime pleasure she took with her lover.

The creek rippled and whooshed arrogantly just past the bonfire as if to tell Fire that Water was its master, and Fire better not forget it.

May 1.

Beltane.

The festival of flowers, sensuality, fertility, and delight.

The perfect night for a wedding.

Eilis heard the faint strains of Mendelssohn coming from the hidden speakers all around her property, closed her eyes and sniffed at the fragrance coming from the honeysuckle that climbed the stone walls and iron fence surrounding her swimming pool, felt the slight breeze on her near-naked body, faintly tasted a hint of talc that drifted off her sleeping baby.

She opened her eyes when she felt Sebastian's big hand encase one of hers, his big warm body pressed next to hers. He smiled at his son, his eyes reflecting the firelight. He looked to her then, held her gaze as he lifted her fingers to his lips and pressed a kiss into them.

Suddenly shy, she smiled and felt the blush creep up her cheeks.

"I need to paint you like this," Sebastian murmured as he inspected her, head to toe. Played with the baby's curls. "Giselle and your tailor make a good team."



"I guess," she whispered, still self-conscious about having her not-yet-recovered-and-newly-pregnant-again belly bared, her breasts and hips vaguely covered with flower-and-leaf-studded lingerie. With her hair caught up in a tiara made of fresh cosmos, she looked like the Green Man's bride and indeed, she was.

The Green Man himself had a green-dyed leather loincloth, heavily embroidered in a leaf pattern, that barely covered his butt and probably wouldn't cover his front if he got an erection. He would have gone naked and insisted she do the same had not the officiator balked at performing the ceremony amongst nakedness.

A good portion of her enormous family wandered around the park Eilis had built of her back yard, laughing, eating, drinking (some of them drinking alcohol, even), kissing their spouses, engaged in overt foreplay in the shadows, practically making love—

—which was as Sebastian had intended, as this, he had explained to her, was what Beltane was all about.

*Technically, what it's really about is throwing away the wedding ring for a night without recriminations.*

*So tonight . . . ?*

*You won't see that tonight. You're dealing with a bunch of Mormons who think this is strange enough, but they're willing to go along for the ride to indulge an eccentric relative. Even the most maverick draw the line somewhere and adultery's one of those lines. Look at 'em. Do any of them look like they'd rather be with someone other than their spouse?*

*No.*

*The ones who are active in the church are as invested in their demonstrations of obedience to the Lord as they are in their spouses. A little light exhibitionism with your spouse isn't exactly excommunicable, so don't worry about them. They know their limits. Everybody else here tonight does too.*

A good half of the women were as bare as Eilis, and most of the men wore similar ragged leather, green-dyed and leaf-embroidered loincloths as skimpy as Sebastian's.

Justice had gone to a costume shop and found iridescent wings she could wear laced to the tiny green velvet harem vest that matched her tiny velvet skirt. Her face and pregnant body glimmered and glistened in the firelight from the iridescent makeup she'd applied to her skin. Eilis didn't think she'd ever seen Knox's attention so fully riveted on one thing and for so long. His expression betrayed his wonder that this Faery Queen had chosen to stay with him, to bring him his dreams. Knox couldn't keep his mouth off her neck nor his hands off her breasts, and Eilis expected that at any moment he would drop to his knees at his young wife's feet to worship her with his mouth, as was her due.

Giselle wore a green merrywidow, her breasts pushed up high enough to emphasize the slim platinum diamond-and-emerald choker she wore around her neck. A ground-length skirt consisting only of hundreds of long pastel ribbons and ropes of white beads hung from the hem of her merrywidow. Every time she took a step, the ribbons and beads all fluttered and flew, exposing the fact that she wore nothing underneath. Bryce made no effort to hide the strokes of his fingers between her legs, that he was deliberately keeping her on the edge of an orgasm without letting her go over.

*It's Beltane, Eilis, Giselle had said when Eilis questioned her outfit and plans for the night. I want to make love with my husband by the bonfire or in the woods.*

*But you aren't pagan, Giselle.*

*I don't separate my sexuality and my spirituality. I think it's a gift from our Creators, just like nature is a gift, and I feel closer to them when I'm in nature. Plus, I think there's truth in everything. Just because I'm more invested in one truth than another doesn't mean there isn't value in the others. And lemme tell you something else. Sebastian isn't as much of a spiritual renegade as he likes to think he is. Mormons do believe there's a Heavenly Mother as well as a Heavenly Father, we just don't assign her an active role in our lives. Sebastian's problem is with the need for a savior and he doesn't accept that Christ is a savior. He believes the God and Goddess love us because we belong to them and wouldn't create us and put us here just to make us jump through those kinds of hoops. There's a great inequity in Christianity Sebastian doesn't like.*

*What do you think, believe, about the Goddess?*

*I love her, Eilis. I pray to both the Father and the Mother. But don't tell my mom or my aunts that or I'll be forced into a weekend of remedial doctrine.*

Well, Eilis didn't really understand enough about Christianity—or any other religion—to grasp the depth of significance of all that, but the rest of her family did. And it didn't matter; wherever Sebastian led her, she would go because he had proven time and again that his philosophies worked.

*Giselle, I don't understand why a Mormon bishop would consent to marry us in a pagan ritual.*

*Eilis, you've met Mitch. You know how much he and Sebastian depend on each other. He wouldn't not do it. His only condition was that we didn't go completely naked.*

And then it was time.

Bishop Mitch Hollander wore khakis and a green rugby shirt, but he was definitely overdressed. He stared pointedly at the men's attire, then cast both Bryce and Sebastian a glare. Sebastian smirked. Bryce coughed to cover a chuckle. Morgan rolled his eyes. Étienne snapped something in French, which made Mitch scowl and snap back. In French. Whatever he said made Sebastian laugh and add his own two francs. A couple of other similarly dressed cousins apparently understood the blatant chastisement and got out of the line of fire.

"Mitch is gonna kick my ass," Sebastian muttered to Eilis with a crooked grin.

"What was that about?" Eilis whispered.

"Mormon thing. I'll explain it later."

Mendelssohn faded away and the only music left was that of the park: the bonfire's crackle, the creek's merry burbles, the whisper of the breeze in the treetops, the calls of the hoot owls.

The baby shuddered sleepily against Eilis's shoulder, rearranged himself, sighed, smacked his lips and settled again, all without opening his eyes.

The family gathered silently to stand and watch and listen to Mitch's short remarks, which, though apropos, didn't really seem too different from what Sebastian believed.

He directed Eilis to face Sebastian.

"Will you be my Goddess, Eilis?" Sebastian whispered.

"Always and forever. Will you be my Artist, Sebastian?"

"Always and forever."

"Amen," said Bishop Hollander.

The soft answer of fifty *amens* echoed through the trees as Sebastian wrapped his arms around Eilis and kissed her, the child they had made together—both children, really—between them.

So lost in her husband's kiss for so long, Eilis didn't notice that half the family had started back toward the house and the rest had drifted off in their rightful pairs, into the woods or down into the dales or up on the hills, until she and Sebastian slowly parted.

Sebastian looked at Mitch. Mitch looked back at him and then Sebastian grasped Mitch to him in a bear hug.

"Elder," Sebastian said, "you need a vacation. You look exhausted."

"Elder," Mitch returned, "I am, but I can't right now." Indeed, Eilis could see his fatigue even in the firelight.

"Tell you what. Send Trevor out for the summer. We'll take care of him and you can take care of Nina with one less thing to worry about."

Mitch chuckled then and said, "I fear for the boy's salvation in your hands, Sebastian, but I'll take you up on that. Trev's feelings won't be hurt at all." He looked at Eilis then and suddenly, her heart hurt for him. He'd sacrificed a great deal to officiate his best friend's wedding. "Please take care of him, Eilis."

She smiled and nodded.

Mitch looked around him and said, his voice wry, "Glad I'm not staying. This isn't exactly the kind of wedding reception I'm used to."

"Well, Mitch, there's the house," Sebastian said, gesturing to the grand Tudor revival far off behind them. "The rest of the True Believing Mormons are in there

having cake and lime-sherbet-and-7-Up punch, keeping away from us philistines in case they see something they might be tempted to try.”

Mitch laughed a hearty laugh. “No can do. My pilot’s waiting for me. See you two next month?” Once both Eilis and Sebastian had nodded, he turned and trotted across the lawn to the driveway.

“Eilis. Sebastian,” said a woman, low, seeming to appear out of the darkness. Dianne, a joyous expression on her face, took the baby gently from Eilis. She cast a soft smile at both Eilis and Sebastian, then left with the boy to head for the G-rated shelter of the house, where the other, more orthodox members of the family would spend the night, waiting for the heathens to join them in the morning after a night of fire- and starlit debauchery with their respective spouses.

Sebastian untied his loincloth and dropped to the ground to laze in the grass and stare up at Eilis. She pulled off the flowered bra and wriggled out of her flower-bedecked maternity boyshorts. He offered her his hand and tugged at her until she knelt beside him and simply stared at him, at his naked body glowing in the light of the bonfire.

She languidly straddled Sebastian’s hips, wrapped her hand around Sebastian’s cock, guided him into her. He laid one hand over her pregnant belly, his fingers splayed out, and wrapped the other around her hip so far his finger caressed the sensitive spot just behind where their bodies joined. She closed her eyes and released a long, shuddering breath at the ecstasy of how his hands felt on her, how he felt inside her.

“My Goddess,” Sebastian murmured as he raised his hips, just a little. “Let me love you in the light of the Beltane fire.”

The faint sounds of a dozen other pairs of lovers taking their pleasure in each other wafted to them on the breeze, Eilis’s cry and Sebastian’s roar echoing, answering the rest.

## *Missa Solemnis*

DECEMBER 29, 2008

**P**ERSONAL ESTATE TO BE DIVIDED EQUALLY BETWEEN MY DAUGHTER, EILIS Hilliard Logan Taight and my nephew, Fort Knox Oliver Hilliard, both of whom I deprived of what was rightfully theirs.

“To Celia Giselle Cox Kenard, I leave this box.

“To Celia Gertrude Dunham Hilliard, I leave nothing because I have nothing left to give you. I gave you everything I had and, ultimately, I sacrificed my life and my salvation to make you happy. And I failed.”

Fifty adults sat or stood in a conference room meant for thirty, shocked into silence, the only sound the soft swish of a box across the conference table and the weeping of two women.

Mr. Jerome Larkin looked around the table at the beneficiaries of James Fenimore Hilliard's largesse, unable to understand the exact nature of their distress. The beautiful blonde to his left, Eilis Taight, had turned into her husband's chest to cry softly. King Midas urged her to sit onto his lap so he could hold her close and whisper in her ear. Of all the people in the room, only Sebastian seemed unconcerned—perhaps even pleased—with Fen's death, which Jerome *could* understand, all things considered.

Eilis's half-brother, Knox Hilliard, sat to Jerome's right, his hands clenching the arms of the fine wooden chair so tightly it would probably break. He stared down at the floor, an expression of rage on his face so intense, Jerome now believed every rumor he'd ever heard about the man. Hilliard's young wife slid one hand across his

back and reached up with the other to caress his cheek. She watched him with great concern, then she leaned in to him to press her lips against his cheek.

The diminutive strawberry blonde who sat just beyond Sebastian, took possession of the box she had been bequeathed with great reluctance, as if it were laced with poison and she didn't want to touch it. She studied it carefully. The size of a large dictionary, it was an elaborate affair: ancient, cracked tooled leather, gold leaf, and utterly masculine. Jerome had wanted one for himself, but when he'd inquired of Fen as to its acquisition, Fen had said something like "brukka." Jerome had had no idea where or what "brukka" was and Fen had not elaborated. The only word left marginally legible looked like it might spell "BRUGES," but the leather was mostly smoothed over and the gold had long worn away.

Not only did Jerome not know where the box came from, he had no idea what was in it. Fen's niece folded her arms on the table and ducked her head into them to sob, obviously heartbroken. Her husband buried his fingers in her hair to play with her curls, his scarred face betraying anger and worry.

Jerome looked around at the rest of the gathered: All eight of Fen's sisters-in-law were present, some with spouses, some not. A goodly number of Fen's other nieces and nephews and their spouses were present, including inventor Étienne LaMontagne and economist Morgan Ashworth. Another of Fen's favored nieces, Victoria LaMontagne Bautista, sat at the table next to her husband, Emilio, clutching his hand. They had flown from Spain to attend the funerals and reading of the will. Victoria, in shock at what had transpired in her family, simply stared at something far beyond the room.

There were children present, the infants all asleep in carriers scattered around the room or in their grandmothers' arms. The older children were the most well behaved Jerome had ever seen and obviously knew better than to disrupt the proceedings. Granted, from the looks on their faces, they were frightened by the extreme emotion their parents displayed and whispered amongst themselves, trying to make heads and tails of the level of vulnerability that must be foreign in this family.

Truth be told, Jerome was as shocked as the children at the grief and anger in the room; he had never presided at such a meeting where the rage did not involve money and what had been left to whom. No, here, the rage and grief had nothing to do with money and everything to do with the sick and twisted relationships Fen had had with some of his nieces and nephews, part love, part hate, one warring with the other every minute of every day. And it seemed most of these people returned that lovehate, unable to decide which.

Jerome knew why: Trudy, Fen's wife.

Jerome had despised Trudy and, he was not ashamed to admit, he was very happy not to have to deal with her. Her suicide had relieved him of a task he had not wanted to face. Naturally, Fen would have never guessed she would take her own life, nor would Jerome. Narcissistic to her core, Trudy had loved the vicarious attention; bad or good, she didn't care, as long as she controlled the strings and made every one of these people jump at the twitch of her hand without appearing to do so. While it was possible Trudy had wanted her suicide to be a legacy of everlasting control, Jerome didn't think so. A narcissist's death was transient in survivors' lives so he couldn't deduce what she'd thought to accomplish, unless . . .

. . . it was less about an extravagant way to inflict damage and more about the reality of facing a life without her beauty, with or without Fen. After an unfortunate—albeit unexplained—accident a year and a half ago that had shattered Trudy's face and required her to undergo a great deal of plastic surgery to rebuild it, Trudy very rarely ventured outside of the Hilliards' estate.

To Jerome's eye, of the three specifically named in Fen's will, it seemed Fen had loved his niece Giselle the most; Jerome wasn't sure why. Trudy had hated her the most. Perhaps the two were inextricably entwined. Jealousy did strange things to narcissists.

"So . . . that's it?" asked Lilly Cox, Giselle's mother. "One page?"

"That's it," Jerome answered, still a little amazed himself. It was the shortest will he'd ever drawn up, two days before Fen's death because Fen had known he would die, on what day, and by what method. He'd planned to commit suicide-by-Knox-Hilliard—and succeeded.

One of the babies awoke and began to whimper. Dianne Taight, King Midas's mother, went to retrieve the child—Jerome didn't know to whom it belonged and apparently, it didn't matter; it seemed every child in this family was fair game for love and care. This family was its own village.

Giselle Kenard raised her head finally and looked to her husband helplessly. He pulled out a handkerchief and began to gently dry her face of tears. Once he'd finished, he murmured, "What's in the box, Wife?"

She took a deep breath and looked down at it. Touched it. Caressed it. She hesitantly worked the key out of its hidden pocket (how she found it was anybody's guess, as Jerome hadn't been able to find it even after hours of searching), then unlocked it.

A piece of paper fluttered with the opening of the lid; she picked it up gingerly and began to read silently, her husband looking over her shoulder. The husband-and-wife grew matching expressions of shock and horror as they read until Giselle stuffed it back into the box and slammed the lid closed.

She bolted out of her chair and wove through the room's occupants, sobbing, her husband following, trying to catch up.

When Taight reached out a hand to open the box, Belinda Ashworth, one of his aunts, slapped it. Hard. "Not yours," she snapped.

It was the first time Jerome had ever seen a forty-two-year-old man—a financial powerhouse—reduced to the affect of a guilty ten-year-old boy.

These people made Jerome terribly uncomfortable; he had never encountered such collective passion and loyalty, such respect, such love. The power that these people represented, in terms of personal strength and nationwide influence, was suffocating. Jerome checked his watch.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I do have another appointment I need to prepare for. If you would excuse me . . ."

No one said a word, so Jerome stood, gathered his papers, and left unnoticed.



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