

MAGDALENE

MORIAH JOVAN

MAGDALENE

Book 3 in the Tales of Dunham

by
Moriah Jovan

A Mormon bishop.
An ex-prostitute.
A man with a vendetta.
Let the games begin.

Smashwords Edition

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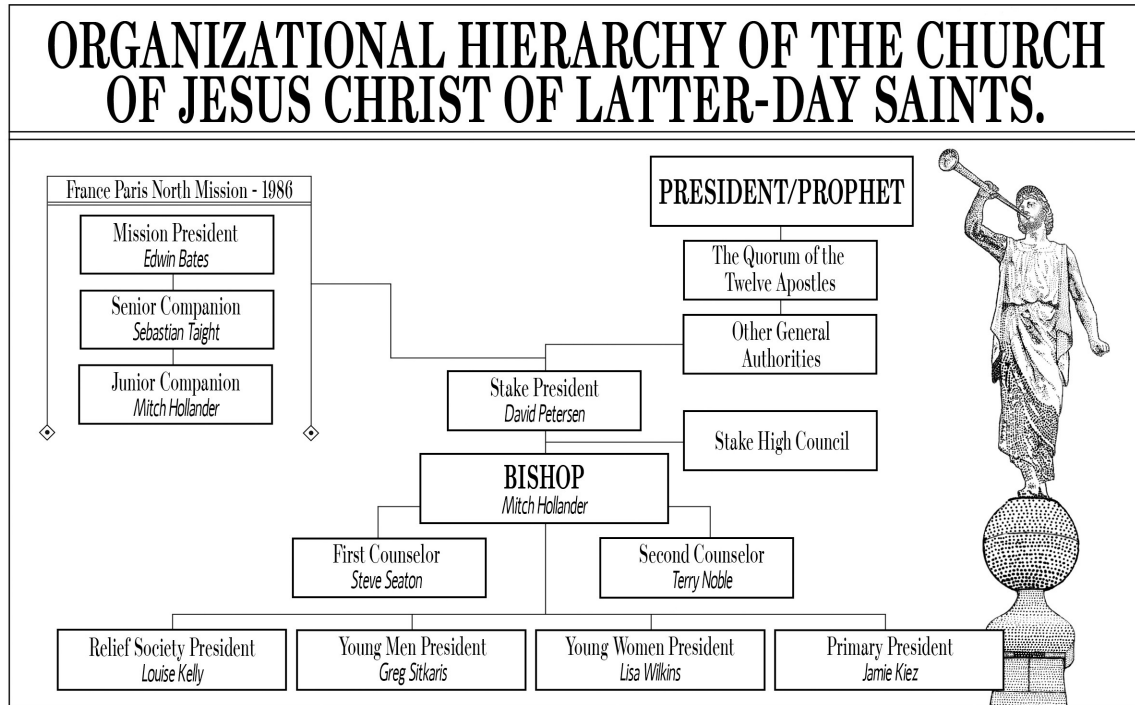
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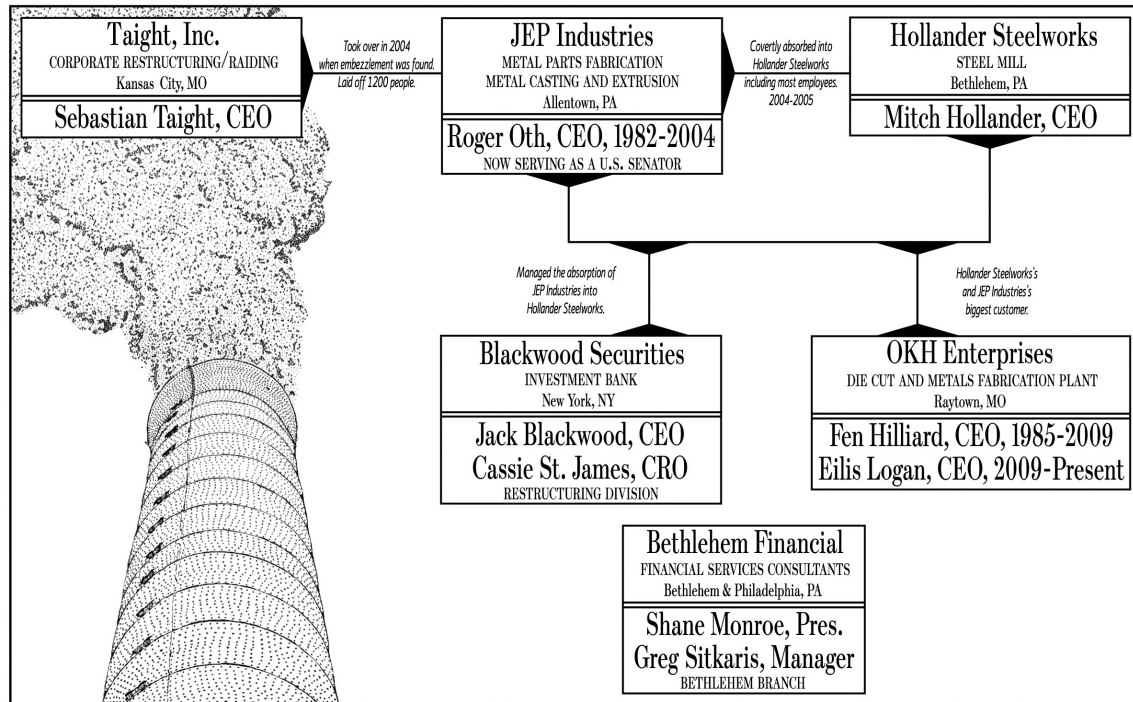
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But if they cannot contain, let them marry: for it is better to marry than to burn.

I Corinthians 7:9 (KJV)

* * * * *

MAY 2007

I didn't go into prostitution because I was desperate; I did it because I was bored: Bored with my hausfrau existence, bored with my husband both in bed and out, bored with my ingrate daughters who don't (yet) understand what it means to be the sacrificial lamb in the nuclear family setup and that being a wife and mother can be its own category of prostitution. They will. And I'll laugh.

I was never the stereotypical whore with a heart of gold, which seems to be used as point and counterpoint: If you're pure in heart, being a whore is tolerable, forgivable even; if you're just a mercenary bitch who likes sex and, moreover, getting paid for it, it's the unforgivable sin. Ultimately, however, I had to choose my clients on their ability to pay my exorbitant prices and leave the good sex to my carefully selected lovers.

I didn't quit prostitution for some sort of wish fulfillment of born-again virginity; I quit because I was bored. Fucking for money involves a certain amount of acting ability and while I'm a very good actress (thus, a very good whore), it takes some amount of concentration that is not usually conducive to having a real orgasm.

With a healthy bank account, one ex-husband whose current partner sports genitalia similar to his own, four grown daughters, my forty-third birthday on the horizon, and with professional ennui setting in, I had to find something else to do.

* * * * *

Never an Honest Word

November 9, 2010

It was Tuesday night at church, and Mitch could tell: The sound of twenty teenagers' laughter echoed from the gym. Toddler squeals came from the nursery and carried across the building. Murmurs and chuckles drifted from the kitchen where women gathered to learn the art of creating decent meals out of food storage.

They weren't doing so well.

He headed out of the room to escape the cooks who knew the food was bad but were determined to brazen it out.

"That's right! Leave us to our misery!"

Mitch tossed a grin over his shoulder at the woman who'd spoken. "Self-induced, Prissy," he called back. "You get no sympathy from me."

Chuckling, he looked down at his BlackBerry and nearly barreled into another woman. He stifled a groan and stepped back immediately. "Excuse me, Sister Bevan," Mitch murmured, refusing to use her first name.

"Bishop, can I talk to you?"

He didn't want to.

But he would.

Because he had to.

"Certainly," he said politely, and gestured toward the hall that led to the bishop's office. She preceded him and once inside, he closed the door behind her and checked a second door to an adjoining room to make sure his clerk was present and puttering about with church records. Mitch left that one open an inch.

Meanwhile, Sally had made herself comfortable in the chair across from Mitch's desk. As usual, she had dressed in her best, something approaching a cocktail dress, but not quite making the look work for her. She should probably not wear red.

He dropped into his chair, leaned back, and intertwined his fingers behind his head. "What can I do for you?"

What can I do for you?

His life's refrain.

Of course, he didn't have to be told what he could do for her. She'd made herself abundantly clear in the last year, and hadn't been too subtle before that.

She launched into her usual litany of complaints against her husband, Dan, most of which involved his inability to find or keep a job. But jobs at Dan's level were scarce and the man was overeducated and overqualified for anything he could get in Allentown or Bethlehem. Apparently, he hadn't told Sally he was looking for jobs in Manhattan, Chicago, and Atlanta—and not just because there were better opportunities.

Dan wanted to get Sally away from Mitch, and Mitch was perfectly happy to assist him in that endeavor. They'd never talked about it, but the knowledge lay heavy between them.

Mitch wasn't listening to her. He'd heard it before and didn't believe a word of it, so he stared at a spot just to the left of the woman's ear and said "uh huh" and "no" and "yes" in all the appropriate places.

A knock sounded on the door, and with far too much gratitude, he said, "Come in." It opened and a seventeen-year-old girl stuck her head in his office. "Hi, Bishop."

"Hi, Hayleigh."

"Is Trevor here tonight?"

"He's at the mill." Which she knew. It was code for *I really need to talk to you now, Bishop.*

"Don't you think it's kind of weird that the bishop's son doesn't come to the youth activities?"

That stung, but she didn't know. Mitch didn't need another reminder that Trevor hated Church—everything about it, from doctrine to culture—and would rather clean rest-stop toilets with his own toothbrush than come to church.

But he did attend on Sundays and, to the kid's credit, he did everything he was asked with a smile and without complaint.

Mitch might have been happier about that were it not for the stab of guilt he felt because he'd farmed the kid out to someone else to raise during his most impressionable years. Now it was too late.

Sally rose abruptly, obviously offended that he had allowed her to be interrupted.

"Thank you, Bishop," she said tightly.

"You're welcome, Sister Bevan."

Hayleigh Sitkaris opened the door fully and moved out of Sally's path. She waited until the older woman had disappeared, then slipped into the office and plopped herself on a chair. "Bishop—"

He waited, but she looked down at the floor. Twisted her diamond bracelet around with her finger. Swallowed. Maybe tonight would be the night she'd confide in him the way a few of the other kids did, the ones who didn't trust the charismatic youth leader—
—Hayleigh's father.

"I— Uh, I need—"

"You better tell me quick, because your dad's going to be here any minute."

She paled.

"Hayleigh," he said abruptly, no-nonsense. Her head snapped up. "Whatever it is, I can help you. You have to trust me."

"Nobody believes me," she whispered, casting a glance at the cracked clerk's door. Mitch leaned over and gave it a gentle push until the latch clicked.

"Except Trevor?" It was a stab in the dark.

She paused. "He...doesn't get it."

Well, Mitch hadn't understood it himself until recently, either, and the girl had no faith that he ever would.

A sharp series of raps on the door made the girl stiffen. "Just a moment," he called. "Hayleigh," he said softly, leaning over his desk to offer her the ever-present tissue box. "Mop up."

She obeyed. Mitch waited and watched as she struggled to pull herself together. Finally, she took a deep breath and nodded.

"Come in."

Enter Hayleigh's father. He stilled when he saw the girl, and said smoothly enough, "Hayleigh, dear, your mother's looking for you."

"Yes, Daddy," she said brightly, popping out of her chair and acting for all the world

that she was happy to see him. But she never met his eyes, and cast a glance at Mitch.
“Thanks, Bishop.”

“No problem.”

She squeezed past her father, who watched her, then closed the door and looked at Mitch. “Appropriating something else of mine, Mitch?” he said low. “Raising two daughters of your own wasn’t enough that you feel the need to raise mine, too, or are you into teenage girls?”

“Siddown.”

“I’ll stand, thanks.”

Of course he would. But those tactics didn’t bother Mitch in the least, and he simply relaxed back into his chair again. The hostility was ever-present and had been for the last twenty-five years, but now there were no illusions—or at least, there weren’t any now that Mitch had something approaching proof, though not of the right type.

“Whaddaya want, Mitch? The kids are waiting for me, and you know I don’t like being at your beck and call.”

“I can help you with that,” Mitch drawled, making a point to look straight into Greg’s soulless gray eyes. “I’m releasing you from the Young Men’s presidency.”

“You *what*?” Greg asked, shocked. It was the first time Mitch had seen him show a genuine emotion in years.

“Young Men’s president. You’re out.”

Greg’s face contorted with the anger of perpetual frustration. “Why?” he ground out.

“Does the name Rohm mean anything to you?” Mitch asked.

Greg’s rage didn’t abate nor did he fall to justifying, explaining, reasoning. “So what if it does?” he snarled. “You can’t prove anything.”

Mitch shrugged. “Does it matter? I don’t have to have proof. Maybe I just want somebody else to have a crack at such a...*prestigious*...calling.”

“Nobody in this ward can do that job better than I can.”

That, in fact, was true, but Greg had an ulterior motive: In this neck of the woods, Young Men’s president was seen as the stepping stone to the bishopric and above all else, Greg wanted to be a bishop.

“Still waiting to sit in this chair, eh?” Mitch said, just to twist the knife a little. It wasn’t very Christlike of him, but he couldn’t resist.

“Dave’s going to hear about this.”

“I’m sure he will, bright and early tomorrow morning at tee time. Does Shane know you’re a thief?”

Greg barked a humorless laugh. “Ah, your father-in-law. He’s always been a tool.”

Mitch totally agreed, but there was no satisfaction in knowing that Shane was as blind to Greg as everyone else.

Almost everyone else. There was a minority of people who either understood or had instincts enough to steer clear:

A couple of the kids.

The Relief Society president and her husband.

Mitch’s first counselor and his wife.

His second counselor, who had had a few run-ins with Greg when they worked together at Jep Industries years before.

Somehow Mitch had managed to surround himself with the few people in the ward

who understood what Greg was about—and he had never noticed.

“So tell me something,” Mitch said abruptly. “How does it feel, knowing you were the flunky at J.I.? What’d they promise you? A million? Two?”

Greg’s face flushed and he balled his fists. Mitch knew Greg wouldn’t dare punch him, because Mitch was bigger, stronger, and he had authority over Greg. Getting arrested for assault would take the shine off Greg’s façade.

Oh, how Mitch wished he had enough proof to take to the D.A., but since he didn’t, he had to settle for punishing Greg ecclesiastically—and even there his options were limited.

“And leaving the country without you, after you’d done their dirty work? Nice touch.”

Mitch couldn’t bar Greg from going to the temple. The stake president—Mitch’s superior—would have to okay the decision, which would oblige Mitch to explain. Without proof, explaining to a man that his best friend had been the linchpin in a large-scale embezzlement scheme would be...awkward. At best. And explaining it to most of the people in Mitch’s ward—even if he could—would cause no end of trouble for Mitch.

Better to release Greg quietly and not call him to anything else. Caught between the most popular man in the ward and the stake president, it was the only thing Mitch could do—and he’d get hammered for it from every side.

Ah, well. Perhaps then President Petersen would release Mitch from the bishopric so he could go on with his life and do something...different.

“Considering our history, I don’t know what possessed me to call you in the first place.”

“It’s because you’re such a damned fool, Mitch.”

“I’m sure Senator Oth would believe me.”

Greg planted his hands on Mitch’s desk and leaned over it. “Go right ahead and tell him. He’s as stupid as your father-in-law is.”

“I can’t disagree with that,” Mitch said blithely. “But Roger has the power to make your life miserable whether I can prove it or not.”

Greg’s mouth twitched as he slowly straightened to his full height. “You would never go to Oth,” he murmured. “You and your wolf pack aren’t exactly his favorite people, and to him, I’m a nobody. He wouldn’t understand it if you carved it in his skin.”

That was true, too.

“You have no conscience, do you?”

Greg answered Mitch’s question with a smirk, his temper evening out into a vague humor. Fake, all fake. Except the rage. The rage would manifest as “slips” of the tongue and gentle, slyly penitent tidbits of gossip, little seeds of contention planted in the minds of three quarters of the people in the ward and stake.

Why was Mitch only seeing this *now*?

“Maybe I do, maybe I don’t,” Greg said, “but *I* don’t keep company with women who pose for nude portraits. Or modern-day Gordon Gekkos. Or *murderers*.”

“Jesus did.”

Greg’s rage resurfaced and he reached for the doorknob. “You’re going to regret this, Mitch,” he snarled. “You just can’t be happy unless you’ve taken everything that belongs to me, can you?”

“I never took anything away from you. Mina didn’t belong to you. Neither does my

car, my house, my kids, my company, my bank account, my friends, my calling. Never did.”

“I’ll find a way to destroy you, Mitch. When I’m done with you, you won’t be able to walk into a church building anywhere in the world. You think anybody will believe you over me? You could have mountains of proof, and nobody would believe I’m capable of anything less than perfection, and you’d get crucified for daring to suggest that I am—starting with your father-in-law and the stake president.”

“Aaannd while you’re trying to figure out how to do that, I’ll be turning your life inside out and upside down, finding all your little schemes, starting with Jep Industries. Let’s see who finishes first.”

“Don’t play chicken with me, Mitch,” he growled. “You’ll lose, just like the Rohms. Just like Senator Oth.”

Mitch smirked. “Do your worst.”

Greg turned in a fury, but his demeanor changed the instant he opened Mitch’s office door and stepped out in the hall to find a cadre of teenagers awaiting him. “All right, guys,” he boomed, as jovial as always, “*Now* we can get back to the fun.”

The excited chatter dimmed with the close of the door, and Mitch picked up his phone. “Sebastian,” he said without preamble. “I know you’re up to your eyeballs in problems right now, but we need to go over those Jep Industries documents again. ASAP.”

“Uh,” said the man on the other end of the phone after a long pause. “Why? It’s been six years. We’ve gone through those a million times.”

“I have something to look for now. Guy in my ward, one of the HR execs we didn’t rehire. He was in on it. I just can’t prove it.”

Sebastian put him on speakerphone. “Name?”

“Greg Sitkaris.”

Keyboard clicks. Mouse clicks. “Okay, I see him, but nothing pops out at me. What are you thinking?”

“I want to get together. Lay it all out with the new information, re-map it. And the sooner the better.”

“So what did he do? Why now?”

Mitch hesitated, wondering how much he could say. Being a bishop held the same responsibility of confidentiality that every other ecclesiastical position did. But in this case...

“One of the foundry’s foremen— He’s a bishop of another ward. Two weeks ago he tells me about a family in his ward whose financial situation isn’t adding up, and Greg’s name kept popping up. I took the liberty of having my people check into this family’s situation, and all roads point to some annuities Greg sold them—”

“But that’s not illegal,” Sebastian said with some impatience, and Mitch could tell his attention was beginning to wander. “And annuities are notoriously bad instruments to begin with. *Caveat emptor*.”

“Sebastian!” he snapped. “Stay with me. This is important.”

Pause. “Sorry.”

“Once the new information is added in to what we already have, it turns into a different picture. I just don’t have a clear idea of that picture. I want us all there so we can brainstorm.”

Silence, except for the sound of a fingertip tapping on wood. Finally, Sebastian said, "Okay. We can do that, but not in the next couple of weeks. I'm trying to hold Knox together while the media drags him through the mud over Vanessa."

Mitch felt a thud deep in the pit of his stomach. The stake president would demand to know why Mitch had released Greg from such a key position in the ward, and Mitch had hoped to have figured it out before that happened.

"You're going to Whittaker House for Thanksgiving, right?"

"Of course." Mitch only wished Mina had been well enough long enough for him to have taken her to Whittaker House Inn, in the heart of the Missouri Ozarks. It was only a hundred miles southwest of Rolla, the town where he and Mina had truly, finally fallen in love and spent eight years, where they'd built their life and family.

Mina would have adored it.

Under normal circumstances, Mitch would have never gone to one of Vanessa Whittaker's holiday masquerades, with Mina or without. Those parties were way too decadent for his comfort zone, but this time, his attendance was necessary. Vanessa was mired in media mud and nursing a broken heart, to boot. She needed all the support she could get, and he owed her for the sweetly quiet way she'd taken care of him this past year.

"We can do it then," Sebastian was saying. "Bring what you have. See if you can gather more. We can spend the weekend going over it all. That okay?"

No. Possibly too little. Definitely too late.

Mitch couldn't even *enjoy* the thought of finally solving this riddle and putting Greg in jail because of the dread settling over him. He'd bested Greg for almost twenty-five years, time after time, and his winning streak had to end somehow.

Mitch knew this would be it, and it wouldn't be pretty.

"Yeah, that's fine," he said with a confidence he didn't feel.

"Oh, bullshit," Sebastian drawled after a split second. "There's something else going on."

Not for the first time Mitch wished he could lie to his best friend as well as he could lie to the rest of the world. "I just released him from the Young Men's presidency."

"And?"

"He wants to be bishop. Always has. And...compared to him, I have a bit of a credibility problem."

Sebastian grunted. "Because of us."

"That and Greg is...charismatic. In the charlatan televangelist way. Whole ward loves him, especially the kids. He plays golf with the stake president and softball with three quarters of the stake high council. My father-in-law's still in love with him, and you know how Shane feels about *me*.

"But he's also got his daughter wrapped up in knots, his wife is a little too Stepford for my comfort, and the few people who understand what he is stay far, far away from him. It's been explained to me, but I never got it until lately. I started really watching him, tracking his behavior through the way other people act and treat each other. He can stir up trouble without seeming to and make it seem like everybody else's fault."

"Oh, I get it. Like my Aunt Trudy. She could've gaslighted a frog."

"Yes, exactly. Gaslight. That's it. I couldn't think of the word."

"So what naïf called him to be Young Men's president?"

“Uh...that would be me,” Mitch muttered. “He’s useful. Does everything he’s asked and does it well. He’s heavy into Scouting, does all the high adventures in grand style. I wasn’t going to let that go to waste just because he and I have history.”

“And you can’t stand him.”

“It’s not that... It’s—” Mitch sighed. “I never knew him. Never thought about him enough to care. I’ve never looked past his act because it doesn’t affect me one way or another, and I was too busy with my life. Mina tried to explain it to me for years, but apparently I wasn’t listening.”

More guilt.

“And you’re worried about what he could do to you.”

Mitch paused. “Not...*professionally*, no.”

Sebastian laughed then, a booming laugh that made Mitch crack a reluctant grin. “Aw, c’mon, Elder. Have a little faith. This isn’t Paris, and we’re not twenty, getting dressed down by a mission president with the IQ of a crêpe. This guy has no power, no connections, and nowhere near the money you have. What’s the worst he can do?”

* * * * *

Lady Marmalade

November 30, 2010

My email dinged and the sender’s name shocked me.

TO: cjsj@blackwoodsecurities.com
FROM: SA Taight
REPLY-TO: kingmidas@taight.com
SUBJECT: [no subject]
DATE: 11/30/10 2:11 PM EST

Cassie,

Even though you neither called me to rescue you from your cockeyed theories about my Fix-or-Raid Protocol nor presented yourself for my anointing as my ideological successor, I want you to reorganize the Hollander Steelworks/Jep Industries operation. Need it fast and I hear you specialize in fast. Please give me date and time we can get this done. Pref next week. Pref Mon. Pref 10am. Pref @ Hollander’s office.

SbnT

kingmidas@taight.com

What an ego that man possessed. But I laughed, delighted that *he* had come to *me*, albeit with the infamous arrogance that he could snap his fingers and the financial world would jump.

I hit **REPLY**.

TO: kingmidas@taight.com
CC: jack@blackwoodsecurities.com
FROM: Cassandra J. St. James

SUBJECT: How high? Re: [no subject]

I would prefer Monday next, 10 a.m., Hollander's office. Please make the appropriate arrangements.
St. James

It took me the rest of the day to clear my calendar, and it took my assistant that long to get the file storage service to promise a rush delivery. When they had stacked at least a dozen banker's boxes in my corner office suite the next morning, Susan and I looked at each other in dismay.

"Uh..." The head of the corporate bond department stood in the door of my office staring at the carnage.

"New project," I said when I realized Melinda had arrived to whisk Susan away so they could watch their favorite cooking show—*Vittles: Gourmet Roadkill and Weeds*—together. "I need her right now, so DVR it."

"What project?"

"It appears that Hollander Steelworks can no longer support the old Jep Industries operation by itself and needs to be cut loose."

"Oh," Melinda said, blinking. "That's...interesting."

"Want to help?"

"No," she said flatly. "I have about as much interest in restructuring as you have in bonds. Plus, I have plans for the weekend and they do not include—" She waved a hand. "That."

"Okay, then," I said pointedly. "Bye."

Melinda left in a huff, and Susan and I set to work sorting and sifting, finding all the documents I needed.

I'd been through most of them in the last four years, but my assistant hadn't, and she needed to know the whole story so she could help me. Finally, we had the boxes organized enough that we could plant ourselves on the floor and start digging. Susan settled in as if I were going to spin a magical financial yarn for her pleasure.

"Once upon a time," I said, flashing her a smile. She grinned back at me in appreciation. I wondered what it would be like for one of my daughters to happily listen to a story I wanted to tell while we worked on a project together.

"You know who Senator Roger Oth is, right?" I said.

She nodded. "He's an imbecile."

"Exactly. He was the owner and CEO of Jep Industries about, oh, seven years ago. He inherited it and really didn't have a clue what he was doing. One of those silver-spoon types. Like me, only stupid." Susan laughed. "Anyway, J.I. ended up in a hole Roger couldn't pull it out of and he had to call Sebastian Taight to fix it."

"And Mr. Taight raided it instead."

"Well, kind of."

It wasn't King Midas's usual *modus operandi*, and had taken everyone by surprise. Usually when Taight was called to restructure a company, it took a while; no one understood why he did what he did or why it took him so long to do it, but his method worked. When he finished with a company, he left it lean and strong, and—more importantly—it *stayed* that way. It would take a year or more for Wall Street to find out if

he would initiate a hostile takeover, which happened often enough that the betting pools opened as soon as he stepped foot on a property.

"The first thing that tipped everybody off that this wasn't his normal process," I said absently as I thumbed through the files, "was that he called his family in immediately."

"His family?"

"Morgan Ashworth. Knox—"

"Morgan Ashworth, the writer? He's related to King Midas?"

"He's not a writer. He had a few good ideas and hired a team of ghostwriters and marketers. He's an economist who's been politically disenfranchised for the last few years. He basically—" I laughed and reached for another folder. "He shrugged."

Susan groaned at my bad joke, then said, "I've seen him. Well, his picture. On the back of his books. He's hot."

"And gay."

She sighed and I chuckled, unable to blame her.

"Then," I said, and threw a file in a box, "there's Knox Hilliard."

"The OKH Enterprises heir? The one who had to fulfill all those crazy conditions to inherit the company?"

"Yes. The one who had to get married and have a living child before he was forty, which nobody thought he'd do after his uncle—Fen Hilliard—killed Knox's fiancée and *tried* to kill the woman Knox would've married as a last resort."

"I can't imagine a company being important enough to kill people over."

"Ah, well. Fen had built a billion-dollar empire from a ghetto one-guy shop and he loved it. I can understand how he felt about losing it to somebody who didn't want it but felt obliged to take it."

"Enough to *kill* for it, though? Really?"

I pursed my lips. "Of course not. But by the time Fen decided to kill Knox, he'd already lost the company. If Fen couldn't have it, neither could Knox. Fen just wanted to make sure he took Knox with him to hell—and he almost succeeded. Knox had no pulse for a couple of hours after he was shot. In fact, he was still in the morgue when his mother committed suicide."

"Oh, that's so sad."

"It really is."

"Does that have anything to do with Jep Industries and Hollander Steelworks?"

"Only marginally." Then I really started to warm up to the tale. It was a sexy story and I wanted to tell it. "Ashworth and Hilliard—Knox, not Fen—are Sebastian's cousins. Hilliard's a specialist in prosecuting white-collar crimes and he's a magician with numbers. Sebastian only calls him in when he suspects theft. He calls on Ashworth when he needs an assessment of the greater economic impact of a company failing completely."

"Which meant there was a chance that could happen."

"Right. The fact that he called them in *immediately* meant the situation was about to blow up and devastate a huge portion of the economy." Indeed, a Jep Industries failure would have rocked the core of American industry. J.I. bought at least half of Hollander Steelworks's annual output of steel to manufacture thousands of metal parts from the mundane (nuts and washers) to the magnificent (tuned mass dampers). Jep Industries was the BASF of metal-parts manufacturing: J.I. didn't build anything; they made the products used to build everything.

I would have continued to talk, but my mouth was getting dry. “Want anything?” I asked as I stood to get something to drink.

“Cassie,” Susan pleaded, hopping to her feet. “Let me do it.”

“Water, then,” I said, and let her go. It embarrassed her when I got her a drink or brought her lunch, but I knew what she liked and if I wanted to go out... I saw no reason to cater to her sense of corporate propriety over my sense of efficiency.

I stretched. Checked email. Made a phone call.

Wondered if I had yet come to a place in my life where I could contemplate having an affair.

Even though you neither called me to rescue you from your cockeyed theories about my Fix-or-Raid Protocol...

Oh my, and had I ever needed rescuing from my advisor—an asshole professor who didn’t think a rich Upper East Side divorced stay-at-home mom had any business cluttering up *his* MBA program.

I hadn’t called King Midas to pull me out of business school with a diploma because he was beautiful and I couldn’t afford the distraction of attempting to break my long fast—especially with a man who’d ostensibly taken himself off the market a few years before.

He probably would’ve brought his gorgeous wife and then I’d have had *two* people in my immediate vicinity reminding me how long it’d been since I’d had good sex from a man or woman—or both—and taking my attention away from getting my reworked thesis approved.

Taught *had* managed to rescue me *in absentia*, however, by alerting the CEO of Blackwood Securities as to my plight. Jack Blackwood had offered me a job after one evening with a thick dossier his investigators had compiled, my thesis, and my résumé. That, in turn, forced my advisor to reconsider his opinion of rich Upper East Side divorced stay-at-home moms.

Or at least, one of them.

Susan returned with water and we returned to our sorting.

“Where was I?”

“The part where you say you were kidding that Morgan Ashworth’s gay.”

I laughed. “Ah, sorry, no can do.”

“Rats. Okay, so... J.I. was bleeding money and...?”

“Right. Roger Oth’s executives were stealing from him and they’d laid a crumb trail that would point to him as being—oh, the wing man, I guess—once they jumped ship and headed to Brazil. What nobody knew at the time was that Sebastian, Hilliard, and Ashworth were working around the clock to find out how and where that money was going and to stop it. The best they could do—because all the executives left the country the minute Hilliard found the crumb trail—was shut down Jep Industries.”

“I thought that was what they were trying to avoid.”

“They were, but the employees’ 401(k) accounts had been scheduled to drain to a Swiss bank account, and the accounts were locked with a dead man’s switch.”

At Susan’s blank look, I had to backtrack.

“If the accounts were accessed in *bulk* with one login by anyone other than the thieves, they would instantly transfer. It was possible to access one account at a time, which would allow any one employee to receive their funds should they leave before the

scheme was set in motion.”

“To keep anybody from suspecting.”

“Right. Hilliard figured this out, so as soon as he had all the paperwork in place, Sebastian laid off all the workers. Before any employee was allowed to leave the building, they were directed to a computer, instructed to access their account, and roll it over into a different account. That left the thieves without most of the funds they were counting on.”

“Clever.”

Indeed.

“All hail King Midas. Again.”

“Oh, no,” I corrected, then took a long drink. I hadn’t talked to anyone for this long in...oh, forever. “Not this time. Everyone was stunned. The employees. Wall Street. Congress. One day J.I. lived and breathed, secure under King Midas’s guidance for at least another year or two, and the next day it was gone. Poof. Left a hole in the manufacturing sector and killed twelve hundred jobs. He made a lot of enemies.”

“Why didn’t he just hold a press conference and explain it?”

That was a good question. The rest of the world assumed it was because Taight never talked at all, which would have been an entirely reasonable thing for them to assume. King Midas’s mystique rested on his refusal to explain how he decided whether to fix or raid a company.

But I’d spent two years studying Taight and his methods, and I knew why he hadn’t said a word about Jep Industries: He wanted to catch the bastards. He had never gone into a company with an embezzlement problem and not come out without getting a few people jailed. To the rest of Corporate America, Jep Industries looked like a triumph. For all I had never met nor conversed with Sebastian Taight, I *knew* he considered Jep Industries a personal failure.

He’d never failed before or since. It had to grate.

Finally, I said, “He’d rather just keep his reputation for being a ruthless bastard.” Susan nodded. Yes, she would understand because, while I might be King Midas’s heir apparent, I certainly didn’t give companies years to figure out their issues and learn how to be better at their jobs. I had gained a reputation for doing it *fast* because I was *rude*.

Possibly cruel.

“That happened in the summer of 2004. I started grad school in 2007, which was about the time everybody began to figure out that none of the companies that needed Jep’s products had closed. At first, everyone assumed they were still working on leftover inventory, so no one thought much about it. Eventually, they’d have to start buying from Jep’s nearest competitors.”

“I thought Jep had no competition.”

“In effect. It’s hard to compete when nobody wants your products because they’re crap.”

“Oh, I see.”

I took another long drink.

“It took a while for people to notice that none of Jep’s customers had gone out of business and they weren’t buying the inferior products. Nobody could figure out who was manufacturing J.I.’s products. It became a brand new situation to analyze, and I walked right into it.”

Indeed, that puzzle had caught my imagination nearly immediately, and I watched and listened, picking up clues here and there long after the furor had died down. The three years between the closing of J.I. and my entry into the MBA program had been ones of silent upheaval in the manufacturing sector and thus, the economy. Only a handful of people had been witness to it.

I was one of them, albeit in retrospect.

I became an amateur historian, funneling through all those old records, finding Sebastian Taight and his family, digging back to his ties with Mitch Hollander, which seemed to originate in the Mormon church.

That piqued my curiosity to no end, this tendency I began to see in Mormons to be able to spin gold out of straw, especially Taight, his mother, and his cousins. Taight fascinated me simply because he was an enigma to the rest of the country. There was something there, something in him that I could hold onto. I knew it was there, and I *would* find it.

And then I did.

It was like finding a snag on a cardigan, the one thread that, if tugged, will unravel the entire garment in a single pull.

I'd been with Blackwood Securities barely six months when Taight's five-year-long war with Fen Hilliard came to its shocking head. Jack, Melinda, and I, along with the rest of the officers and executives of Blackwood Securities had held our collective breath for a month while we waited for Knox Hilliard to live or die.

"And how does OKH Enterprises fit into it?"

"Well, once Hollander had completely absorbed J.I., he wouldn't sell his products to OKH out of loyalty to Sebastian. Now, Fen was clever and he could make do with the other vendors' inferior products—better than anybody else could—but it cost him more in the long run in time and lost productivity."

Susan said nothing for several seconds. "That's just so...junior high."

I laughed. "It is, isn't it? The stakes are just a lot higher. And so now I've told you the story—"

"They didn't all live happily ever after?"

I snorted. Cheeky girl. "Yes, but now Sebastian wants me to go reorganize Hollander Steelworks. What I'm going to do is detach Jep completely and give it a new corporate identity. It needs to have something other than 'The Old Jep Industries' as its brand, since *Jep Industries* went out of business in 2004."

"Why doesn't Mr. Taight do it himself? I mean, that's what he does, right?"

That was an excellent question.

"I don't know for sure," I said, "but I have a theory. Now. What we're looking for are the original documents pertaining to when Hollander Steelworks absorbed Jep. Then I'll need you to contact Hollander's assistant and get the organization's charts and— Well, you know what I want. After I have all that, I can figure out the most efficient way to get it done." I looked at her as she sifted furiously through boxes, all business now that she knew what to look for. "We have a long weekend ahead of us."

* * * * *

Cabiria

December 6, 2010

"Cassie, whatever you do, don't use your schtick on Mitch Hollander. It won't work and it'll annoy him."

I didn't bother to look up from my desk, where I had assembled everything I needed to get this project done. My boss stood in the threshold of my office, nervous, showing it, but that didn't affect me.

"Cass?"

"I heard you, Jack," I murmured, too engrossed in preparing for the task ahead to indulge his insecurities. "You should know me better than that."

He grunted. "I know you well enough to know you pull out the sex kitten when it suits you."

"As I recall, that's why you hired me."

"I hired you for your little black book and your tendency to use it as a weapon."

Which made me one of the most powerful people in America. I smirked.

"So let me make this perfectly clear to you: The man's a Mormon bishop. It would be like seducing a priest."

"Did that. Two years, until the archbishop busted him."

"Fuck."

"Yes, but not *badly*. Boringly. I don't remember if he got excommunicated or just sent to Siberia."

"Cassie. Please?"

I sighed and looked across the room at him, all five feet and ten inches of barely leashed—usually cheerful—energy. "Why are you so afraid of Mitch Hollander?"

He waved a hand. "I'm not *afraid* of him. I *like* him. I *respect* him. He doesn't like *me*."

"Okay, then. Why do you need his approval?"

"Why do you need Clarissa's?"

Ouch.

"I don't have time for this," I said, getting back to packing my laptop and associated displays. Jack made fun of me for using paper, but digital presentations kept people at a distance, and I got in my clients' faces. Paper suited my style. "I promise I won't disgrace you by throwing myself at Hollander."

"Thank you," he breathed, and I shook my head. Jack's concern for Hollander's opinion was so out of character I had no frame of reference for it.

At a word to my assistant, my things were taken down to my car while I ate the last of my breakfast.

"And, oh, keep your mitts off the rest of the pack, too."

"Why?" I asked around my lox.

"Just—No playtime or side arrangements amongst my Mormon clientele, okay? It kind of creeps me out."

"Their morality is their problem," I said. "And as to that—except for Hollander, who nobody can figure out anyway—none of that pack is a shining example of morality. I mean, look at Hilliard."

"That's a rumor."

"But he's never denied it."

I felt a deep affinity for Knox Hilliard, a man who'd cracked and gone rogue the

minute the justice system failed to deliver justice. Fortunately or unfortunately (I'd never known which) I hadn't had Hilliard's courage and had settled for dispatching my enemies in less permanent ways.

Even then, while my daughter could overlook a charismatic law professor's *alleged* misdeeds (so much she was willing to follow him to his no-name midwestern college to get a law degree), she could not forgive me mine.

The ones she knew of, anyway.

Vengeance was far uglier up close and personal, and did not sit as attractively on my shoulders as it did on Dr. Hilliard's, whom she worshipped on a semi-regular basis whenever he lectured on white-collar crimes at NYU's criminal justice program.

"And Taight."

Jack shrugged. "He'll tell you he's still a cultural Mormon."

"Doesn't keep him from fucking half the world's women."

"He's settled down."

"Doubt it. A tomcat like that doesn't just stay home with the kittens when one particular pussy catches his fancy." Jack cleared his throat and I rolled my eyes. "Okay, okay," I said, conceding once I remembered Jack's history, sexual and otherwise. "I get the point. Unless *you're* fucking around on your wife."

"Would *you* fuck around on my wife?"

"It would depend on her libido and how good she is in bed."

"She's a raving lunatic. Eat your heart out."

That made me laugh. If Eilis Logan had done for King Midas what Lydia Blackwood had done for Jack, I'd have to kill my assumptions about his chronic promiscuity.

I looked at my watch and stood to clean up.

"Cassie, please, let me do that," Susan said as she zipped through my office door, past Jack.

"Susan..."

"It's my job," she said and glared at me, her fist propped on her hip. Really, she was too young to be that bossy, but I acquiesced.

I swept out of my office, Jack's last-minute admonitions following me down the hall to the elevator bank. Once down on Wall Street, I slipped into my waiting car. My driver closed the door, walked around the car, slid behind the wheel, and said, "Good morning, Ms. St. James."

"Good morning, Sheldon. Any news?"

He gave me a few details on my neighbors, my colleagues, my children—tidbits he'd picked up here and there at Zabar's or the dry cleaner's or wherever he went while waiting for a call from me or my children. Every day he had at least one small thing that I could use. Somehow.

"Thank you," I murmured when he ran out of *on dits*.

"And," he continued, as if I hadn't spoken, glancing at me in the rearview mirror.

"My wife finally got a job. Really good one, where she can do what she likes and go up the ladder. Benefits, too. The works. Ms. St. James," he said earnestly, "I really want to than—"

"Excellent," I said, and checked my phone for messages.

We said nothing else to each other on the drive to Bethlehem, home of Hollander Steelworks, mostly because I needed to call the one person guaranteed not to want to talk

to me.

“Cassie!” she hissed, then lowered her voice. “I’m in class.”

I knew that.

“Question,” I said, disregarding her irritation. “When do you graduate?”

“In May. Which you know. My graduation application is posted on the refrigerator.”

“It’s dated two years ago, Clarissa.”

“What do you want?”

“Are you serious about going where Knox Hilliard teaches?”

“Dammit, Mother. Of course I am. An urban commuter school—a state one at that—in some hick town in the middle of nowhere that doesn’t have skiing *or* a beach?”

Her willingness to sacrifice so much for her educational goals was admirable.

“I mean, for real? As in, you’re going to work, not simply drool over Professor Hottie and wait for him to notice you and fall in love with you?”

“I’m going to ignore that and point you to my 4.0 in a *double* major. Which is criminal justice and Spanish. *Not* humanities, also known as underwater basket weaving. Unlike some people I could name. *Mother.*”

She had me there. The snob. “I am on my way to a meeting at which he will be present. Would you like me to finesse your name into the conversation? Plant a few seeds?”

I would have thought the call had been dropped but for the background lecture going on and the rustlings of students. “What *kind* of meeting, exactly?”

“Not that.”

I could hear her breathe a sigh of relief. “Thank *God.*”

“Although I might change my mind...”

“Mother! Don’t you think you’ve poached enough men? You have to move in on my territory, too?”

“A crush on a man old enough to be your father does not ‘territory’ make.”

“God, you’re a bitch.”

“Isn’t he married? To that gorgeous redheaded right-wing nut?” Stony silence. “Oh, I remember. We don’t like to talk about that.”

“Bite me. This conversation is over.”

And it was, because she’d hung up on me.

I attempted to annoy my other three daughters, but none of them were available. I doubted they were avoiding me, but I couldn’t rule it out.

My phone rang then—“I’ve Never Been to Me,” my best friend’s ringtone.

He hates that.

“Where are you?” Nigel demanded.

“About halfway to Lehigh Valley. Why?”

“Word got out that you’re detaching Jep Industries from Hollander Steelworks, rebranding it, and installing a COO. Hollander’s bigger customers are biting their fingernails.”

“Shit, already?” I had hoped that word wouldn’t get out so soon, but it was inevitable when the CEO of OKH Enterprises—J.I.’s biggest customer now that Fen Hilliard was dead—was married to Hollander’s best friend. King Midas probably didn’t want to piss off his wife by doing the reorganization himself.

“You’re the wild card in this scenario.”

I would have pinched the bridge of my nose, but I didn't want to disturb my makeup. "Keep mum until I can work Logan around to my point of view."

Indeed, Sebastian Taight's wife could be a right bitch when she was unhappy, and as the CEO of the biggest metals fabrication plant in the country, her opinions were critical. The health of OKH's equipment depended on Jep's products, and any change in its leadership could negatively affect her production lines—which would affect a lot of other companies. Thus, the manufacturing sector took its cues from her: If Eilis Logan wasn't happy, nobody was happy.

Naturally, I'd planned for that.

"I'm not sure how long it will take me to beat Hollander and his cronies into doing it my way, especially if she fights me. And God knows how Taight will figure into it. Even if he likes my plan, he'll stand with his wife."

"That's a helluva conflict."

"Has that ever stopped the Dunham family before?"

"Good point," he said. "Gotta go. Bring all their balls home in a jar."

Right.

I looked at my watch. "Damn. Sheldon, could you drive around Bethlehem and Allentown? I want to see a few things."

"Pardon my saying so, Ms. St. James, but won't that make you late?"

"Yes, Sheldon. Yes, it will. Perhaps...twenty minutes or so?"

"Yes, Ms. St. James."

* * * * *

Mid-Life Crisis

"Mitch, you okay? The pack's here."

He knew that.

From the vantage point of his office three stories up, through floor-to-ceiling plate glass windows, Mitch had watched his board of directors, his friends-cum-family, drive onto the grounds in two vehicles, then disappear into the parking garage.

It wouldn't take them long to get to his office once they parked.

Still Mitch stood with his arm pressed against the glass, up over his head, his forehead against his arm. He watched sparks fly out of the massive doors of the foundry half a mile away and regretted the weak winter sun; it was pretty in daylight, but it was spectacular at night. He liked going out and contributing to the creation of those sparks.

In the eternal battle of man against steel, Mitch conquered.

Every minute of every hour of every day, and Hollander Steelworks was a living testament to that.

"I'm fine, Darlene, thanks," he said without turning. His poor assistant, so worried about him.

But here it was, early December, the ground around the office building covered in white or glittering ice melt. The only grief he could muster today, his wedding anniversary, was that he didn't remember much about the time before Mina's disease had really started to drain the life out of her; didn't remember much about his wife, the woman he'd loved and married twenty-three years before. She had loved him, believed in him, supported him, borne his children. He remembered what she had done, but not who

she was.

He only remembered the long-suffering invalid he had nursed so long.

Mitch heard the booming voices and boisterous laughter of four men and three women drawing closer to his office suite.

Still he didn't move, even when he saw their reflections in the glass.

The big hand of Mitch's best friend came down hard on his left shoulder and shook him lightly. "Sorry, Elder," Sebastian murmured. "I didn't think about the date when I scheduled this. You should have said something."

Mitch shook his head. "If it bothered me that much, I would've."

Another man approached on his right and halted at the glass, his arms crossed over his chest. "You okay, Mitch?" he rasped.

Second time in five minutes someone had asked him that, but Mitch knew Bryce would understand completely, and he couldn't lie to Sebastian when it was important.

"Wondering if I did everything I could," he finally replied.

"You got her seen and gave her the best care money could buy," Sebastian said.

Palliative, not curative.

"If it makes you feel any better," Bryce offered, "her first obstetrician should've suspected something was wrong and checked her over."

The second one missed it, too. The third—

Mr. Hollander, I want to admit her so I can run some tests. Something's wrong, and we need to find out what.

—had called in a neurologist who finally uncovered it: early-onset multiple sclerosis, progressive, undiagnosed for over ten years.

I'm sorry, Mrs. Hollander. There is no cure. No drugs. And this is...serious. I don't know how much longer you'll live, to be quite honest.

Sixteen years, eight of them spent lying in bed in a deteriorating state of consciousness.

"What are you not saying?" Sebastian was nothing if not persistent.

Mitch continued to say nothing.

"Oh, don't start piling on the guilt. You got nothin' to feel guilty about."

Oh, yes he did. He felt guilty for not remembering her, for not missing her. Shouldn't a widower grieve longer?

Or at all?

"Mitch," Sebastian said with some impatience. "Her *body* died last year. Her *essence* left years ago. You've done years of grieving."

Mitch was not shocked that Sebastian had read his mind. It was to be expected; they were brothers, after all, their bond forged in the blast furnace of adversity. It was also to be expected that Sebastian would spout facts to negate emotion he didn't understand.

"Elder," Mitch murmured finally, an edge in his voice, "you don't know from guilt."

"Mitch—"

"Shut up, Taight," Bryce rumbled. "You have no idea."

So the three of them stood there a moment longer in silent companionship. Trust Sebastian to bear Mitch's temper with equanimity whether he deserved it or not.

Ah, well. That was what brothers were for. Mitch had no one *else* to vent on, that was for sure.

Mitch pushed away from the glass, turned with a well-practiced hearty cheer he

rarely felt, and rubbed his hands together. “All right. Let’s get this party started.” He looked at his board of directors.

Sebastian Taight.

Bryce and Giselle Kenard.

Knox Hilliard and Justice McKinley.

Morgan Ashworth.

All here to implement the reorganization of Hollander Steelworks, which had begun to stumble under the weight of its own success.

Then there was Eilis Logan, Sebastian’s wife, Mitch’s biggest customer for J.I.’s products, who had come to look after the health of her own company. Mitch had no doubt Wall Street and the rest of manufacturing were waiting for news of this meeting.

Ah, but it had to be done. This reorganization would rejuvenate his company while taking a lot of weight off Mitch’s shoulders.

Never mind the idea to reorganize had taken root while getting quite a bit closer to proving that Greg Sitkaris was a thief.

Never mind it had come up while Mitch stood in the midst of a hundred or more beautiful, scantily clad women—*knowing* he could have any one of them (or more) if he so much as crooked his finger...

“We’re missing somebody,” Mitch said, needing to shake that off. Another layer of his guilt, wanting to move on.

Not knowing how.

Or with whom.

“Cassie St. James,” Sebastian said as he seated Eilis at the foot of the conference table. He proceeded to position himself as close to her as he could without pulling her onto his lap. “Traffic must be heavy.”

“Who is she?” Mitch asked as he sat at the head of the table, and the others, who seemed to be waiting to see if Mitch were truly okay, followed his lead.

“Me,” Sebastian said, “version 2.0. Cassie wrote her MBA thesis on my rationale for deciding whether to fix or raid any given company.” Mitch raised his eyebrow and Sebastian nodded. “She got roundly pummeled and ridiculed for daring to suggest that my decision was predicated on the teachability of a company’s leaders.”

Mitch, along with almost everyone else, stared at Sebastian in shock. “She figured it out?”

“She sent me her thesis before she turned it in; had it down to the last detail, examples, anecdotes, quotes, patterns, data analyses, and footnotes wherever she could see a deviance from my norm. She speculated that could indicate Knox’s involvement into any particularly complex project I was working on. That *really* got trashed.”

“You told me about that,” Knox said. “Did you go back her up?”

“I would’ve if she’d asked, but she didn’t. She refused to budge in her defense, though, and ended up nearly getting herself drummed out of her program. I told Jack about it, so he hired her. He’s been wanting a clone of me on his staff for years.”

“Have you ever met her?” Mitch asked.

“I have not and furthermore, I’ve only communicated with her by email once—to get her to do this.”

His brow wrinkled. “You’re handing the whole thing over to her?”

“Yup. I didn’t want to end up sleeping on the couch for the foreseeable future.”

Eilis chuckled.

"How long has this woman been with Jack?"

"About a year, I think. He hired her just before she was scheduled to defend her thesis."

Mitch let every suspicious thought he had show on his face and, predictably, Sebastian read him correctly. "Mitch, I've been watching this woman work and I'll go so far as to say she's better at being me than I am."

"She's certainly faster at it," Eilis said, staring at Sebastian speculatively, "but she's rough on the ego. She doesn't do the same soft-shoe routine Sebastian does."

"So, what, she cuts about a year off your process?"

Sebastian nodded. "Bout that, maybe a little more. I figure it's probably what I should have done all along, but..."

"It's your inner nurturer, Midas," Eilis teased with a nudge that garnered her a pleased grin.

"She's, what, twenty-four, twenty-five?" Bryce asked. "And she's the phoenix rising out of the ashes of Sebastian Taight's sudden career change from corporate raider to full-time artist and stay-at-home dad?"

"Not that young, but otherwise, yes."

Knox glanced at his watch. "Late. Dammit, I hate late."

Mitch glared at Sebastian. "Me too. Why hasn't she called? Why hasn't Jack called?"

"He's afraid of offending you," Sebastian shot back. "He can't tell when you're being funny."

Knox laughed then. "Shit, nobody else can, either."

"Jack annoys me," Mitch grouched.

"Jack annoys everyone," Eilis offered. "Even his wife."

The eight of them settled in to wait, and Mitch relaxed as they began to indulge their favorite pastime while together: Poking fun at each other.

"So, Bishop Hollander," Ashworth boomed. Morgan Ashworth never *said* anything. "How's the wife hunt going?"

"I could ask the same of you," Mitch shot back with a smirk, not in the least offended, and the snickers and laughter around the table rose, Morgan's guffaw outstripping the rest. "You have anything to confess yet, Elder Ashworth?"

He held up his hands in truce. "Not me, Bishop. I'm pure as the wind-driven snow."

"My ass," Giselle Kenard returned. "I saw the way you checked out that carpenter as we came in."

"Looking is not the same as doing, dear Cuz. Tell her, Mitch."

"True. But did you lust after him in your heart, Elder?"

Morgan snorted. "I'm not confessing to anything." He pointed at Giselle. "And *you* have no room to talk, O Freshly Excommunicated One."

"Pffft. Shall I tell our bishop about your *Playgirl* stash?"

"You mean the one that doesn't exist?"

"Ha! I *caught* you."

"Twenty years ago, at which time you decided you wanted to share in the eye candy. All afternoon. I was not amused."

The table erupted in laughter. "I can't believe you're still mad about that," she

grumbled underneath the noise.

"I might not be if you hadn't *stolen* them."

She sank down into her chair and bit her lip. "I still have them if you want them back. They're kind of, um...dog-eared, shall I say." Bryce stopped laughing and looked at her, one eyebrow raised. "Well," she said defensively when she caught her husband's look. "It's not like I need them anymore. You know, 'cause you— Believe me, I don't need— You, you're—"

"Giselle," Bryce growled, though Knox and Justice, Sebastian and Eilis, were all coughing and choking on their laughter.

"They're at Mom's, okay? In storage. And they have been for years. I moved on from pictures to words and—" She shot up in her chair and stuck her finger in Bryce's face. "—*You* don't seem to mind my library. You've practically got *Tropic of Cancer* memorized and you've done—"

Bryce clapped a hand over her mouth. "Okay. Got the point." He looked at Morgan. "You want those back?"

"No." Morgan glared at Giselle. "I should've drowned you when you were a kitten." Then he took a deep breath and looked back at Mitch, who simply rolled his eyes at the family's ribaldry. "Speaking of bishops," he said smoothly once the hilarity had died down. "Why haven't they fired you yet?"

"I wish they would," Mitch said. "*You* try going into year seven running a ward the size of mine and knowing you're on the short list for stake president."

He caught Bryce's shudder out of the corner of his eye and chuckled.

"Now, see, this is what I like about my situation," Morgan said. "I don't have to worry about being called as bishop or anything higher than what I am. *And* I don't get stuck teaching rugrats. It's all I can do to grin and bear all the little bastards at family gatherings. I have my brush with greatness being second counselor and that's more than enough for me."

Mitch stared at him. "Second counselor? I didn't know that."

He shrugged. "Lucky that way. I figure the Lord gives me little consolations to make up for the big one I don't get."

"I empathize," Mitch murmured as he stared down at the table, no longer quite as amused as he had been. Fifteen years of celibacy. At least. One did not beg a dying woman for sex, no matter how badly one needed it.

He *had*.

Still did. Spending the past week at Whittaker House and having to endure its three-day bacchanalian masquerade—in complete misery—had made that perfectly clear.

Kenard clapped him on the back and squeezed his shoulder with a big, comforting hand. Yes, of all the people at that table, even Morgan, Bryce understood the most. They'd talked about it privately, the two of them; had compared notes, had given and received solace as only people with similar experiences can do. Had he been the bishop to hear Bryce's confession—

Some days he wondered if Bryce would ever come back from his excommunication and Mitch shook his head at the senseless waste of a believer—two, if he counted Giselle.

If nothing else, Mitch's long experience as a bishop had taught him a large measure of compassion. He was just tired of spending every free moment at church.

He needed a vacation.

But where would he go? With whom? His daughters had their own families now and his son had his own life. So what would he do there, alone? When Mina was well enough, he had no money and no time. When he'd amassed enough cash and time to take his family somewhere nice, Mina was too weak and he'd had too many worries to be able to relax. He'd lived his entire life without having gone somewhere specifically to relax and have fun. Now that he had the cash, time, and fewer worries, he had no one to go with.

He waved a hand and looked up at his motley collection of friends who looked back at him with varying degrees of concern they tried to hide. His mouth twitched as he studied the men. "All four of you born and bred in the Church, only one of you eligible to hold the priesthood—and he's gay. Nobody would believe it."

The laughter, rich and sincere, broke out again and Mitch was glad. These people, his adopted family, knew him better than anyone, let him be himself—not dad, not CEO, not bishop, not scientist. Just Mitch. And he did not want to be maudlin around them.

"Mitch?" The double doors to his office suite opened and his assistant poked her head around. "Ms. St. James is here."

He nodded and all eight of them stood to welcome the newcomer. He regretted it, really. An unknown would put paid to the impromptu party; the in-jokes would have to cease.

It was only his years of training as both a businessman and a bishop that kept his expression impassive when Ms. St. James walked in. It was only the fact of his suit coat's length that kept everyone in that room from knowing how sex-starved he must really be to react that fast to the sight of her. In her late thirties—not mid-twenties as had been assumed—she was, at first glance, fairly ordinary-looking.

But not *at all* ordinary.

She smiled with a calculated reserve, noting, he was sure, that this was a table of people familiar with each other and she was the outsider, though not the enemy. Mitch could see that she knew they'd expected someone much younger and that she had intended to catch them all off guard.

With age came credibility and she had just turned the balance of power upside down.

She would need that edge to get past Eilis's objections.

Morgan, ever the extrovert, immediately glad-handed her, then began to introduce her around. Mitch took the opportunity to study her while she chatted with each member of his family.

She looked Parisian, tall, slim, with skin the color of café au lait, heavy on the lait. Her black hair was sleek, pulled into a tight twist at the back of her head. A hint of a mole just above the left corner of her full mouth gave her an air of mystique. She stood about five-eleven in modestly high-heeled black shoes. She had dressed conservatively, in a pencil-slim, mid-calf-length black skirt and a severe white button-down blouse underneath a black blazer. Ruby cufflinks in French cuffs folded back over her blazer sleeves and a simple Tiffany watch were her only jewelry.

Expensive simplicity.

"And this," boomed Ashworth, "is the man himself, Mitchell Hollander, founder and CEO of Hollander Steelworks."

"Mr. Hollander," she said, her voice husky as she offered her hand and met his look, her light brown eyes clear and without guile.

"Ms. St. James," he replied and took her hand. He shook it in his most bishoply way,

the grip just firm enough and his other hand over hers. The handshake that said *As one of the Lord's representatives, I care about you and I'll do what I can to help you*. The handshake he now used as a defense mechanism because his immediate interest in her bore absolutely no resemblance to anything spiritual.

"Please, call me Cassie."

He released her hand carefully, all the right signals sent, none of the wrong ones, and inclined his head. "Call me Mitch." He gestured to the empty chair at his right, between him and Bryce. "Make yourself comfortable. If you'll let Darlene know what you'd like to drink, we can get started."

* * * * *

Rough Boy

I walked into the CEO's executive suite, saw them all in their natural habitat, and was immediately caught off guard.

Me!

I couldn't say why. I knew what they all looked like, save Hollander. And it wasn't as if I had never seen half a dozen beautiful people in a room together before.

Perhaps it was the attitude that filled the room, of camaraderie, of...friendship...that made me uncomfortable with them. A room full of testosterone with no posturing, no competition— It felt almost like...love?

Couldn't be.

Still, as much as they had surprised me, *I* had surprised *them*, exactly as I had intended.

Most of them would not have expected a woman their age; after all, Jack Blackwood specialized in training up very young Big Swinging Dicks. The young had the energy and drive to do the job to his satisfaction and they didn't have the family commitments that would keep them from the 24/7 availability he demanded. Jack enjoyed spawning ruthless little business bastards as if they had his genes, and the younger the better.

When people succeed early, they can retire early.

As Morgan introduced me around, I assessed each of them intellectually and sexually. Yes, Jack had told me to keep my hands off, but a pretty lover with a high IQ would assuage my burgeoning restlessness, and I was looking at a room full of people who filled the bill.

Ashworth himself. He was no exception, and I'd been attracted to him from the moment we met. Large, animated, utterly masculine, with rich mahogany hair and piercing ice blue eyes, Morgan wouldn't trip anybody's gaydar, but then, neither would Nigel.

Knox Hilliard. Blond and tan, with the same color eyes as his cousin Morgan, Knox was not much younger than I, but he looked older; in my experience, blond men don't age well. I didn't find him particularly attractive, but he had a quick, warm smile and the charisma of an entertainer or prophet. I could see why Clarissa was so smitten, and I wished I had thought to bring her if only to meet...

Justice McKinley. She was the May to Hilliard's December. Only a year older than my eldest daughter, she seemed like such a sweet girl in person, with her freckles and short, bouncy auburn curls, fashionable glasses perched on her pixie nose, all trumped by

a perfect hourglass figure dressed to utmost advantage. But her utterly telegenic beauty hid a cutting wit she used to slice and dice—on national TV—politicians who displeased her. I would relay this meeting to Clarissa tonight in excruciating detail and enjoy watching her writhe in envy.

Giselle Kenard. Her muscular little body hung nude in the Metropolitan Museum of Art. On canvas, she was gorgeous, with long flaming curls accentuating her agony. In person, though, she radiated humor and I could not guess her age. Her ice blue eyes betrayed her blood ties to both Hilliard and Ashworth, and her rather dull honey-colored curls—caught up in a yellow-ribboned ponytail—made her cute. Barely. My taste in women does not run to barely cute.

Her husband, Bryce Kenard. Now, *he* shocked me. The burn scars that matted half his face gave him an animal sexuality that cloaked him like an aura. He had the most beautiful green eyes I'd ever seen in a man. I couldn't imagine what a man like that saw in a woman as mousy as Giselle, and I wondered if he could be lured away from her.

Eilis Logan, whom I'd also only seen as a nude on canvas. Taller than I, zaftig, with shoulder-length blonde hair, one green eye and one blue eye— It was too bad that she would be my natural enemy in this little project.

And finally, her husband, King Midas, Sebastian Taight, the object of my curricular fascination and my predecessor in unconventional corporate-restructuring methods. He was perfect in a carefully unstudied *GQ* way, black Irish from his white-tinged black hair to *the same* ice blue eyes.

He had noticed my scrutiny of his wife, and glanced between us, then smirked.

"I think not," Eilis murmured dryly.

"No?" Sebastian drawled low enough so only the two of us could hear. "Eilis sandwich?"

She raked me from head to toe. "Tempting. But...no. I don't share."

"Damn," Sebastian and I said at the same time. And all three of us laughed at a joke everyone else was straining to hear.

"Too bad it took an imperial order to get to meet you, Cassie," he said, holding his hand out. "Another month or two and I would've stormed your office."

And with one handshake, I knew I'd earned the respect of a man who respected very little. "I find it's not always good to know too much about one's idols."

"That's true. Your dad was one of mine." I stiffened. "I was...disillusioned."

Ah, yes. If he had followed my father, he would have known what happened to him. It had never occurred to me that King Midas and I might have learned from the same master; thus, my affinity for Taight's style had nothing to do with serendipity and everything to do with familiarity.

"Relax," he murmured with a warm smile. "I didn't summon your father. I summoned you."

I nodded and took a deep breath.

Intriguing, yes, this clan of entrepreneurs, philosophers, artists, and lawyers with some strange fraternity I couldn't pin down—

Then Ashworth introduced me to Mitch Hollander.

Ordinary. An ordinary man in his mid-forties who felt comfortable in his own skin, comfortable with who he was, and comfortable with his ordinariness amongst the cadre of *extraordinary* people in the room. He was athletic, with a broad chest and shoulders,

and stood an inch or two over six feet. He had short, thick sandy hair that curled slightly. His eyes were an unremarkable blue.

I couldn't stop staring at him, and the rest of the people in the room faded.

He shook my hand in an odd way, with his left hand covering our clasped right hands, but it had no hint of sexual intent and, in fact, he seemed to be above such base human needs. A Mormon bishop, akin to a Catholic priest. Ah, yes, the Man-of-God Handshake. Thoroughly non-threatening while at the same time being loving and caring—and sincere in it, too. I remembered my boring priest and suddenly wondered what Hollander would be like in bed.

Then I got a little obsessed by the idea. My very curiosity about him intrigued me; of all the overtly sexual people in this band, none of them had caught my fascination more than the one ordinary man—

—who happened to have built a steel empire, so I shook off those errant thoughts and got down to business.

Honestly, fucking these people's minds had to be at least as pleasurable as fucking their bodies, but once I immersed myself in the business at hand, that ceased to be of any importance at all.

By the end of the meeting, I had wrestled with Eilis—and, somewhat surprisingly, Knox—over my plan to split the former Jep Industries back to its own entity. Knox's opinion was negligible, his objections clearly rooted in the fact that he'd worked so hard to get Hollander Steelworks and Jep Industries consolidated that he didn't want to see his work undone. But Eilis had real concerns and was a worthy opponent, flinging questions at me as fast as I could catch them.

Kenard and Ashworth grilled me on details, and took copious notes to help them ascertain some of the more complex legal and long-term economic aspects inherent in such a move. They asked every question I knew they would ask, and got answers that satisfied them.

Sebastian, obviously bored, had pulled out a sketchbook and pencil. He seemed to pay no attention to the proceedings at all, but I knew better.

Both Justice and Giselle had disengaged themselves from the meeting soon after it began. They tapped away at their laptops, serious expressions on their faces. Curious, I actually stopped the meeting and asked what they were doing.

"Uh...bookkeeping?" Giselle said warily after a minute hesitation, as if she thought I were reprimanding her.

Justice looked at me over the top of her glasses and, with a straight face, announced, "I'm having cybersex." Knox nearly fell off his seat laughing, most everyone else chuckled, and I couldn't help but smile, conceding the point that it was none of my business. Then she grinned and went back to it. Whatever "it" was.

Throughout the presentation, Hollander made no comment whatsoever, nor had he laughed at Justice's joke. He had simply leaned back, relaxed, interlaced his fingers behind his head, and took it all in with an expression I couldn't read. He had watched my relatively loud scuffle with Eilis and Knox like someone watching a tennis match, back and forth, back and forth. For someone who had to make the decisions—difficult ones—he didn't seem terribly stressed about it.

Finally I had finished detailing my plan, answered Kenard's and Ashworth's questions to their satisfaction, earned Sebastian's approval with a faint nod, and

thoroughly quelled the objections of both Eilis and Knox. I turned to Hollander, wondering if he even understood what had happened since he stared right through me and hadn't seemed at all engaged.

"Mitch?" I said, and watched his eyes focus on me fully.

"Do it."

Both Eilis and Knox piped up again, a token protest, really, but he held up a hand. They snapped their mouths shut.

Well. That was easy.

My minions would put the plan in motion and what would have normally taken me eight hours today and another six weeks in a flurry of emails and phone calls had taken me all of three hours with no bloodshed.

I gave Hollander a little smile as I began to pack up my displays and my laptop, careful not to look too long lest he believe me to be interested in him personally, which would not be an incorrect assumption.

Morgan and Giselle amused themselves with an obviously familiar game of swapping increasingly clever insults across the table.

Knox sat quietly, playing with Justice's curls and reading over her shoulder while she worked with great concentration. Then he pointed at the screen and said, "You might want to reword point four. Wilson hates that trick." She looked at him incredulously. "I've done it before. He's never said anything to me about it." Knox held up his hands. "Just sayin'."

Sebastian had his phone plastered to his ear and Eilis leaned against him to hear the other side of the conversation. "What do you mean, they don't miss us? ... *No*, we're not going to stay another three or four nights. Elliott's sick and— ... He was running a fever when we left, remember? ... Oh, he was, too. Mom, are you *trying* to kill my kids?" Eilis plucked the phone out of his hand. "Dianne," she said into it, "I'll keep Mr. Mom away as long as I can... No, thank *you*." Sebastian growled at her when she terminated the call and calmly handed his phone back to him.

Bryce leaned into Giselle and whispered something in her ear, interrupting her and Ashworth's game. She stared down at the table while she listened. She flushed and her hand curled into a fist. "Yes," she whispered hotly when he finished, staring into his face with a mixture of adoration and lust. "I would *love* to." No, that was not a man who could be lured away from his wife. Ah, well.

I felt unfamiliar stirrings of sentimentality. Who were these people that watching and listening to them could make me want to sigh as if they were a Hallmark Christmas special come to life?

Then there was Hollander, standing with his back to me, staring out a bank of windows that looked toward the business end of his mill, his hands in his pockets, his suit coat gathered over his wrists. It was a stance I'd seen thousands of men take thousands of times, but there was just something about him...

He turned then and caught me staring at him, though I hoped it was simply a stare of speculation and didn't betray my now driving need to know what it would be like to fuck a squeaky-clean Mormon bishop. He returned my look without blinking. His lids lowered. His mouth twitched.

Ah, he and I understood each other perfectly then.

"Dinner?" he said underneath the familial conversation and laughter behind me.

“Delighted. Seven?”

“I’ll pick you up.”

I turned with a smile, then left to arrange for a hotel room and find a killer outfit.

* * * * *

Roxanne

I dressed carefully, Jack’s instructions ringing in my head.

Still, I wanted to see if Mitch could be distracted, rattled. I wore a white blouse with a low cowl that showed a touch of cleavage—what I could muster up with a push-up bra, that was. A simple red skirt that went to my knees wasn’t sexy by itself, but combined with red suede peep-toe heels, it should do. Understated, but very, very clear in intent.

I know how to finesse men. It had taken some trial and error to learn this as Nigel trained me to be the sophisticated whore I’d set out to become. He had taught me how to lead the conversation exactly where I wanted it to go and never, ever allow it to get off track. I could anticipate any man’s conversational rabbit trails and steer accordingly, without letting him know that I had an ounce of brains.

Mitch Hollander could not be steered, and I realized that the minute he handed me into his navy-and-silver Bugatti. Moreover, he knew exactly what I was about and with a droll expression, dared me to continue to try. That fascinated me as much as it puzzled me.

We sat in a French restaurant in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, and comfortably conversed about absolutely nothing, as we had since he’d picked me up. (How he knew where I was staying, I had no idea, but I was getting the distinct impression he could flex his power without seeming to stir so much as a finger.)

Tonight at least, Hollander was a master at negotiating meaningless conversation with utmost aplomb, as if he did so on a regular basis. He spoke, gestured, and held himself with some strange mixture of confidence, strength, and humility I had never encountered in a man before.

No arrogance, no swagger.

His cohorts, Taight and Hilliard, Kenard and Ashworth, had arrogant alpha-male swagger down to a science. Though I couldn’t tell who was *the* alpha in that barrel of testosterone, I understood and appreciated men like that. The women, as powerful as their men, had their own swagger. As do I.

Hollander I did not understand. He knew that and used it like a weapon.

I had my first shock when the wine steward came around and Hollander did not wave him away. “I’m not versed,” he murmured in a voice as rich and warm as a stream of the darkest Belgian chocolate, “so I’ll have water, but feel free to serve the lady.”

Just to be perverse, I chose the most expensive wine on the menu. Mitch relaxed back in his chair, his elbows on the arms and his fingers steepled under his chin, and simply watched the sommelier and I. At long last it was done and I sat back in my seat to watch him watch me, and I raised my wine glass in a small, somewhat mocking, salute.

His eyelids lowered almost imperceptibly and the corner of his mouth curled up.

For a man of God, I decided, he might know a whole lot more about how to seduce women than I’d given him credit for. The thought disturbed me.

I decided to quit the bullshit and be completely transparent. He would see it as a

tactic, and it was, but at this point, I had no other tricks up my sleeve. I waited until after we had ordered our entrees.

“What,” I asked slowly, never taking my eyes off him, “does a Mormon bishop do, precisely?”

He smiled slowly as his eyelids lowered, and I crossed my right leg over my left knee. He didn’t miss that and his eyebrow rose. I nearly laughed because this man was so out of the realm of my experience.

“A Mormon bishop,” he replied with some care, “is a low-level executive, ah, a project manager, I guess, of a ward—a congregation. He has two counselors who help and a cadre of management types and assistants to delegate responsibilities to. My nearest female counterpart in that hierarchy is the president of the women’s auxiliary. Relief Society. She reports to me directly, but has the same structure.”

“Who’s the CEO?”

“The president of the Church, also known as the prophet.”

“I suppose any large organization like that would have to have a fairly rigid structure.”

“Yes.”

“How much time do you put into it?”

He thought a moment. “Twenty-five, thirty hours a week maybe.” I nearly dropped my glass. “I only have one child at home now, and he has his own timetable so it’s easy to lose myself in it. Most bishops have wives and children at home and they sacrifice just as much as the bishop does.”

Oh, hell, I wasn’t even going to bother with etiquette. “And you don’t get paid.”

He shook his head. “No. We don’t have paid clergy.”

“And you’re the low man on the totem pole?”

“Yes.”

“Like a Catholic parish, right? So you have a diocese?”

“A stake. The stake president is my, ah, boss.” He broke out into a grin and I had to smile. The Hollander of Hollander Steelworks was the *low* man and had a boss.

“How do you get that job?”

“If you’re smart,” he said wryly, “*not* voluntarily.”

I laughed.

“You get called. The stake president asks you if you’d be willing to accept the calling. You accept. Or don’t. By the time you get to that stage, you probably have a reputation for accepting other jobs and doing them as well as you can.”

“Is this a lifetime position?”

“No, but there are days it feels like it.” He relaxed back into his chair. Stared at his plate. Played with his utensils. Suddenly, I felt like I was witnessing a man in the throes of an unpleasant epiphany. “A bishop is usually called for five, seven years at the outset,” he said slowly, still not looking at me, still lost in whatever had jerked his attention from our flirtation. “Usually only once. It’s a very stressful job.” He paused. “Sometimes, you serve out your term and then move up the ladder. Mostly you just go back to being a regular member of the ward.”

Ambition! There was his chink. “Ah, you want to move up?”

He looked up at me then. “No. This is my second term.”

Was that *fatigue* I saw? I didn’t know; he covered it too quickly.

“How many years do you have in this one?”

“A little over seven.”

I blinked. “That means you’ve been at this...?”

“Thirteen years, with about a year between terms, give or take.”

“So...” I said carefully. “This isn’t supposed to be your life’s work. Not like a Catholic priest.”

“Correct.”

“And you don’t want to advance.”

Whatever emotional well he’d dropped into, he suddenly came out of with a smile.

“The pay is lousy.”

I had to laugh then. “So why don’t you just turn in your resignation?”

He waved a hand. “Oh, it’s not that simple. Someone has to be found to replace me and if I’m released—if I quit or get fired—I could always be asked to fill some other equally stressful position.”

“Can’t you just say no?”

“I could,” he said slowly, as if he’d never thought of it before, but I knew better.

“Yes, I could, but I wouldn’t. I would do whatever I was asked to do.”

“Why?”

“Because that’s part of what the faithful do; they serve. They sacrifice. They give their time and their talent and their money to keep everything running.”

“Your church is rich; why don’t they pay you?”

“Sacrifice. Emotional investment. Obedience. Love. I don’t know. Pick a reason, any reason.”

I couldn’t pick a reason. I didn’t have reasons like that. I didn’t know people who thought in such terms as sacrifice and love and emotional investment. *Obedience*. Good God.

“So. Ms. St. James—”

“Cassie, please.”

“That doesn’t suit you.”

Interesting. No one had ever been so bold as to say so, if they’d even thought about it at all. “I don’t much care for it myself, no,” I finally admitted.

“Cassandra.”

I smoothly pulled my right leg farther up my left. “Did I detect a bit of a French accent when you ordered?”

“Yes.”

“You speak French?”

“Yes.”

Damn. I wanted to undress him already and our entrees hadn’t even arrived. I couldn’t remember the last time I had been so aroused by so little so fast. It made no sense. I knew men who spoke French and Japanese and Greek and some all three. One man, one relatively ordinary-looking man who spent the equivalent of a three-quarter-time job working for his church for free in the name of faith, love, obedience, and sacrifice—

Inconceivable.

“Tell me, Cassandra,” he murmured, that heavy-lidded look doing more to me than I wanted it to. He had me pinned like a butterfly. “What did you do before grad school and

Blackwood Securities?”

The fact that he asked meant he really didn't know, that Sebastian hadn't seen fit to tell him (which was interesting in its own right), and the answer was the only thing that would free me from the hold he had on me.

“I was a prostitute.”

Not a twitch of a facial muscle to betray his thoughts. “I'm assuming we're not here on that basis.”

“No. I retired from that years ago.”

“And you got into it how?”

“I was bored.”

“That doesn't answer the question.”

Oh, God, no. I couldn't talk about this. What had I been thinking? “Do you hear confessions from your parishioners?” I asked abruptly, needing to get off this track, sorry I'd gotten on it. “Is that part of your job, like a priest?”

“Yes.”

“So I don't want to confess.”

“Were you confessing?”

“No.”

“Forgive me. It's not an industry I have much knowledge of and I was curious.”

No, dammit! He had me in curlicues. He still didn't look shocked nor did he seem as if he wanted to cut the evening short.

Our food came and I caught myself breathing a prayer of thanks to a god I wasn't sure existed. Our conversation veered to safer territory: His board of directors, to whom he referred as his family.

“Sebastian Taight,” he said after I asked him how he'd come into that circle of players, “was a companion I had on my mission.”

The image of two young men in black suits with black name tags, pushing bicycles, carrying backpacks flashed across my mind. My dinner companion had been one, once upon a time? So bizarre. More bizarre: King Midas having been one.

“You were a missionary?”

He nodded. “In Paris.”

“With Sebastian Taight.” I simply couldn't process that.

His mouth quirked. “I know how it sounds, but yes. The same Sebastian Taight. He...” He paused a moment, as if he were thinking. “The mission was very difficult for both of us. Sebastian made it bearable. He had ideas and plans. Philosophies. He shared them with me and he was so passionate about them... I learned more from him in the four months he was my companion than I'd learned in the nineteen years before that. If it hadn't been for him, it would never have occurred to me to do what I did with my life.”

I blinked. Interesting. “How old were you?”

“Twenty.”

I'd been pregnant with Clarissa when I was twenty.

“And then you just got dragged into his family.”

“Dragged? No.” He chuckled. “I didn't have to be dragged. Sebastian's family is large and tight. It doesn't take much to want to be part of them.”

“I can see that.” After having been with them all morning, I could.

He stopped to take another bite and we ate in silence for a moment before he said,

“Do you have kids?”

I raised an eyebrow at him, surprised. “You didn’t ask if I was married.”

“You work for Blackwood.”

Obviously. I shook my head at my inability to think straight within ten feet of this man. “I have four daughters. Helene, Clarissa, Olivia, and Paige. Olivia and Paige are twins. They’re twenty.”

“They all live at home?”

“Yes.”

“What do they do?”

“Helene is a resident at Bellevue. Clarissa is a senior at NYU preparing for law school. Olivia is a personal trainer with an affluent clientele and Paige is a principal dancer with Alvin Ailey.”

“Ailey’s tough. I’m very impressed.”

His response startled a grin out of me. “I’ll tell her you said so. She’ll be very pleased.” Invariably, the kudos went to the doctor, not the dancer, no matter how prestigious her company.

“I’ve been meaning to—”

Mitch’s abrupt silence startled me. He was watching the maître d’s station with an unreadable expression, and I turned.

There, what looked like a husband and wife—both almost too beautiful to gaze upon—being escorted to their table. The man glanced our way, then stopped short to stare at us.

He was the most gorgeous man I’d ever seen, with strong, slightly tanned features, and chocolate-colored hair shot with silver at the temples. He was shorter than Mitch, but lean and wiry, lending him the appearance of height. In short, he was far more physically attractive than Mitch and in another time, another life, I would have approached him, but now...

Mitch glanced at the man’s blonde companion, then back at the man, his eyebrow raised. I looked back at the man—God, it had turned into a tennis match—whose expression slowly turned into a smirk.

He handed his companion off to the maître d’, then headed our way. He came to a graceful halt close to my left, his elbow nearly touching my ear.

I have never been one to shy away from a handsome man’s touch.

“Mitch,” he purred.

“Greg,” Mitch said tightly. “How’s Amelia?”

“Oh, don’t be coy, *Bishop*,” he said, pronouncing the “p” sound with a contemptuous little pop. “You don’t have any illusions about me. Your first problem is that you have no proof. Of anything. Your second problem is that even if you did, nobody would believe you. For all anyone knows, she’s a new client of mine.”

Mitch grunted and took a bite.

“I see I’m not the only one out with a beautiful woman who isn’t my wife,” this Greg person said. “And *who* are you?” he asked me with the kind of suavity with which I was intimately acquainted. He cupped my shoulder with his perfect hand and caressed me, almost to the point of kneading.

And he did it exactly right.

While stripping me visually with enough skill so as to escape all traces of sleaze.

“Cassandra St. James,” Mitch murmured as he tapped his mouth with his napkin, then took a drink of his water. I expected him to follow up with an explanation of *who* I was, but he didn’t. “Greg Sitkaris.”

“So very pleased to meet you, Ms. St. James,” Greg said, and took his hand off me to dig in his coat pocket. He handed me his business card. “If there’s...*anything*...I can do for you, please don’t hesitate to call me.”

I took the card with alacrity, knowing that Mitch was taking in every detail of this by-play, knowing in which direction his thoughts were going.

“Thank you,” I murmured up at Greg, flashing him a brilliant smile.

“No, thank *you*,” he murmured, sliding his big hand across my back, leaning into me. He looked at Mitch. “We look good together, don’t we?”

Mitch’s expression betrayed nothing but a slight boredom I suspected was well practiced. That dig must have been an old and familiar one, but it was true and we all knew it: In looks, Mitch couldn’t begin to compete with Greg.

Neither could any other man I’d ever met.

“Must get back to my lovely companion for the evening,” he continued, as if his comment had gotten the reaction he wanted. He gestured to the wine bucket. “Don’t drink too much, Mitch. Wouldn’t want to wreck that glorified Beetle of yours, now would we? Good night, Ms. St. James. I hope to see *you* again very soon.”

He sauntered away, secure in his beauty and power. It didn’t take much for me to sketch a rough picture of the situation.

“One of your parishioners?” I asked blithely after a sip of wine.

“Yes.” Mitch had withdrawn from me, from our connection, but I’d expected that.

I glanced at Greg across the restaurant, holding his dinner companion’s hand and listening intently to whatever she was saying with such animation. “He’s a sociopath.”

Mitch started.

Ah, good. I’d managed to shock him, and I bestowed upon him my most wry smile.

“How—?”

I shrugged. “I’ve run into my share of people like him. It’s not hard to spot if you know the tells. Let me just say that in my previous life, I wouldn’t have taken him as a client.”

The corner of his mouth reluctantly twitched upward, and I knew I had him back. Stronger now.

“There are problems there, I take it? I mean, other than the fact that he’s committing adultery?”

He sighed. “It’s...complicated. And I can’t talk about it in any case.”

I pursed my mouth and looked at my plate. “Hypothetically speaking,” I drawled and played with my fork, “if I were one of your parishioners and I came to you and confessed my adultery, what would you do?”

“I would walk you through a repentance process,” he replied. “It would take a while, depending on how repentant you were. It could take as little as a year, but usually longer. It’s possible you’d just drift away if you weren’t interested in completing the process.”

“And that would be?”

“Excommunication is the beginning of the process. Rebaptism to finish. Start over with a clean slate, like it didn’t happen.”

“Ah. And...if I didn’t confess, but you...witnessed me in the act?”

He took a deep breath. Held it. Released it with a whoosh. “*Normally*,” he murmured, still willing to play along, “I would start the process anyway, without expectation of repentance. Hypothetically speaking.”

“You can do that? Just kick someone out?”

He nodded. “I call a bishop’s court. The stake president—my immediate superior—and eleven other men get together and have kind of a tribunal, I guess, to decide the matter. But I get the ball rolling.”

“And *some* situations aren’t normal.”

“*Some* situations are...politically delicate.”

If his tone of voice was anything to go by, he’d told me all he would tell me, but I tried again anyway. Without knowing more about him, about the way his church worked, and his congregation’s internal politics, I couldn’t deduce details any other way.

“How do you see yourself as a bishop?”

“When I was new at this job,” he said wryly, letting me know he understood I hadn’t given up, “it bugged me that people got upset with me because I couldn’t or wouldn’t give them what they wanted, or they thought I was too harsh or...any number of strange reasons. My dad said, ‘Son, if a third of the ward isn’t mad at you, you’re not doing your job. Any less than that, you’re a pushover. Any more than that, you’re on a power trip and you need to get off it.’”

I laughed. “I take it you’re right at about a third?”

He grinned. “Depends on who I offended that week.”

I let it go with a smile, and the rest of the evening passed in casual, very careful conversation, both of us aware of Greg and his extramarital date, and he of us. He caught my eye across the restaurant and lifted his wine glass in a toast.

I didn’t press Mitch for any more details of the feud brewing between him and his parishioner, despite my acute curiosity, and he didn’t seem put off by the blunt deconstruction of my résumé. It was entirely possible he had simply made a mental shift from potential lover to friend or all the way back to colleague. It wouldn’t surprise me in the least.

Yet he insisted on walking me up to my hotel room, strolling really, my hand in the crook of his elbow, his free hand covering mine. Neither of us said anything and by the time we reached my hotel room, my body was languid, ready, willing. I hesitated to ask him in because I wasn’t at all sure I could control the situation; by the same token, I didn’t want to hear him hem and haw about saying “no.”

But he trapped me between his body and my hotel room door, his arms bracketing my shoulders, both hands planted flat against the door behind me. He leaned toward me, his mouth barely brushing my cheek. He touched me nowhere else, but I trembled and closed my eyes.

“Thank you for a wonderful evening, Cassandra,” he breathed, his words sifting softly across my skin and seeping into my brain. I sighed as if he had made love to me. I awaited The Kiss, but he pulled away from me. I opened my eyes when he tugged the keycard from my hand and slipped it into the door.

He opened the door, gave the keycard back to me, flashed me a smirk, then turned to stride down the corridor, one hand in his pocket. Even through my pique at having been so thoroughly seduced without having been touched, I had to smile as I watched him walk away from me.

So.
He *did* have a swagger.

* * * * *

Quench My Thirst With Gasoline

Mitch *never* lost control.

Most days, his legendary cool was the only thing that kept him from destroying his house with his bare hands. Sebastian rarely got angry to begin with, so he had no cool to lose; Knox popped off the minute something hit him wrong then promptly forgot about it; Morgan laughed at everything; Bryce had the good fortune of a wife who could manage his temper.

Mitch, though... Mitch didn't have the luxury of anger. He was a bishop and bishops had no emotion but loving concern, however detached.

He could vent to the one person who knew him best, but while Sebastian would take everything Mitch had to throw at him, then offer a "Feel better now, Elder?" he didn't have the empathy necessary to help Mitch put it in perspective. Bryce had empathy to spare, but he had enough on his emotional plate without Mitch adding to it. It didn't matter anyway; they were a thousand miles away. Time and distance tempered any satisfaction he could derive from unloading on either of them.

There was only one public place he allowed himself an outlet: In his high-performance sports car with ZZ Top blaring from the speakers, on the road with his foot shoving the gas pedal to the floor. He raced his demons home after having left Cassandra at her hotel room door.

Without kissing her.

Undressing her.

Making love to her.

At those speeds, in the dark, on narrow, twisting country roads, knowing there were patches of ice here and there, he had to concentrate, but once he got home...

He didn't even glance at a clock as he took the sweeping staircase two steps at a time to his seventeen-year-old son's room. He burst in to find the kid sloppily arrayed on his bed like a pig in a blanket, asleep. He only knew that because of the snores that came from somewhere inside that roll.

"Get up," he nearly snarled as he gripped the boy's exposed ankle and yanked. Hard. "Outside."

A miserable groan issued forth from that mass. "Dad..."

"Now!" he barked and left the room, slamming the door behind him.

It was another fifteen minutes before he met his son on the back lawn of the estate, which he had long ago transformed into a full-length soccer field, floodlights blinding in their intensity and more ZZ Top coming from speakers attached just below the floodlights.

He said nothing and fired a soccer ball at Trevor, who promptly lost the last vestiges of sleepiness to head the ball back at him and the game was on.

Neither spoke as they ran and maneuvered the ball over the snow-and-ice-littered field, no holds barred, their breath blowing white in the cold.

After a while, Mitch felt his tension wane. "Loser!" he called as he kicked the ball

straight at Trevor's head.

"Go look in a mirror, old man!" Trevor yelled back as he dribbled the ball down the field, dodging all Mitch's aggressive attempts to get it back. "You know what young lions do to the old ones. You want me to break your arm again?" Trevor lunged right to knock Mitch on his butt.

Mitch laughed as he hopped up, and the game grew a little lazier. They traded insults as fast as they traded the ball—

—then the floodlights and music shut down, leaving them in the pitch black.

They stopped and Mitch bent over, his hands on his knees, panting. His eyes burned with afterimage and his ears rang. He'd set the timer for two hours, never expecting that they'd play that long, much less have another hour of play left in them.

"Dude, you musta had a shitty day at work," Trevor drawled as he bounced the ball off Mitch's back, caught it, and headed into the house.

"Not exactly," Mitch replied, straightening to follow his son, ignoring the profanity. He heard it all day, every day, especially when he went into the foundry and, moreover, Trevor did too. Besides, this wasn't the bishop's house; it was the house of a single father with a teenage son. Without a female around, the males were bound to go feral at some point.

There were moments Mitch could barely keep himself from dropping an f-bomb or two. It was only a point of pride that kept him from swearing at all, ever; if he did, his public persona might crack and that he couldn't allow to happen.

He entered the warm house behind Trevor and took off his filthy winter clothes in the mudroom.

"You need to get laid," Trevor yelled from the kitchen.

Mitch barked a surprised laugh, and shook his head as he threw his cleats in the laundry room, then entered the kitchen and grabbed a bottle of Gatorade out of the refrigerator. Trevor leaned against the counter nursing his own bottle. "That," Mitch said after a long drink, "is true."

The boy stared at Mitch, shocked. "Serious?"

"I met a woman today."

"Shit."

"We had dinner."

"Is she hot?"

He shrugged. "Not like you mean it, no."

"I don't even know what 'hot' is anymore, anyway," Trevor muttered, looking at the floor, an unhappy expression on his face.

"What does that mean?" Mitch asked, genuinely curious.

It took a long time for him to answer, which was normal. Trevor usually chose his words with care. "Okay, like Hayleigh Sitkaris."

Mitch said nothing.

"She's really cute. Actually, she's drop-dead gorgeous, but she's so...needy."

"Neediness comes in a lot of different varieties," Mitch found himself saying. "It's not always a bad thing." All Hayleigh *needed* was a rabblrouser of a boyfriend who'd stand up to her father—

"Yeah, but that's not hot. Am I missing something? At church, at school, there are a lot of guys who want to go out with her, but she's all about *me*."

—which she apparently knew, since she kept attempting to confide in Trevor in hopes he would take the hint—and the job.

“Okay, so say she wasn’t needy. Would you like her then?”

Trevor pursed his lips in thought. “I’d ask her out.”

“Why do you think she’s needy?”

He glanced at Mitch warily. “You’ll think I’m crazy.” Mitch shook his head, and Trevor took a deep breath. “Her dad. He’s so awesome, right? He’s fun. He’s cool. He’s not all about the rules all the time.” He stopped. “But there’s something about him that’s not right. The way Hayleigh acts around him, it’s totally different from the way she is, like, when she’s hanging around me and Josh and Cordelia.”

Josh and Cordelia. The other two kids who didn’t buy into Greg’s charm. Four teenagers out of thirty-eight. They didn’t know why, either.

“Crazy, huh?”

“Not at all. But think back. Does she come on to you? Does she act like she’s angling for anything other than somebody to listen to her who won’t think *she’s* crazy?”

Trevor stared at the floor, silent for a couple of seconds. “Well, yes and no,” he murmured. “It’s weird. When Josh is around, it’s almost like she would rather be with him than me, but— It’s like, she wants me to do something for her, but won’t come out and say it.”

“Like...something only you can do that Josh can’t, and if Josh could do it she wouldn’t be all about you?”

“Yeah, exactly. Weird.”

Not weird. Smart.

Josh didn’t have a trust fund he could use to whisk Hayleigh away from her father, much less a full-time union-wage job and his own investment portfolio to support her on. Josh also didn’t have a father who could protect her from Greg. Hayleigh wasn’t mercenary—she was confused and desperate to either untangle her confusion or find an efficient, palatable way to get away from its source.

Trevor had cash and Mitch had power.

It was more than Mitch had had when faced with the same situation.

“You know what’s going on with her, don’t you?” Trevor asked.

Mitch shrugged. “I have my suspicions. Nothing concrete. It’d help if you paid attention to whatever she’s trying to tell you. Then maybe you could pass it along to me if you feel comfortable doing that.”

Trevor studied him a moment. “Okay,” he said slowly. “I can do that.” He remained silent for a while, and Mitch began to dread whatever would come out of his mouth. A long silence like that meant Trevor was trying to decide how best to deliver bad news.

“Dad, I don’t want to go to BYU.”

Mitch released a long whoosh of air. Was that all? “Okay.” Easy enough. “I didn’t go to BYU and I never expected you to. Where do you want to go?”

“NYU.”

Mitch would rather he go farther away from home so he could feel truly independent, but it was Trevor’s money, Trevor’s decision.

“And I don’t want to go on a mission.”

Mitch had expected that a year ago. “Why not?” he asked, but he already knew. Trevor had spent a lot of time with Sebastian over the last few years. Even though Mitch

had known the consequences of letting an impressionable teenager loose with a libertine like Sebastian, Mitch had needed help desperately.

Sebastian was willing to step in where Mina's parents wouldn't, Mitch's parents couldn't, and this—

“I don't think I believe any of it, much less enough to preach it for two years.”
—was the result.

Mitch had gambled his son's religious training and lost.

“Déjà vu all over again,” he said under his breath, remembering the late nights, the arguments, the *anguish* of watching his best friend lose his faith, hurt, angry, bewildered, and, ultimately, alone in a mire of doubt. Mitch certainly wasn't going down the “pray about it and you'll know it's true” route again. That rarely worked anyway.

“What? No objections?”

“What am I supposed to say to that, Trevor? You've always been expected to be a man, and you've grown into a fine one, so I trust you're capable of making your own decisions.”

“I don't want to embarrass you in front of the ward.”

Mitch laughed. “I haven't been embarrassed about anything since I came home from my mission early.”

“Aw, c'mon, Dad. You were sick.”

That was the story, anyway.

I've been hearing things about you, Elder Taight, Elder Hollander. The stock exchange? The Louvre? You're not here for the sightseeing, Elders. You're here to work. Have you seen our baptism numbers, President?

Yes, Elder Hollander, I have. Impressive, certainly, but I simply can't ignore you two breaking the rules. I know you two spent your last P-day in La Rive Gauche.

It was a P-day, President. Preparation day. That was part of our preparation.

Don't get smart alecky with me, Elder Taight. I always knew you were trouble. And where are you getting all the money I know you've been spending? You can't afford half the food that's in your apartment.

No, Elders Hollander and Taight weren't blameless.

Sebastian had indeed dragged Mitch to the stock exchange and museums on the sly, taught him about money and art and philosophy, encouraged Mitch's taste for subversive books at the tiny bookselling stalls they found on their explorations of Paris. Mitch ate well on Sebastian's dime and didn't beat his feet to death walking everywhere because Sebastian made sure they had the money to use the subway and, if they were desperate enough to risk being found out, a taxi. Sebastian had taught him what it felt like not to pinch every penny because he had to, and Mitch was only too eager to take the mental and emotional respite his renegade companion offered.

But they also worked hard and had the numbers to prove it. It should have been enough.

You two need to figure out if you're here to work or if you're here to mess around.

But President, we're the second-highest baptizing companionship in the mission.

I heard you the first time, Elder Hollander, but you're not listening to me. It doesn't excuse either of you. You and Elder Taight here, birds of a feather, shirking your duty. I'm sure your parents are very proud, but then...the Church is paying for your missions, right? Because your parents can't? So they don't have any real investment in how you do

here. *Weak, both of you.*

The mission president's insults had stunned Mitch into silence, but not his companion.

Oh, fuck you, President. You wouldn't know weak if it crawled up your ass and died. Elder Taight! Your language!

Maybe you should worry less about my language and my food and my going to the stock exchange, and more about your two lily-white rich zone leaders out fucking every pretty girl they can find. That's against mission rules too, right? I never hear about them getting called on the carpet. Put our stats up against any other companionship in the mission and you'll see who's fucking around and who's not. C'mon, Elder. Let's go back to tracting, like we're supposed to. Like we were doing when we got hauled in here. Totally bogus.

Mitch had walked out of the mission president's office nauseated, ashamed of whatever weakness that had made him sit there and take it. His transfer orders had arrived the next day, as had Sebastian's. No, the mission president couldn't let a companionship like Elders Taight and Hollander exist; their hard work made everybody else look bad.

Just like working for the government. I'm blowing this popsicle stand and going to Spain. Come with me and we can see Europe like it's supposed to be seen.

No, I have to do this. I want to make my parents proud.

Proud? Of what? Bending over? This is shooting fish in a barrel, and we're the fish.

My brother didn't have these problems. Your cousins aren't having these problems. It's just this mission.

So what? It doesn't change our situation.

My dad says when you're going through heck, keep going.

Yeah, Mitch, you know what? There's this thing called strategic retreat. Why are you letting a prick like that judge us worthy or not? He's the one with the problem, not you. Not me. We're doing what we came here to do, what we said we'd do. That's all the Lord cares about. You can't tell me you believe the Lord depends on that asshole to tell him whether we're worthy or not.

I don't. I can deal with it.

Mitch had been assigned to Elder Snow, and he didn't think it was a coincidence that Elder Snow was considered the "cleaner" of the mission. An extraordinarily high number of missionaries who were assigned with Elder Snow went home early.

Mitch's weary disappointment that a quarter of the mission's elders were partying grew to anger, then rage, under Elder Snow's abuse.

The guy never slept. He kept the lights on and made noise so Mitch couldn't sleep, taunted him relentlessly, ate all the food, and stole what little money Mitch had.

Turn the other cheek. Turn the other cheek turn the other cheek turn the other cheek—

Elder Hollander, did you hear me? Oh, no wonder you're such a retard. Just a steel worker, like your old man. Do you even know how to read?

What would Jesus do? What would Jesus do what would Jesus do what two—

It was true that after two months with Elder Snow, Mitch had grown ulcers so severe he should've been in the hospital, but that wouldn't have gotten him sent home.

Always keep your cool, Son. Honorable men let it roll off their backs.

It was the day Mitch had managed to slip his jailer and find a street vendor a few blocks away where he'd spent the last of his stipend on a crêpe filled with cheese and

sausage that sealed his fate. Mitch had watched in horror as Elder Snow snatched the crêpe out of his hands and tossed it in the Seine with a victorious smirk.

Mitch had thrown the first punch.

And the second.

And the third, fourth, and fifth until Elder Snow was curled up on the concrete, protecting his head, sobbing and pleading for mercy.

The mission president hadn't been any happier with Elder Snow (for having botched the job) than he was with Elder Hollander (for not groveling for mercy from Elder Snow). But Mitch had a weapon: his journal, loaded with every detail of the mission and his tenure with Elder Snow. He would not bend over one more time.

President, you send me home with a dishonorable release, and I'll make sure the General Authorities hear about this mission.

You can't threaten me.

Try me.

Mitch knew that if he hadn't been so ill, so emaciated and clearly exhausted, President Bates would've called his bluff—but all Mitch had to do was drop his journal in the mail to Salt Lake and head to the hospital. Mitch had backed the man into a corner until he'd agreed to a medical release.

It was easy for people to buy that. Mitch's father had taken one look at him and driven him straight from the airport to the hospital, where Mitch had spent a couple of weeks.

Yo, Elder. Did you hear about President Bates?

Sebastian, you're calling me from Europe?

Yeah. They reorganized the mission just after you left, and sent Bates home.

Apparently, you and I weren't the only ones kicking some ass and getting kicked back. It's a big scandal.

That had twisted the knife even deeper.

Not even Sebastian knew the real reason why Mitch had come home early. Sebastian would have crowed and praised him, but Mitch didn't want praise. He was ashamed. Ashamed for letting Elder Snow get under his skin, for cracking, for losing control. And if Mitch had had a little more faith—in himself, in the Lord—if he'd waited it out...

Mitch toyed with the idea of telling Trevor about Elder Snow, but instead of being a successful object lesson, it would only reinforce the contrary opinions Sebastian had already pounded into the boy's head.

"Doesn't matter why you come back early, Trev," he finally said. "If you say it's medical, you're either lying, crazy, or weak. If you say nothing, you must have been sent packing because of a girl. The worst is always assumed."

"Maybe if I *did* go, Grandpa Monroe would—"

Acknowledge my existence.

Trevor couldn't even finish the sentence, and Mitch felt the boy's pain as he'd felt Mina's, as he'd felt his daughters'. Mina's parents, who had moved to Philadelphia upon the Hollander family's return to Bethlehem, had never acknowledged their grandchildren's existence. Once Mina had had the temerity to run off and marry a lowly steel worker, Shane Monroe had stricken Mina's name from the family tree. As far as Shane was concerned, the Hollander family simply didn't exist.

"He's never going to, Trev," Mitch said simply. "Don't do things with the idea that

you can earn his approval or love. Your sisters already tried that and it didn't work."

Lisette and Geneviève lived picture-perfect good-Mormon-girl lives: graduating from BYU with honors, serving missions, marrying in the temple. Shane knew of it—they'd both insisted on sending him invitations to their graduations, pre-mission send-offs, post-mission open houses, weddings—but had still never spoken to them.

They'd both cried for hours, inconsolable, and Mina had cried with them. Mitch could only stand by and watch, mop up the tears, listen to their heartbreak.

"'Cause you were a steel worker," Trevor muttered into his Gatorade bottle, half angry, half hurt. "That's messed up."

A steel worker who'd deprived Shane of the son-in-law he'd wanted.

Trevor was angry, hurt. He wouldn't cry, but his back molars might suffer some damage from the grinding of his jaw. Either he was trying to control his normally even temper or he was planning some scheme to get his grandfather's attention. If it were the latter, Mitch wished him the best of luck and prepared for the emotional fallout.

"I'm not going to try to talk you into going on a mission," Mitch finally said, more to change the subject than make his next point, "but think about this. If you don't go and you decide you do believe and you want to find a good LDS girl, your options will be cut about in half. That probably doesn't make any difference to you now, but it will if you change your mind later."

"But Mom didn't care."

"Your mother was very young. All she wanted was to get married and have children." And escape an arranged marriage. "I caught her attention and she caught mine, so it worked out. But she had all these romantic notions of living on love, and part of the romance is hardship and struggle. When you marry a guy who didn't finish out his mission and works in a dying industry, you get an extra helping of hardship and struggle."

"And you struggled."

"I don't regret a second of it, either."

"Dad," Trevor said slowly, "why *did* you and Mom elope?"

"Ah, well..." He took a deep breath, wary of where this could go. "Her father wanted her to marry someone else and she didn't want to marry that man."

Trevor shrugged. "All she had to do was say no."

"She did. She said it the only way she could make it stick."

"Huh?"

"She married me instead."

"Oh, Grandpa Monroe wouldn't have forced—" He stopped short when he saw Mitch's raised eyebrow. "*No*," he breathed.

"The wedding was planned. The rings and dress were bought. She already had her temple recommend in preparation. The flights to Salt Lake were booked. Honeymoon was paid for. She was a good girl. She would've done what she was told."

"Running away was your idea?"

"Yes."

But once Mitch had presented the idea, Mina had been only too willing to let him rescue her. It wasn't the best way to start a marriage: two kids who weren't as in love as they should've been, getting married under duress, both of them with questionable motives. He and Mina might have been young and desperate, but they'd had a common

culture and common goals, and had worked hard to make their marriage a success.

So what if Mina's crush on Mitch hadn't completely matured— So what if Mitch's simple compassion for Mina's circumstance hadn't completely matured— So what if they hadn't been completely in love on their wedding day—

They were by the time Lisette was born a year later.

"And so now you've met somebody else?"

"Yes. Not sure where it's going yet. Or if it is. Would it bother you if it did?"

Trevor shrugged. "I don't know. I don't...remember Mom very well. I guess it would depend on the woman."

Ah, well, then, Mitch might as well get his most pressing issue out in the open.

"She's from Blackwood Securities, doing the reorganization."

"I thought that's what Sebastian does."

"He doesn't do as much of that anymore. He likes the design work he's doing for me, wants to dig into the metal, learn the machining, see what he can get it to do. And he likes being a stay-at-home dad."

Trevor shuddered and Mitch laughed. "Okay, so then the problem is she's not a member of the Church?"

"Well, not that so much as her previous profession." He paused. "She was a prostitute. A *very* high-dollar one."

"No *shit*," Trevor breathed, straightening up, all interest now. "She *told* you that? Just out of the blue?"

"She wanted to shock me, to see what I'd do, how I'd react."

"Maybe she was lying."

"No, she wasn't."

Trevor laughed. "Well, hell, at least she was smart enough to get paid instead of giving it away."

Mitch grinned. "There's a certain honor in that, eh?"

"Yeah. So...?"

...in my previous life, I wouldn't have taken him as a client.

"Doesn't bother me."

"What if she just wants your money?"

"Doubt it. She has her own and if all she wanted was a meal ticket, she wouldn't have stopped being a prostitute. That's a lot more honest than a woman who marries for money." He paused. "What I think she wants is to see if she can get a Mormon bishop in bed. She sees me as a challenge. It's a game for her."

"And?"

He slid a glance toward his son. "You know me better than that."

Trevor threw up a hand. "Of course. It's why you drag me out of bed at one o'clock in the morning to play killer soccer whenever you're horny, which, by the way, is seriously fucked up."

Mitch couldn't disagree with that—

"When'd you figure that out?"

—but he wasn't about to admit to the rare occasion he was desperate enough to take care of it the usual way.

"A while back. Dunno when."

Mitch let that hang for a while, reluctant to ask, not really wanting to know. "Trev?

You, uh—?” He held up his hand. “Not dad, not bishop. Just men talking.”

The boy said nothing for a moment, then— “I don’t know how to answer that. If I say no, it’d make me feel pathetic. If I say yes, you’d be disappointed.”

Mitch remained silent because Trevor had a better handle on it than he’d thought.

Finally Trevor sighed. “No. I haven’t met a girl I wanted that much. I mean, I think about sex all the time.”

“Yeah. You’re seventeen.”

“But I look at what I’ve got to choose from at school and it’s just not... Something’s not clicking for me. I mean, I don’t like dudes, either, so that’s not it. In a way, that’d be easier because at least I’d know why I’m not digging the girls. And at church, well, the girls I like aren’t giving anything up, and the only one who does isn’t interesting enough to make up for all her bullshit.”

That was the most sensible thing Mitch had ever heard out of a seventeen-year-old boy’s mouth, and he said so.

“No, it’s not sensible. It’s a fact.”

Mitch snorted a laugh. After a couple of seconds, he said, “So...if you did meet a girl...?”

“Yeah. I would.”

Mitch sighed. “Well, be careful. Watch out for the girls with dollar signs in their eyes. Use condoms. I’m sure Sebastian’s already given you the lecture. And if you do, you better act accordingly at church. No public prayer, no blessing the sacrament, no choir practice, no splits with the missionaries.”

Trevor nodded and took another swig of his Gatorade. “So speaking of church. You gonna bring this woman?”

“Nope.”

“Heh. You can be embarrassed.”

“Nope. This isn’t a missionary moment, Trevor. She’s a woman who has her own life and I find her interesting, so why would I want to try to change her? If she comes to church with me, fine, but it has to be at her instigation.” He paused. “I know I don’t talk about myself this way much because it makes me uncomfortable, but, Trev, I’m a powerful man and I didn’t get that way without knowing exactly what I want and having a great deal of cunning and patience to get it.”

“And you want her?”

“I’m intrigued. But with who she is now, not because I want to change her into something she’s not. I might go ahead and play the game with her, but I’ll win.” He leaned over then and got in Trevor’s face. “Because I *always* win.”

* * * * *

Steel in Vase

December 27, 2010

Three weeks.

Well, that settled that, I supposed, but I didn’t know why it bothered me so much. I should never have told him something so outrageous, full disclosure be damned. I might have been able to keep my prostitution from him for however long our little flirtation would have lasted, but now it wasn’t possible.

Maybe I should've immediately repudiated the little prick who'd intruded upon our evening, instead of falling into my act, conditioned by years of fucking people I wasn't attracted to—and some I didn't like.

Qué será será. I sighed and rubbed away a strange stinging in my nose.

I swung around in my chair when my assistant knocked on the door and my breath caught in my chest as the biggest bouquet of the most perfect roses I'd ever seen preceded her into my office—in vibrant orange. What the hell, *orange*? She put the vase on my desk, her face a study in excitement. She bounced on the balls of her feet and said, in a rather conspiratorial whisper, "Three dozen."

Three weeks.

Three dozen.

I might as well have been told point blank. I reached for the card and opened it. I recognized the handwriting.

Babbo
Tonight 7:30

"Who's it from?"

Nobody knew of my evening with Mitch. Never mind Jack would blow his top; I simply wanted to keep it to myself. It was so...different from anything I'd experienced.

"The man's a romantic," I breathed in wonder. I felt something warm and soft blossom in my chest and that strange stinging feeling in my nose started again. Was this what "to woo" meant? "To court"? Was I being courted, wooed?

I had never been that.

Gordon Rivington—a teenage crush cum marriage cum property swap.

Nigel Tracey—my introduction to and instruction in exquisite sex.

Lovers, miscellaneous—affection, fun, and a few mutually beneficial extras.

Clients, by referral only—business deals.

Mitch had come to Manhattan, but whether it was solely to see me or not, I didn't know. I doubted it highly.

"I looked it up," my assistant said, and I started because I'd forgotten she was there. "Orange roses mean desire and passion."

Really.

"But orange means other things, too, so maybe it's not just that or not that at all."

"What other stuff?"

"Enthusiasm."

"That's fairly generic."

"And fascination and um, like, 'I'm proud of you' kind of stuff."

"I have a hard time believing a man would indulge in rose language."

Susan bent to take another whiff, but stopped and said, "Oh? What's this?"

From the center of the bouquet she plucked a bright orange iPod Nano, its earbud cord tied in a bow. I stared at it, my mind blank.

"Cassie?" Susan had been speaking and I'd completely spaced. "I said, it must have something on it. If he just meant to give you the iPod, he would've left it in the box. And it's not like you couldn't buy your own."

Oh.

I pulled the cord loose, plugged it into the device, put the buds in my ears, then turned it on. In a second or two, the smooth voice of Harry Connick, Jr. flowed into my brain and straight down to the pit of my belly.

What are you doing New Year's Eve?

"Cassie! Sit down before you fall down. What's wrong?"

I sat, relaxed back into my chair, and closed my eyes, listening to Harry repeat the question while envisioning Mitch. Somewhere in the back of my mind I knew Susan was tiptoeing out of my office, and I even heard the soft swish of the door closing behind her.

Expensive gifts from clients were *de rigueur*; it was ritual, simply part of the payment protocol for a mistress. Jewelry. Collectible wines. Art. Favors I could call in, occasionally worth many thousands of dollars, but mostly priceless. Things neither I nor my client would have to account for on a tax return. Occasionally the smaller gifts might arrive in or with flowers, but they meant nothing.

No, I had never had this.

A bouquet and a song, to plead for a date on a special night of the year.

My face heated up and I wondered if I were getting sick, so I felt my forehead, but no. It was nice and cool. I put my hand to my cheek, then had to find a tissue because my skin was all wet.

* * * * *

Uptown Girl

She had worn orange.

The minute she stepped into the restaurant, she took Mitch's breath away. He had felt every minute of the last three weeks, debating whether to pursue her, how she would mesh at church, if she would be willing to mesh at church, whether church really mattered in this equation or not, beyond keeping his covenants.

He couldn't figure out what it was about her that had him feeling as nervous as a kid asking a girl out for the first time, but he had to see her again.

Three weeks. It had taken him that long to determine that his fascination with her wasn't going to go away. He knew what conclusion she would draw from his leaving such a long space of time between then and now, given her bald pronouncement. It'd been a test—and he'd passed it.

Because she was here.

In orange.

"Cassandra."

She started and turned, a sweet smile on her face that he wanted to see more of. Her face, piquant, with those clear brown eyes, was the most beautiful face he had ever seen

—and that included the face of his wife, the mother of his children, whom he had loved and married in the temple for eternity, whom he had cared for so many years before she died.

He didn't remember this fire in his gut, this *need* for Mina that he had for Cassandra. Perhaps it was the fact that she was, unlike Mina, vibrant and sensual. Perhaps it was the fact that he wasn't twenty-one and destitute, stretched to his limit and depending on his fragile eighteen-year-old wife to keep them out of the red every month. He was forty-

four, healthy, and had everything to offer a woman, even one who had as much money and power as he did.

But here Cassandra stood in front of him, beautiful in a way Mina had never been.

Guilt stabbed him. The guilt of disloyalty. The guilt of an adulterer, the way it had been described to him in countless interviews over the years. He was a widower and he had been faithful to his wife and his covenants, so he didn't understand why his spirit was vulnerable to guilt when his mind wasn't.

"Mitch," she returned in that husky purr he wasn't sure was deliberate. He thought he was an expert at spotting women who affected husky purrs, so if she was faking it, she was better than all the women who had tried before.

She held her hand out for him to shake, but he turned it and brought it to his lips for a light kiss. Her eyes widened almost imperceptibly as he held her gaze. He could tell her breath caught and he wondered if she was as smitten as he was. He doubted it.

Still, she was here and she had worn orange.

He tucked her hand into the crook of his left arm and nodded at the maître d' for their table.

The conversation began easily enough, though Mitch wasn't paying attention to what she said so much as how she said it. He noticed she did not order wine. That intrigued him, since, in Bethlehem, she had chosen what Sebastian later informed him was what anyone with exquisite taste and money to burn would order. Sebastian wanted to know who had ordered it and why it had piqued Mitch's curiosity enough to ask. Mitch had declined to explain.

Now, Mitch simply watched her, listened to her voice. It evened out after a while and he wondered if the purr had been nervousness, but he doubted it. He didn't make women like her nervous.

"How was your Christmas?" he asked during a small lull just as they had been served.

"Decent," she murmured. "Gordon, my ex-husband, and his husband, Nigel, took the twins to a performance of *Wicked*. Helene had a double shift at the hospital. Clarissa and I indulged in a chick-flick marathon and binged ourselves sick on Ben & Jerry's. Yours?"

"My wife died on Christmas Day last year," he said, wondering why he'd even brought it up, except, well, it was two days after Christmas. Why wouldn't one ask? "My son and I went to Vail. My daughter hosted Christmas this year and filled up her house with her in-laws. Fun people. Did a little skiing. So it was good."

Relatively speaking.

"I'm sorry," she murmured.

"My fault," he said briskly and sat up a little straighter. "I figured yours had to be better than mine."

She chuckled then. "And it wasn't."

"Didn't sound that way, no."

"So what brings you up to Manhattan?" she asked finally. He'd expected it immediately, but perhaps she was hesitant to know.

"You."

She bit her lip and he didn't know how she'd survived as a call girl without getting completely fleeced. If she was acting, he couldn't tell and—well, that pretty much meant she wasn't.

"As it happens," she said, suddenly paying a lot more attention to her meal. "I am, uh, free Friday."

His heart thumped in his chest.

What are you doing New Year's Eve?

"I find that...odd."

She looked up at him, her expression shuttered. "Then why did you ask me out if you thought I had something else to do?" she asked brusquely.

"I couldn't not."

She swallowed. "Oh."

"Cassandra," he began slowly, not even sure what he wanted to say. "I would like—"

The phone in his suit coat chirped the ringtone that let him know he had a problem at church. Cassandra stiffened and the moment shattered. "I'm sorry," he said, immediately frustrated, but hiding it as well as he usually did. "I have to take this call."

"Go ahead," she said flatly with a dismissive wave.

He arose and stalked through the restaurant and out the front door. "What," he said tightly, without looking at the caller ID.

"Uh..." Then Mitch looked. His first counselor. "Did I interrupt something?"

"As a matter of fact, Steve, yes. What's wrong?"

"Sister Bevan is trying to get hold of you."

Mitch ground his teeth. "I'm in Manhattan."

There was a long pause. "She's demanding to talk to you, wants your cell number."

"What's the problem this time?"

"She says Dan hit her."

Mitch had every reason to doubt that, but wouldn't take the chance. "Steve, *please* do me a favor and take care of it. There's a list of shelters in my desk drawer—"

"Been there, done that, Mitch. Louise is over at her house trying to talk her into going to the hospital and filing a police report, which she's refusing to do."

Of course.

"Where's Dan?"

"Gone...who knows where."

Probably the library, where he'd always gone when he wanted to escape his life. He'd done it since they were kids, and right then, Mitch wanted to throttle him for it.

"Have you seen her? Do you know what kind of condition she's in?"

"No."

Another call was coming in. "Hey, Steve, lemme call you back." He switched over, already knowing who it was, wanting to strangle whoever gave her his number.

"Bishop!"

"Sister Bevan," he said politely, holding onto his patience with every last ounce of will he possessed. "What can I do for you?"

"I'm done. I cannot take this anymore. Dan's just...out of control. Help me!"

"Listen to me and do what I tell you to do, okay? Sister Kelly is with you, right?"

"Yes, but she isn't *you*. *She* can't make Dan go away."

He ignored that. "Let Louise take care of you, get you to a shelter at least."

Sally launched into a list of reasons why *he* had to be the one to help her and why she couldn't go to the emergency room or call the police.

"Sister Bevan, I *am* going to help you, but you have to let me talk to Sister Kelly,

okay?”

“Yes, Mitch,” she said, then sniffled. “Thank you.”

“Louise,” he said without preamble when she answered. “Are you free to talk?”

“No.”

“All right.” This was an old exercise. Louise’s job as Relief Society president gave her unlimited access to Mitch’s ear, and they’d collaborated on the disposition of too many such situations. “Any bruises or blood?”

“None.”

“Do you believe her?”

“No.”

“Call the police and have her make a report. If she’s not lying, we can get this dealt with properly. If she is, maybe it’ll scare her enough to quit...”

“Greg’s here.”

Mitch’s throat clogged. Louise’s terseness told him everything he needed to know about how helpful Greg would be, sweetly feeding Sally’s obsession with Mitch.

“Can you get him to leave?”

“No.”

No one but Mitch and Brother Kelly knew how much she despised Greg Sitkaris. Her hatred had grown slowly over the last five years as she’d gone about tending the women in the ward, seeing the way Greg charmed them. Then, once they were thoroughly captivated by him, he would slowly, subtly chip away at their confidence and self-esteem with backhanded compliments dispensed in tones flavored with disdain—
—for his own amusement.

Even Mitch had thought Louise’s descriptions of his behavior unbelievable and she, like Mina, had given up trying to explain it to him.

But now Mitch understood.

“All right. Insert yourself between them. Don’t let him talk to her or get close to her.”

She paused. “Uh...”

“I get it now.”

“*Finally!*” Little whispers of fabric let Mitch know she was moving. “You need to do something,” she hissed.

Louise certainly wasn’t shy about stating her opinion. He knew exactly what she wanted him to do.

“I’m...working on that,” he admitted gruffly.

“Right now?” she asked, shocked.

“Yes, right now! And I’m having a good time and I want to get back to it.”

“Oh,” she breathed. “That’s great! Okay, I’ll call my husband and we’ll get it done. Consider your evening free.”

Mitch had just turned his phone off when a flash of orange at the door of Babbo caught his eye.

“Cassandra!” he called, panicked, and trotted toward her.

She stopped. Gave him a cool glance. “Yes?”

“I’m sorry. That was a church call. I had to take it.”

“Had to?” she asked smoothly.

Mitch opened his mouth to protest, but no, he hadn’t had to. That was why he had

two counselors and a female counterpart with her own counselors, and an entire hierarchy of people who could have dealt with it without involving him. "I'm sorry. It's...complicated. I've— My ward—parish—they've gotten used to my availability—" He needed to shut up.

"You're a brilliant man, Mr. Hollander," she murmured. "You know how to make yourself unavailable, and I don't take second place to anyone. By the way," she said as she turned and walked away from him, "*I am* busy Friday."

His nostrils flared. "Cassandra—"

"I didn't pay the tab, so you'd best see to it."

"Cassandra—"

"Good night, Mr. Hollander."

Mitch wanted to howl, but didn't. As usual. "Happy early birthday, then."

She stopped cold and stood motionless for long seconds. Her head bowed. He watched, his heart pounding in his ears, wondering if...

"You had me investigated," she said quietly over her silver-mink-clad shoulder, her breath white in the cold air.

"Of course I did," he said, exasperated. "I'd be an idiot not to."

"So you know everything."

"Not everything I wanted to know, no."

"My ex-husband? My ex-father-in-law? My divorce?"

"Yes, yes, and yes."

"Police reports? Criminal trial transcripts? Financial records?"

"Those too."

"My client list?"

"You didn't sell it. Did you destroy it?"

"I'm not that stupid."

"That's a relief."

"The people on it don't share your opinion."

"I wouldn't think so. Couldn't get your medical records, either."

She waved a hand. "Well, I don't have any cooties, if that's what you're wondering. I'm a professional."

"Trust in Allah, but tie your camel."

"Fine. I'll get tested again and send you the results."

"Much appreciated."

"So knowing what you do know, why did you ask me out?"

"You're a brilliant woman, Ms. St. James," he said, hope seeping back into his soul. "You know what that means."

"It could mean anything. Like...pity."

"I don't drive two hundred miles round trip to have intimate dinners at chic restaurants with people I pity."

"Slumming, then."

"No. *You're* slumming. I'm the one from the wrong side of the tracks." He saw the corner of her mouth twitch. "And what did your people find out about me?"

She released a resigned sigh. "That you have a PhD in metallurgical engineering from Missouri S&T. That your wife had a rare and devastating form of multiple sclerosis. That your daughters were missionaries for your church in Moscow and Hong Kong,

respectively, although I can't remember which went where. That you have one child—a boy—still at home. That I'm the first woman you've been interested in since your wife died last year *and* that she was the only woman you've ever had sex with. That you have lived a very boring life and that you seem perfectly happy to wallow in your boringness."

He laughed, feeling lighter than he had in weeks. Months. "And yet, you accepted my invitation. Why?"

She turned almost fully then and looked at him, a smile creeping up on her. "I honestly don't know."

"Cassandra. Could we please go back in and finish our meals? I'm still hungry."

"Turn your phone off."

"I did."

"Did you get your crisis taken care of?"

"Would it make any difference?"

"No. I come first. Always."

Mina never would have made such a demand, and Cassandra's arrogance had Mitch aching.

He offered her his arm and said, "Likewise."

She sniffed. "I made a very good living knowing how to treat men."

Mitch chuckled. "Nice to know I'll be in good hands then."

"You have no idea how good. Yet."

* * * * *

Hey, Big Spender

December 31, 2010

"Cassie, what is your problem?"

Hell if I knew. I'd been pacing around the house all morning, too restless to find any one thing and do it, too wound up to watch TV, too distracted to catch up on household business.

"Go to work or something," Clarissa snapped before stuffing popcorn in her mouth.

I stood in the kitchen and stared at Clarissa, Olivia, and their boyfriends in the living room splashed out in front of the TV for a New Year's Eve Woody Allen marathon.

Something was wrong with this picture, but I couldn't figure out exactly what.

They'd finish the movies, nap—have sex—all afternoon and evening, then go clubbing all night long.

My oldest and youngest were busy, too: Helene would be at the hospital for the next thirty-six hours. Paige had three performances today and two tomorrow.

I didn't want to go to work.

But I didn't want to be here, either.

I could go to my room, but that felt too much like I'd been sent there by my disapproving offspring.

The phone rang and I snatched at it just because it was something to do.

"Were you planning to come in any time today?" Susan asked.

"It's ten o'clock in the morning and I am not there. What do you think?" I do my best work early in the morning.

“You need to come in today.”

That didn’t sound good, but I didn’t want to hear some chopped-up explanation for whatever had gone wrong. “All right. Get Sheldon here.”

I didn’t bother to change out of my sweats, the “NYU” stamped across my tits and ass brittle, cracked, half chipped off. I barely brushed my hair and went without makeup. Battered running shoes, no socks, old gloves and stocking cap, and I was out the door.

“Ms. St. James,” Sheldon murmured as he handed me into the car.

“Good morning, Sheldon.”

“Happy birthday,” he said when he finally slipped into the driver’s seat.

I stared at him. My *driver* was the first person today to tell me that? “Uh, thank you, Sheldon,” I said, but shook it off as he pulled away from the curb and into traffic. “Any news?”

“All quiet.”

“I suspect Olivia’s being followed.”

“She *was*. I took care of it.”

I met Sheldon’s significant look in the rearview mirror. “Permane—? Never mind.” He said nothing. “Did Susan tell you why she called me in?”

At that, he smirked.

My curiosity as to what had happened at the office deepened. I was a specialist, my department created for me and all my support staff handpicked by me. Neither I nor my employees got involved in the bank’s day-to-day business, and I had given my staff the day off.

I knew why Susan had gone in. She had her eye on some kid in Payroll, and would use the opportunity to fiddle around a little bit, play whatever computer game she was obsessed with, then head on down to the human resources department for her lunchtime stalking ritual.

“So,” I said briskly as I came off the elevator, pulling off my gloves and hat. To my surprise she and Melinda were smashed up together right in front of Susan’s computer, rapt. I didn’t have to be told what they were watching. “What’s the crisis?”

Susan paused their cooking show, looked around Melinda at me, up and down, and said, “Geez, is it possible for you *not* to look gorgeous?”

“Huh?”

“You come in dressed like a bag lady and you’re still hot.”

I laughed, unaccountably pleased, but Melinda snorted. “I hate you.”

“*Vittles?*” I asked dryly, stepping behind the two Vanessa Whittaker fangirls.

“I missed her when she was here, cooking at Chez Fricassee,” Melinda said, looking up at me. “Did you?”

“No, I ate there. Several times. She’s a brilliant chef, but she only got her break because she was Ford’s mistress and model. It would’ve taken her years to break out like that otherwise.”

Melinda grunted. “Doesn’t mean she’s not good at what she does.” She gave me the once-over. “Q.E.D.”

“Touché.”

“We all need help,” Melinda continued, looking at Susan now, lecturing. She did that a lot when she was in a reflective mood. “Don’t let anybody tell you all you need is brains and hard work, because that’s bullshit. We get help along the way, lucky breaks,

countless people who help in small ways and a few who help in big ways. That chef—” Melinda pointed to the computer. “—got a big break because of who she was sleeping with. That’s true. Being beautiful doesn’t hurt. But it didn’t give her her talent or her drive or her business sense. She had to work for what she built and now she has to work twice as hard to keep it and grow it.

“The trick,” she went on, “is to always be giving back. To help people along *their* way. Sometimes that comes back to you in strange and wonderful ways. Occasionally you get it back from the person you gave it to, but mostly not. So those lucky breaks people get? No such thing as luck. That’s the groundwork you laid when you helped somebody else.”

I nodded toward the monitor. “Makes me wonder what she did to come into Sebastian’s orbit, because you know how antisocial he is.”

They both stared up at me then. “You don’t know?” Susan asked.

“Know what?”

Melinda waved a hand. “Her boyfriend, the politician.”

“Cipriani? The hotshot who just got Senator Afton hounded out of Washington?”

“Him. She pretty much saved his life when she was a little girl. It involved Hilliard, so that was how she got access to Taight. She gave a big press conference at her Thanksgiving masquerade. I was there and it was *powerful*. She had me in tears. Go watch it on YouTube.”

“I will. I need to hit one of those masquerades. I hear they’re decadent.”

Melinda smiled wickedly and stretched, her beautifully toned arms glistening dark chocolate. “It was...*lovely*,” she purred after a second or two.

“Are either one of you going to cough up the reason you have summoned me?”

“It’s in your office,” Melinda said dismissively and gestured to Susan to restart their program.

I obeyed as if I were a flunky—

—and stopped short. There, on my desk, a gift basket but clearly not some perfect corporate parfait of meaningless motivational bullshit. I approached it slowly, as if it were a wild animal that would pounce on me at any moment if it noticed me.

It was a pathetic little thing, really. I’d mastered my share of crafts early in my marriage when I was a Martha Stewart acolyte, trying my best to be what I’d been brought up to be: A high-society June Cleaver, perfectly accomplished in the home arts, perfectly dressed and coifed while practicing those arts, my pretty mint shirtwaist covered by a complementary apron I had hand-embroidered. I could’ve done a better gift basket in my sleep, even after all these years.

I untied the pink tulle. A “bouquet” of cookies on sticks, probably a couple dozen. Sugar cookies, from the looks of them, unartfully iced and decorated, with two sticking prominently up in the center, each with one word: “Happy” and “birthday.”

Oh, my. I cleared my throat and plucked a cookie out of its fastening.

“*Shit*,” I breathed after I’d taken a tentative bite. Chewy, with a delicate balance of lemon and vanilla. They might not be able to decorate, but damn, they could bake.

Whoever “they” were.

The cookie sticks were in a small vase. I pulled that out and set it aside to see— There, in the bottom of the basket were two paperbacks. I held one in each hand and looked between them. No, not two books. One. One in French and one in English. The

one in French was old, yellowed and battered. The one in English was fresh and bright.

Angélique, Marquise des Anges or, in English, *Angélique, the Marquise of the Angels*.

I knew this story: A teenage girl obliged to marry an unattractive eccentric over a decade her senior, with whom she gradually fell in love as she learned who and how truly wonderful he was.

I'd been required to view the movie during one of my interminable humanities classes in my interminable undergraduate years, and had written my paper on the contrast between the heroine in the story to my own history. I'd earned a C because, "No matter how well written, treacly fiction has no place in film critique. You're lucky I didn't fail you."

Why had Mitch chosen this particular story? He was a sly devil, and I couldn't discount the possibility that, now he knew my history, he was making the same comparison I'd made. Yet...

The French version was well loved, and a quick glance at the copyright page told me it was from an early printing, 1958, and it was old before we were born—ancient by the time Mitch had gotten his hands on it. He had written in the margins, tiny, in French. Inside the back cover, in a different hand, in English, was written, "You should be reading your scriptures, Elder!"

That made me smile, this microscopic look into the lives of two twenty-year-old boys in a foreign country, out of their depth, and struggling to make sense of their situation.

I put the books down, then looked back into the basket. Ah, yes, a note. I broke the seal and took out the plain white card.

Happy birthday, Cassandra.
I'll pick you up at 8:00.
(jeans—bundle up)

I fell into my chair. Dammit, where *was* that box of tissues?

Once I'd mopped up my face and taken a Benadryl for my allergies, I made sure the cookies were within reach, opened the English version of the book, tilted my chair back, propped my feet on my desk, and settled in.

* * * * *

When Did You Fall

I opened my door at two minutes to eight to see him standing there relaxed, his hands in his jeans pockets, a long wool overcoat swept back behind his strong arms. His sandy hair glinted a slight red in the glow from the street lamp and his eyes seemed lighter in the reflection off the snow. He had a sly smile on his face and I wondered if he would kiss me at the stroke of midnight.

Was it only a month ago I'd thought him ordinary?

"Come in for a minute," I said with an unintentional huskiness to my voice. I stepped aside, but his smile change from sly to amused and he said,

"Thank you, but no. Not coming in."

It took me a second or two to figure that out, then said, “You think I’m going to seduce you.”

“Attempt to.”

I smirked.

“Appearance of impropriety and all that.”

“Ah, okay.”

Chuckling, I went to find my coat, then shoved it into his hands when I stepped out onto the stoop and locked my door. He assisted me into it as I had expected him to.

“Did you get my test results?” I asked as he handed me into the car he’d hired for the night. I slid over a proper distance so that he wouldn’t be *too* tempted.

“Yes, I did, thank you,” he said with a chuckle. “And I turned off my phone.” Once he was comfortable and we were on our way, he looked at my lap, grasped one of my hands, and wrapped my fingers up with his. “Did you have a good birthday?”

“Only because of you.”

Oh, my God. I hadn’t really said that, had I? I had. His frown told me I had. “What does that mean?” he rumbled.

“Uh...”

“Are you telling me that your family didn’t do anything for you?”

“Uh...”

“And your daughters all live at home, right?”

I looked past him out the window, seeing nothing. “New Year’s Eve is...New Year’s Eve. It’s special to them. It’s always been difficult.”

“Even when you were a kid?”

“Um...” I cleared my throat. “No. My parents— They made sure to put me first. Then...”

“Then...?”

“Then I got married,” I said flatly, hoping he would back off. He knew what had happened—at least, what was in the public record as having happened.

His jaw clenched then and he looked away as if to hide it. His hand closed a little tighter on mine, and I wondered— “Do you ever get angry? Really angry?”

He looked at me sharply and his expression melted into a smile immediately. “Not much, no,” he said. “I’m pretty easygoing.”

Liar.

I didn’t say it, though. He’d deny it and I really didn’t want to spend my evening trying to get him to admit something probably very few people knew about him.

“That book you sent me,” I said. “I like it so far. Thank you.”

“How far in did you get?”

“Angélique’s marriage.” I launched into the oddity of his having chosen that particular book to send me and why, and, because I couldn’t keep my fucking mouth shut, I said, “Did you send that to me because of *my* marriage?”

He started. “No. I— It’s my favorite book. It...helped me get through a rough time in my life. I didn’t see any connection in it. I wanted to— Um...”

I closed my other hand over the knot that his and mine already made. “It’s okay,” I murmured. “It wouldn’t have bothered me if you had. I was curious, is all. Big coincidence.”

He stared at me for a second, his expression somber. “Tell me about it.”

I took a deep breath and sighed, then shifted to make myself more comfortable. I knew what he was asking and I didn't pretend otherwise. "Gordon was twenty-five. I was fifteen and madly in love with this dashing older man. He saw me as a well-behaved little girl...a pretty life-sized doll who could walk and talk. He didn't object when his father and my father set up the deal. I sure as hell wasn't going to object." I stopped, thought back. It was humiliating, thinking how I'd doodled Gordon's name on my notebooks, being so very...*fifteen* about it. But fifteen was fifteen and not forty-six, and was to be expected. I was far more forgiving of, say, my twenty-four-year-old assistant's crush on the kid in Payroll than I was of my fifteen-year-old self.

"We had three years of an entirely chaste and fairy princess courtship. I thought Gordon refused to kiss me because I was underage, which only proved to me that he was honorable. We got married a week after I turned eighteen. My father didn't figure out until my wedding day why Gordon's father was so eager to get us married off." I laughed. "Hell, *Gordon* didn't even know."

"When'd he come out?"

The warmth of Mitch's big hand seeped into my cold ones. "When he got out of prison. Before he went into treatment."

"And your father put you in that position, even though he knew."

"He didn't *know*," I said. "He suspected. Didn't know what to do because if he were wrong, it would've blown back on all of us very badly... I try to give him the benefit of the doubt."

"I see. You were the one hit with all the aftershocks."

I shrugged. "I was a good girl. I did what I was told."

"Until you couldn't anymore," Mitch muttered, his head bowed and his voice far away. I leaned forward a little to look up into his face.

"Mitch?"

He glanced up at me, then chuckled wryly. "You and Mina. Good girls backed into a corner, then came out fighting."

"Your wife?" I asked, not in the least bit jealous. I'd be suspicious of any man who didn't want to talk about the woman he had loved so long, the mother of his children. After years of studying men, fucking a good many of them, and acting as overpaid therapist to more than a few, I had come to the conclusion that ones who'd lost beloved wives after long marriages made excellent relationship material, and I wasn't threatened by a ghost.

"She was seventeen when we met," he said slowly. "Very shy, soft-spoken, eager to please. Physically delicate. She was sick even then, but nobody knew it. She had never rebelled, not even so much as smarting off. I was...without prospects, so her father— He was—is—a CPA with his own successful firm, very upper middle class. He disapproved of me."

"Putting it lightly?" I asked, hearing the edge in his voice.

A corner of his mouth turned up. "I think you read me too well."

"I think you let me."

He tilted his head in acknowledgment of that.

"And?"

"And I...stole her."

"*Stole* her? From whom?"

“Her father. The man he wanted her to marry. They had it all arranged for her to marry him the week after she graduated from high school.”

“So you eloped? How’d that work out with her family?”

“Disowned her. Never spoke to her again. I got into S&T, so after she graduated from high school, we moved to Missouri and stayed there for eight years. It was easier for her that way, anyway. She could use distance to excuse them.”

Well. Mina Monroe and Cassie St. James, two sides of the same coin.

“Now?”

Mitch waved a hand. “Her mother died before she did. Her father never had anything to do with me or the kids.”

“Still?”

“Still. My son is having a hard time with it right now, same way my daughters did. Do.”

I sighed.

“And...what’s *your* ex-father-in-law doing these days?”

That startled a delighted laugh out of me, as he had surely intended. “*My* ex-father-in-law is working at a convenience store somewhere on the Tex-Mex border.”

“How much of a hand did you have in that?”

“Both hands, both feet. And I make sure to keep my stiletto heel in his jugular at all times. Revenge is best served in a Slurpee cup, you see.”

He and I laughed, and we were still laughing when our car pulled up to Bryant Park. “Mitch,” I drawled, not in the least surprised. “Ice skating? What a chick-flick cliché.”

“Well,” he said as he got out and pulled me out after him, “it’s free and I didn’t have much money left after that ridiculously expensive basket I sent you.”

“Don’t tell anybody I’m such a cheap date. Did you make those cookies?”

“Uh, no. The young ladies in my ward—parish—”

“I’ve got the lingo now, Mitch. Ward, not parish.”

He grinned. “—were making them as a service project, so I asked my Relief Society president—my female counterpart in the ward—to swipe a few, write the words, and wrap it up.”

“Service project?”

“Yeah. It’s where somebody in the ward is identified as being in need of having something done. Sometimes it’s a job the teenagers can handle with little or no supervision. They get together and work on it, get it done. Project. Service. Service project.”

“I’m not in your ward-slash-parish.”

“No, but *I* am. And I was in great need, let me tell you.”

We laughed.

And continued to all evening as we attempted to skate, neither of us very good, leaning against each other, propping each other up, occasionally pulling the other one down. We may have spent more time upright than on our asses, but I wouldn’t have bet on it.

Breathless, we retired to a bench a couple of hours later to watch others who were far better than we were. Mitch draped his arm around my shoulder and I snuggled in for warmth. He curled his free hand around mine, and I felt his strength even through several layers of wool.

"Where are you staying?" I asked. "Did you drive?"

"I drove. Staying at The Mark."

I glanced up at him, surprised. "Just around the corner from me!"

He simply smiled, which carved concentric laugh lines into his cheeks.

"You're ornery."

"That I am," he murmured.

"What would God say about that?"

"God made mosquitoes."

I burst out laughing then. "Point taken. Then I will assume you have something planned?"

"My only plan was to spend the day with you, if you were free."

I was supposed to go shopping with Clarissa, during which she would attempt—and fail—to wheedle a five-thousand-dollar dress out of me. Boy, would she be pissed when I canceled. "I'd like that," I said, more softly than I'd intended to. "But not in my house?"

"Not alone, no."

I tried to be angry, but I couldn't. It was simply too funny.

"Yeah, yeah," he muttered. "Ha ha ha."

"Oh, don't be mad. I haven't laughed this much with a ma—" Well. He didn't need to know that.

"I think," he said slowly, looking off into the distance, "that it's time for hot chocolate and brownies. Jacques Torres."

"What are you talking about? They close at nine on Friday and maybe earlier today."

"You sure about that?"

My breath caught. "You evil man."

"The epitome."

•

We had the chocolaterie to ourselves, and we were seated with much ado—New Year's Eve, almost three hours past their closing time and coming up on midnight. People were knocking on the door to get in, but were ignored.

Midnight.

I was getting jittery, wondering how Mitch kissed, unable to wait for the new year when I would feel his mouth on mine.

Happy birthday to you...

I gasped and turned in my seat when the singing began.

A cake.

With sparkler candles.

Fuckers wouldn't go out when I blew at them, either. There were only four, but they kept sparking and sparkling. I kept blowing and blowing.

"Dammit!" I plucked them out of the cake and dunked them in my water glass.

Mitch roared with laughter. I tried not to, but failed.

"That was a nasty little trick," I grumbled. He opened his mouth, but I held up a hand. "I know, I know. God made mosquitoes."

The cake was cut and we each had a piece. There were chocolates and hot chocolate and ice cream and fruit and by the time we left at two, we were buzzed on sugar. We bounced nonsense off each other, in hysterics over things that, in daylight, would be simple stupidity, not even worthy of eyerolling.

The hour, the laughter, the sugar, the dark, the cold kept at bay in the back of a warm car with a warm and attractive man— It made me say and do things I knew I would find humiliating in the morning because they were so very...*fifteen*.

"I didn't get my midnight kiss," I whined, but it had taken me almost the entire distance home to cut through our silliness enough to remember it.

"You were otherwise occupied blowing out candles, and now it's too late."

"It's never too late for a kiss."

He cocked one eyebrow at me. "You think?" He shifted and leaned toward me and, with a sigh, I closed my eyes.

And he kissed me.

My eyes popped open. "What the hell was that?" I demanded.

He spread his arms, all wide-eyed innocence, and said, "I kissed you."

"On the tip of my nose! I barely felt it!"

I was squeaking. Oh, God, I was fucking *squeaking*!

"You weren't very specific."

I screeched. He laughed. I screeched louder, but it turned into a fit of giggles. I fell over and lay across the car seat with my head in his lap, simply looking up at him. He smiled and smoothed my hair, picked up a strand only to let it slip through his fingers.

"I'm drunk," I said.

"I know. You're worse than a toddler. Can't hold your sugar worth a darn."

I blinked. "Darn?"

"That's right."

I sat up. "You don't swear?"

He shook his head slowly. "Never."

"You better write me a list of things you can't do."

"Tomorrow. It's a long list."

"And then I will attempt to get you to do them."

"I would expect nothing less."

I sobered a bit. "Mitch, I— I wanted to tell you. Tonight was..." He pulled a handkerchief out of his pocket and dabbed my face. Benadryl. I needed Benadryl. "This was the best birthday I've had in a long time," I murmured. "Maybe ever."

He looked at me, no longer amused, and said, "I'm sorry."

* * * * *

Long Nights, Impossible Odds

Mitch unlocked his hotel room door wearily, closed it, and sagged back against it.

"What am I doing?" he whispered to no one.

That was a stupid question. He knew exactly what he was doing and he wanted to continue doing it.

Mitch, you have a taste for bad girls. You always have.

Now, *there* was a voice from the past. Inez, his first crush, a sultry Latina five years his senior. She had been in desperate search of a dance partner so she could enter a competition, and had conscripted him. At fourteen, the only things he had to offer her were his size, strength, and malleability.

He wasn't going to lie to himself and deny that Cassandra's history was part of his

attraction to her, but there was so much more to her, other things that were just as attractive.

But...

Inez again.

We don't usually make such good wives, or at least, not the kind of wife the Church expects us to be...

That had been relevant when, at twenty and fresh home from his aborted mission, he'd attempted to persuade Inez to marry him—two misfits banding together against the world—but it was irrelevant now.

Look, figuring out how to get what you want is the easy part. Figuring out what you want is the hard part.

It was one of Sebastian's first lectures to him as they sat in the cool, dark peace of the Notre Dame cathedral to hide, rest from their labors, and talk about theology and philosophy. Once Mitch and Mina had settled in together, he'd figured out what he wanted easily enough and gotten it. He'd never had a need to revisit the issue until, just before Mina slipped away from him completely, she used the last of her strength to give him a speech that sounded rehearsed.

Mitch, you rescued me from a fate worse than death, then turned around and gave me everything I ever wanted. You made my dreams come true. Promise me— When I leave here... Find someone. Someone who can match you the way I never could, someone who'll take care of you the way you deserve.

Mina...

No, Mitch. Trevor will be gone soon to make his own life. It's your time now. Take it. Enjoy it. You haven't had a minute to yourself in twenty years.

He turned on his phone and checked for messages: five, all from his counselors and various ward members. He slowly undressed and got in a hot shower, hoping it would help him remember the right question, so he could try to answer it.

What do you really want?

Mitch knew that voice, still and small, but deep like his father's. It seeped through his brain whenever he needed more guidance than his common sense and life experience could supply, asking the question he hadn't had the courage to ask himself.

"Cassandra St. James," he murmured.

His evening with her had only pulled something within his reach he'd been trying to grasp—and missing—for months.

"I want a life."

A life that wasn't so filled with everyone else's problems that he had no room for any of his own.

Now you can figure out how to get it.

Mitch hadn't had so much fun since he'd taught Mina how to drive on their first date, then when they were first married and without children, when he'd taken her on cheap adventures and taught her to be silly with him. Once he'd gotten her away from Shane, given her the freedom of his name and validated her fun-loving soul, he'd watched her blossom about as much as she could.

But she'd never opened up that far. She hadn't had the strength to pop open the way he'd hoped she would, especially after Lisette was born. Mina had been happiest spending her energy with the children, nesting in their apartment, pinching pennies until

they screamed, keeping hearth and home while Mitch went to school and worked at menial jobs and tended to church callings that had demanded everything he'd had.

And, well, Mina loved babies, toddlers, children, but she hadn't been altogether thrilled with how one went about making them. He knew that, although he hadn't known *why* until she was pregnant with Trevor. But because he always had other things on his mind, because he was always at work or at church, sex—or lack thereof—had never been an issue.

Tonight, having stood on Cassandra's stoop, captivated by her cool, dark beauty, knowing none of her children were home, knowing she wanted him, knowing she had no barriers to keep her from sex whenever, however she wanted it, that she *enjoyed* it and could teach him anything and everything...

It had immediately become an issue.

Don't lie to me, boy.

Okay, okay. Not just tonight.

Eight months ago he'd stepped out of his life for a while and indulged himself on a dance floor, his favorite teenage pastime, long dormant, one Mina was not physically capable of sharing with him, one from which he could walk away when he got too uncomfortable.

Then last month he'd spent a week at Whittaker House, in the midst of beautiful women, any one of whom would've—

Unable to walk away from the temptation because his presence was needed *and* he'd needed his family's help and that was the fastest way to get it.

He'd spent the last year dealing with this, being single, suddenly without most of the obligations that had taken up his time, able to take a second to look around at what the world had to offer, wanting...something—and not knowing where to start.

Lisette and Geneviève were married and lived far away in opposite directions.

Mina was gone.

Trevor would fly the nest soon.

The foundry's profitability had risen markedly once Eilis had taken Fen's place, settling the last of Mitch's worries. It had been his own choice not to do business with Fen, but because OKH was the foundry's biggest customer, the cost had been great. With Eilis at the helm, Mitch had no reason to withhold his products from OKH.

When Cassandra finished detaching Jep Industries from the Steelworks—critical now that the foundry's growth had exploded with the new business—the entire operation would be permanently settled. Mitch's officers could run it should he decide to take a sabbatical or bury himself in his lab with his alloys, or both.

And surely, *surely* he'd be released from the bishopric sometime soon...

Wouldn't he?

Right?!

Soon. Patience. You have a mess to clean up first.

Two or three, more like.

No, just one.

A world of attractive, available women, and—

Look, if all you want is companionship, you got a church full of single women our age. Half of 'em are virgins and half of those have PhDs.

Bryce's advice.

Look, if all you want is sex, I know a dozen powerful women who'll blow your mind without blowing your bank account. Break free, Elder. Break free!

Sebastian's.

Mitch had money, power, time, and an almost-empty nest.

And had spent the last year dazed and confused.

Until Cassandra St. James had walked into his office, austere, aggressive, accomplished.

And beautiful. Even—no, *especially*—in faded, hole-ridden jeans through which he could see thermal underwear, three sweaters (mismatched), and her beautiful black hair, sleek and shiny, swinging freely around her shoulders when she moved. She'd guessed his planned evening activity and layered accordingly.

He got out of the shower, dried, dressed for bed, crawled in it, checked the clock.

Three-thirty in the morning.

"Thank you," he sighed, his eyelids drifting closed, too tired to pray properly.

You're welcome.

•

His phone rang.

He groaned at the ringtone, slapping his hand over his face.

"Mitch," said Steve without preamble when he answered, "did you authorize a youth activity today?"

Mitch smacked his lips together and looked at the clock. Nine. He wasn't due to pick Cassandra up until twelve-thirty. "No," he croaked. "On a holiday? I wouldn't have authorized anything like that."

"Greg says you did. Says it was scheduled before you released him"

And there it was, Greg's latest divot out of Mitch's credibility.

"Oh, I remember now. Yeah, I did and yes, it was. I forgot to mention it in ward council or put it on the calendar, so that's my fault. Let 'em in."

Steve said nothing for a beat or two. He wouldn't countermand him, and he wouldn't accuse Mitch of lying, but he knew something was off kilter. "Okay," he said finally.

"Steve," Mitch said, "I haven't heard anything about Sally all week and I didn't see her Tuesday. What happened?"

Steve growled. "Wouldn't call the police. Wouldn't go the hospital. Wouldn't go a shelter. Dan's denying it, but he does have a temper. If Sally weren't so..."

Nobody ever said it.

If Sally weren't so stuck on Mitch.

"He's getting madder and madder."

"I know," Mitch said low. "Can't be helped. I'm gonna have to talk to him."

"This is going to implode."

Yes, it would. "I'm going to send her to counseling," he said. "This is at a level I can't touch, and I will *not* meet with her privately anymore."

"You better do it soon. Prissy's seen Greg, ah...*comforting*...Sally."

Mitch bit back a groan and could muster nothing more than a lame, "I see."

"Okay, boss. Sorry I woke you up."

"No problem."

Are you going to give me another calling or not?

Not.

You motherfucker.

Don't keep coming to me like a kid who didn't get what he wanted the first time, thinking he can wear me down. Until the stake president gives me a direct order, nothing's going to happen.

He will.

It's been a month and a half, Greg. I see him in two meetings a week and he hasn't said a word. So either he doesn't feel a need to stick his nose in my business or he thinks I made a good call.

At least now there's no question about whether or not you can prove whatever it is you think I did.

Of course I can. But we both have all the time in the world for me to do it.

You're such a hypocrite, Mitch. No wonder a third of the ward's pissed at you.

If a third of the ward weren't angry with me, I wouldn't be a decent bishop.

I could do better.

Apparently the Lord doesn't think so.

Fuck you.

"I hate this job," Mitch muttered, and tried to go back to sleep.

But couldn't.

* * * * *

Gypsies, Tramps, & Thieves

January 1, 2011

"YOU WHAT?!" It wasn't a screech so much as a horror-movie scream. "You promised!"

I shrugged, calmly preparing for New Year's Day brunch with Mitch. "You've made a lot of promises to me you didn't keep," I said.

"This was important to me, Cassie!" Clarissa yelled from the top of the stairs that led down to my bedroom suite, otherwise known as The Bordello. It was my safe place. She wouldn't deign to set foot in it. "God, you're a bitch!"

"You say that so often," I mused as I dropped my towel and slipped into my favorite black lingerie. "I wonder what your basis for comparison is." I sat on my bed and pulled on thick black tights, then grabbed my thigh-high black leather boots. Over that, a thick, thigh-length red sweater.

"Oh, you are not serious," she sneered from her perch. No, she wouldn't come down into my subterranean suite, but she'd make herself comfortable at the top of the stairs. "Fuck-me boots? *Really?* You're not twenty-five anymore, Mother."

"You," I murmured as I swept my almost-dry hair into a loose queue at the back of my neck, "should be so lucky to look like me when you're forty-six."

"Oh, bullshit. At least I have tits."

"Fake ones. And with your party habits and tanning schedule, you'll have to have Botox before I do." She gasped. "It's the smoking that'll really age you, you know, with all those little lines around your mouth, which I don't have. It's fortunate all your boyfriends smoke, too. I imagine kissing you is like licking an ashtray."

"Oh, right. Fucking hundreds of men for money is *more* healthy and virtuous than smoking."

I put big gold hoop earrings in my ears. “You might not like the way I’ve lived my life, Clarissa, but at least I’ve been smart about it.” Well, when I had the chance to make my own decisions. I met her eyes in the mirror. “I didn’t give it away, Clarissa. That’s the point. I vetted my clients carefully, didn’t budge on the terms of service, protected myself inside and out, and demanded what I was worth.”

“And then some. Care to spread the wealth the way you spread your legs?”

“You live in my house, don’t you?”

“Not *your* house. Daddy’s.”

I ignored that. “At least I remember to feed and water you now and again.”

“I have to go to Daddy for *everything*.”

“Including your tits. If you’re feeling that deprived, get a job.”

“On my back?”

I shrugged. “Why not? It’s the only thing you’re qualified to do at this point. When are you graduating again? Have you taken your LSATs?”

“You’re dressing for someone,” she hissed. “Setting up shop again? Who’s the lucky john or jane?”

I turned then and said, “You will not refer to this man as a john, client, customer, trick, fuck, or any other pejorative. One slightly off-color peep, and I will make sure you don’t come within three states of Knox Hilliard—or any other law school in the world. And don’t forget. I can make sure you *never* graduate no matter what you do or how hard you work.”

Her bluster fled and her mouth hung open, her body frozen at the distinct threat in my voice.

“His name is Mitch Hollander and you will speak of him and treat him with the utmost respect. Do I make myself clear?”

I had never spoken to her like this, never threatened her with anything. Gordon and I had fucked up our daughters’ lives irreparably and I accepted that there were consequences. Clarissa’s contempt was one of them.

But I would *not* allow her to transfer it to Mitch.

Unfortunately, she found her attitude again. “What are you going to do? Ruin my entire life the way you did Grandfather Rivington’s?”

“There are fates worse than working for minimum wage.” Of course, my ex-father-in-law didn’t think so, which was why I’d chosen that one.

She curled her lip at me, but the doorbell rang and she hopped up to answer it. She’d probably try to sink her claws into Mitch directly, but he could take care of himself. Perhaps between the two of us, Clarissa could be muzzled.

What a peculiar idea.

She was remarkably well behaved, however, as she stood holding the door open, shivering, saying—pleading, “Really, won’t you come in? It’s *freezing*.”

“Thank you, no. I’ll wait here.”

Ah, he’d confused her.

Scrambled her brains.

“Mitch,” I said, slipping out, brushing against Clarissa as I passed. “This is my number two, Clarissa Rivington. Clarissa, Mitch Hollander.”

He inclined his head. “Nice to meet you, Miss Rivington.”

Clarissa stood, still stunned. “Uh, you too,” she murmured, unable to do anything

else when confronted with a man so obviously a proper gentleman.

Mitch glanced at me, then at Clarissa. Held her stare, eyebrow raised, until she blushed—*blushed!*—and closed the door with a respectful nod. He said nothing as he helped me into my red-and-black plaid wool jacket, a tad shorter than my sweater.

“That was...” He paused. “Tense.”

“We just had a little come-to-Jesus meeting.”

“Ah.”

“I’ve never seen her roll over and present her tummy like that. How’d you do it?”

He chuckled. “It’s my Bishop Hollander stare. You deal with twenty-odd hormonally ratcheted teenage girls of varying temperaments and backgrounds every week, you get good at the silent smackdown.”

“What about the boys?”

“Not silent.”

I chuckled. “I— Actually, I don’t think anybody’s ever done that to her.” I could hear the wonder in my own voice.

He shrugged. “Part of my job.” He turned me, stepped back, looked me up and down. His mouth twitched. “Very nice.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Nice?”

“I’m not giving you the satisfaction of telling you what I’m thinking right now.”

I swept his overcoat open to check for the evidence in his khakis. “Ha! You just did.” He shook his head in helpless amusement and I laughed in wicked delight.

We descended the stairs and set off, heading toward Park Avenue and our New Year’s Day brunch. He was careful to walk on the outside of the sidewalk, holding my hand, entwining his gloved fingers with mine. I leaned against him as we strolled in warm, companionable silence for a couple of blocks.

“I’m curious,” he murmured. “How did you arrange your clients’ arrivals and departures with your kids around?”

“There’s an alley entrance to the servants’ quarters,” I explained. “I made sure all the girls’ bedrooms were in front, so they never saw any of my clients or lovers. They have no idea who they are or how many. But mostly my appointments were during the day when they were at school.”

“Lunchtime rendezvous.”

“Mostly, yes. The rest after bedtime. In fact, other than Gordon, they’ve never seen me in any kind of relationship, so maybe that’s why Clarissa’s a little freaked out right now.”

“Do they know about your business?”

“Oh, yes. Clarissa stabs me with it every chance she gets. Helene can barely look at me, barely talks to me. She usually sleeps at the hospital. Olivia takes her cue from Clarissa, but isn’t as brazen about it, and Paige is too busy to think about it, much less care.”

“Then how—?”

“Rivington told them. Four years ago, just after I’d taken my red light down.”

“Why would he do that?”

“He was after me from the minute I married Gordon, so when he found out how I was making all this money, he thought I was fair game,” I said, feeling very smug. “He said he’d tell the girls if I didn’t take his business.”

“So you called his bluff and he made good on his threat.”

“And that is why he’s cleaning Slurpee machines far, far away from here.”

“I see.” Mitch’s mouth pursed in thought. “How, exactly, did you do that?”

“I danced for Herod and requested John the Baptist’s head.”

He laughed.

“I thought you’d appreciate that.”

“And your father?”

“My parents left on their own after they declared bankruptcy. They had to find a cheaper place to live.”

“Did you do that, too?”

“Oh, no. My father... He’s trying to make amends, and I leave them to their self-imposed exile. Not sure what it would accomplish if I reached out to them.”

“So you had a good childhood?”

“I did,” I said with alacrity, and it felt nice to reflect on that time. “I learned how to invest from watching and listening to my father. He did it all, you know. From home. Stocks, bonds, commodities, derivatives, insurance, annuities, real estate. There wasn’t an instrument he didn’t understand, couldn’t trade, couldn’t make money on.” Mitch nodded.

Yes, he probably would know; my father was a genius, a generous teacher and mentor. Sebastian had since informed me that his mother had spent the 1960s and 1970s following Theodore St. James’s business deals via the *Wall Street Journal*, reading his articles, and had passed what she’d learned on to Sebastian. Then Sebastian had done *his* MBA thesis on my father’s work.

Full circle.

“But,” I went on. “It was my mother who taught me how to spend it. Here we were on the Upper East Side, in the most chichi neighborhood, the most expensive home. We had a tiny patch of yard in the back, maybe fifteen square feet, and she got incredible produce out of it. Canned it. She designed and sewed our clothes—we were the envy of the neighborhood because she was so good. That was before Wal-Mart clothes, before sewing became a luxury hobby. She made frugal menus and dining out was a real treat. She did all the housework and taught us how to do everything she did. They came from poverty, they weren’t ashamed of it, and they weren’t afraid of it. But they were determined to teach us how to weather it, and they refused to allow us to become spoiled brats.”

“So your mother was your father’s true partner in the business of life.”

I nodded. “And, well... I actually did end up needing those skills for a long time. When your efforts are measurable and you’re striving for your next financial goal, it’s very rewarding. Fun, even. She made it fun. It’s different when you’re working that hard for so little, depriving yourself of things you’d like, and watching the savings all go down a hole.”

Mitch sighed.

“What about your parents?” I asked quickly to turn the conversation back around, to keep Mitch from going any farther down my path.

Mitch smiled. “They got an RV and are having a grand old time somewhere in Florida. I think. Last time they checked in, anyway.”

“I take it you’re funding their retirement in style?”

“Least I could do.”

“And your daughters?”

“Lisette,” he drawled, “is about to make me a grandfather.” I grinned. “In June. And Geneviève—” *jhon-vee-EVV*. Not *JEN-a-veev*. “—got married in August.”

“Your son. Trevor, right? He’s seventeen?”

Mitch nodded.

“You trust him alone on the weekends?” I wouldn’t have trusted Clarissa with the remote control when she was seventeen.

“It’s an unfortunate fact of Trevor’s life that I know where he is almost twenty-four-seven.”

“You have him watched?”

“Not deliberately. He works in the mill thirty hours a week, second shift. He’s in school four hours a day, in the morning. If he didn’t show up for work, I’d hear about it and pronto, but that’s never happened. I have to be at church every Sunday and so I know where he is then, too.” He paused. “But, even if that weren’t the case, I’d trust him implicitly. He’s a good kid and I’m proud of him.”

“What does he do in the mill?”

“Anything his foreman tells him to do.”

The seventeen-year-old trust-fund kid of one multimillionaire worked thirty hours a week in a steel mill, went to church and school, and wouldn’t trash his house on the weekends...

The twenty-four-year-old trust-fund kid of the other multimillionaire took six hours a semester, had never had a job, and spent her nights clubbing...

“You okay?” Mitch asked with some concern when I sniffled.

“Allergies.” He handed me his handkerchief. “Thank you. Does he date? Any kind of social life?”

Mitch drew in a deep breath. “I’m not sure. That’s one part of his life he’d keep from me, and I respect that. He has little enough of his own.”

“Does he resent that?”

“I don’t think so. He has his own money he’s made. His own car. Pays his own bills, what there are of them—I don’t know those, either. And for the record, I don’t make him work in the foundry and he doesn’t report to me. He applied like anyone else—” He barked a laugh. “He was sloppy about filling in his surname so HR keyed it as ‘Holland.’ He’d been working for a week before Payroll caught it and all he had to say was, ‘Oh, my bad.’”

“So he’s as clever as you are.”

“Not quite. Sebastian taught him how to avoid getting preferential treatment.”

“What are his days off?”

“Sunday and Monday. He gets sick time, but by the time I find out he’s called in, he’s already taken himself to the doctor.”

I cleared my throat, embarrassed. “I’m a little jealous,” I said. “My daughters are— Well, really only Clarissa... Helene’s self-motivated. The twins are, especially Paige.”

“The dancer.”

I nodded. “Olivia—the personal trainer—she needs a little help with the business part of her business, but she goes to Nigel for that. It’s Clarissa I don’t know how to— Um, I’ve never known.”

He pulled me closer. “We do the best we can. We’ll never think it’s enough.”

•

We spent the day together doing nothing in particular, warm, well fed, a little melancholy, hand in hand. We hit the museum, pseudotourists, the both of us, and wandered around looking but not seeing.

Oh, he smelled good, and I buried my nose in his coat as often as I could.

We revisited Jacques Torres and practiced far more moderation than we had the night before.

“Open your mouth and close your eyes,” he murmured, pulling me tight against his body, his arm slanting down my back, his big hand wrapping around my hip.

I did as ordered, tilting my head back as he fed me there in the middle of Jacques Torres, people milling about, brushing past us in the small space.

It was just a cherry cordial, albeit a gourmet one. I don’t really even like cherry cordials, but *this* cherry cordial...

I sighed as I nipped it off its stem, chewed carefully, letting the flavors burst over my tongue, feeling his strong body against mine, inhaling his scent mixed with the tang of the fruit.

He took me home that evening after we’d picked up his car from the hotel.

“May I see you Friday?” he whispered in my ear as he led me up the stairs to my door.

I closed my eyes and nodded, unable to speak.

“Thank you for a wonderful weekend, Cassandra. Happy birthday.”

It didn’t occur to me until I’d watched him drive down my street and disappear into traffic that he still hadn’t kissed me.

* * * * *

Sweet Valley High

January 7, 2011

I walked out of the elevator bank on Friday morning, buzzing with anticipation, feeling fifteen—

And hating myself for it.

Please. Get yourself together, Cass.

I’d had the week to think about it and had come to realize that it couldn’t last. Clearly, Hollander was not only *not* repelled by my past, he was fascinated by it.

He’d grow tired of me quickly enough once I’d seduced him.

If I didn’t tire of him first. Instructing men was tedious, especially if they had hangups or needed constant validation—and I was pretty sure Mitch would have some serious hangups.

And no, I didn’t care what his church or God or congregation wanted him to do or what they’d think of him. I wanted to fuck him and I *always* got what I wanted, morality—questionable or otherwise—be damned.

Oh, what was this? The kid from Payroll was perched on Susan’s desk, and Susan was practically bouncing in her seat.

“Cassie!” she squeaked, obviously happy to have landed her big fish. Stalking must work for some people.

“Morning,” I said with a smile. “Good morning, Phillip.”

“Good morning, Ms. St. James.”

I walked to my door and Susan followed, still twitterpated. I looked at her suspiciously. “Something I should know? Are you pregnant?”

Phillip’s face turned red.

She bit her lip in excitement and hopped on the balls of her feet. “Open your door.”

So I did.

Oh, my God.

Smack dab in the middle of my desk stood an enormous vase, chunky cobalt glass, filled with dozens and dozens of white flowers: daisies, mums, carnations, roses, lilies, orchids, tulips, hyacinths.

“That bastard,” I whispered.

“Are these from the same guy who sent you the orange roses and those ugly cookies?”

“Yes,” I whispered.

“He must really like you,” Susan said, as gleeful as if they’d been for her.

Yes, he does. I crossed the room to caress the delicate petal of a daisy, allowing my week’s worth of cold analysis and self-admonitions to dissipate. I opened the card.

6:30

jeans and earplugs

Wha—? Earplugs?

I dug into the flowers and there, an iPod Shuffle, a blue that kind of sort of matched the vase. I turned it on and saw the playlist.

Was he *serious*?

I picked up the phone and dialed. “I refuse to see ZZ Top,” I said without preamble.

Mitch laughed. “Not a fan?”

“As in, actively loathe.”

“AC/DC?”

“*Hell*, no.”

“All right, then. You pick.”

“My treat.”

“Okay.”

Had I just offered to *pay* for a man? “And— The flowers are beautiful. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” he said, his voice warm and filled with humor. “A candlelight dinner at your house won’t work, so don’t try it.”

It was my turn to laugh because it *had* occurred to me, but that would come. I had to ease him into it, get him used to the idea.

Then I’d pounce.

I hung up and realized that Susan was still hovering, Phillip not far behind. “Shoo! Phillip, get back to your department. Now.”

They both scampered.

My phone buzzed. “St. James.”

“What the fuck happened to Clarissa?” Nigel demanded.

I panicked. “What’s wrong? Is she hurt?”

“No. She’s acting weird. Has been all week.”

Ah, yes. The *lecture*.

My heart rate went back to normal.

I had made it abundantly clear that if she spilled Mitch’s name to anyone—*especially* her father and stepfather—she would have to find new accommodations.

Still stinging from having been thoroughly intimidated by the first man she’d ever seen me with post-divorce, a man who was not impressed by gorgeous young women, a man who’d taken her measure and found her wanting, she’d looked away from me and muttered, “Fine.”

No, she would not want to acknowledge Mitch’s existence, even to damage me.

“Weird how?”

“Quiet. Restrained. Almost...” He paused. “Cowed. But I know *you* didn’t do that.”

That was a chronic discussion, the fact that *I* didn’t do that, and Nigel was of the opinion that I, being her mother, should. Of course, he, being the stepparent, would never presume to correct his husband’s children, no matter how much he wanted to.

“Huh. That’s weird, all right.”

“What are you keeping from me?”

“Nothing. What’d you do last Friday?”

He said nothing for a beat, then said low, “We forgot your birthday again, didn’t we?”

“Sure did.”

“I’m sorry, Cass. We can—”

“Forget it. Not important.” I didn’t want my wonderful birthday marred by any lame attempt to make it up to me.

“What are you doing tonight?”

“Busy.”

“Oh, don’t bullshit me. Chick flicks and Chunky Monkey with Clarissa does not equal busy. We’ll pick you up and go to the movies or something.”

“Clarissa has a boyfriend at the moment, and I am not interested in going to the movies with my ex-husband and husband-in-law.” Even if I hadn’t had plans with Mitch, I wouldn’t have gone. Watching Nigel and Gordon canoodling made me sick to my stomach, Gordon all happy and content with the love of his life, living the kind of life he’d deprived me of, and me with—

Fifth wheel? Not even worthy of being a beard or a fag hag? Absolutely not. Maybe I could have had that kind of charmed life if I’d gone to prison after stealing millions of dollars from my spouse and—

“Seriously, I’m busy. But thanks.”

I hung up before he could say anything else, pissed and restless, shoving files around as if I were making sense of them. I jerked open my top drawer and stopped short when I saw the bright orange iPod. I looked up at the white-and-blue confection reigning over my desk. I looked over at the two small paperbacks stacked on another corner.

I picked up the battered and broken *Angélique, Marquise des Anges*, the words “Elder M. Hollander, 1986, France Paris North Mission” in the top left hand corner of the inside front cover, and sat, flipping through it, stopping occasionally when I saw margin notes in English. An Alvin Ailey performance stub slid from the pages, and I caught it before it hit the floor. I stared at the stub in thought, losing my focus until it was a blur of

clashing color and thermal print.

Oh, yes. I knew where I'd be taking Mitch tonight.

* * * * *

The Heavyweight

Mitch's phone rang as he strode into the foundry's parking garage, already late in getting on the road to Manhattan. Speeding would be near impossible because of traffic.

He looked at the caller ID but didn't recognize the number.

"Hollander."

"Mitch."

He stopped walking.

"Shane."

It didn't matter that he hadn't heard that voice in twenty-five years. He'd never forget it.

You stay away from my daughter. You hear me, Elder Hollander?

You got a problem with me, Bishop Monroe?

I have a problem with poor white trash who waste the Church's money by not finishing their missions.

Who's your daughter again, Bishop?

Wilhemina Monroe.

I'll remember that.

This couldn't be good. He started walking again.

"Meet me at Fogo de Chao in downtown Philly in an hour."

Mitch laughed. "Absolutely not." Stunned silence. "Did you really think you could call me up, snap your fingers, and expect me to hop to?"

He unlocked his car, slid in. Turned the key.

"What was that?"

"My engine," Mitch said mildly, putting his phone in its cradle.

Reverse. First gear. Release clutch hit gas.

Hard.

Mitch roared out of the garage and up onto the service road.

"What do you want?"

"I thought that would be perfectly clear," the old man said imperiously. "I want to talk to you."

"Call my clerk. Set up an appointment like everybody else."

"I will do no such thing."

"Then I guess whatever you want to talk about isn't important. After all, you couldn't even be bothered to go to your own daughter's funeral."

"Don't you throw that back in my face," he snarled.

"Shane, *you* called *me*, and considering you managed to get my cell, you must have gone to a great deal of trouble." Or not. First Sally, then Shane. Mitch knew exactly who was giving out his number to people he didn't want to talk to.

"I've been hearing rumors about you. And Trevor."

"Oh, so you *do* know your grandson's name."

"Don't get smart-alecky with me, you piece of steeler trash."

“That’s *Bishop Steeler Trash* to you. You know how to find my clerk’s name and number, so if you want to talk to me, you do it on my turf, my terms.”

Mitch hung up, thinking he should be more forgiving of Shane Monroe because for one, that was his job—to forgive. It was incumbent upon every follower of Christ to forgive, no matter what. For two, Mina’s father had always been a small man, petty, controlling, narrow-minded and rigid, but he wasn’t evil and he didn’t warrant the energy that carrying a grudge took, no matter how egregious his behavior. For three, he’d probably had Greg in his ear all these years, picking at Shane’s pride, trickling poison into the wound, making his hurt and anger fester. Greg was a master at manipulation and deceit; Shane couldn’t be blamed for succumbing to it.

Still lighthearted from his weekend spent with Cassandra, Mitch’s mood had dampened considerably Tuesday night at church. Mitch, the last one out as usual, was locking up after the evening’s activities when Dan Bevan had confronted him.

“Mitch, we need to talk.”

“Yeah, we do,” Mitch had said immediately, and gestured to Dan to follow him. “You got a couple of hours? We can go grab a bite.”

“Sure.”

They’d ended up at a Denny’s some distance from Allentown and Bethlehem, their drive silent but not necessarily uncomfortable. They had been seated, waved away coffee, and ordered before they got down to business.

“I can’t compete with you,” Dan admitted baldly. “I don’t think moving anywhere will help. Sally’s going to punish me for not being you.”

Mitch sighed. “Dan, I don’t know what to tell you. She’s got me cornered.”

Dan looked straight at him for the first time. “I never thought of that,” he said softly. “She can really hit you where you live, even if you haven’t done anything.”

“*You* know I haven’t done anything.”

He looked insulted. “Mitch. We’ve known each other since we were kids. She’s had a crush on you since before you left on your mission and she was just too scared of what everybody would think if she went out with the guy who came home early.”

Mitch said nothing for a long moment. “I think I always knew that.”

“I thought she was over it when I got back from my mission,” Dan grouched and dug into his meal. “Why is it,” he asked around a mouthful of food, “that we have to make our most important decisions when we’re young and dumb? Marriage, career, kids?”

Mitch laughed wryly. “Because if we waited until we were smart, we wouldn’t do it at all.”

“What I want to know,” Dan said, “is if you think I hit her.”

“No,” Mitch said immediately. “You *do* have a bad temper, though, so it’s natural people will be suspicious—and by the way, you need to calm that down.” Dan nodded morosely at the chastisement. “But I’ve never seen or known of you hauling off on anybody, much less a woman, much less a woman you love.”

It was like someone had let the air out of a balloon. Dan sagged in such utter relief that Mitch felt sorry for him. Dan did love Sally. Always had. Mitch realized he was witnessing the death of a man’s love for his wife—or, no. The death of the *hope* that she would love him the way he loved her. Mitch wanted to look away, but couldn’t. This was part of his job *and* he had a vested interest in how this got resolved.

“Would you be willing to say that in court?”

“Yeah,” Mitch said slowly, “but that could backfire on you and me both.”

Dan nodded.

“I’ll talk to Louise,” Mitch said finally. “See if she can get a handle on this.”

“It’s going through the ward,” Dan said glumly. “Every time I turn around, someone’s glaring at me, turning her away from me like they’re protecting her. This is... It’s like it’s more than about you.”

Mitch sat and thought about what to say to put Dan on the right path without violating confidentiality. Finally, he said, “You and I are being played. My suggestion—and I’ll help you—is leave. Take her and go. Somewhere. Anywhere. Far away. Get her away from me, away from all the people giving her bad advice based on disinformation. Get her into counseling.”

Dan snorted. “We’ve tried counseling.”

“You haven’t tried it in a place where you don’t know anybody.”

“Who’s doing this?” Dan demanded. “You know.”

“Of course I do,” Mitch said, exasperated. “Like I can tell you? I’m giving you my best advice and offering to help. On good faith. I need her gone as much as you need to pull her back to you.”

Dan planted his chin in his palm and drummed the fingers of his other hand on the table as he stared out the window.

“All right,” he said finally with a sigh. “I need to figure out where to go and make arrangements. I hate taking your money, though.”

“Dan, I didn’t offer out of the kindness of my heart.”

His shoulders sagged. “Prissy could fix this.”

“She doesn’t get involved in ward politics and she doesn’t meddle in other people’s business. You know that.”

“No, but Sally’s mean to her. I thought— Maybe—”

Mitch waited, but Dan’s mouth tightened. “You thought Prissy would crack and cut Sally open, and then Sally would go running to you for comfort.”

“Yeah,” he muttered, looking down at his plate, his face flushed.

Prissy was a sharp woman who found gossip and ward politics beneath her, worthy only of her contempt, and carried herself thusly. She also didn’t have an ounce of patience for people who were catty or cruel and she’d publicly chastised more than a few people who’d crossed the line of civility.

That was why Mitch would never call Prissy to any leadership position. She was a vial of nitroglycerin. Never mind that she had no interest in leading anybody. Or following, for that matter. Mitch had no idea why she had always held her tongue in the face of Sally’s cattiness—especially since it was most often aimed directly at her.

Now, several days later and halfway to Manhattan, he had an idea. “Prissy?” he asked after he’d dialed her number. “Mitch. Got a minute?”

“Sure.”

“This is between you and me. I’m extending you a special calling. Unofficial and off the record.”

She was silent for a beat, then drawled warily, “Okay...”

“I would very much appreciate it if you would tag along with Sally and...steer her away from...certain people.”

“Greg.”

“Yes. And...”

“Check her every time she starts running her mouth?”

“That.”

“How far are you willing to back me up?”

He’d like to give her *carte blanche*, but he wasn’t sure exactly how nasty Prissy could get. “Within moderation.”

She was silent for a second or two. “All right,” she said finally, decisively. “I’ll do my best. I can’t do anything about a whisper campaign, except speak up when I hear it, which means never. And a sudden divergence from the lesson manual to teach on the evils of gossip would not go over well with the Relief Society in general.”

Mitch laughed, knowing that was precisely what she’d do—and he’d hear about it after the fact. It was an excellent strategy. “No. No, it would not go over well at all. I’ve got your back, Prissy. Thank you.”

“No,” she purred. “Thank *you*. Now—”

Oh no.

“Are you aware that Hayleigh Sitkaris has run away from home? Twice?”

Mitch wiped his hand down his face. “No.”

Prissy paused. “But you’re not surprised.”

“No.”

“Then I may as well continue. I also have reason to believe that all is not right with Amelia, either.”

Of course it wasn’t. “Like how?”

“Can’t put my finger on it,” she said matter-of-factly. “You know how controlled and unnaturally happy-happy she is.”

“Yeah.”

“She’s cracking. Little things. I don’t think I could explain it.”

He didn’t have to have it explained anymore. “Crying for no reason? Temper showing through? Little slips that sound paranoid? Flinching at the slightest noise out of place?”

“Yeah, like that. You’ve noticed?”

Mitch sighed. Messes, more messes, one on top of the other. He couldn’t say the number of them was abnormal, but these had the potential to be explosive—and all of them at once...

“Talk to Louise, please.”

“Okie doke. Oh, and congratulations on outmaneuvering Greg’s last stunt.”

“Made him mad, did it?”

“Steve said his face turned bright red when he told him you really had okayed the building for his activity. He got the kids all excited about the activity, but he’d also been priming them for you changing your mind at the last minute, so when you didn’t... The kids made it very clear how cool *you* were for bending the rules for them, while he was scrambling to come up with an activity he didn’t plan on having.” Mitch grinned.

“Mitch,” she continued gruffly, “I want you to know that you are one of very few people I truly respect. See you Sunday.”

Click.

In all his years as a bishop, nothing any of his ward members had said to him meant as much as that.

* * * * *

And We Touch

Because I am a bitch, I made Clarissa answer the doorbell.

“Good evening, Clarissa,” I heard Mitch say with as much aplomb as I would expect of him.

“Hi, Mr. Hollander,” she replied, sullen.

“Be there in a minute!” I called from the kitchen so I could eavesdrop.

“Won’t you please come in?” Clarissa said.

“No, thanks.”

“Why not?”

“Propriety.”

“Um. Okay?”

“I don’t know if your mother told you. I’m LDS.” Pause. “Latter-day Saint?” Pause. “Mormon?... A bishop, actually. I observe certain...standards.”

“And you’re dating *my* mother?” she squeaked. “Do you *know*—”

“Yes,” he said, an edge to his voice. “I do.”

“So you have a thing for whores?” she sneered.

“Your mother is an extraordinary woman, but *you* are a spoiled br— Don’t you *dare* shut that door on me,” he snarled.

Oh. My. God.

He was livid and I was wet.

There *was* an angry man under all that sanguinity, with passion to burn—and I was lame enough to chuckle at my own joke.

“Okay,” I said, breezing out of the kitchen and snagging my coat along the way. Mitch’s big hand was splayed out on the door, holding it open against Clarissa’s attempt to slam it. “Sorry about that. Had to finish paying a couple of bills and the site wouldn’t load.”

Mitch didn’t break his rock-hard stare at Clarissa, who stared back, wide-eyed. Hypnotized. “Good evening, Cassandra.”

“Mitch. Thank you, Clarissa. I’ve got it.”

I could barely contain my snickers as I stepped out and closed the door behind me, Clarissa having fled immediately.

“Why do you put up with that?” he asked tightly.

“Oh, don’t start,” I said. “I get it enough from Nigel.”

“Tracey puts up with it? The *same* Nigel Tracey who took down two banks single-handedly because their CEOs offended him?”

“He doesn’t have much of a choice. It would hurt Gordon’s feelings. Besides, those banks were already on the edge, so it wasn’t that big of a deal. I could’ve done it on a Friday afternoon if I’d felt like going to the effort.”

Mitch grunted as he opened the door of my car, and handed me in. “Maybe Gordon’s feelings need to be hurt,” he muttered once he’d slid in beside me and given Sheldon an address I didn’t recognize.

“The girls need somewhere to run when Mommy’s being a big bad bitch,” I said.

“Oh, I get it. Fun parent, mean parent, and the stepdad won’t do anything.”

“Precisely.”

“And the guy Mom’s dating gets to be her enforcer.”

“Only because he’s so *good* at it.”

“Would you be dating anybody who wasn’t?”

“Absolutely not. ‘Spoiled brat.’ True, but clichéd.” He sighed and I chuckled. “I *do* have reservations made.”

“Cancel ’em,” he said shortly. “You had no intention of paying anyway.”

I did as he instructed and smirked when he realized I would have had to call in a few favors to get that particular reservation. He bit back a smile and shook his head. “Now,” I said when I turned my phone off. “I do have something planned for after dinner that’s non-negotiable.”

He grunted. “Good thing or I would’ve taken you to the concert in spite of your inexplicable dislike of ZZ Top.”

“No, *loathing*. Is that a dealbreaker?”

“Very well could be.”

The ride was a short one, almost a straight shot across Central Park to the Upper West Side. We pulled up in front of a beautifully maintained brownstone on a quiet, tucked-away street. The address was as chichi as mine.

He said nothing as he handed me out—

“Seven-thirty,” I murmured to Sheldon, who nodded.

—and escorted me down the stairs to the servants’ entrance. He rapped on the door in what sounded like code.

“Mitchell!” cried the old woman who’d opened the door. The smells of borscht and lamb teased my nose. That explained the accent. “Oh, you darling boy! You have been gone from me so long!”

“Mrs. Andronnikov,” he murmured, picked up her hand and kissed the back of it. “I dream of you every night.”

Mrs. Andronnikov looked past him at me and beamed. “Oh, and your lovely new lady friend, hello! Come in, come in!”

Mitch ushered me in with a gentle hand on my back, and I looked around. It was a restaurant—with exactly five tables-for-two tucked into semi-private corners, all but one of them occupied. It was dark, all the better to disguise some of the gaudy Russian décor.

Mrs. Andronnikov, a large woman clad in what looked like a cotton house dress under a stained apron—she had house slippers on her feet—led us to our table, upon which sat an enormous crystal vase full of orange roses.

“These are the right ones, *nyet*?”

“Perfect, Mrs. Andronnikov, thank you. This is Cassandra. Cassandra, a dear friend of mine, Polina Andronnikov. Her husband was my first foreman at Bethlehem Steel, and she babied me terribly. Still does.”

I liked this look into Mitch’s past, the kinds of connections he’d made in his life, and I smiled. I couldn’t not. “Pleased to meet you, Mrs. Andronnikov.”

“Please! Call me Polina. Mitchell is not allowed, you see. *He* must show respect, but for you, I am Polina.”

“Thank you. I’m Cassie.”

I sniffed the roses before Mitch seated me, before he handed the vase off to a wraith of a busboy I hadn’t seen and gave him my address. So many questions, and the orange

roses weren't at the top of the list. I didn't even know where to start.

"How long has this place been here?" I asked.

"Mmmm, ten years? I think."

I ran through my mental contact list to figure out who would know about this restaurant and how— And why didn't *I* know about it?

A Russian matron whose retired husband was Mitch's first foreman back in the mid '80s and had babied a teenage steel worker— In a brownstone on the Upper West Side, with exactly five tables—

"My God. You funded this place."

He grinned and took a sip of the water already on the table.

"Does it have a name?"

He shrugged. "If it does, I don't know what it is."

"No menu?"

He shook his head. "You get whatever she feels like cooking for you."

"This is...wonderful," I breathed, the scents making my mouth water, and the rich ambiance putting me in the mood for something I knew I wouldn't get— *How* had I missed this place? "*Thank* you."

"I'm trying to impress a pretty girl."

I might have laughed, but his sincerity had the hint of a question, of insecurity. It was too important to laugh off. "You're succeeding." I paused, then blurted, "You're very complex."

He slid me a look. "Most people are." I said nothing. "Take Clarissa, for example."

"You don't know Clarissa."

"I know enough to know that if she didn't need you for some reason, she wouldn't be living with you."

"What?"

"Tell me something. If she wanted to go live with Gordon and Tracey, would she be welcome?"

"Oh, yes. Gordon adores the girls and they adore him. Nigel treats them all like kittens."

"And would she be allowed to live her life the same way she does now?"

"Yes."

"Okay. So why does she live with you?"

I blanked.

"You said Helene sleeps at the hospital because she doesn't want to be around you, but she's a resident. She'd sleep there most of the time anyway, so she has no reason to move. Paige also has a job that requires her to work on Friday nights. I'm going to guess Olivia's either working, out, or getting ready to go out. But Clarissa... She wasn't dressed to go anywhere. She's pretty, single, in college, has a driver and money. It's Friday night. Shouldn't she be out on a date?"

"Uh...usually, Friday night is— Uh, she and I— We usually spend it together. Watch movies. Eat pizza and ice cream. Drink beer."

His eyes narrowed. "No wonder she's upset." *Why* had I told him that? "Does she hang around the house a lot when you're home?"

"Well," I mused. "I suppose so. She and I... We have a strange relationship."

"So she's getting something from you that she needs other than a weekly movie-

night bonding session with her mommy, or she wouldn't stay."

That was too much of a stretch. "How did you get that from the entire twenty words you've exchanged with her?"

"Thirteen years of counseling and interviewing people who are sometimes pretty desperate to keep themselves from me."

Shit.

"Would it bother you if I have wine?" I asked abruptly, needing to talk about something else.

"No. Why?"

"Because I really need a drink."

He laughed then, and, like magic, a wine bucket appeared at my elbow and a sommelier I recognized—late of Per Se—had the bottle open and a glass poured for me before I could say a word.

"How—" Oh, fuck it. If this old Russian frau could afford to woo the head sommelier of a glam restaurant, I wasn't going to second-guess the wine. I took a sip, closed my eyes and let the flavor devour me.

"I think she likes it," Mitch said dryly, and I felt the sommelier's presence fade.

"This is..." I couldn't speak above a whisper. "...the best wine I have ever had."

"You can thank Mrs. Andronnikov for that," he murmured. "Between my ignorance of wine and my ignorance of your tastes, I wasn't sure how you'd like it."

"And where—!" I jumped. There was Polina at our table again, this time sliding a small service of caviar between us. She straightened and glared down at Mitch. "Where is that good-for-nothing brother of yours?"

Mitch's brow wrinkled. "He said he was here last month."

"Da," she breathed, "and with his *lovely* wife. He does not deserve her, you know."

Another ghost of a waiter slipped between Polina and me to add a service of pickled herring surrounded by fresh pumpernickel, and a dish of crisp crackers.

"But!" she was saying. "A month is too long! He is to paint my dining room and let me feed his children."

"I'll give him a nudge."

She turned in a huff and disappeared around a dark corner I hadn't seen.

"Your brother?"

"Sebastian," Mitch said, as he took a cracker and spooned a bit of caviar on it. I followed his lead, and my experience with caviar told me this was some of the best. "Mrs. Andronnikov can lead him around by his nose with her food. He's painted murals over every inch of this house—more than once. In a style he hates. If he doesn't, she won't feed him."

I looked at the wall on my right and, though it was really too dark to see, I felt a little dizzy knowing I was sitting next to what, in the art world at the moment, amounted to a fortune.

I was completely, thoroughly charmed. "Oh, Mitch." They were the only words I had. "This place...the wine..."

"It was worth it," he murmured, staring at me, heavy-lidded. He slid down in his seat a little, relaxed, stretched his long legs out under the table, just brushing mine. "The look on your face, I mean."

I swallowed. Was that an *innuendo* Bishop Hollander had just thrown at me?

“And,” he said low, slow, never blinking, “you haven’t really started eating. I can’t *wait* to see how you react to that.”

My God, the man was seducing me, and very effectively at that.

“Mitch,” I said abruptly. “I need to know— Why doesn’t it bother you I’ve been a whore?”

“Because it’s an honest exchange,” he answered immediately, sitting up straight again. The spell was broken. “No long fake courtship. No fake marriage. No living with a person you despise. No deceiving the other person, who may actually be in love. In my opinion, that’s a far worse sort of prostitution.”

Our second course came. Borscht. But not just any borscht— I looked down at my spoon full of red liquid, startled by a lovely flavor I couldn’t identify.

Mitch went on once the waiter disappeared. “I don’t *like* it, because prostitution comes with a big bag of its own problems, especially for people who are desperate—and you weren’t. But I also wouldn’t be here if I were interested in condemning you.” He paused as he took a bit of pickled herring, a dab of what I assumed to be mayonnaise, and laid them on a piece of pumpernickel. “I’ll admit I’m completely mystified as to *why* you did it, because you could’ve made your fortune back in a dozen other ways, but I’ll figure it out.”

“You could *ask* me.”

“I did. You lied to me.”

“I did not!”

“You said you were bored. Bzzt. Wrong answer.” I glared at him over the rim of my wine glass. “Are you going to pout now?”

“Yes.”

“Mmmm, okay.”

“You like bad girls. That’s what it is.”

He shrugged. “Yeah, so what?”

“Was Mina a bad girl?”

“Other than eloping with a guy her father hates? No.”

“Did she *want* to be?”

That drew him up short. “She liked to play at it here and there,” he admitted gruffly. Looked at his plate and smiled. “Things she thought were risqué.” Chuckled a little. “She never made it to bad. Just cute.”

“I don’t get you,” I said flatly. “When was the last time you had sex?”

He pursed his lips in thought. “Let’s see... Trevor’s seventeen, so...eighteen years.”

“And your sex life wasn’t anything to write home about.”

“How would I know? I don’t have anything else to compare it to. I did get three kids out of the deal, no divine intervention necessary.”

“But you—a celibate Mormon bishop—are dating a woman who made her money on her back and now goes around the country browbeating CEOs.”

Heaving an exasperated sigh, he said, “Jesus didn’t hang out with the Pharisees, Cassandra. The people he hung out with were considered the fringes of society, the sick, the poor, the working class, the Romans, the tax collectors, the prostitutes.” He raised an eyebrow. “And he loved them all.”

“You’re not Jesus.”

“Not even close. Like tonight. I should never have popped off at Clarissa like that.”

I looked at him, sitting there all suave and debonair, his wavy dark-blond hair a little mussed and looking more gold against his navy suit, his blue eyes sharp and intense.

“Do you hang out with the sick and the poor?”

“Yes. It’s my job. Actually, it’s one of the reasons I don’t ask to be released. I get the inside information on who needs what.”

“But it’s limited to your ward, so they’re more like friends, right?” I said snidely.

“No personal investment there.”

“No. Every person who lives in my ward boundary is my responsibility, whether they’re members of the Church or not, and I take that responsibility very seriously. I see a need, I meet it or get it met somehow.”

“I have a need.”

His nostrils flared, his eyes darkened, and his lids lowered, but he only murmured, “I know.”

“Jesus hung out with Mary Magdalene,” I said snidely, but only to take the edge off my arousal. “Maybe he liked bad girls, too.”

“Magdalene wasn’t a prostitute,” he replied, then took a bite. I knew that, but awaited his explanation while he chewed. “There was the woman taken in adultery—”

“Cast the first stone, blah blah blah.”

“Right. And then there was Magdalene. Not the same woman. And,” he continued, “I have reason to believe he *really* loved Magdalene.”

I blinked.

“Yes,” he said dryly. “Like *that*.”

“But—”

“Give me a reason why a Jewish man in a Jewish culture wouldn’t have been raised to be completely, thoroughly, totally, normally Jewish from being circumcised to attaining Bar Mitzvah to getting married.”

“Is that what your church believes?”

“No. We speculate. But confirmed bachelorhood within an ancient Jewish society built on strict tradition doesn’t make sense to me.”

“Maybe he was gay and she was his BFF.”

He barked a surprised laugh. “Well, okay then.” He paused. “Look, it’s not as if that idea hasn’t been thoroughly explored by half the scholars in the world over the last fifty years. I’m far from unique in believing it.”

“You’re a *Christian* who believes it. That’s the bizarre part.”

He sighed.

I was as tired of the heavy conversation as he, and only too grateful when the entrée was served: lamb. Exquisitely spiced, not an insipid mint jelly in sight.

The awkward silence between us was unbearable. It must have been to him, too, because when I looked up at him and chirped, “So tell me about Paris,” he was only too happy to comply.

After a truly delightful hour of anecdotes—mostly involving Sebastian and his unconventional brand of rebellion involving art galleries and museums and the stock exchange—we wrapped up dinner with a salad and sorbet.

Mitch endured Polina’s scoldings for not having brought me to her sooner for approval (she approved), and I found my face between two puffy old hands, both my cheeks being bussed heartily and with no small amount of moisture.

I returned the favor. Without the moisture.

“Where now?” Mitch asked as he handed me into the car.

“Fifty-fifth and Ninth.”

I knew by his expression that he suspected what I had planned. Once inside the Ailey building, I led him to the will-call window, and then allowed him to escort me into the theater.

“Now it’s my turn to thank you,” he murmured as he settled himself beside me. “I haven’t been here in a while.”

“I wouldn’t have pegged you as a modern dance fan,” I murmured, but he only smiled.

The performance was exquisite as usual, and though I had always been proud of Paige’s talent and ability, I’d never attended one of her performances with someone who seemed to understand and appreciate it as much as I did. In fact, I usually attended alone. Gordon and Nigel made sincere-but-standard proud-dad noises, while her sisters only upped the stakes in their competition for pats on the head.

Were it possible for me to watch Helene and Olivia at work—Clarissa at school—and applaud for them, I’d do so.

After the final curtain call, Mitch sat silent, staring at the stage, oblivious to the people around us streaming out of the theater, and I wondered if he had some rare medical condition that had caused him to go catatonic.

“Mitch?”

He started. “Oh. Um, sorry. I was...”

“Somewhere else.”

“Yes.”

“Mind telling me where?”

He pursed his lips. “Long time ago,” he murmured. “A girl I knew once. She would’ve loved this.”

“Not your wife?”

He shook his head. “No. Mina was a soccer player.”

“Soccer? I thought she had early-onset multiple sclerosis? How’d she manage that?”

“High school. She was the star forward, but her coach would yank her out about halfway through the game—sometimes he’d let her go a little longer—because she didn’t have the stamina to finish the game, and she’d be in pain. She racked up the points before she got benched. I don’t have a clue how she endured practice.”

“Then why’d she do it?”

He paused. Looked somewhere over my shoulder. “Her father made her. He pushed her too hard, wouldn’t hear her when she complained, wouldn’t get her seen. Always raising the bar, expecting her to conform in things that he thought were appropriate for girls, discouraging things he thought weren’t.”

“Like?”

“Well, the soccer. That was the hip sport for teenage girls at the time, and he expected her to be the best. But then there was math. Calculus. Chemistry. He finally just forbid her any math classes at all. Said she didn’t need it because she was going to marry a man who could support her. Her job was to be a good wife and mother, stay in shape and be pretty. Soccer was the staying-in-shape part.”

I swallowed. No matter what had possessed my father marry me off to Gordon in

spite of his eleventh-hour doubts, I never doubted his love, and my mother was never without a smile or a word of support. I couldn't imagine little Mina Monroe's life.

But...well, yes, I could. Gordon had had that life with his father. Then Rivington had tried to cast me in that mold as well and failed miserably.

The theater was empty, but here we sat, Mitch churning through whatever unpleasantness with which he'd arrived on my doorstep. I wanted him to meet Paige, but I know when a man needs a sympathetic ear and has no one else, so I stayed still and silent.

"He called me today," he said abruptly. "My father-in-law, I mean. He's only spoken to me once in my life. Twenty-five years ago. To warn me off Mina."

My spine tingled.

"Demanded I meet him in Philly—why, I don't know. Told him to make an appointment with my clerk, make him come to me as a bishop."

"Well, so you won that little pissing match."

"Yeah, you know... Problem is winning all the battles and losing the war."

"War?" This was far too cryptic, but I wondered— "Does this have anything to do with Greg Sitkaris and the...delicate politics?"

He slid me a look. "You've been checking into him, I take it?" I smiled, and he chuckled suddenly. "What've you found out?"

"So far nothing important or interesting. He's just your run-of-the-mill penny-ante sleazeball." I paused. "And works for your father-in-law. Right-hand man?"

Mitch gave me a small salute. "Greg was the man Shane had arranged for Mina to marry."

Oh, my God. I couldn't imagine what a man like that would've done to such a fragile girl.

We stayed in our seats in the still of an almost-empty theater.

"I," Mitch said abruptly after a moment, "would like to meet your daughter, if I might?"

Topic closed, but that was all right with me. The parallels, both literal and metaphorical, between Mina's life and mine were getting a little too close for comfort.

We went backstage and I found Paige in her dressing gown, cavorting with her boyfriend, a veritable Adonis with gleaming mahogany skin, in the midst of dancers streaming in and out and around.

"He's here?" she squealed when she saw me, hopping off André's lap and blowing through the dressing room, out the door. I stopped for a small chat with André, whom I really quite liked, as he treated Paige well and seemed to be inclined toward building a life and family with her—if she ever caught on or he worked up the nerve to tell her.

I entered the hallway some minutes later to find her in Mitch's arms, her cheek on his shoulder, tears streaming down her face and soaking into his suit coat. He cast me a helpless smile over her head.

Something warm trickled down my cheek and I wondered if I had any Benadryl.

•

"What'd you say to her?" I asked Mitch the next day as we awaited Sheldon's arrival. "First she was bawling and this morning she was practically giddy. Wouldn't tolerate Clarissa's opinions on the subject of Mom's new friend."

He shrugged as if he dealt with weepy young women on a regular basis. "I told her I

appreciated her artistry and skill. Then I asked for her autograph and that's when she started to cry."

My throat constricted. "My kids might be spoiled brats, but they— Excellence is the expectation. Praise is...hard to come by. Add to that a big sister who's a doctor and..."

"I understand," he said quietly, and I knew that he did. "So what do you all do in the winter around here?" he asked with a robustness that sounded forced.

"Hang out at each other's apartments, drink a lot of wine, and fuck. I'm game if you are."

He laughed as Sheldon pulled up smoothly in front of us, and I felt I had done my part to lighten what was left of an emotionally draining weekend.

"You and I," I said once he'd handed me into the back of my car, "are going bowling."

He looked at me strangely.

"A client taught me." I waved a hand. "Good ol' boy from Texas, widower. Self-made gazillionaire who missed his wife and wanted someone to talk to and play with. I was willing to trade a perfect manicure and some time in a seedy bowling alley drinking cheap beer for installing Rivington in front of a Slurpee machine in a border town."

Mitch began to laugh, as I knew he would. "Herod?"

"The same. In this case, Salome learned how to bowl and do it well because Herod wouldn't tolerate anything less than perfection."

"Outstanding," he said.

And he was, but not outstanding enough to beat me—though he tried.

"Thank you for a wonderful weekend, Cassandra," he whispered in my ear that night once he'd wrapped me in his arms. "May I see you Friday?"

I closed my eyes and sighed, unable to remember a time I didn't know this man, unable to imagine what it would be like not to see him.

"Yes."

Please.

* * * * *

Yentl

January 13, 2011

"Good morning, Cassandra."

I smiled at the deep voice on the other end of the line. "Good morning to you, too," I replied, my voice rusty from several hours of disuse. "What's the occasion?"

"Just thought I'd give you a Thursday-morning wake-up call. To be a mosquito."

"I'll play mosquito with you. Want to know what I'm wearing?"

Long pause. "No."

That made me laugh until I choked.

"Are you almost finished?" he asked wryly when I'd begun to wind down.

"Had to think about that, didn't you?"

"Er, yeah. So what's on your agenda today?"

Snickering, I said, "Oh, you know, take down a CEO or two, install a dictator in a banana republic, assassinate some other tyrant somewhere else."

"All before lunch."

“Then I have to consult with the President.” Mitch chuckled and I closed my eyes.
“So what are you doing today?”

“I have a meeting with one of Eilis’s competitors. He wants a price break for quantity.” That made me chuckle. “Really,” he said dryly. “Eilis doesn’t get one, so this guy sure as heck won’t.”

“And you’re making him come to you for a refusal just to amuse yourself.”

“Exactly. Cassandra,” he said low, that husky bass sending my libido into overdrive.
“You have a good day.”

“You too,” I whispered, suddenly shy and unbearably aroused at once.

I hung up and lay stroking myself, imagining what it must be like to writhe with Mitch Hollander in bed, nude, skin to skin. Under him, on top of him.

I knew his suits weren’t padded, his chest and arms muscular. His trousers lay exquisitely over his ass, but unfortunately, I had never been able to get a good idea of that part of his anatomy my body really wanted.

Craved.

I came thinking of Mitch. I’d really had no need for that since I took my red light down, but since the night he’d seduced me with a softly whispered “good night” in my ear, then sent me roses, I couldn’t stop.

Mitch confounded me on too many levels to sort out. Spiritual and celibate. Quietly ruthless and ornery.

God made mosquitoes.

Just thinking about him made me smile, no matter what occupied me at the moment. It had struck me earlier in the week during a business meeting; in the middle of a negotiation, one of the players said something that reminded me of Mitch and I had smiled to myself.

That smile had sealed that deal.

I showered and dressed, went down to get in my car. No one had ever made me feel so special, in bed or out. With anyone else, I would have been cynical, but Mitch had no ulterior sexual motives. He’d fight me every step of the way to his inevitable seduction, so his offerings of flowers, inexpensive gifts, interesting dates, came without expectation of anything, much less sex, which made them poignant and...innocent.

Knowingly so.

Frustratingly, excruciatingly, wonderfully so.

Jack, irritated that I now had a distraction of the personal type, wanted to know who sent the flowers, who made me smile over nothing, but I wouldn’t tell him.

I didn’t care if he blew his top.

I just wanted to keep it all to myself, this sweet little thing we had.

“What *do* we have?”

“What’s that, Ms. St. James?”

Sheldon glanced from the road to the mirror and back again.

“Nothing, Sheldon, thanks. Just talking to myself.”

What we had *was* a seduction, a slower one than I was used to, granted, but I knew what I wanted from Mitch: a night or a week or a month in the sack. That would cure me. He was a novelty, intriguing because I couldn’t have him the only real way I wanted him.

Yet.

I knew his game. He did it with industry leaders across the spectrum, coy, subtle,

leaving them wanting, then dropping them when it amused him while they never got what they wanted at all but came crawling back to beg, unaware they'd been played.

So why was I playing it? Why had I succumbed to his spell like everyone else?

He'd never been bested, and I was probably one of the only people in the country who could do it because I had clear and significant advantage no one else had.

The question was *why* he played such games.

I didn't know, but I intended to find out.

I walked into my silent office, which would be abuzz in about an hour, and flipped on the light to see the barely-hanging-on orange roses (I still didn't know what the fuck was up with the orange) and the pathetic little basket on the ledge in front of my window. The white bouquet in the cobalt vase still graced my desk in a prominent place.

A tulip was soft as velvet under my fingertips.

"Who is he? Or she?"

I looked to the door to see Jack leaning against the jamb, his arms folded over his chest. He couldn't decide whether to be irritated or amused at me. I knew how it must look to him: A forty-six-year-old woman smiling over flowers.

"That's my business."

"Is it business?"

I studied him, knowing which answer would appease him, but it really didn't matter. "No."

"I'd rather it be."

Of course he would. No attachments.

"Is this going somewhere? Seriously, Cassie. I need to know if you're gonna hang around for a while."

"Jack," I drawled, "there is no reason I can't do this job from wherever I am. I'm not here half the time anyway."

"I want my officers *here*," he said. "That's part of the deal."

"Fire me," I snapped, planting my fist on my hip. "If I'm not allowed to have a life at all, or if you're going to wait up for me to sneak in past my curfew, then I'll just clear out my office right now and go across the Street to set up shop with Nigel. I'm not one of Jack Blackwood's twenty-two-year-old Baby Swinging Dicks."

And that would be the end of that. I set my own terms at Blackwood Securities because there was no one else quite like me, and as Sebastian Taight's acknowledged successor with a history of success, I lent Jack inestimable cachet.

He said nothing as he turned and walked out of my office, leaving me alone with my chaotic thoughts.

Was it going somewhere? Really?

Or did I just think I could get it where I wanted it to go?

Shit, he hadn't even kissed me yet.

Something had to happen that would jar Mitch enough to push this relationship somewhere other than this...sexual stalemate. I knew what it was: I simply hadn't tried hard enough to seduce him.

I was enjoying the novelty of the foreplay too much.

Tomorrow night.

Thus far, I had been rather circumspect in my dress with him, to respect his beliefs, his unwillingness to be caught out in sin. Tomorrow, no.

Something had to give.

* * * * *

Let Us Make Man in Our Image

Mitch was perched on a high stool, bent over a microscope, measuring the tensile strength of his alloy after the last tweak of his formula. His lab assistant entered the measurements into the computer as Mitch called them out, but he already knew what the computer would spit back out at him.

He began to smile.

Perfect.

Or about as perfect as a man-made alloy could get.

Lighter than aluminum and stronger than the strongest titanium alloy. At least, this variation of it.

“What are you gonna call it?”

Cassandra.

“Perfection,” Mitch muttered at his head chemist, who had sidled up to check Mitch’s data. “I don’t know yet.”

“Kinda makes you feel like God, doesn’t it?”

“Yup.” And it had from the first moment he’d stepped into a lab.

And in the lab, he was just another scientist pursuing a nebulous dream of perfection: one metal, all applications.

It couldn’t happen, of course, so they simply worked at strengthening existing alloys for existing and future applications.

Except this one, a formula Mitch had been working on since grad school. Being head of a company had gotten in his way.

“Oh, before I forget. Darlene’s looking for you.”

There went his day playing scientist at a word from his executive assistant, who pretty much ran his work life. He sighed.

“Hey, that’s what you get for being a hotshot CEO. It’s your own damn fault.”

Mitch chuckled, landed a light punch on his chemist’s arm, left the lab, and headed up the elevator—

—only to stop short in the reception area of his office suite when he saw who awaited him.

“Dave.”

David Petersen, the stake president, impeccably attired in a brown suit, turned with a smile that seemed to Mitch to be a bit...strained.

“Hey, Mitch.”

“I...thought we got all our business taken care of at last night’s meeting.”

“Oh, yeah. Yeah,” he said. “Just wanted to chat a bit.”

“Dave,” Mitch said bluntly. “It’s Thursday. I’m at work.” He gestured to his jeans and tee shirt. “You pulled me out of my lab for a *chat*? That’s what email is for.”

“Mitch.”

Out of respect, he said nothing more and swept open his office door in invitation.

“Anything to drink?”

“No thanks.”

Mitch gestured for Dave to have a seat in one of the club chairs in the sitting area away from Mitch's desk, while he went to his wet bar, fully stocked with nothing alcoholic and pulled out a Coke from the mini fridge. He headed across the room and dropped onto the sofa, then propped his feet up on the coffee table.

"What's up?"

Dave scratched his jaw and said, "Mitch, you know I don't like to meddle in the way my bishops run their wards. I mean—" He gestured around Mitch's massive office, expensively and tastefully decorated and furnished. "I figure you know what you're doing."

"Yup." He took a drink and waited.

"But I gotta ask you: Why in the world did you release Greg from the Young Men's presidency? He did a great job."

Of course, Mitch had prepared for the question and gave the standard answer: "Inspiration, Dave. I prayed about it and there you go."

President Petersen's mouth tightened as if he didn't believe the answer. It wasn't a lie, but the entire truth wouldn't go over well.

And there wasn't much Petersen could say to counter that. "Well, um... Do you have any idea *why*?"

Oh, boy. Mitch still hadn't figured out how to worm his way out of that question and had hoped it wouldn't be asked at all. "I got the impression Greg needed a break and somebody else needed the challenge of the position." That, too, was true.

Petersen thought on that a minute, then took a deep breath. "Is there some bad blood between you and Greg? It feels like a vendetta on your part, but for what I don't know, and I've never known you to be vindictive."

Mitch played dumb. "That's weird, since I did call him to that position in the first place and he's been there four years. That's a long time. Why is this even an issue?"

Dave pursed his lips, and nodded slowly as the sense of it sank in. "Yeah, you know, you're right." Mitch almost breathed a sigh of relief. "I think Greg's just feeling a bit useless right now. Unsettled. Have you thought of something else he could do?"

"Nope."

Mitch knew what would happen: Petersen would take pity on Greg and call him to the stake high council. It was a fairly prestigious calling, but it would keep Greg traveling around to the different wards in the stake, limiting his ability to stir up trouble in Mitch's ward.

Another battle won.

It didn't make him feel any less tense.

"Is that it?"

"Um...just one...little thing. I even hesitate to bring it up."

"Hit me."

"Have you...been...*encouraging*...Sally Bevan's interest in you in any way?"

Mitch's nostrils flared. "Absolutely not. I won't even call her by her first name."

"I would understand if you, maybe, had said things you didn't mean to say that she took the wrong way. You're a widower and maybe that—"

"President," Mitch said, putting his feet on the floor and sitting up. He braced his elbows on his knees and looked up at his ecclesiastical boss. "*Why* am I still a bishop?" he asked earnestly. "I'm in year seven and yes, I'm a widower. I have to meet with

women and counsel them and provide for them. I'm not just some random single guy in the ward. I'm wealthy and relatively young. No matter how appropriate I am, no matter what chaperones I have around, I'm a target and it's very uncomfortable for me. Can you imagine Romney or Huntsman being widowed bishops?"

Petersen blinked. He clearly hadn't thought about it from Mitch's point of view.

"That's how it is for me, except I'm not running for President and I'm not even close to that good-looking. I have done everything I can to discourage her. If you want to know about Sally and Sally's issues with me, go talk to her husband."

"Dan's word isn't the best in the world, Mitch, all things considered. And your friends aren't the Church's favorites, *especially* Knox Hilliard."

Mitch stared at Petersen, knowing he was trapped: Trapped between his widowerhood, a woman with an obsession, an ally with little credibility, a milieu with no credibility at all, and a sociopath with an ax to grind.

"You know what?" Mitch said wearily. "Release me from the bishopric. It's been seven years. *This time*. I'm single. Clearly you don't believe me or trust me—"

"Mitch—"

"It would solve everybody's problems."

"I...can't," he said softly.

Shocked, Mitch realized that that hadn't been part of Petersen's agenda for this meeting. "Why not?"

"I've prayed about it and...I've felt impressed that I shouldn't."

"Definitely or just kind of a vague feeling?"

"As in, a big flashing neon 'NO' in my head."

Mitch stared at him, his mouth hard. "Then you're just going to have to trust me, aren't you?"

Petersen gulped. "Yeah," he murmured, and Mitch knew he was trying to figure out how to make this palatable to Greg. "Yeah, I guess I am."

* * * * *

Cell Block Tango

January 14, 2011

The bouquet of lavender, purple, mauve, hot pink, and white roses, tulips, and lilies that sat in the middle of my desk Friday morning had no iPod buried in it. Just a card.

8:00

Swishy skirt and high heels
MLK Mon. Long weekend?

"That's a pretty vase," Susan said, picking it up to study it. "I've never seen anything like it."

Neither had I. Plain and flaring out from the base, it looked almost like matte stainless steel that flashed pink-purple iridescence, almost holographic. It was heavy and well balanced.

She held it up and looked at the bottom. "MH?"

"Let me see." Indeed, Mitch's initials were etched in the base, in his hand.

I shooed Susan away and when the door had closed, I picked up the phone.

"Did you make this?"

"Yes," he said immediately. "Do you like it?"

"It's *lovely*."

"Mmmm," he said, as if from far away. I heard what sounded like pen scratches.

Then, survey-like, he asked, "What do you like about it?"

I told him my impressions and, after studying it for a moment, added a few other details while he took notes.

"Would you buy that in, say, Bergdorf?"

"Oh, sure."

"How much would you pay for it?"

"Four, five thousand dollars. Maybe more."

"Okay."

"Embed diamonds in the base. Other jewels. Not too many. Make the jeweled ones limited. Signed and numbered. Design some other things, though. Brand yourself, MH, something."

"Working on it."

"Oh? Spill."

"Hollander Home. Tentatively. Anything else?"

"Not right now. I may think of something later. I like the sheen. Matches the flowers."

"The sheen changes depending on the color that's next to it."

"Is it stainless?"

"No. It's an alloy I've been developing since forever. Sebastian saw the color properties in it and decided he could do something with it. This is part of the flagship Ford collection."

"So you want to capitalize on his fascination with your metal, put him to work, then establish your brand on the back of his name as an artist."

"Exactly. You were my test market."

"You are a remarkable man, *Doctor* Hollander."

"I hate it when people say that," he groused.

"So...long weekend. Does that mean you're playing hooky from church on Sunday?"

"Well, that's why I have counselors, right? But I don't want to wear out my welcome."

"You can't wear out your welcome until you've worn out my sheets."

He chuckled.

"Swishy skirt, then?"

"Eight o'clock," he said instead, and hung up on me.

I would've dumped any other man who was arrogant enough to tell me what to wear—and in such specificity!—but if I were going to comply, I'd damn well do it right.

I stared at myself in the mirror that evening, wondering if it were too blatant and thus would derail my full-court press.

Red.

The color of a whore.

Only...

Mitch didn't make me feel like one. He sent me gifts, but not expensive ones.

Sentimental ones, ones that meant something to him—layers of meaning I couldn't hope to peel away without getting to know him better.

I doffed the dress that said *Fuck me!*

I put on a bra and found a different dress—still red—that said *I know you want to. What are you going to do about it?*

With a swishy skirt.

And wickedly high red Louboutins.

My doorbell rang and I headed up the stairs from The Bordello, where I'd done business for so many years. I stopped on the stairs and looked over my shoulder. It was as exquisitely decorated as it had ever been, though completely different from when it had been my workplace.

It was not a place I'd ever bring Mitch.

"Where are we going tonight?" I asked as we descended the front stairs, feeling my tone coming from somewhere down deep, husky, willing. I did not do this on purpose; it seemed I couldn't keep my arousal out of my voice and, worse, he probably knew that.

He opened the back door of the taxi that awaited us and said, "Dancing," low, slow, and held my attention with those unimaginably ordinary blue eyes that did unimaginably extraordinary things to me.

"I thought dancing was verboten in most Protestant religions."

"Dancing is one of my culture's favorite pastimes and as a collective, we're *very* good at it."

I wondered how he defined "very good at it." In my experience, heterosexual white males aren't particularly interested in dancing, much less taking time to learn how to do it halfway decently. Appreciating good dance is one thing, but doing it—Dancing well takes time and effort, concentration and practice, interest and talent.

Like making love.

"We aren't going anywhere if you don't get in the cab," he said finally, amused.

He handed me in, but I left him little room to sit beside me. If I calculated correctly, I could end up in his lap by the time we got wherever we were going.

As he squeezed in next to me, he looked at me sideways with that knowing expression he had; I had indeed miscalculated. He was much bigger than he looked under his expensively tailored suit and I had to scoot away from him—an entire inch—so he could close the door. He gave the cabbie an address I didn't recognize and then looked at me, inscrutable, and laid his arm across the back of the seat behind me.

I leaned into him and touched him, dared him to say a word as I rested on my hip and pressed closer to slide my left leg over his, then draw it up his until my knee nudged his cock. I placed my hand on his shirt front, and slid it slowly across his chest and under the lapel of his jacket.

He dipped his head a bit. Finally!

But his lips only barely brushed mine when he whispered, "Were you hoping I'd kiss you?"

I sighed and began to close my eyes and tilt my head just a tad.

He chuckled—*chuckled!*—pulling a mere inch away from me, a satisfied smirk on his face. In retaliation, I found the little nub of nipple through his shirt and flicked it with my thumb. His only response was the slight flare of his nostrils and bob of his Adam's apple. He said nothing, but continued to watch me as speculatively as I watched him.

Daring more, I caressed downward, intending to make a point of the fact that he was as aroused as I—if the tent in his trousers was anything to go by—but he caught my hand just as I touched his belt buckle and slid his fingers through mine, at once rebuffing me and drawing me closer.

“Abstinence,” he murmured, “is an effective aphrodisiac, don’t you think?”

Unbelievably erotic.

I swallowed, my mouth dry, unable to stop staring at him. I knew I should feel ridiculous, but I didn’t. He wouldn’t allow it. He seemed to know every move I’d make, be prepared to stop me and at the same time, keep me near.

He dropped his arm from the back of the seat over my shoulders and pulled me tight against him; my breath caught when I felt his lips against my temple. “Patience.”

Patience.

All signs pointed toward the inevitable, but something was off, some disconnect about the basics of the game. We seemed to be playing with the same end in mind, but the rules conflicted in some way I couldn’t sort out.

“You want me,” I whispered. “You want to make love with me.”

“Yes, I do.”

I blinked and drew away from him to stare. I already knew that; I’d known it from the moment he’d asked me to dinner, but his candor shocked and diverted me.

“That surprises you?”

“It surprises me how quickly you admitted it.”

He shrugged. “I have no reason to lie. It’s not a sin to want.”

“Just a sin to do.”

He inclined his head.

“I *am* going to seduce you.”

“You can try. You won’t succeed.”

“I already have because you’re here.”

“Maybe I like playing this game with you.”

“Why would you think it’s a game for me?”

“*You* made it one. So since I still haven’t given you what you want, you decided to throw down the gauntlet.”

“I don’t play games I can’t win.”

“Neither do I,” he whispered, this time in my ear. I shivered. “Puts us at cross purposes, doesn’t it?”

“You want to. I want to. What’s the problem?”

“You know the answer to that.”

And the cab came to a halt. Mitch got out, but not in an attempt to escape from me; he’d had plenty of chances to put me off and, well, he had but...he hadn’t. He turned and held his hand out to me, to help me out of the cab.

I looked up at the building in front of us and gasped, even knowing he watched me, gauging my reaction to the place he had brought me. I glanced at him, amazed. “You—?” It came out as a squeak.

He flashed me a wicked grin. “Shall we dance?” I stared at him, aghast, but apparently he misunderstood as he wrapped his arm around my waist and propelled me toward the door. “Don’t worry about it. I’ll teach you.”

But he didn’t have to.

I'd spent my childhood and adolescence as a good debutante from the Upper East Side learning how to dance properly in a ballroom, and I'd made sure to dirty up all those sanitized Latin dances as soon as I was old enough to sneak out of the house with my sisters and into a nightclub.

It was my sole rebellion, one my parents would never have believed me capable of, even if they'd caught me.

"Where—? How—?"

"Long story," he said, concentrating on navigating the path from the cab to the door, guarded by a large bouncer. He held my left hand in his, his right arm curved around my waist to guide me past the hundreds of people on line all the way down the block and around the corner.

"Hey, yo, Bishop!"

"Luis," Mitch called back as he climbed the stairs. "How's Maria?"

"Good, good, and— Rowr," said the bouncer as he looked me up and down appreciatively. For once, I didn't feel objectified so much as appreciated. I found myself preening; it was an odd feeling and I liked it, particularly when Mitch smiled at me, pleased.

Proud.

"Missed you the last few weeks."

"Had better things to do than hang out with a big bouncer checking IDs."

Luis roared and after another couple pleasantries, Mitch guided me into the darkened club, buzzing with the energy of humans engaging in the ages-old sex ritual of drums and dance. The music assaulted my ears and entered my body easily, like an old lover I had neglected too long and was now welcoming back to my bed. Lights flashed. The dance floor writhed with the serpentine grace of a hundred bodies moving to the same beat.

The bartenders all greeted Mitch, and he yelled back to them and others as we navigated a path through the clusters of people toward the dance floor. At the edge of the parquet, I saw that a table was waiting for us. In the middle of it sat a platter filled with a large selection of tapas and two pitchers of water with glasses. He took my coat and handed it to a server who'd appeared out of nowhere. "Thank you, Margarita." He took off his jacket and I watched, hungry to see more of what those expensive clothes covered.

"You come here a lot?" I yelled over the music once Margarita had left.

"Yes," he yelled back.

"With whom?" I asked before I thought and instantly regretted it. The corner of his mouth quirked as he jerked off his tie and threw it carelessly onto the table. He unbuttoned the top two buttons of his fine white shirt to his rather low-scooped undershirt, then rolled his sleeves up to his elbows. He dropped his cufflinks in his pocket with one hand and offered me his other.

I put my hand in his.

He led me to the edge of the floor, and I was not surprised when he first pulled me to him, then pushed me away. I had to grin at the look of pleased shock on his face when I completed the simple figure I knew he would choose to begin my lessons.

Swishy skirt. High heels.

I threw back my head and laughed.

The dancers on the floor seemed to notice us as we stepped out onto the parquet.

Mitch could dance as well as the best club dancers I'd ever met or danced with. He

had a more pronounced Cuban styling than mine and I was terribly rusty, so it took us the whole of half an hour to get me up to speed and negotiate adjustments. It took us another hour to learn to dance together, but then we did so as if we had been doing it our entire lives, equally matched in skill and stamina.

If I actually believed in a deity that cared, I might have been tempted to think it had had a hand in this.

Everyone here knew him, from bouncers, bartenders, and random denizens, some of whom—the female variety, anyway—stared at me with some amount of consternation. I laughed in the middle of a turn, Mitch’s arm sliding around me and turning me under, swift and sure, then his turn under my arm. I didn’t have to look around to know that only Manhattan’s best club dancers were here tonight and it seemed that the CEO of Hollander Steelworks and bishop of a Mormon congregation was one of them.

The air was heavy with sex: impending, frustrated, yearned for.

Incomplete.

I was no different and neither was he. I knew it the minute the music slowed and he pulled me back against his chest for a slow rumba. His arms slid around me, his body close against my back, his mouth near my ear, his arousal against the small of my back. In business, he didn’t hesitate to practice a little sleight of hand. Here, though... I wasn’t sure it would occur to him to press his cock into me to make a point.

“I come alone,” he whispered. I closed my eyes and melted into him, my hands wrapped around his hair-dusted arms. “Eight months or so, I guess. Cutting loose from my life. I don’t dance with any woman more than once and I don’t stay past midnight. Mina, she— She was never strong enough to dance like this. I’ve missed it.”

I gulped.

He turned me out then and I looked at him: Fine white dress shirt all sweaty and wrinkled, the tails out now, his face open and happy, without that sly humor he used as a shield.

The music exploded then and I turned, stepped away from him, ecstatic that I had a skirt I could flip back at him as my hips hit every beat, swiveled and otherwise taunted him, but then he caught me, twirled me around to follow him.

Mitch was not shy about his footwork nor the hip technique he needed to do it and even in those generously cut trousers, I could tell he had a fine ass. His figure eights were a work of art—and I wasn’t the only one who noticed. I caught him and he turned, so that he held me firm in frame as we maintained eye contact and did crossover steps.

The night wore on, neither of us flagging, our steps faster, our turns and footwork more complicated, as if this were the game itself, to compete on a dance floor.

No, not competing.

Making love.

We left the club at three a.m., breathless, sweaty, laughing, hanging onto each other. We had cleared the floor a couple of times, finished off kids half our age, decimated two platters of tapas, amused the bartenders and waitstaff.

I had never felt such joy in my life.

“So do all Mormons dance as well as you?” I teased when he handed me into a cab.

He laughed. “If they don’t, it’s not for lack of opportunity or encouragement. You surprised me. It was nice.”

I smiled and bit my lip, somewhat shy to be so happy right in front of the man who

made me feel that way. “*Where* did you learn to dance like that?”

“Ah...” He laughed wryly and looked down at the knot our entwined hands made. “The first woman I ever asked to marry me.”

“What? And she *refused*? Crazy.”

“No. Backed into a corner. Like you. Like Mina.”

“What was her name?”

“Inez. She was five years older than me. She was a competition dancer, lost her partner, grabbed me at a church dance and gave me a crash course.”

“You were how old?”

“Fourteen.”

“Awww, you caught a little crush.”

He grinned. “Not a *little* one.”

“Is this who you were thinking of at Ailey?”

“Yes. I competed with her for a couple of years until she met her husband. That broke my heart. Nineteen, went on my mission. Twenty, came back. She was divorced with two kids she couldn’t support by herself, and her ex wasn’t paying child support.”

“What a loser.”

“Yeah, well... That was when Bethlehem and Allentown were dying. There wasn’t much work to be had. She never told me what happened with her husband, but I wanted to marry her and take care of her and her kids.”

“And...you didn’t have any more prospects than anybody else.”

He shook his head. “I’d worked in the steel mills since I was sixteen and didn’t know anything more than anybody else did. Steel was your ticket to retirement. Then it wasn’t. Our whole way of life was disintegrating around our ears. I was watching it happen and had no idea what to do.”

“And so how’d she get out of her corner?”

“She, um...” Mitch’s mouth tightened and he looked down at the floor. “She’d taken a lover. Much older. Married. Rich. I couldn’t compete with that.”

The bottom dropped out of my stomach and my mind went blank.

“Anyway,” he continued. “She left. Mina caught my eye. You know the rest.”

“Have you ever tried to get in touch with her?” *Say no say no say no.*

“No. I have no desire to.”

“Did you...” I did not want to know the answer, but I asked the question anyway. “Did you carry her into your marriage?”

He looked at me sharply, sober. “Yes. And I regret that. Mina deserved so much better than that. Better than me.”

My mouth dropped open. “Mitch!”

“That was another reason I needed to get out of Pennsylvania, besides getting Mina away. I needed to get away from memories of Inez. Start fresh with a girl who thought I was worth something, enough to defy her family over, who believed in me. I wanted to do my best to live up to her opinion of me, but I couldn’t do it in that pressure cooker.” He paused. “I would’ve died young putting food on the table for Inez. Mina made me who I am.”

“And Mina?” I murmured. “Now?” *Why* did I care? I wanted to fuck the man, not marry him, and any past women he might bring to bed with us shouldn’t make any difference to me.

“She was pretty much comatose the last couple of years before she died, so... We said goodbye three, four years ago. The last thing she said to me before she slipped away was that she loved me and she wanted me to find someone who could match me.”

My heart caught in my throat.

“Aw, Cassandra,” he murmured, shaking out a handkerchief. “I didn’t mean to make you cry.”

I batted his hand away. “Stop it. I’m not crying. I never cry.”

“Okay.”

The rest of the ride was silent, me in the crook of his arm, half lying against him, my ear just over his steadily beating heart. Once the cab dropped us off in front of my townhouse, we strolled across the sidewalk and up the stairs.

As we climbed, I pressed myself into his body and he seemed to press back. I felt his attention and returned it, but once in the shadow of my front stoop, I pushed him into the corner.

His chest rumbled with a chuckle and his large hand wrapped around my waist to hold me close to him. I attempted to kiss him because I so wanted to feel his mouth on mine, his tongue in my mouth, but he turned his head slightly. My lips met his cheek.

Frustrated, aroused, thoroughly bewildered—he pulled me to him but refused my kiss?—I closed my eyes and simply, softly pressed my mouth to his skin, breathing in the bittersweet musk of good cologne, clean sweat, and male. One soft kiss, then another.

I opened my mouth and touched my tongue to his skin...

...and smiled when I realized his breathing was rough and his heart raced.

“Stay with me tonight,” I whispered when I pulled away from him only enough to hand him my key.

His sly humor was back and he tossed a grin at me as he unlocked the door and swung it open. “I think not.”

“Afraid of losing?”

His grin faded a little and he said, with a serious tone I had never heard him use, “I would lose much more than this game, Cassandra. You have no idea how much I have at stake.”

I swallowed and looked away. It seemed like a reproof and I felt ashamed for something I didn’t understand at all. Then I felt his big hand gently cupping my chin and tilting my face up to look at him.

“When I kiss you,” he murmured, the pad of his thumb caressing my cheekbone, “it’ll be on my terms, not yours.”

Shit, there he was, the CEO, laying down the law, giving no quarter.

“I’m used to that,” I snapped, hoping to slice open a wound somewhere, anywhere, in retaliation, my anger and...something else...bubbling up to swallow my happiness.

He drew back, surprised, wary. “Oh? How so?”

“I do what men want me to do; it’s always on their terms.”

“But you chose your clients and you set the prices accordingly,” he shot back. “You didn’t do business with anybody you didn’t want to and you made sure they could and would comply with your terms. *Who* was in the power position again?”

I pressed my mouth together, furious that he refused to be shocked, that he had no compunction about referring to my prostitution as the business that it was. If he’d been judgmental in the least, I would have had a weapon to use or at least an excuse to dump

him, but he wasn't so I didn't.

"I'm not Gordon, Cassandra," he went on, and I felt—*loved*—the anger in his voice, the *passion*. "I'm not one of your clients. You can't intimidate me and you can't manipulate me. You figured that out half an hour into our first date, but you're still trying."

"Oh, that's rich. You're the one who called it a game."

His mouth tightened then and his eyes flashed with the same anger that had cowed a girl never known to have been cowed. But I was not Clarissa and I liked it. It made him magnificently human in a way that the hot swivel of his talented hips on a dance floor did not.

"Then if you want to keep playing this *game*," he nearly growled, "I suggest you concede this round and go in now. Alone."

"Is that a threat?" I breathed, shocked, unable to believe the turn of the conversation. "Because if it is, you can take it and shove it up your ass."

I had the good fortune of a door that would slam satisfactorily.

In his face.

* * * * *

Your Holy Man

Mitch clipped down the front steps of Cassandra's townhouse and stalked the two blocks to his hotel. He stopped at the front desk to request his car, then stalked off the elevator and down the hall to his room.

He never had to bring much, but the fact that he had clothes for three days that he wouldn't be spending with Cassandra ratcheted his temper up a notch. Once in his car, he squealed out of Manhattan, ZZ Top as loud as he could stand it, and, once he was on the New Jersey Turnpike, he floored it.

So angry.

Ninety, hundred, hundred and thirty before he could think about it—

So aroused.

—needing the speed and concentration to take the edge off.

He couldn't remember being so angry with someone he cared about and certainly never with Mina. Mina would have withered under the force of Mitch's temper if he'd shown it. His kids had never given him much reason to get that angry, though they'd had their moments, particularly once Lisette and Geneviève started dating.

Trevor— Well, Mitch had no right to complain. Whatever Trevor did now that Mitch didn't approve of, Mitch could only blame himself for not putting his son ahead of his other responsibilities.

Cassandra, though...

She was like no one he had ever met and he wanted to make love to her with a passion he didn't know he had. Only *now* did he understand why Kenard hadn't hesitated to seduce a woman he'd known less than a day.

In that instant, Mitch's surface sympathy sunk to soul-deep empathy.

What Cassandra didn't know, what Mitch couldn't afford to let her know, was that she didn't have to do much of anything to wage an effective seduction. Tonight she had pushed him almost further than he could bear—and she had no idea how close she was to

her goal.

Which made him angry.

Angry and painfully aroused—not a combination he had ever had to suffer before he'd met Cassandra St. James.

He made the ninety-mile trip in fifty minutes, a record for him, but it hadn't helped at all. He hit the stairs at a run and burst into Trevor's room.

Where he slept.

Naked.

With a girl.

Who screamed.

"Dad, shit!" Trevor croaked, startled out of a sound slumber and shooting to his knees, snatching his bedclothes. The girl started to cry as she scrambled around Trevor. She bolted into the bathroom and slammed the door.

"You brought a girl into my house?" Mitch growled.

"That's a *surprise*?" He was tangled in the sheet and he struggled to get his feet on the floor without falling on his face.

"You couldn't even have the decency to get a hotel room?"

"Sleazy!" he yelled. "You were supposed to be in New York! Until Monday!"

Mitch ignored that. "Outside."

Trevor halted in his efforts, stared at Mitch, his mouth hanging open. "Are you *kidding* me?"

"No, I am not. Get dressed and get outside."

Trevor's face darkened. "No, Dad. I'm done. You dragged me out of bed three times last week, and twice the week before. I'm *tired*, Dad. Get it? I'm sleeping in class and Decker's pissed as hell at me because I can't do my job and as we all know, not doing your job in a steel mill gets you *killed*."

The boy gritted his teeth. Held his ground. Somewhere in the back of Mitch's lust-drugged mind he could respect that.

Now Mitch could add jealousy to the poisonous stew roiling within him. His son felt free to— But *Mitch* couldn't—

"What am I supposed to say? Oh, I'm sorry. My dad wants to sleep with his girlfriend, but he won't, so he gets me up to play soccer in the middle of the night to run it off? Fuck that. I'm done. Find another way to deal with it because this is your problem and I'm not going to let you make it my problem. Oh, hey, here's an idea—jack off like the rest of us weak mortals."

Trevor finally got untangled and out of bed, his sheet wrapped around his waist, and stumbled toward the bathroom. "Scarlett!" He pounded on the door. "Baby, lemme in. Please?"

Mitch stood watching this, his fists clenching, seeing only the deep hurt on Cassandra's face, the door she had slammed in *his* face.

He didn't know what to do.

Too much.

Out of control.

He knew he was, and he had no idea how to get back in control.

He was too old for this.

Trevor cast him an angry glance over his shoulder. "*Okay!* You can *go* now! And

turn off the light and close the door on your way out.”

As angry as Mitch was, he couldn't think, couldn't do anything but what his son had said, so he turned on his heel and walked out. It was petty, he knew it was, but he didn't turn off the light or close the door, and felt even worse when he heard the curse and the slam of the door behind him.

Mitch stalked down the hallway to his bedroom, locked his door, then threw himself on the bed and ripped his fly open.

* * * * *

Baby I Love U!

January 18, 2011

I didn't have any problem Tuesday morning acting as if nothing were different in my life, because it wasn't. All was well in the world.

As usual.

Except...

There was a dullness to my day, and that irritated me.

Hollander had it coming and I didn't regret it, even though it meant the end to our budding little romance. It would take another two months to finish separating the old J.I. operation from Hollander Steelworks, and I could do it through my minions. I would never have to see or speak to him again.

Ah, well. I'd had more intriguing men than he. There were plenty more.

“Cassie, you okay? You seem a little—I don't know. Down in the mouth.”

I flashed a bright smile at Susan, who smiled back and went about her business. An hour later I got a phone call that took me to California, where I waged war on a board of directors who wanted to block the brash reorganization plan their new CEO had begun. The CEO—all of twenty-eight—was an arrogant shit, especially for someone so young, but he wasn't so arrogant that he wouldn't call for help when he needed it.

It took me almost three days to beat the old bastards into submission, with a level of rudeness and cruelty surpassing any I had ever displayed, and probably would never need to again once details of this meeting worked its way across the country.

At the end of business Thursday, once I had finished my work and cleared the conference room of its collection of aging socialites, I busied myself packing my laptop and wondered what kind of wine one served at a pity party.

“Cassie.”

I looked up at the CEO. Tall, lean. Powerful. He was gorgeous, from his closely shaved afro, to the sharp planes of his dark face cut sharper by a meticulously trimmed goatee, to his intense brown eyes. And almost twenty years younger than I.

Oh, he fit my idea of the perfect lover to a T. Four months ago, I would have taken him back to my hotel room immediately and fucked him with no time-wasting niceties.

Now... I read his faintly predatory expression and felt absolutely nothing but a slight annoyance.

“Would you care to have dinner with me tonight?”

As an invitation, it was non-threatening and sincere. Underneath all that pretty and arrogance and genius, he was a good man, but he wasn't Hol—

And he was most definitely eager to have some quality time with me between the

sheets. God knew I could use a weekend of lithe young brainiac stud.

"I don't think so," I murmured after a second, wondering why I didn't take him up on it and angry with myself for not doing so. "I'm, uh...not on the market right now."

"For men or...?" he questioned carefully. It was a fair question and I shook my head.

"I'm— Um, for anybody."

"Oh," he said, as if that were a foreign concept and perhaps it was. It wouldn't have occurred to him that I might dissemble; he had been witness to a protracted demonstration of my nasty reputation. I didn't realize I'd spent so much time with Hollander that my concept of what "most single people" did had expanded so far as to include adults who remained celibate by choice because they believed that God requested it as a token of obedience.

More than a token. Downright martyrdom.

Idiots.

"All right." He held out his hand for me to shake and I took it. "Let me show you to your limousine at least."

By the time I got to my hotel room only a few minutes later, it dawned on me what would not happen the next day.

No flowers.

No phone call.

No date.

I was back to Friday nights with chick flicks and Chunky Monkey and Clarissa. If she didn't have another boyfriend yet. Maybe Nigel and Gordon would take me to a movie.

That made me wince.

I decided to have my pilot change his flight plan, as I had the sudden urge to make myself unavailable to everyone and perhaps go down to San Diego—hang out in TJ for a few hours—then turn up Monday morning well rested and relaxed.

I stripped down to my expensive lingerie and redressed in ordinary clothes that would allow me to blend in here where beautiful young women teemed and I was considered plain. Old.

There was great freedom in that.

I walked aimlessly, not caring where I went. Eventually, I found myself in front of a bookstore, then inside it, then in front of the romance section. An hour later, I walked out with a bag full of books and went in search of alcohol and ice cream.

Two Harlequins, a quart of Phish Food, and half a bottle of Mount Gay later, I had accomplished some vague goal of passing out completely shit-faced so I could awaken in the afternoon, having slept through the absence of—

But *shit*, my stupid ringtone, the one I'd whimsically, ironically, assigned to Mitch, taunted me even in the dreams of my drunken stupor... It quit, but then J.Lo's tinny voice started up again and I groaned, wondering what in the hell had possessed me to choose *that* song. I covered my head with a pillow and rolled over to go back to sleep.

"Fuck," I croaked when I heard my assistant's ringtone ("I Heard a Rumour") some time later and struggled to reach the phone. "What?" I rubbed my eyes and yawned.

"Cassie, I'm so sorry. I know it's three hours earlier there, but I thought you'd want to know what today's were."

I stilled as what she said penetrated the fog. "Today's?" I asked carefully.

“Oh, they’re gorgeous,” she breathed. “It’s like Holland exploded all over your desk.”

“Tulips?” I whispered, my mouth dry.

“Dozens and dozens. In every color imaginable, in those pretty metal vases that change colors.”

“Vases?”

“Twelve, thirteen, maybe. I haven’t counted yet. All completely different. They’re reflecting off the walls and it’s like a pastel rainbow in here.”

I cleared my throat and struggled to sit up, wondering if I’d only imagined my phone ringing earlier, then groaned.

“Cassie, are you okay?”

“Migraine. Is there a card?”

“Yes.”

“Open it.”

She dropped the phone and I winced. I could hear her scrambling to get it. “Oh,” she said when she picked up the receiver again. “It just says, ‘eight o’clock, swishy skirt and high heels.’”

My reflection stared back at me from across from the bed: eyes wide, mouth open—exactly how I would expect to look after getting shit-faced the night before.

I pitched the phone across the room and burst into tears.

•

I cursed myself for fifty-three kinds of a fool for the thudding in my heart as I checked my reflection in the mirror at 7:54. My migraine had ceased, thanks to the half bottle of Tylenol and the ice pack I’d laid over my eyes before I’d fallen asleep in the corporate jet’s bed.

I had gone shopping as soon as I got home. I looked good and I knew it.

From the white off-the-shoulders peasant blouse to the short orange ruffled skirt over layers of short black net petticoats to the orange leather ballroom dance shoes, I was ready to salsa, mambo, rumba.

My stomach lurched when the doorbell rang and I hated that I felt like such a teenager, but he made it all seem so new and fresh, so...

Innocent.

I opened the door to find him there, one hand in his pocket and the other braced against the jamb, a gleam in his eyes I was only too willing to assuage. He wore Dockers and a button-down shirt, already unbuttoned at the throat and sleeves rolled up to his elbows, his most expensive piece of clothing the loafers on his feet.

“I wasn’t sure you were still speaking to me,” he murmured as he straightened and approvingly took in my outfit. “You didn’t answer the phone this morning.”

“I was in California,” I replied, unable to raise my voice above a whisper. “It was very early. I wasn’t expecting you to call, so I thought I was dreaming.”

He took a deep breath and straightened, then stuffed his other hand in his pocket. “Cassandra, I meant what I said last week.”

I pressed my lips together, but only said, “So did I.”

“Yet here we are, both of us dressed to go dancing all night. What does that say?”

His wry tone made me laugh then and my jitters evaporated. “I have no idea.”

He held his hand out to me then and said, “Shall we dance?”

* * * * *

Ere You Left Your Room This Morning

February 2, 2011

There was only one man who'd ever come close to earning Mitch's hatred, and at the moment, he stood in the doorway of Mitch's office, trembling with anger. It gnawed at Mitch, the way he couldn't let go or forgive Shane Monroe for breaking Mina's heart.

His daughters'.

His son's.

"Come in," Mitch said over his shoulder. "Have a seat."

Mitch turned back to his laptop to enter a few more details on his report. The door slammed. Fabric rustled. A shadow appeared at the corner of Mitch's right eye.

He looked up at his father-in-law staring over his shoulder at the screen. "Don't," Mitch growled and closed the lid a little too hard. "This is *my* office. Go sit down until I'm done, then you can speak your piece and leave."

Shane's nostrils flared and his fists clenched.

It was Mitch's job to forgive, yet he couldn't.

Mitch's eyebrow rose when he didn't move. "Would you rather I had you come to the foundry and talk to me while I'm on the line?"

"Still playing in the coal?" Shane sneered, but finally he did as Mitch ordered. "You just can't get the blue off your collar, can you?"

"Who says I want to?"

Mitch turned back to his report, then started when his door opened without a knock. "Dad, what—" Trevor stood in the threshold, wearing his greasy coveralls, staring at his grandfather, who stood slowly and stared back at Trevor in shock. For Shane, seeing his grandson for the first time must be like looking in a mirror.

Crap.

"What can I do for you, Son?" Mitch asked calmly.

"Uh..." Trevor had a hard time dragging his attention from the old man, but finally did. "I got a message at work. Said you wanted me to come over here."

Mitch's jaw ground as he glared up at Shane. "I don't know what's going on in your head, Shane, but I will not tolerate you manipulating my son the way you manipulated Mina."

"I wanted to meet my grandson. Sue me."

Mitch gaped at Shane, unable to believe what he'd just said. What could he say to such blatant manipulation? Rather, *which* thing would he choose to say?

"So, young man," Shane said heartily, flagrantly ignoring Mitch, holding out his hand, never flinching when Trevor's greasy hand clasped his. He pulled him into a one-arm hug and heartily thumped his back. Trevor, still shocked, allowed it. "I hear you're getting ready to go on a mission?"

Trevor's face betrayed his confusion and underlying hurt. He had no idea how to deal with this: a grandfather who'd refused to acknowledge him suddenly appearing, acting friendly, asking about the one thing he did not want to do—the very thing he was willing to do to earn Shane Monroe's attention and, possibly, love.

"Trevor," Mitch said. "Go back to work. I'll talk to your foreman in the morning."

He almost protested, but one look from Mitch was all it took to get him moving out the door.

The door closed softly, and Shane pursed his lips. “Well, you’ve got that boy trained. Congratulations. Wilhemina was never that tractable.”

Elder Snow. Elder Snow. Elder Snow.

“Mina was tired. And ill. She *couldn’t* do what you expected of her. If you’d paid the least bit of attention to her, you’d have known that. Or was it that you didn’t want anything messing up your perfect life?”

Shane sucked in a sharp breath. “You worthless piece of scum,” he hissed.

“You wouldn’t take her to a doctor when she asked. You pushed her into soccer and wouldn’t let up on her. You browbeat her into silence. Shane, face it. You just didn’t want the inconvenience of taking her to the doctor or the embarrassment of a daughter with a terminal illness.”

“You accuse me of, of, of—*that*, but you’re the one that made her cook and clean house and have babies.”

“That’s what you trained her to do, isn’t it? But only for Greg.”

He flushed.

“For the record, I didn’t *make* her do anything except see a doctor when I finally figured out she was lying to me about her health—and even then it took her obstetrician admitting her to the hospital to do it. Because *you* made her think it was all in her head, and she didn’t want to burden *me* with either the time or the expense. Not only did *I* give her excellent medical care, I also gave her a housekeeper, a nanny, and a cook, which Greg would never have done.”

Mitch and his father-in-law squared off until Shane looked away and down, toward the wedding picture Mitch kept on his credenza.

The man reached out as if unwilling to touch it, but compelled by some greater force. He picked it up gingerly with fingers that had never known hard labor, a fact of which he was proud. He had made his money early on and was very successful by most standards—but not compared to Mitch. It didn’t matter. Shane would never allow himself to see Mitch as anything other than a failed missionary and loser steel worker in a dying steel industry with nowhere to go but McDonald’s and shanty town.

Shane tapped the glass over Mitch’s twenty-one-year-old face. “That should’ve been Greg standing there,” he whispered. “In Salt Lake. Not you in DC.”

“Tell me what Greg could’ve given her that I didn’t,” Mitch murmured.

Shane glared at him, opened his mouth—

Nothing came out.

The old man deflated in front of his eyes, aging ten years when he couldn’t lie to himself anymore.

“You wore Mina down every time you refused her attempts to contact you, every time you returned Lisette’s and Geneviève’s invitations unopened, every time you defamed me to anyone who’d listen. You haven’t spoken to any one of us in twenty-five years, and now you show up...why? To insult me? To trick my son and get him all wound up for...what? Why are you here?”

Shane’s chin jutted out, but he refused to look at Mitch. “I’ve been hearing things. About you. Bad things. I came hoping to find out they were wrong, but I’m not even going to bother asking. Obviously you’ve pulled the wool over everyone’s eyes—your

stake president and your own leadership—even if everybody else knows what you’re about.”

“Care to share?”

“That you’re carrying on with some poor married woman in your ward, leading her on, doing—*things*. Spending so much time with a teenage girl, putting ideas in her head—rebellious ideas—encouraging her to run away and such.” Mitch let his father-in-law rant while he made a note to talk to Hayleigh. “It shouldn’t surprise me, though. Wilhemina was Hayleigh’s age when you pounced on her.”

Mitch threw down his pen and laughed. “Do you really believe that or are you saying that because it fits how you’d like things to be?”

“No, I believe it, you and that low-class Guerrero girl all wrapped up in each other not a minute after you got home from France. Don’t think I didn’t see you two going at it, hot and heavy.”

Yes, Inez. Always the minuscule monkey wrench in the works, which, no matter how small, could still stop the cogs occasionally. Mitch remembered that night, when he’d begged Inez to leave her lover and let him provide for her and her children.

Mina had healed his broken heart in no time.

“*Then* you had the gall to go after Wilhemina after I specifically warned you away from her.”

Mitch shrugged. “It would’ve taken me longer to notice her if you hadn’t, so...thanks.”

Shane’s fists clenched and Mitch knew the old man was about to come charging over the desk at him. “You like fragile women, don’t you? First Wilhemina and then Sally Bevan—”

“Oh, so you *admit* you knew Mina was sick.”

Shane’s face flushed. “I didn’t mean it like that.”

“Believe what you like,” Mitch said heavily. “Just get out of my sight and leave my son—and my daughters—alone, the way you have for the last twenty-five years.”

Shane quivered with rage as he stood. “I’m a practical man,” he said through gritted teeth, “and I have never believed in such things as demon possession or—selling your soul to the devil, whatnot. All that satanic stupidity other churches talk about, but I’ll tell you something. Right now, when I look at you, knowing what you’ve done and what you’re doing, I believe it.”

Mitch watched him leave, sick at heart that it had come down to one man’s delusions—hatred held so long it had twisted his mind. He sighed and picked up his wedding photo, stared at it for a long time.

Mina had been lovely, especially that day, her chestnut hair gleaming, piled elaborately on top of her head and studded with tiny sprays of baby’s breath. She had had pretty chocolate-colored eyes sparkling with optimism. Her cheeks and nose flushed pink in the cold, but her smile was warm. She looked like a brunette Barbie doll in the photograph, clad in lace and beads and puffy white sleeves. She had been of average height, if a little too thin, but against Mitch’s bulky six-one, she looked tiny. Fragile.

It was twilight in winter in Washington, D.C. The temple was brilliantly lit from inside. The grounds, all dressed up for Christmas, framed them in the photo.

It had taken Mitch a month to arrange a proper temple wedding for her. His mother and sisters had made Mina’s dress. They’d also made the cake and refreshments for a

little reception at the union hall. There had been invitations and gifts and dancing... It hadn't cost that much, true, but it hadn't *felt* like an elopement, either, when everything was said and done.

He traced her face with a finger and murmured, "Mina, what do you think of Cassandra?"

Mina would've shied away from Cassandra like fog from ten a.m. sunlight, intimidated by her carriage, her beauty, her confidence. Then she would've watched Cassandra from afar, perhaps a month or two, and, once persuaded of Cassandra's integrity, would have approached her—skittish as a butterfly—with an offer of friendship.

No answer.

Well, Mina's spirit wouldn't be here with him, anyway. She'd be off doing interesting things with her ancestors, having a good time while she waited for him.

He took the picture home and packed it away with the rest of his treasures. Once he finished his shower, he stopped short at his dresser. Stared at the valet that held his cufflinks, tie tacs and bars, watches. Looked down at his left hand. Gulped.

"I love you, Mina," Mitch whispered, then raised his right hand to his left and pulled his wedding ring off. He opened his valet and dropped it in. "I always will."

* * * * *

It's Just a Phase

February 8, 2011

My phone buzzed. "St. James."

"Hi, Cass."

I sighed and dropped the stack of analysis printouts that had absorbed me all morning, trying to figure out where the hell all that cash was going...

"Out of money again, Gordon?" That meant I could expect a call from my husband-in-law some time later in the day to deliver another one of his parenting lectures.

"The twins' birthday is coming up."

Oh. Well, of course. "I already took care of it. *As usual.*"

"You did?" His voice betrayed his conflicted feelings. "What did I get them?"

"Skiing in Vermont for a week with their boyfriends."

"Oh," he said again and fell to silence; I could almost see him squirming, struggling to get the words out, the *real* reason he'd called.

"In case you're wondering," I volunteered, "I'm going to give them the usual little birthday party with cakes I'm going to make from scratch and ice cream and wholly inappropriate handmade gifts for their oh-so-special twenty-first birthday. You and Nigel are invited, of course. You know the drill."

"Preciate it," he said absently, so lost in his need he didn't understand what I'd actually said. I sighed. I wasn't this man's wife anymore; why was I still bailing him out, making his life with our daughters so easy?

"Gordon, does Nigel know you're calling me?"

"Um..."

Mitch would know why I did this, if I ever decided to tell him, to detail it for him, how sick and twisted my little nuclear family unit was—and he'd take it in stride, the

same way he took everything else in stride. Then he'd explain it to me.

My patience broke at the thought of Mitch.

"I'm not giving you any more money, Gordon," I blurted, shocking myself to realize that I meant it.

He choked. "What?"

"I'm tired of the charade. From now on, you sink or swim on your own. If you want, I'll tell Nigel I've cut you off so he knows to prepare for the fallout."

"No!" he breathed. "The girls!"

"Nigel is your husband. Ask him for the money like every other society wife in the world, because I'm not going to go behind his back anymore. It's not fair to him." Oh, well. I'd tell Nigel just for the hell of it at lunch tomorrow and order a decent bottle of wine to smooth the transition from ex-wife-as-caretaker to current-husband-as-caretaker. "Your other option is to start using the magic word 'no' when the girls want something."

"You never minded going behind *my* back," he snapped.

"Gordon," I said sweetly, "do you *really* want to go there?" He said nothing. "I didn't think so."

"Cassie, sometimes I just want to—"

"Rape me?"

Silence.

"No," he finally said, deflated. "And I'm sorry about that. You know I am."

Yes, he was, and the only reason we had a good relationship was because it had been *such* an aberration. People do nasty things under duress, and it was a miracle Gordon hadn't cracked sooner with the pressure his father had applied his entire life.

"Are you *ever* going to forgive me? You know I wasn't myself."

"Oh, I don't know," I muttered, unwilling to let him know that with that one vile act, he had freed me from my prison. It was a strange sort of gratitude that I couldn't explain even if I wanted to. He'd paid his debt for his crimes against me, then sought treatment. He was a far better, stronger man now than the one I had married. "I hang out with you, don't I?"

"I'm the father of your children and your best friend's husband. I'm hard to avoid."

"Gordon," I huffed, exasperated, "I could forgive and forget if the girls didn't think I set you up."

"Are we back to that?"

"Yes. I'm asking you to tell them I didn't lie to the police, didn't lie in court, didn't make it up out of whole cloth. They'll believe *you*."

He'd never do it in a million years, which is why I felt safe hounding him about it. He remained stubbornly silent.

He wasn't better or stronger *enough*.

"Anything but that, right?"

"Are you seeing someone?" he asked abruptly. Typical. "As in, for real, not business? You're different. Olivia says you've been distant. Clarissa misses you."

"Clarissa?" I snorted. "She wouldn't miss me if I got myself shot off to Mars."

"That's not true. She's been with us for the last three Friday nights. Whining." And here I thought she had a boyfriend. "Paige won't speak to her except to tell her to shut her mouth."

Oh, yes. Mitch had cemented that alliance quite nicely.

“Look, Gord, I meant what I said. No more money. And if you *really* wanted my forgiveness, you’d confess your sins, so I have to assume you don’t.” I hung up and immediately hit the speed dial.

“Tracey.”

“Nigel, we need to talk.”

“Oh, God, he didn’t call you to ask for money again, did he?”

I said nothing to that for half a second. “Did you know about that all along?”

My ex-husband’s husband chuckled. “Cassie. I work across the Street from you. I have lunch with you three times a week. I can hear the girls bitching about what a dry well you are, add up the money Gordon spends but doesn’t have, and put two and two together. What I can never figure out is why you still give it to him.”

“Get a clue, Nigel.”

“Do you think,” he said, “that it does you any good to continue to let them think you’re the villain of the piece?”

“Don’t pull out the Jung on me, Nigel. I prosecuted the man. *You* married him.”

“He gives good head.”

That made me chuckle.

“And I get to reap the vicarious rewards of having stepkids who think he’s the greatest father that ever lived and, by extension, me too. It’s sickening how they treat you, and what’s more sickening is that you *let* them.”

Don’t you dare shut that door on me... Why do you put up with that?

“Gordon doesn’t seem to mind,” I said, though I struggled to keep the bitterness out of my voice. “He could fix this, but he doesn’t have the balls.”

Nigel couldn’t disagree with me. “Well, he *has* been better about trying to defend you,” he offered.

Poor people food again? Cassie, I’m not eating poor people food and I’m not going to let the girls eat it, either. We’re going for Thai. You’re welcome to come with us as long as you don’t bitch about the prices.

“Unless he tells them the truth,” I said, low, a slow rage building in my gut, even though, truly, it was the *last* thing I wanted. I just wanted him to be *willing* to do it. “I don’t care what other lame attempts he makes at amends. I do *not* want to be the recipient of some late-date half-assed apologetics just because he’s the born-again spouse to a Wall Street top.”

“Then quit being such a fucking martyr,” Nigel snapped back at me. “Don’t expect him to do something when you *live* with them. You *let* them treat you like shit. If you treated them the way you treat your clients, you’d have their respect, but no— You act like you’re begging for crumbs from their table. You’re not a beacon of hope to feminism when you do that.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. I thought I was the *victim*.”

Nigel growled.

“Good luck with your man’s spending habits. You might have been able to retire early on the alimony I’ve been paying under the table.”

“Fine. Lunch is on you from now on.”

“Fine.”

“So,” Nigel said the next day as we sat down to lunch. Out of sheer perversity, I’d chosen a little deli. No expensive lunch for the husband-in-law today. “Who is he?”

“Who is who?” I asked once I’d swallowed a bite of salmon. And oh, this deli’s fish was divine.

“The man who’s kept you from bugging your little shits to death. Olivia says you’re virtually dreamy, there’s been an abrupt cease to the daily phone calls at inconvenient moments, and Paige is keeping the lid on whatever Clarissa knows. And speaking of Clarissa, you do know that your standing Friday-night date has glommed onto us, right?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” Ah, the pleasures of providing a roof for my children.

“The guy who sends you flowers on Friday.”

I didn’t think I’d ever be able to breathe again. “How do you know about that?”

“Please. It’s all over the financial district. Everybody thinks you’re moonlighting.”

“God, no. I haven’t had sex with anybody but myself for the last four years and I only started that up again two months ago.”

He looked at me strangely. “A man sends you flowers every Friday for two months and keeps you out until the wee hours of the weekend and you’re not sleeping with him?”

“Nope.”

Nigel snorted. “What is he, a Mormon?” When I remained silent, he choked on his beer. “*No*,” he breathed.

I still didn’t say a word. As far as I knew, there were only two available Mormon males in the country who could afford to date me. One of them was gay and the other one had hired me to reorganize his company. And since the funds Nigel managed specialized in manufacturing...

“Oh, *shit*, Cass. Hollander’s the *mother lode*.”

And didn’t I know it. Any other time, I might have preened at the awe in his voice. “You keep your mouth shut, Nigel. You could teach TMZ a thing or two about breaking news.”

“Does Jack know? He must not because your building hasn’t blown up yet.”

I snorted.

“Did Taight set you up?”

“No.”

“Don’t tell me you’re going to join that pack of nutjobs.”

“Of course not. And they’re not nutjobs,” I said, feeling terribly defensive all of a sudden. “Does Hollander seem like a nutjob to you?”

“Well, no. He’s such a brilliantly sneaky bastard I assumed he was an anomaly.”

“He’s perfectly representative of the lot.” Not that I knew that, but it didn’t keep me from saying so.

“I’d fuck him.”

“So would I, if he’d let me.”

Nigel smirked at my dejected tone. “You’re not trying hard enough.”

No. I wasn’t. I’d stopped trying because I liked this slow seduction, liked the erotics of abstinence, the game.

For now.

“Does he know?”

“Yes. I told him right up front. He demanded test results.”

“Whoa. Really not a nutjob, then.”

“Exactly.”

“So where does he take you?”

“Dancing. That’s where we go most Friday nights.”

“Where?”

“Cubax.”

“That’s where the serious dancers go. He must be good.”

“Better than that. He can clear the floor by himself.”

“Oooh, I think the great and magnificent Cassie St. James is in *luv*.”

“Fuck you. I’m just more patient than he is.”

“*Nobody* is more patient than Hollander. So...where’s it headed if it’s not headed to bed?”

“I don’t know. I’m going to ambush him at his church Sunday. You know he’s a bishop?”

Nigel burst out laughing. “Don’t tell me you’d marry him to fuck him.” *Oh. Hmmm.*
“Uh huh.”

I said nothing as we busied ourselves cleaning up the litter of our lunch. I wanted to ignore his smugness, but I had to answer it somehow. “I’m not in love with him,” I said calmly and stood to head back to work. “But he wants to play this ridiculous game and I’ll go along for the ride because I want to ride *that* particular ride. He simply doesn’t comprehend who he’s dealing with.”

“He must be a good kisser then.”

I huffed. “Well, for your information, he hasn’t kissed me, either.”

A moment of stunned silence. “Oh, Cassie,” murmured my husband-in-law with mock sadness. “I think maybe *you* don’t comprehend who *you’re* dealing with.”

* * * * *

That’s the Way Love Goes

February 11, 2011

My assistant hung over my shoulder to read the card that had come in today’s Friday flowers. I held it close to my chest and looked at her, half annoyed, half amused. “How many firms are paying you to find out who these are from?”

She flushed. “Six.”

“How big is the betting pool?”

“I don’t know,” she whined. “Nigel’s managing it. I only know the six.” I smirked. “Which totally isn’t fair because he knows who it is and he’s taking fifty percent off the top.”

“Oh, it’s fair. It just makes everyone else stupid for betting on his terms. So who’m I in bed with?”

She rattled off the names of half a dozen financial movers and shakers around the world, three actors, a celebrity chef, two bestselling novelists (both female), a Saudi prince, and...Sebastian Taight.

“Sebastian’s coming in first so far,” she told me. “I mean, look at those paintings. Man like that couldn’t be faithful. Not to mention the fact that you’re his heir.” I began to laugh as a feeling of contentment stole over me. That the entirety of Wall Street was betting on the identity of my lover meant either that no one had any better entertainment or they were genuinely puzzled.

“Is there a side bet?”

She rolled her eyes. “If you’re hooking again or not. That’s running about even.”

“I haven’t seen or heard of anyone staking out my house. Must be no one’s willing to mess with Sheldon and his crew over a bet.”

“That’s for sure. Besides, Nigel made it clear he’ll know if somebody has inside information.”

I couldn’t help my grin.

Not a hint of a whiff of Mitch Hollander, one ordinary man amongst that stable of studs and suddenly I realized that his ability to fly under the radar like he did—both financially and sexually—was a good chunk of the reason he had been so successful.

Brilliantly sneaky.

Indeed.

It’d taken the financial world three years to realize that Jep Industries had not actually died an ignominious death due to Senator Roger Oth’s incompetence, and that between the OKH Enterprises heir’s devious mind, King Midas’s strong-arm tactics and capital, and Mitch Hollander’s behind-the-scenes talent, it still lived and breathed, better than ever, employing more people than it ever had, and keeping dozens of businesses alive along with it. If anyone had figured that out before, during, or fairly soon after Mitch’s takeover of that company, he would have had to work three times harder to keep it afloat.

I looked down at the card I hadn’t had a chance to read.

Saturday 10 a.m.

Get plenty of sleep and dress warm.

I blinked. That was different. Mitch had said nothing this morning about not going dancing tonight and suddenly, I simply didn’t know what I would do with myself.

Chick flicks and Chunky Monkey and Clarissa? *Really?* When I *had* a man?

I hadn’t realized how much I looked forward to going dancing every Friday night, no matter what else we did Saturday.

Lost.

Angry, bereft.

I had a man?

Dancing on Friday nights at Cubax was the only chance Mitch gave me to get close enough to declare war on his libido. I needed that time, that atmosphere, that sexual intensity to seduce him.

“Cassie!” squeaked Clarissa that evening as I came in the front door to find her and some guy half naked on the sofa. I couldn’t tell if they were just getting started or just finishing, but it didn’t matter. “Shit,” she hissed as she sprang to her feet, looking not in the least bit abashed.

“I’m too young for grandchildren and I’m not paying to treat any sexually transmitted diseases,” I sniped as I dumped my briefcase on the kitchen counter. “And if I find any cum stains on my very expensive couch, I’m billing you for the cleaning.”

“I thought you were going out.”

“Can’t I have a moment to myself in my own house? You have a room. Go fuck in it.”

“God, Cassie, could you be *more* disgusting?”

Why do you put up with that?

“Clarissa,” I said, hoping she’d take the warning in my voice. “Get him out of here. I don’t care if you take him upstairs or leave, but I want *my* space to *myself* for a while.”

She opened her mouth to fling something else at me, but I pointed at her.

“You say one more disrespectful thing to me and you can go find somewhere else to sleep tonight. And tomorrow. And every night after that. No more, Clarissa. I’m tired of it.”

“Shit, I hope you get laid soon,” she sneered.

I looked at her, this young woman I didn’t know, and anger flooded me, hot and thick. The young woman who spoke to me this way was my *child*. I had gone to war with some of the fattest cats in the country and won, but my *children* treated me like dust on the soles of their feet.

Why had I allowed this?

How?

“Out. You have an hour. After that, I’ll call the cops and have you taken in for trespassing.”

“Fine,” she snapped. “I’ll go live with Daddy and Nigel.”

“Good. Why didn’t you do that four years ago?”

She flounced off and up the stairs, leaving the boy, whose name I didn’t know, standing half naked by the couch, flushed from his toes to his—

“Button your fly, kid,” I said as I pointedly inspected him. “I’ve seen better.”

He flushed even redder and turned to do as I said.

“Don’t mind her,” Clarissa snarled, having stopped short and jumped the four steps down to the floor, then shot across the room to help him into his clothes. “She’s just an old whore who thinks dating an asshat Mormon bishop’ll give her her virginity back.”

Everything stopped and I could hear the roaring of blood in my ears. I had never struck my children. Not once.

It had never occurred to me to do so.

Until now.

I stood frozen, unable to do anything—much less slap her—until she left, boyfriend in tow, and slammed the front door behind her. I fell back against the refrigerator and slid to the floor, drawing my knees up to my chest. I would not cry, would *not*—

I sat there on the kitchen floor for a long time, in a complete daze, before I noticed the dust bunnies in the corners, hidden by the toe kicks. So I arose and began to run water to do my housekeeper’s job—without bothering to change out of my tailored suit—then the doorbell rang. I threw the rag down in the sink with a pissed-off sigh and stomped down the hall to fling the door open.

My heart thundered.

“Cassandra.”

I could say nothing, because *he* was here, when I had least expected him, wearing that sly smile and the way he was dressed—

“Shall we dance?”

•

At three a.m., Mitch and I were the only ones left at Cubax.

The lights had come up and the staff was putting the chairs on the tables, sweeping,

cleaning the bar. The band was putting its equipment away, yet there we were, alone in the middle of the dance floor—

—slow dancing to music only he and I could hear, my sweat-soaked back to his sweat-soaked chest, his arms wrapped around me. His mouth just touched my ear.

Just before I closed my eyes and let my head rest on Mitch's shoulder, I saw the bartender signal someone. Not long after, Janet Jackson's voice began to stream from the speakers and perfectly matched the rhythm in which we danced.

Neither of us had spoken more than perhaps twenty words each since I'd opened the door and he'd asked me to dance. He'd known something was wrong and opened his mouth to ask, but I'd shaken my head, unable to give it voice. He simply took out a handkerchief and dabbed at my cheeks as if I had been crying.

Once the song ended, the front door was flung open, letting in a blast of cool early-morning February air.

"That's our cue," Mitch whispered in my ear with a soft kiss.

At that moment, it didn't matter. None of it did. My kid's disrespect. My ex-husband's lack of financial discipline. My best friend's disapproval of the way I handled my family. My boss's irritation. My colleagues' wagers.

"I heard about that," Mitch murmured as we walked out into the frigid darkness and I told him about the financial district's Friday flowers betting pool. "Tracey wouldn't let me place a bet, or I would've thrown a couple bucks in the 'Sebastian Taight' pot."

I stopped short and stared at him, saw that wicked grin that matched the mischievous sparkle in his eyes. "I'm not allowed in the pool, either. Imagine that."

Mitch threw back his head and laughed, hugging me close. "So...what happened earlier?"

I shrugged. "A little tiff with Clarissa."

"Ah."

Not so little, considering the subtext of what she'd said, but I had done nothing to curb that tongue when I could've, so I supposed I could be gracious about reaping what I'd sown. Nigel would say I deserved it, and I'd have to concede.

"I thought I'd be spending Friday night in a bathrobe watching *Bridget Jones's Diary* with a quart of Cherry Garcia for company."

"Oh?" he said blithely as we strolled along, vaguely heading toward my townhouse. "Did I impose?"

I chuckled. "I could've asked you to join me. Olivia and her boyfriend could've been our chaperones."

"Ah...Bridget Jones...no, thanks. Geneviève made me sit through that. I wanted to poke out my eyeballs and eardrums."

"Don't tell me. You like movies where they blow lots of stuff up."

"I'm pretty adolescent about my movie tastes, yes. Tell you what. I'll watch *Bridget Jones's Diary* if you'll watch *Fight Club*." That made me chuckle, but we said nothing for a block as we walked, my arm hooked in his and our bodies pressed against each other. I was hyperaware of every rub of his body against mine; this was as close as we ever got to kissing, making love, and it occurred to me that eight weeks of foreplay might be worth it when—if—I actually got him in bed.

"I wasn't planning on going dancing last night," he finally admitted, low and without a trace of humor. He sighed and wiped his left hand down his face. I noticed his bare ring

finger immediately. "I wanted to take you somewhere today and needed some sleep, but I — I couldn't stay away. I couldn't wait that long to see you."

I thought I'd never breathe again.

"But...I have to be there when I told them I would and I really need the sleep."

"Um, that's fine," I said, distracted, unsettled. "Where are we going?"

He flashed me that mischievous smile once again as he hailed a cab. "Ice skating."

"With...?"

"You'll see."

* * * * *

Satine

February 12, 2011

He showed up on my doorstep in worn, faded jeans, hiking boots, and a fisherman sweater, all under a sheepskin coat. God, that man was *hot*, no matter what he wore, and I made sure he knew my opinion. He inspected my similarly clad body with an indecipherable expression, that poker face his only defense against me.

"Like what you see, Bishop?"

"Always."

"Come inside and I'll show you how much better it looks undecorated."

He grinned and refused to budge one inch inside, as usual. "Did you get enough sleep?" he asked me once I'd locked the front door behind me and we trotted down the front steps.

"More than I'd have gotten if you had come to bed with me," I grumbled. "Don't expect my gratitude."

He laced his fingers through mine, wound his arm around my waist and pulled me to him as if to rumba right there on the sidewalk. I wrapped my free hand around his neck and pressed my nose into the corner of his jaw simply to smell him and I felt his breath hitch when I touched my tongue to his skin.

"Cassandra," he whispered.

"Mitchell," I whispered back and nuzzled his ear, caught his earlobe lightly between my teeth. "You aren't wearing your wedding ring."

"No."

"Why?"

We stood like that for a while, me making love to him, upright, fully outfitted for winter, on an Upper East Side sidewalk on a cold Saturday morning. I felt his body tense more and more, his infamous control struggling with his lust.

I knew he was vulnerable to me. How vulnerable, I wasn't sure, but he had to have a breaking point and dammit, I *would* find it.

Just then he drew away from me and nudged me in the direction of Central Park.

"You get everything with your daughter patched up?" he asked after a moment, his voice hoarse. He wasn't going to answer my question, but he didn't really have to, so I let it go.

"No. Nigel texted me. Congratulated me for kicking her out. Finally."

"It was that serious?"

"He thinks that I am martyring myself in a misguided quest for my children's

approval.”

“I see.” Which meant *I agree*. God help me if Mitch and Nigel ever got together to compare opinions.

“Do you encounter a lot of that?”

He nodded slowly. “Yes. It’s...difficult to watch, not being able to do anything about it. Best I can do is send ’em to counseling if it’s serious enough.”

“How about your kids?”

He pursed his lips and he took a deep breath. “I believe,” he said slowly as he released that breath, “that the Lord gave me low-maintenance kids to kind of make up for the other stuff I’ve had to deal with. I mean, we’ve had our tussles, but my daughters were pretty young when Mina began to deteriorate and so somehow they just...understood that I needed their help and they grew up fast because of it.”

Hmmm. By comparison, my family came up looking merely self-indulgent and spoiled rotten.

“But as it happens,” he said slowly, “I got a little too complacent with Trevor.”

“Oh? The perfect son?”

“I guess that depends on how you define it. Caught him in bed with a girl two weeks ago.”

So many wisecracks, so little time. “And?”

“It was inevitable,” he mumbled. “I’ve— Neglected him. He’s spent more quality time with Sebastian the last four, five years, than he has with me.”

That explained a lot.

“And you feel guilty.”

“Of course. What kind of a man lets another man raise his kid?”

“And you chose Sebastian because...?”

“Sebastian,” he said thoughtfully, “is a born father. And he had time to teach Trevor the things that would put him ahead in the game of life. You know, the things he taught me way back when, only now it’s twenty years later. He’s refined it and can back it up with a long string of successes. I didn’t have time to turn around twice in the same spot; I sure didn’t have time to do that.

“But...he also taught him that the Church doesn’t mean anything. He taught Trevor to respect me and my beliefs, but that it didn’t obligate him and he had to make his own decisions. Told him before he could do that, he had to have some life experience.”

That sounded perfectly reasonable to me and exactly the sort of thing King Midas would say. “You had to know he’d train him that way.”

Mitch inclined his head. “I did. I was arrogant enough to think I could counter it.”

“Didn’t you tell me he goes to church?”

“And hates every minute of it.”

“Do you make him?”

“No. I kept waiting for the day he’d say, ‘No more,’ but he never did. He only goes to support me and as far as anybody at church knows, he’s a perfect son. It’s a complete act. I don’t really know how I feel about that. But after the, ah, *incident*, I forbid him from fulfilling the church duties young men his age do. He wouldn’t mind, but when he’s asked, he has to refuse, and that’s out of character. He gets hounded about why. It makes him uncomfortable, but he won’t admit anything that would reflect badly on me.”

“Duties? Like what?”

“The big one is blessing the sacrament. Same as what a priest does for communion, only our sixteen-, seventeen-, eighteen-year-old boys do it. With any other kid, if he came to me and confessed, I’d give him a stern lecture, try to determine if he just slipped up or if he doesn’t care, have followup interviews if he’s interested in getting back on the straight and narrow. But with Trevor it’s a moot point. He got caught. He’s not repenting of anything. And I already know that as soon as he leaves home, he’ll leave the Church.”

Clearly, the man was miserable, and I touched his arm. “Mitch, I don’t get this. The kid’s smart, responsible, and respects you enough to do whatever he can so as not to embarrass you. And you’re grieving his lost virginity?” Mitch looked at me funny. “If that’s your only issue with him,” I said low, “I think you should congratulate yourself on a job well done. I wish I had done as well with my children as you’ve done with yours.”

He remained silent, but I could tell he was thinking about that.

“How much did Mina have to do with him?”

“Not much,” Mitch murmured. “She tried to keep up with him, but he wore her out. Little boys— They can wear out a border collie. He was eleven the first time Sebastian offered to take him for the summer, and I needed to get him away from Mina so she’d stay in her wheelchair and rest.”

“He doesn’t remember her?”

“He remembers the invalid Mina. Not the awesome mom Mina that my daughters knew.”

“And he’s had no women in his life?”

“Not enough to make an impact.” I couldn’t imagine that. Usually it was the father who was absent in situations like that. “How much has Gordon been involved with your girls?”

“He couldn’t be more involved if he lived with us, which I wouldn’t allow even if he wanted to. The good-cop, bad-cop dynamic, you know. That was my Achilles’ heel. Designer clothes, vacations, gadgets, clubbing— Way more attractive than anything I had to offer.”

“Discipline.”

“Of any kind.”

“I understood Gordon to have no money, and never has had. How does he shower them with gifts?”

I shrugged.

“Ah.”

“But that’s about to stop,” I said in a whoosh. “I cut him off yesterday, and Nigel won’t let him spend money that way. Prepare to hear the screams of anguish all the way to Bethlehem.”

Mitch said nothing and I glanced at him, though his expression gave nothing away. “Speaking of Tracey,” he said abruptly. Finally. “He called me.”

I stopped, my heart pounding in my chest.

“He wants to have dinner, you and me, him and Gordon.”

Oh, good Lord. An ex-prostitute, her ex-husband, and her ex-husband’s husband having dinner with a Mormon bishop.

“I think it’s a good idea,” he continued, as if he didn’t notice I was practically choking on my own spit. There went my grand plan to keep Mitch and Nigel as far apart as possible. “I like Tracey. He’s got a good head on his shoulders and he cares about

you.”

Well, of course. Nigel was my best friend and he was emotionally agile enough to be able to take care of Gordon’s needs *and* my needs in the most efficient and mutually beneficial way possible.

We got to Fifth Avenue. Hailed a cab.

“Nigel set me up in business,” I admitted as he handed me in and slid in beside me. “I couldn’t have done it without his contacts and advice. You know, who to accept as clients. Who not. How much to charge. He bought my black book from someone who wanted out.”

“Thirty Rock, please,” he said to the cabbie, then looked at me. “What did you have to promise him to get him to do that?”

“Gordon. Believe me, I got the better part of *that* bargain.”

Mitch burst out laughing and I couldn’t help but laugh myself. Seen through his eyes, it seemed no more outrageous than any other business deal any of us had ever done.

“Nigel,” I said hesitantly, unwilling to tell him but unwilling to keep it to myself, “taught me how to please a man.”

Mitch started and looked at me sharply. “He’s bisexual?”

“He’ll tell you no, but he’s never been completely immune to women. He certainly has a better-than-average understanding of female anatomy and it occurred to me that there’s no one better to teach a woman how to please a man than a gay man. It took awhile, though. Gordon and I...” My throat seemed gummed up for some reason.

“Why,” Mitch asked slowly, “would a *friend* help you do this?”

“Oh, he didn’t want to,” I hastened to assure him. “He knew if he didn’t help me, I’d find somebody else and it wouldn’t turn out well, because I didn’t know anything about anything. He had the right contacts and the sexual experience to teach me what I didn’t know, which was, well, everything.”

“How did Gordon take this?”

I tightened my mouth. I didn’t want to discuss it any further, but I would. Because it was Mitch and Mitch just...understood. Everything. “Gordon doesn’t know Nigel and I were lovers. It didn’t matter. We were divorced and he was in prison.”

“But I thought you said—”

“Nigel wanted Gordon. He would have done anything to help me if it meant uncoupling me from Gordon, and I didn’t want anything more, so we had a common goal. He helped me get out of my situation, protected me from my father-in-law until I could protect myself, paid off most of the debt Gordon had saddled me with. It took years. Everything he did to help me, start to finish, was so he could get what he wanted. If that meant fucking me for six months to teach me how to be a fabulous whore, that’s what that meant.”

Mitch didn’t flinch at my nasty tone or vulgarities. He simply pulled me close, rubbing my arm until I relaxed against him.

“Hmm.”

“What’s that mean?” I muttered.

“Nothing, I guess,” he said slowly. “Just— I have a different impression of Tracey now than I did before.” I waited. “Well, Tracey’s brilliant. What does he see in Gordon? Especially after what he did to you?”

I could feel my face stretching with a slow smile, because, yet again, Mitch had said

the unexpected and in no way did he let his personal morality get in the way of common sense. “I...don’t know,” I admitted. “He’s been in love with Gordon since...well, since they met, which was soon after we got married. Nigel was Gordon’s boss.”

“And Gordon?”

“Ha! I didn’t know it was possible for Gordon to love anyone but himself, but whatever he’s doing—which I don’t know—it makes Nigel happy, so...”

“And Nigel loves you.”

I shrugged. “In a BFF sort of way.”

“Ah, BFFs. Got it.”

I sneered. “My entire family is a gaggle of teenage girls, and sometimes the maturity level isn’t even that high.”

Mitch began to laugh. “I’ve had two of my own and deal with a bunch of them every Sunday. No need to explain.”

* * * * *

Smooth Operator

We got to Rockefeller Center to see a bus with children and teens pouring out of it, heading with much shouting toward the curiously empty rink. A phalanx of parents followed more sedately. Mitch watched with the interest of someone who was just checking that it was happening as planned.

“This is your congregation?”

“No,” he muttered absently. “Friend of mine’s. He was a brand new priest when I was a brand new bishop. I forget how we met, but we leaned on each other pretty heavily while we were learning the ropes. He had the advantage of seminary training and I had the advantage of high-level management. He got transferred here—Brooklyn—oh, five, six years ago, but we keep in touch.”

“Brooklyn?” We exited the cab, held hands as we walked toward the ticket booth of the rink. “That’s not the richest diocese in the world. No priest would be able to afford this.”

Mitch shook his head. “Nope. He sure can’t.” I stumbled, but he caught me. “Careful.”

By the time we got down to the rink, there were a dozen children and a few adults already booted up and on the ice, but some of the ones who weren’t yet saw us.

Their eyes lit up.

“Bishop!”

“Bishop!”

“Bishop!”

Men, women, children. Didn’t matter. They all wanted a piece of him and he was more than willing to give it.

“Bishop! Cassie!”

We both turned at the yell from across the rink. “Luis!” Mitch yelled back, then waved. I began to smile. It was the bouncer from Cubax, his wife and family in tow.

“Bishop Hollander!”

A broad smile broke out on Mitch’s face at that last shout. “Father Farraday!” He let go of my hand to clasp the priest in a bear hug once he’d joined us.

They talked God shoptalk for a moment until a natural break in the conversation led Mitch to say, “Rory, this is my friend, Cassandra St. James.”

The priest looked at me, then he glanced at Mitch.

He knew.

And even though I had never met the man before, I knew exactly *how* he knew.

But the man had the good grace to smile widely and shake my hand, to appear to accept me at face value. The hesitation was minute, but I’d caught it and if I had, Mitch most certainly would have.

I knew how it would go down: The man of God of one faith would call his good friend, the man of God of another faith, give him some vague advice about the woman who’d conned him and what she *really* wanted from him. I doubted Father Farraday would know I’d taken down my shingle years ago and that I whored for Blackwood Securities now, all under the eagle eye of the Securities and Exchange Commission.

Unfortunately, Father Farraday wasn’t as clever about concealing his thoughts as Mitch, who gave nothing away and treated me as his beloved, a hand on my back, introducing me to what seemed hundreds of people.

The music that poured out of the speakers was some innocuous bubble gum pop, and the three of us requested skates without need for payment. I looked around. Concession was open and the non-skaters were already lined up for hot chocolate and snacks, with no money changing hands. I cast a glance at Mitch, who just shrugged.

“Allergies?” he asked wryly as he touched his gloved thumb to my face.

“Yes, and I forgot my Benadryl.”

“Benadryl,” he muttered, shaking his head.

We all sat to put on our skates, then set out slowly around the outside of the rink. I listened as the two men chatted about their callings. I might have felt left out were it not for Mitch keeping me close to his side, holding my hand, always making sure I knew he had not forgotten me.

“Now, you know,” Father Farraday drawled, “half the congregation wants to skate with you.”

I felt Mitch chuckle. “They’ll have to ask Cassandra. She’s got first dibs.”

And again the priest glanced at me *that way*.

“Ah, Mitch, can I talk to you a minute? I’ve got a parish problem I could sure use some advice on.”

“Not now, Rory,” Mitch said. Almost anyone would have missed the slight edge in his voice, including Father Farraday, but not I; I’d heard it before. The Mormon bishop was receding in favor of the CEO of Hollander Steelworks—and the CEO of Hollander Steelworks could be a mean son of a bitch when he was crossed. If pushed, he would not play well with others.

“Mitch—”

“Not. Now.”

Father Farraday froze and stared at Mitch. Mitch stared back, daring him to say another word about it. What had I thought when I first met him? That he was the ordinary man amongst the other, more extraordinary men in his milieu?

No.

Mitch fit right in with that pack of wolves he considered his family, as capable of the same ruthlessness as the rest of them.

Father Farraday smiled again and clapped Mitch on the back and skated smoothly away to see to his congregation's fun.

Mitch looked at me then, his expression one of mixed regret and humor.

"His colleague is in my little black book," I muttered wryly, not surprised when Mitch flashed me a grin. "I guess the archbishop decided it'd be a good idea for Father Farraday to stake him out and find out where and with whom the good reverend was sinning. Nip that bad PR in the bud."

"You're pricey, so how...?"

"No idea, but I didn't care. I will say this: He was terribly pedestrian. Easiest money I ever made."

Mitch threw back his head and laughed, a warm, rich sound that seemed to fill me up with gladness.

"I don't know why they bothered," I continued. "I'm a woman and an adult, so relatively speaking, I wouldn't be any kind of a scandal at all."

"Money."

"I don't think so. What he spent on me— Not even close to what all those lawsuits cost." I paused. "You know," I mused. "All he really needed was an intelligent woman's company. To talk, laugh."

Mitch made a vague noise of sympathy. "So you have a thing for clergy."

"I had a client who *happened* to be clergy; I've only ever had a *thing* for one man of God—and in eight weeks I haven't gotten so much as a kiss from *him*."

"Gripe, gripe, gripe," he murmured, coming to a slow stop in one corner of the rink, my hand in his. He gave me that heavy-lidded look, took my glove off and raised my hand to press his mouth softly into my palm. I bit my lip when his tongue just touched my skin, daring me to ask for more.

I couldn't, not when he had just made one otherwise innocent little gesture the equivalent of an evening of foreplay. My pulse thundered in my ears and I couldn't breathe.

"Stop," I whispered, wanting the exact opposite. I was panicking. I knew that. How easily he could arouse me—with *nothing*!

I hadn't felt this powerless in years, and certainly had never found powerlessness to feel so *delicious*.

He smirked and slowly drew away, but apparently only to lace his warm, calloused fingers in mine—when had he taken his glove off?—then wrapped his other arm around my waist, pulled me up against him and we began to sway to the stupid muzak as if we hadn't spent all night dancing to real music, full of fire and passion. His mouth brushed my temple and then down to my ear.

"Patience."

I gulped. "Mitch, I—" I what? He already knew. Had known from the moment he first asked me to dinner. "What are you doing to me?"

"Just playin' the game you wanted to play, Cassandra," he murmured as he touched my neck with his lips, barely, light, butterfly. "Notice you're not winning."

God, no, and I had never been so happy to be on the losing end of anything in my life. I swallowed. "Is this the Mormon version of Tantric sex?"

He stilled, and I could feel his wide grin against the underside of my jaw. "I guess you could say that."

* * * * *

Every Member a Missionary

February 13, 2011

Quite frankly, I didn't know how Mitch would react when he saw me on his turf uninvited. After the research I had done, I was confused about why he hadn't simply invited me, though I could think of about three or four plausible explanations. Asking him to bring me would have muddied the waters in a different, though no less turbulent, direction; thus, I took the decision out of his hands.

It had taken me a bit of maneuvering around his church's website to find out where he'd be on Sunday and at what time, but I needed more information. Thus I had, with surprising nervousness, called Morgan Ashworth. I was unwilling to expose that much of myself to Sebastian, whose first loyalty was to Mitch.

"Why, it's Cassandra St. James, as I live and breathe. What can I do for you *today*?"

"What do you think? You know how much I love fucking gay men."

His booming laugh set me at ease, as it had every time I had spoken with him. "And you are the only woman who's ever tempted me."

"I do seem to have that effect on you all."

"So, m'dear..." he drawled slyly, and I heard the creak of an office chair being relaxed into. "I've been hearing some very interesting tidbits and piecing together a sweet little story about your current love life or lack thereof, depending on your definition."

I should've known. "You're the only one, apparently. I had to spell it out for Nigel."

"Ah, but my network is diverse, complex, and intersects in the most interesting ways, which is to say, almost never."

"Okay, well, don't ask me to explain it because I can't. What I want you to do is get me to the church on time." Shocked silence. "That was a joke. Tell me all the gory details of your super secret rituals so I don't make an ass of myself."

More silence. Then, "Freud would adore you."

"Bite me. Just give me the information I need, since it appears I have to have a decoder ring to figure out what the Romans do."

He grunted and his chair creaked again. I heard papers shuffling in the background, books being tossed on a desk. "You have the whens and the wheres?"

"Yes. Bishop Mitchell Grant Hollander, Bethlehem Second Ward, Nazareth Stake. Nine a.m."

"Okay then. Protocol. Do you want the short course or the long explanation?"

"Whatever I need."

"All right. First, Sunday is a twelve-hour day for a bishop. He won't have much time, if any, to spend with you. He'll be swamped with meetings and paperwork and fires to put out. I wouldn't be surprised if he doesn't even see you at all unless you let him know you're there and he won't be able to see you after church. Sit back and observe, soak up the atmosphere. The more you understand about our culture, the better you'll understand Mitch."

Sounded reasonable to me.

"Are you *sure* you want to do this without him to help you?"

"I can see it'd be problematic for him, but I don't really understand why."

“Fair enough.” Damn. I’d hoped he’d take the hint and tell me. “The meeting is three hours long—”

“Three hours!” I barked and he laughed.

“I forgot how abnormal that is. Here’s the basics. A little over an hour is the main service, called sacrament meeting. Another hour is for your regulation Protestant Sunday school. The other hour you’ll spend in a class with the women of the ward. It’s called Relief Society. The order in which those three things happen is up for grabs.”

Segregation by gender? Interesting. “What do the men do that one hour?”

“They have the same lesson the women do, talk about ward business, who in the ward needs what service performed for them.”

“Tell me something. Why wouldn’t Mitch have invited me to go? I thought you all were about conversion.”

“How long have you been seeing him?”

“Eight weeks.” Very long ones.

“Has he said much about it?”

“Bare bones. I’ve had to research most of what I know myself.”

Ashworth said nothing for a long moment. “I don’t know Mitch that well,” he finally said. “Or at least, not as well as Sebastian does. He does a lot of things I don’t understand when he does them, but then are perfectly rational in hindsight, so I wouldn’t second-guess him, either as a businessman or a bishop.”

And that was, in a nutshell, what intrigued me about the man.

“I—” I drew a deep breath. “Should I say I’m with him if it comes up?”

“That’s up to you.”

“They won’t think I’m... Um...” *Shit*. I hardly ever stumbled for words. “I don’t want to embarrass him or discredit him in front of his parishioners.”

“It won’t occur to anybody to think you’re sleeping with him. The default assumption will be that you’re engaged in a chaste courtship.”

I blinked. “That’s the *default*?”

He paused. “Has he given you any reason to think it wouldn’t be?”

Well, no, he hadn’t.

But Greg Sitkaris sure had.

“Okay. He’s an ecclesiastical leader. But *all* of them?”

“Cassie,” he said with some irritation, “this is the way we live our lives. I understand that it’s foreign to you and most everyone else, but in our world, chastity for unmarried people is the expectation. It’s *normal*. It’s not easy, but it is normal.

“Now, you know how much I love you, but I’m serious about this. If all you’re trying to do is get a celibate Mormon bishop into bed, don’t delude yourself into thinking you can do it with Mitch. If you want to get him in bed, you’ll have to marry him to do it—and he can out-wait Lucifer himself.”

Stung, I blurted, “That’s not all—” I bit my tongue.

“However,” he said right over the top of my unfortunate slip, “if I get a hint of a whiff that you’re going to try to wear him down, I’ll make you regret it.”

Though Ashworth was the only man in the world who could make me back down, it wasn’t his threat that bugged me.

But he continued to deliver rapid-fire instructions, a map to help a non-Mormon navigate her first visit to a Mormon church alone. I relaxed.

No, this wasn't a man attempting to save John Lennon from Yoko Ono.

Yet.

"You won't be able to pass for a member of the Church, so don't bother to lie and say you're visiting from somewhere else. If you don't tell them who you're with, they'll assume you're there as an investigator. They'll wonder why you don't have missionaries with you and then you'll get assigned a pair; I don't know if that interests you, so you'll have to deal with that as you see fit. If you're not interested but you still don't want to use Mitch to dodge the missionaries, tell them you just walked in or you're from out of town and wanted to go to a church and it was the most convenient. Something.

"If you do say you're with Mitch, try to make yourself known to him first thing so he doesn't get ambushed. I don't know the politics of his ward, but every ward has some."

...politically delicate.

"It'd be like...walking into a small town diner where everybody knows your business before you do. People won't assume you're sleeping with him, no, but they *will* assume that he's vetted you as appropriate bishop's wife material—"

Bishop's wife. *God.*

"—and that, because you have shown up, a wedding is imminent."

I gulped.

"That'll make things iffy for one or both of you. You're dating a bishop. That *never* happens because there is no such thing as a single Mormon bishop. The real complication is you're not a member. They should've released him when Mina required round-the-clock care, especially considering how long he'd been bishop. But now he's got an almost-empty nest, time, and money, so I can see why they haven't."

"What's money got to do with it?"

"It means he has the luxury of spending work hours conducting ward business."

"He told me he spends thirty hours a week."

Morgan said nothing for a second or two. "Well, I'm only a second counselor and I spend fifteen or twenty by myself, but, you know, I'm single and I have money, too. I take a lot of the burden off my bishop's shoulders so he can spend some time with his family."

I paused because I wanted to ask, but it was terribly gauche. My curiosity won out. "Um, I was wondering about that... You're in a leadership position, but you're gay? How does that work?"

"Doesn't matter as long as I'm celibate. If I had sex with a man, I'd receive the same disciplinary action as if I had sex with a woman out of wedlock."

"You just can't marry a man."

"Right. So I can't have repentance *and* keep the relationship."

"And so...?"

"I resent it," he said flatly.

"Now, wait a minute. I know your politics. I can't imagine you approve of your church's stance."

"You're right. I don't."

"And yet you stay. Why?"

He said nothing for a couple of seconds. "I am...needed...here."

I knew better than to ask him about the extent of his unwillingness to have a relationship with a woman, but he seemed to want to go there anyway.

"I have my pick of LDS women. Older. Gorgeous. Educated. Even willing to marry a gay man just to *be* married. But I haven't been able to do it. I'm just not attracted to women. I don't think it's fair to any woman, especially if, somewhere in the back of her mind, she's thinking she can change me. She'd end up bitter and I'd end up angry."

"So does that happen a lot? Women willing to marry an out gay man?"

He sighed. "Enough that people know what's going on if they run across a family like that. See, the goal is to marry and have children. Some guys can do that. I don't think I can, and I certainly don't want children. Never have. And for the women I've known who'd be willing to marry me, no kids is the dealbreaker. What's upsetting is if the wife doesn't know her husband's gay. He usually ends up leaving her and the kids because he can't maintain the act anymore."

I let out a totally unamused laugh.

"I'm sorry, Cassie. I guess that's not unique to us."

Indeed, it wasn't. I'd met many long-married women whose lives had been turned upside down by husbands who'd tired of the façade—and none of them were Mormon.

We were covers for our spouses' homosexuality, no more, no less.

"So you can't marry a man, and you won't marry a woman."

He paused. "Well..." he said as if it had never occurred to him, but apparently he really had thought about it. Loneliness is a powerful motivator. "She'd have to look an awful lot like a man, and even then, the lack of the right equipment could be the dealbreaker for me if I don't like her enough to overlook it."

"That can be approximated."

He grunted. "I know. My freak cousin Giselle won't stop reminding me."

"Don't knock it till you try it. Prosthetics are amazing these days."

"Cassie, you find me a single, intelligent, androgynous Mormon woman with that level of kink, I'll buy you a diamond mine."

That made me laugh. "So how do you cope?"

"Some days I don't very well. Mostly I pray a lot. I do things for people. I manage my authorial brand and keep tabs on the political intrigues going on inside the Beltway. I can go weeks, months without thinking about it and then I'll get slapped with something out of the blue. Some days are a real crap shoot. I think about leaving the Church and finding what I want, but then—"

Abrupt silence.

"But then?"

I heard the sound of a finger tapping wood. "But then," he said slowly, "I'll be at church, in my office. Some woman comes by, wants to talk. She's any one of half a dozen single women who have *no hope* of getting married or having sex for various reasons—looks, health, disability, not all that smart, some combination, whatever—and worse, they're competing with half a dozen gorgeous, intelligent, educated, single women for the same limited number of men.

"She pours out her heart to me, crying that no one wants her and the kicker is—it's *true*. She—all of them—have to live with the knowledge that they will never have love because *no one wants them*."

Oh.

I'd very rarely not been wanted.

"I don't know what that feels like," he said, echoing my thoughts. "What am I

supposed to say when I play the gay card to commiserate and she comes over the desk at me, sticks her finger in my face, and says,

““Don’t you act like you know, Brother Ashworth. *You* have a choice. You can stay or you can go, but wherever you go, you will never *not* be wanted—by women *or* men, so your odds are automatically doubled—because you’re handsome and rich and smart. You *choose* to be alone and celibate. *I* don’t and you have no right to tell me you know how I feel because you *don’t*.””

His voice had gone hoarse, and suddenly, I knew that while he hurt for himself, he hurt for these people more.

“And don’t think that’s confined to the women,” he said low. “Everybody has their trials in life. Staying in the Church, being gay but celibate, serving—that’s my choice. I know I can leave any time and have every confidence that I can find someone to love because I’m attractive in all the ways society values most. I know my family wouldn’t blame me, and they’d support my decision. But those people...can’t. Whether they stay or go makes no difference at all. They’re still not going to get what they want.”

I gulped.

“And then...there are the kids who start to question their sexuality. They get hazed at school. Turn into the token gay kid at church. Maybe they’re afraid of their parents’ reaction. They need advice, help. Guidance. From someone who’s been there and turned out to be a strong, successful—politically powerful—adult. Puberty’s hard enough without adding homosexuality-plus-religion to the mix, wouldn’t you say?”

“You stay for them,” I whispered. “The ones with no choice and no voice.”

“Yes. Because I was raised this way, and I know the culture, and I can work within its boundaries to serve people who need it in *this* context.”

At that moment, I realized what an extraordinary man Morgan really was. No matter how misguided—okay, fucked up—I considered his philosophies to be, he was true to his people, people he loved and served, for whom he sacrificed his own desires.

Like Mitch.

“I’m done with this topic of conversation, Cass.”

Oh, so was I.

But he cleared his throat, and, after a tense moment, picked up as if we’d never digressed.

“When the ward members find out you’re not a member, they won’t know how to process your relationship with him and assumptions about your baptism and wedding dates will start flying right and left.”

Baptism. Wedding.

My stomach started to churn in spite of my brave words to Nigel. Just *how* badly did I want to get Mitch naked and in bed, anyway?

“What does a bishop’s wife *do*, then?”

“Why, Cassie,” he drawled after a slight pause. “I’m getting the impression you might actually *want* the job.”

Ahh, hmmm... “Absolutely not,” I said. Then, to throw his threat back in his face, I added, “I just want one thing from him, and I’m conceited enough to think I can get it on my terms. And fuck you if you come after me for it, too.”

I must have waited a fraction of a second too long before decrying, though, because Morgan began to chuckle, then laugh.

Bastard.

“Um, okay. Her only real job is to support the bishop, keep the home fires burning and raise the kids while he’s spending his evenings and weekends tending to the ward. How active a woman is in the ward itself is probably most dependent on her personality and how involved she’s willing to be. Sometimes, the ward, especially the women, will presume upon her as a gateway to the bishop.”

“How did his wife do it?”

“From what I’ve been told, it was about all she could do to keep the house and make dinner until they could afford a housekeeper, and then she spent all her time with the kids. She didn’t have much energy, and she just kept sliding downhill. Once she was in a wheelchair, that was about it. Mitch took over from there. Tried to, anyway.”

“Why did they ask him to do almost a full-time job for free when his wife was dying, he had children to raise, and a stressful job?”

He said nothing for a moment, then, “The Church can be rather self-serving at times, but Mitch doesn’t see himself as serving the Church. He’s serving his ward members, thereby serving God—and that’s all he cares about. Sebastian says that’s all he’s ever cared about.”

Yesterday’s skating adventure—for a congregation a hundred miles away from his and not even of the same faith—flashed through my mind. *Why* did I find that sexy?

“I don’t understand you people,” I said flatly.

“Oh, there’s a surprise.” Again he paused, yet sounded sincere when he added, “Good luck, Cassie.”

I needed it.

“And wear a dress. You’ll fit in better.”

I blinked at the phone after he had tossed that last one out at me and hung up. Okay, Morgan. Thanks bunches.

Thus I found myself in Allentown, Pennsylvania, in front of a rather low-slung church building with no decoration but a nondescript steeple (no cross). I was more nervous than I had been with my first client. Then, every second before his arrival had been spent repeating the mantra, “It’s not too late to back out, it’s not too late to back out.” Now I was doing the same before going into a church, for God’s sake.

Come to think of it, I should’ve done that on my wedding day when, ten minutes before I was to walk down the aisle, my father hinted that I should not, in fact, walk down the aisle.

I shrugged and figured that between getting married, turning tricks, and going to a three-hour service in an oddball church, this was probably the least traumatic of the three and not quite as long-lasting, though church was no place for a whore.

But I felt compelled. I wanted to understand Mitch Hollander the way his family understood him because they shared this culture with him. I certainly didn’t want to remain on the outskirts of Hollander Steelworks like the rest of the financial industry, scratching its collective head over what the hell motivated the CEO.

I wanted to know why he was so stalwart where most of his friends—and his son—were not.

The papers I held in my hand fluttered in the breeze, and I looked down at three pages of instructions, addresses, phone numbers, maps, glossary, and protocol Morgan had sent me.

Sacrament meeting was first.

I sat in an overflow area behind the pews, where chairs had been set up. I could sit back here and observe without being observed in return. From my place, while the prelude music softly streamed out from the organ, I could see Mitch sitting in a theater-type chair behind and to the left of the pulpit, in front of the pews where a choir would sit. He looked over his congregation as it trickled, then streamed in; the men who sat on either side of him occasionally whispered something to him and he would nod or shake his head or whisper something back. The sanctuary itself—chapel, Ashworth called it—was remarkably plain, with no crosses or crucifixes. The only decoration I could see was a small box of tissues on the pulpit.

Then the prelude music stopped and Mitch arose to speak. His short wavy hair glinted dark gold in the light and against the light olive of his impeccably tailored suit. He rested his hand on a stack of Bibles on the pulpit, just to his right.

I caressed my own soft palms, remembering how his rough, heavily calloused hands felt in mine when we danced together, how they felt against my waist and surrounding my hips, and how they looked, the ridges of his fingertips tattooed with faint spots of permanent grime, though his nails were as manicured as mine.

I could feel my arousal start. This was completely out of my realm, a man who was at once a savvy businessman linked to some of the most influential power players in the country, an exquisite salsa club dancer, and a man of God whose sole experience with women had been his wife of twenty-three years. He'd been celibate for eighteen years and spent thirty hours a week tending to the needs of four hundred people. For free. Because he thought he was serving God and that was what he wanted to do.

Amazing.

Once again, he looked out over the congregation and bent his head to read, then stopped, looked up and straight at me. My heart thundered and I couldn't catch my breath. I gave him a smile that felt weak, timid. Beseeching. Asking his forgiveness for intruding upon him. I hated it, but couldn't help it.

His eyelids lowered and his mouth quirked. My heart settled down, and I could breathe again.

To my surprise, Mitch didn't give a sermon. He read announcements, conducted administrative business for the ward and...that was about it. Other people directed its course. A hymn and a prayer. Another hymn. Then came the service of communion—sacrament—by a gaggle of awkward prepubescent boys in white button-down shirts (most of which desperately needed to see the business side of an iron) who scattered throughout the congregation with little trays of bread and water.

After that finished, Mitch arose to announce the names of three people who would be speaking—"giving a talk"—for a few minutes each, one of whom had made it clear that he had been "assigned the topic of tithing." No hellfire and brimstone. No professionally written and delivered sermon by a trained pastor (and it showed). No paid musicians (that showed, too). A hymn and a prayer.

The lack of professionals was yet another anomaly in Christendom, that was for sure, but since I couldn't see Mitch very well from where I sat, I spent most of my time simply trying to hear what was said. The sheer number of screaming, squalling, and crying babies and toddlers was beyond irritating. For all their protestations of chastity before marriage, these people sure as hell made up for it after.

I vaguely wondered how they handled differing sexual needs if they didn't have sex before marriage. But of course, needs change over time and with age, and people can deceive with body parts other than their vocal cords—and oh, how well do I know that.

I started when a little girl appeared at my side, apparently having decided to make me her pet project. Pale, blonde, blue-eyed, her mass of curls were caught up in and fastened by an elaborate, elegant bow that Martha Stewart's staff couldn't have matched. I pegged her around five-ish and she had abandoned her mother (where was the father?) who struggled with an infant, an intractable seven-year-old (or thereabouts) boy, and a male toddler type.

"Hi," she said.

I really don't like children, particularly small ones. "Hi."

"What's your name?"

"Cassie. What's yours?"

"Brittany. You smell pretty."

I had to chuckle at that. "Thank you."

She plunked herself in the seat beside me and leaned against me as if I had invited her to do so. I put my arm around her because I could tell it would go numb if she continued to lean against that particular pressure point. She picked at my sleeve. "What's that?"

"A cufflink." I collect cufflinks; it's my favorite kind of jewelry and I make sure to have my clothes tailored to showcase them.

"What's it do?"

I popped it out and handed it to her, then demonstrated how my cuff fell open. "It's kind of like a removable button. See, you have buttons here, but I don't. I just flip this thing," and I did. "See how your buttons stay on your clothes?"

"So you don't have two of them, like me?"

"Nope. One does the trick just fine, but see, my blouse front works the same way." She was fascinated, but I wasn't about to pop one of those out. "These are called shirt studs."

She played with the cufflink, turning it over and over, holding it up to the light and seeing the glints off the facets. "This is really pretty."

"You can have it if you want."

She looked up at me and grinned. "Really?"

"Really. But give it to your mother to keep it safe for you." I made a mental note to talk to her mother and make sure she knew it wasn't a toy. I popped the other out and gave that to her, too, then rolled my sleeves up to my elbows. I'd been a little too overdressed, anyway, what with most of the mothers all in denim jumpers and the like; and most of the older women in serviceable, though attractive, dresses.

The girl stayed curled up against me for the rest of the service. If her mother noticed, I didn't know about it, but then, the poor woman was so harried I couldn't hold it against her. This was church; the mother had a rightful expectation of a community that would take care of her child if she couldn't.

The village.

And the village was a mix of rich and poor—mostly poor—with not much in between. That surprised me, but it shouldn't have. Lehigh Valley was perpetually depressed. Since the Mormon church was huge, there would most likely be a reflective

percentage of poor mixed in a congregation like this.

It was also as overwhelmingly white as Lehigh Valley. I counted two black families. The one with a father was just as rowdy as the rest of the families with many young children.

The one without a father sat in the fourth row, middle section, from right to left arranged according to height. The mother wore a sapphire silk dress, the two small girls wore dresses that matched hers exactly, and the three boys of widely varying ages wore identical black suits. Then I glanced back at the nattily dressed black man up on the dais to Mitch's right (one of Mitch's counselors?). He had on a sapphire silk tie.

Sacrament meeting finally ended. I dislodged Brittany, stood, and went to her mother while that entire congregation surged toward the doors. "Here," I said. "Let me have the kid." I picked up that slimy disgusting mess of a crying infant and threw it (him? her?) over my shoulder to pat its back, unsure if my jacket would withstand the mess. I looked at the girl and pointed to an empty seat. "Brittany. Sit. Stay sat. Don't talk." She obeyed, wide-eyed.

Why had my daughters never done that?

"Oh, thank you," breathed the mother as she pinned the oldest boy to his chair with one strategically arranged leg and wiped the mouth of the toddler. "My husband is on assignment in another ward." It took a minute to register, but then I remembered the spreading around of labor that Mitch and Ashworth had told me about. Seemed counterproductive to me to take the husband and leave the wife to tend the children he'd made on her, but then I wasn't here to rearrange this organization's flowchart. I was pretty sure that Sebastian would have done it by now had he had his 'druthers.

"No problem." She moved the leg with which she'd pinned the boy and allowed him to dash off somewhere (he seemed to know where he was supposed to go) and then she regained some semblance of control.

"Can I talk now, Sister Cassie?"

"May I," I corrected automatically as I gave Brittany a stern look. "Yes. You may."

Brittany turned to her mother, holding out the cufflinks. "Look what Sister Cassie gave me."

The mother's eyes widened and she looked up at me. "She can't have those."

I waved it off. "Got a ton of 'em. Don't need 'em."

"I used to work in a jewelry store. I know what those are worth."

I shrugged and shoved her now-calm baby back at her. "Put it in a safe deposit box," I said abruptly and turned to walk off—
—straight into Mitch's chest.

His big hands wrapped around my arms to steady me. "What's a girl like you doing in a place like this?" I stiffened, but he pulled me into a bear hug. "I can't spend time with you today," he breathed in my ear and my response was immediate. Effortless. "If you'd told me you'd like to come, I'd have made arrangements."

"I got the rundown from Ashworth," I murmured. "I think I'll be okay."

"Co-conspirators, eh? Well, I'm glad you're here, but I have to go. Sunday school's next. Do you want to go to the one the old-timers go to or the one the newbies go to?"

Morgan had told me about this, too, so I was prepared. "Newbies."

"Remind me to thank him." He offered his arm and escorted me out the door. I felt the wool-silk blend under my hand and I edged a little closer to him, breathing in his

elegant cologne and wanting so much to press my mouth to the soft spot just under his ear, in the hollow behind his strong jaw... “How do you want to play this, Cassandra?”

His voice was rich and full of things I didn’t understand—a first for me. “I don’t know enough about your culture to know. You’ll have to tell me what to do.”

“I’m asking you if you want to be here as my woman or my business associate.”

He hadn’t just said that, had he? “Your *woman*?” I pulled away and cocked an eyebrow at him, feeling as if I had betrayed a country full of feminists for not protesting more strongly.

“Would you prefer ‘girlfriend’ or ‘lady friend’? ’Cause as far as I know, there’s no other barely acceptable term. I’m way too old for girlfriends and way too young for lady friends.”

Girlfriend. God, that was pathetic; next, he’d feel obligated to say something about “going steady.” *Lady friend*. Indeed, that was worse. Florida retirement community, here we come. I sighed. “What do you want? What’s most expedient for you?”

He laughed, his cheeks immediately carved in laugh lines, his smile quick and comforting. “What I want and what’s expedient are mutually exclusive.” He leaned into me and his mouth brushed my ear. “Figure out what you want to do and let me know.”

Then he was gone. I turned to call him back, but got hung up watching that talented ass of his, the hips that could flash through the most complicated turns. Was it possible I was the only woman here who knew what a fabulous dancer he was? I blinked when I saw his confident stride halt mid-step when Brittany’s mother caught him with a desperate, “Bishop Hollander!” He looked down at her, his back now a tiny bit hunched in such a way as to make him seem humble and caring, unthreatening.

This was so different from the way he’d been with Father Farraday, his eye glinting with the promise of challenge, and his body deceptively relaxed, ready to strike at the man’s next misstep.

The way he could tear up a dance floor all night long, his eyes sparkling, his laugh easy, quick, and rich.

The way he could seduce me with a whisper, create in me an intensity of desire I’d never known before, without a touch other than a kiss on my hand.

I couldn’t decide which incarnation of the man fascinated me most.

She hadn’t seen me all the way down the hall from the foyer, but I could see them both in profile. I could hear nothing of what she said, but then I caught my breath when she opened her hand and he looked down. I could feel her distress from here and it occurred to me that perhaps I had done the wrong thing. It had seemed so harmless at the time, to give a child a shiny trinket, but...I had hurt the child’s mother. I saw that now, and I knew no way of taking that back without making things worse.

There, the classroom. I started to go through the door when, in my periphery, I saw Mitch lean toward her to speak to her while he closed her hand back on the diamonds. He gave her a quick hug and directed her away from me to send her on her way down an opposite hall. He watched her until she turned the corner, then looked at me with an unsmiling expression I couldn’t decipher. I couldn’t help but bite my lip and turn away then, unwilling or unable to face whatever censure I had earned.

Thus, the first thing out of my mouth when someone introduced herself and asked the inevitable question was, “Cassie St. James. I do business with your bishop and I was in town with nothing to do this morning, so...”

Naturally, these people would take it on its face, trusting souls that they were, and the woman, whose name I didn't bother to remember because I wouldn't be back, shepherded me to Sunday school ("Gospel Essentials," Ashworth had said).

"I don't usually go to this class," she confided, "but sometimes it's good to get back to basics. Besides, Brother Sitkaris is subbing today. I just adore him."

I couldn't have chosen better Sunday-morning entertainment.

We sat toward the back. A man arose to apologize for the regular teacher's absence, to announce Greg Sitkaris as the substitute teacher, and to ask a woman to give the opening prayer, which she did.

I knew the minute Sitkaris spotted me, and his eyebrow rose.

He wanted me.

Whether for me or because he saw me as belonging to Mitch, I didn't know, but it didn't matter. He was perfectly confident that he could have me.

"Well, Ms. St. James," he drawled. "So nice to see you again. What brings you to our humble services this morning?"

"Oh," said one woman, twisting in her seat to look back at me. "You *are* Cassie St. James. The one separating the old Jep Industries out from the Steelworks? I thought I recognized you."

I never looked away from Sitkaris. "Yes."

"I was chosen to be part of your project team. We're very excited."

But Sitkaris did look away from me to bestow a lovely smile on the woman. It wasn't a concession; it was a gambit to bolster his charming reputation. "It is an exciting time for the Steelworks, isn't it? The bishop doesn't seem to make a wrong move."

I heard it, but I didn't think anyone else had, that undernote of bitterness, the anger and hatred.

He looked back at me. "Does he?"

"Not one," I murmured. "He's always very...*appropriate*."

"How...fortunate," he purred.

The tension between us was thick, half war, half sex. One pointed glance at his crotch, and he smirked before leisurely buttoning his suit coat. I wasn't sure how much anyone else understood—clearly it had gone over my shepherdess's head—but a couple of others squirmed in their seats.

As a teacher, he was exemplary. He taught the lesson on the fall of Adam and Eve, which was rife with innuendo directed entirely at me. As far I could tell, no one caught it; my companion certainly didn't.

But I couldn't blame it on naïveté. It was out of context, Sitkaris had cloaked himself in a flawless representation of Puritan morality, and his broad charm was undeniable. I would have bet an entire year's salary that if anyone did understand the subtext, they were sitting there castigating themselves for their dirty minds.

I knew I wouldn't spend the ten-minute interval between Sunday school and "Relief Society," the women's class, unmolested, especially once my shepherdess excused herself.

Once the room had cleared, except for a few female stragglers who prepared the room for the next class, Sitkaris dropped into the seat beside me and leaned into me, his arm along the back of my seat, his hand wrapped around my shoulder.

"Can I pull you out of retirement?" he murmured.

Ah, he knew.

"I give it away now," I murmured in return.

"But not to Mitch." I wouldn't dignify that with a response. "You don't have to tell me. I already know because I know him. He would never fuck you without marrying you. If he even remembers how to do it. If he ever knew how to do it in the first place. What I don't understand is what you see in him." *Everything*. "Or else this really is about the Steelworks and I'm completely misreading the situation, in which case, I'll take you back to your hotel room after church, douse you in champagne, and lick it off."

I didn't think I could hate anyone more than I hated my ex-father-in-law, but today was a day for surprises.

"He doesn't know you were a call girl, does he?" Greg said. "I can't see him risking his position in the Church, and he's a bit naïve when it comes to women. It probably didn't even occur to him to have you investigated. I, on the other hand, approve of your career choice and cannot wait to sample your wares."

"I thought you liked blondes."

"I like beautiful women."

"And men?"

"Of course. It's not about gay or straight. You know that."

Power is its own orientation, Cassie. Nigel's mantra.

"I simply want to know what it feels like to fuck an equal for once, that's all."

Trust a sociopath to assume he was *my* equal.

"Greg—"

We both turned at the voice coming from the threshold to see a man leaning into the room.

"Waiting on you, bud."

"Yeah, be there in a minute." The room had begun to fill with women as Sitkaris and I negotiated like the two sexually experienced people we were. He turned back to me, tightened his grip on my shoulder, pulled me to him. He pressed his mouth to my ear. "Let me know when you get tired of waiting for Mitch to figure out he has a dick, and I'll be happy to do what he won't. Or can't. Or hasn't occurred to him. I guarantee you won't regret it."

He left in a swirl of suit coat and a whiff of expensive, rich cologne before I could say anything.

"You know Greg?" said my shepherdess when she reseated herself next to me.

Oh, yes. I knew Greg.

"Business," I said airily.

"Isn't he wonderful?" she gushed. "He's *such* a good listener. The kids love him. Well, almost everybody does." Pause. "Except Prissy," she muttered.

I could think of no suitable reply.

Relief Society started out harmlessly enough, I supposed. Louise, the "Relief Society president," Mitch's nearest counterpart in this church's flowchart if I remembered correctly, asked me to stand and introduce myself. There were murmurs of welcome all around as I sat.

I blew off the listing of announcements for upcoming activities in favor of looking at the people around me.

A gathering of women with a common thread tying them together was something I

had never been part of. Now, I knew from experience that in a roomful of thirty or so women, there were bound to be four or five factions and I could almost delineate and label them as I watched how they interacted. However, once Louise spoke of a sister in need, no one hesitated to offer something.

Then came the lesson and it was taught by a woman I thought must be an anomaly in this collection of pretty women: Morbidly obese, she was swathed in a voluminous dark green dress to accommodate her girth. She had to be somewhere between three or four hundred pounds, but she had a charisma I had seen only a few times in women anywhere. She had the kind of charisma that commanded respect and/or fear without saying a word—and it had nothing to do with her weight.

“Today’s lesson,” she said in a no-nonsense manner, “is about bearing false witness.”

A ripple ran through the room and thirty heads looked down at what seemed to be small textbooks.

My shepherdess stiffened. She turned to the woman behind her. “I cannot *believe* her,” she hissed.

“Sally—” she said. “It’s Prissy.” The woman who didn’t like Sitkaris. “What do you expect? Are *you* going to get up and tell her to teach the right lesson?”

I hate women.

“I’m going to go get the bishop.”

“He won’t do anything. He never does.”

Sally turned toward the front again, then cast me a glance. “I apologize for her,” she whispered. “She never follows the lesson. Drives everybody up a wall. This isn’t... I’m sorry. You’re not having a good experience right now, are you?”

“I had no expectations,” I assured her. “Part of my job. Diplomacy. Good corporate partnership.”

She nodded sagely and patted my arm.

This large woman, Prissy—

I marveled at the incongruity of her name and her appearance, then promptly forgot about it because she hooked me with her opening salvo.

“I’m not going to ask what everyone thinks bearing false witness is. I’m going to tell you what *I* think it is, and then we’re going to talk about that.” She turned to the freestanding blackboard and wrote, in enormous letters:

MURDER

Well.

I’d been involved in far too many business deals not to know when someone had just declared war.

“Why would I say such an outrageous thing?” she said smoothly, a benign smile on her face. One woman timidly raised her hand. Prissy pointed to her.

The woman gave some wishy-washy answer that really didn’t seem to apply, but Prissy acknowledged it gracefully and headed into “what would Jesus do?” territory—with a twist.

“Let’s talk about the pharisaical politics of Christ’s time and what underlay his crucifixion, because it’s directly related to the points I want to make today, and how we

in Zion—who profess to be followers of Christ—can learn to live more peacefully with each other.”

Then she began to walk slowly across the front of the room, completely uninhibited about her lecturing. She used no books but pulled references from the Bible and contemporary accounts, scholarly works, Roman and Jewish law. She created metaphors as easily as she breathed; she applied them to the core principle of *her* lesson—not the canned one—with a facility borne of clean, linear thinking. Her vocabulary was impressive and she spoke quickly, packing ideas and concepts into each minute the way I would pack for a month’s vacation in a carry-on.

She would have left at least half the class behind intellectually within the first five minutes, but she had a point to make, and I could tell she was struggling to keep her discussion from heading off into the intellectual stratosphere. I looked around and saw that most of the women were completely wrapped up in her lesson while she paced.

Obesity or not, she moved with the grace of a dancer. I had never seen such a large woman move with that much fluidity and I might have had a harder time reconciling it but for Mitch’s assertion that Mormons danced. I would have loved to spend time with her, picking her brain, learning what she knew and how she knew it, wishing *she* had been my comparative religions professor.

“The end result, then,” Prissy said, still pacing, her fingertips steeped in front of her, “is that one deliberate lie was the final piece the Pharisees needed to attain their goal, which was to get rid of their political enemy number one. Let’s think about that a minute. In what ways does that happen today?”

Someone’s hand shot up, and Prissy called on her. “False accusations of molestation.”

“Very good.” She called on someone else.

“It could be as simple as a child tattling on a sibling and exaggerating what really happened so they’ll get in more trouble.”

I could relate to that, and I found myself nodding.

“Uh huh. Starts young, doesn’t it? Almost an instinctive power struggle, wouldn’t you say?”

Clarissa had done it from the moment she could talk.

“Prissy?” said the Relief Society president.

“Yes, Louise?”

“I think,” said Louise, “there must be a lot of that that goes on when spouses are in the middle of divorcing or even when they’re just going through a bad patch.”

“Indeed,” Prissy purred, a wicked little smile on her face. “Usually it’s best not to bring those things to church, wouldn’t you say?”

“Yes,” Louise said definitely. “Keep it at home and/or take it to counseling so other people don’t start taking sides and meddling.”

Sally made a little gurgle-like noise and I glanced at her.

She was seething.

I ceased to pay attention to the teacher and looked around, studied the faces of the women here. This room was about to explode and I wondered what the hell was going on.

Another woman’s hand inched up, and Prissy pointed at her, eager, as if she were hoping that woman would offer something even more telling. “Amelia?”

How’s Amelia?

Sitkaris. She, too, was beautiful. Blonde.

...politically delicate.

The mystery was so juicy I could taste it, like the most exquisite wine, precisely chilled, its flavors bursting on my tongue and awaiting my analysis.

"I think, uh, maybe when..." She spoke in the manner of a woman who thought she should not speak at all, but was compelled in spite of whatever consequences she feared. "When, uh, people present themselves to be...ah, you know, something in public and then in private they're totally different."

Prissy's smirk melted. She was somber as she watched Amelia, ignored other hands waving in the air for attention. Amelia squirmed and looked down. "That too," Prissy said softly, and moved on from there.

Then it was over.

I gathered my purse after the closing prayer, bid my shepherdess adieu, and headed for the door. I saw the teacher packing up her things alone and I thought to go to her and tell her how much I had enjoyed her lesson—no one else would—but hesitated. I shouldn't have; by the time I'd made up my mind, two small children barreled into the room to clutch at her dress and babble with great excitement, followed by a man who looked at her as if she'd hung the moon. Not only had I lost my chance, I began to wonder if I would ever know a man who looked at me like that.

If Mitch could ever have looked at me like that if I hadn't destroyed the pride of one of his parishioners.

But for right now I had to set about getting the hell out of this place without running into Mitch, because after having shown up on his turf and embarrassed Brittany's mother, he wouldn't want to see me again.

"Ms. St. James," said a low male voice behind me. I turned and saw a tall, handsome young man whose gray suit was as finely tailored as Mitch's. He had dark brown hair, but eyes the same blue as Mitch's. "I'm Trevor Hollander. My dad wanted me to catch you before you left and ask you if you'd come to the foundry tonight around eleven. He'd like you to have a tour, but he's got a time crunch and can't come get you."

I stared up at the boy and I knew my surprise showed, but if he noticed it, he said nothing while he waited for my answer. "Um, sure," I murmured. "I thought—" He stood patient, silent, then I shook my head. He didn't need to know how his father's, uh, *woman* had misstepped. "Okay."

"Would you like me to walk you to your car?"

"Sure."

I wondered if Mitch had told his son what I used to do for a living and I realized I didn't want him to know.

Odd. I usually didn't care who knew.

"He also wanted me to tell you he was sorry he couldn't see you out himself," said Trevor conversationally as he skillfully navigated me down the gauntlet of a hallway where people gathered to chat. "He's got people stacked down the hall all the way to Primary to see him."

I didn't know what the hell Primary was and most certainly did not care. "I knew he'd be busy, so no worries." I paused a moment. "Do you know the woman in the green dress? The one who teaches in the women's meeting? Prissy?"

"Sister Seaton? Sure. What about her?"

“She’s a good teacher. I was impressed.”

“Yeah, Dad really likes her.”

That didn’t surprise me.

I didn’t have much more of a chance to converse with the boy (shit, he was a head taller than I, taller than his father, even) as he led me through the congested hallway. Half a dozen conversation clusters blocked the path and I found it incredibly rude that they didn’t find another place to chat.

Then again, this wasn’t Blackwood Securities and these people had no reason to part like the Red Sea when an officer of the company walked through.

“Trevor, wait up!”

I heard the voice, young and female. Felt Trevor tense. “Fuck, not now,” he whispered. That might have shocked me if I didn’t know the kid had had King Midas for a role model and already had one foot out the door of his father’s religion.

“Trevor…”

The girl was gorgeous, I had to give her that, with a familiar face and auburn hair precisely coifed in innocent-looking curls.

Sitkaris made pretty babies, but then, I would have expected nothing less.

“Hi, Hayleigh,” Trevor said with a patient kindness that perfectly mimicked Mitch’s. “What’s up?”

She glanced at me briefly, but instead of excusing himself to speak with Hayleigh in private, Trevor directed both of us to a small, quiet alcove, making it clear that I was the chaperone. She went with it, apparently trusting Trevor to know the chaperone wouldn’t blab.

“Are you— Um… I didn’t see you at the Valentine’s Day dance last night.”

Trevor’s face pinkened, and I almost laughed. I could just guess what he’d been doing last night. “Uh, well,” he murmured, “I have a girlfriend.”

She flushed and looked away. Her acute embarrassment was uncomfortable. “I’m sorry. I— I didn’t know. Someone from school?”

“No. You wouldn’t know her.” Trevor brightened. “Hey, though— Josh told me he had a good time with you last night.”

Hayleigh stiffened. “He said that?”

“Yeah.” He lowered his voice. “You know he really likes you, right?”

She gulped.

More mysteries. This wasn’t a girl accosting a boy she had a crush on. She needed Trevor for something, but it wasn’t love, attention, or romantic mediation. My fingers itched to untangle all these little knots and find out where the strings led.

Suddenly Trevor pulled her to him in the same kind of bear hug Mitch had given me. “You have *got* to tell my dad what you told me, or else let me tell him.”

The girl looked hunted, and I knew why. I’d seen that look on Gordon’s face too many times during our marriage not to know what it was. I’d seen a flash of it on her mother’s face not twenty minutes before. “Oh, I don’t— I don’t know.”

“Well, if you won’t talk to my dad,” Trevor whispered earnestly, “talk to Josh, and see what he says. You’re almost eighteen. At least make plans to get out of the house.”

Her mouth tightened.

“Okay, look. I’ll try to come up with something. But at least be honest with Josh about your feelings. Just that? Will you do that?”

She nodded, and the relief on her face was almost heartbreaking. The elephant was on its way out of the room.

At the sound of Sitkaris's cheerful booming voice coming from an adjacent hall, Hayleigh scrambled out of the alcove and into the gym—the opposite direction.

Neither Trevor nor I spoke as he escorted me out of the building, then to my car. He handed me in and said simply, "I'll see you tonight." Then he bounded up the stairs and disappeared into the building.

I began to smile in spite of myself, warmth sort of stealing over me in a way I hadn't felt in a long time. I checked my watch.

Eleven o'clock was a lifetime away.

* * * * *

Iron Coke, Chromium Steel

I bought jeans, a sweatshirt, hiking boots, socks, and a cheap coat to go to the mill that night, as I hadn't planned for anything like a tour through the bowels of a foundry. Floodlights held back the night as I drove onto the property, the foundry itself separated from the offices by an enormous underground parking lot. Mitch's office directly overlooked the parking lot and straight into the major building of the mill. I parked and followed the last stragglers through the checkpoint.

I gave my name to the guard who nodded, put his fingers in his mouth, and released an ear-piercing whistle. Soon enough, Trevor jogged around a corner. In sharp contrast to his church garb, he now sported an oil-filthy coverall and a hard hat. His face displayed a healthy portion of the same grease as his coverall and he held a pair of heavy leather gloves in his hand. Without speaking to me, he grabbed the coverall and hard hat the security guard handed him, then signaled to me to follow him.

"You won't need this, trust me," he said, divesting me of my coat and handing it back to the guard. The noise from out here was loud, but not so loud that I couldn't hear Trevor if he spoke loudly.

"Let me help you with these," he said, practically in my ear. So I did, and it was an odd feeling to be dressed by someone. "I'm going to take you to see the furnaces. Dad's casting ingots right now and his dinner break is in an hour. He packed an extra lunch for you if you wanted to eat with him."

I stared at Trevor in shock. "He's doing what?"

"Didn't he tell you?" Trevor plopped a hard hat on my head. "He works the night shift on Sundays. He rotates out with each worker in the mill to give them a paid Sunday night off."

Of all the implications of that that swept through me, I could only articulate the simplest one. "Isn't that breaking the Sabbath?"

Trevor flashed me a grin. "He says service is the higher law."

I tried to catch a breath and said the only thing I could come up with. "Please call me Cassie."

"Okay."

In other circumstances, I would have asked why the CEO of a several-billion-dollar business such as this worked at such blue-collar tasks, but here I didn't have to. Any man who'd spend so much time serving his parishioners for free would serve the lowest of his

employees in the same way. No wonder Jack respected him so much, treated him with a deference he didn't show Sebastian—or any other of his clients, for that fact. Why Mitch didn't return that respect, I didn't know.

We didn't speak as we trudged along into the bowels of a building twice the size of a hangar. I couldn't tell whether the floor was concrete or hard-packed dirt, but it didn't make any difference. I looked up, up, up at the mammoth beasts radiating heat that was oppressive even in the depth of winter; I couldn't imagine what this place was like in the summer.

"What do you do here?" I asked Trevor suddenly.

"I'm on second shift, almost full time. I can do every job in the mill, so I usually end up filling in for whoever called in sick." I could detect the note of pride in his voice.

"You don't normally work on Sunday, do you?"

"No. My dad asked me to come in tonight to show you around at a reasonable hour." Trevor flashed me a grin. "He didn't expect you to show up and he can't leave his station. Decker would kill him." Confusion must have shown on my face. "The foreman. Dad gets bossed around like the rest of us when he's out here."

"Are you getting paid to be here tonight?"

"Of course. I don't work for free."

I laughed out loud at that. "So your dad—"

"Keeps his hand in the pot. It's hard to strike on a guy who works with you doing the shittiest jobs, gets bossed around by the foreman, brown-bags his dinner and eats with you. Out here, he's no different from anyone else. Watch out." Trevor grabbed me then and jerked me aside as a bucket as big as a house—a raging inferno—slid past us, suspended on massive cables from a double track attached to the ceiling, fifty feet up in the air. The heat was suffocating. One tap from that bucket and I'd have been toast.

"Thanks."

"No problem. You get used to the ladles."

I had no words to describe the size of the blast furnaces and buckets—ladles, like something one would use to dip gravy or punch—that poured liquid flames into chutes where they ran like a fire river toward the other end of the building. "Orange is your father's favorite color," I mused, though more to myself than Trevor.

He looked at me sharply. "Yeah. Did he tell you that?"

"No." I pointed to the steel. "He sent me roses that color."

So. Those roses hadn't signified any passion he had for me whatsoever; the thought might have deflated me, except here I was, eight weeks into a relationship with a chaste Mormon bishop. I'd surprised him at church, thought I'd completely blown it, only to end up touring his steel mill with his son.

Mitch was showing me his life, sharing his most deeply held accomplishments with me, even if it was through the conduit of offspring and steel and church.

"Where around here is your father, by the way?"

Trevor pointed toward the opposite end of the building, in the same direction the steel creek ran. "Forming ingots. The steel flows through here to a bed where it gets molded into blocks. Come on, I'll show you."

We walked slowly so I could take in the sights. Occasionally, someone would take a second glance at me, but it seemed everyone here knew who I was or, at the very least, knew who I belonged to.

I stumbled.

“Careful,” Trevor said as he caught me. We walked for a while in silence. Then, in a forced casual tone, he said, “My dad really likes you.” He was too young to have learned how to finesse his voice to betray nothing. Trevor wouldn’t give his okay until he’d had time to probe me for ulterior motives.

“I really like him, too,” I said in a moment of utter candor spawned by the shock of having run up against a seventeen-year-old man. “Does that bother you?”

“Maybe. Maybe not. I worry about him. He needs someone to take care of him.” He glanced down at me, his eyes narrowed. “I’d really, *really* hate it if he met somebody, you know, and he cared about them, but they didn’t care about him that much, if they were just playing some kind of...*game*...and ditched him when they were done with him. That would really suck. Especially after my mom just died, yanno?”

I swallowed. Hard.

He stopped glaring at me, and we continued our stroll past the blast furnaces. “I can’t remember a time when someone took care of him, when he wasn’t taking care of everyone around him. I try, but you know, I can only do so much and I’ll be leaving for college soon.” He paused. “I mean, the Taights and Kenards try to take care of him as much as they can, but they live so far away...”

The rules of the game—the game itself—had just become irrelevant.

I took a deep breath. I wanted to close my eyes so I could come to terms with that, but I didn’t dare, what with all these buckets flying around like Dorothy’s house about to land on the Wicked Witch of the West.

“Don’t you have sisters?”

“Yeah, but they have their own lives and Dad would be upset if they left them to tend to him. He raised us to be out and on our own by the time we were eighteen. Or twenty-three, depending on if we went on missions.”

“Did your sisters?”

“Yes. And then went to the Y—Brigham Young, I mean. Got married like good Mormon girls, in the temple. Lisette hasn’t even been married a year and she’s already got one kid on the way.”

“You don’t approve?”

“Oh, it’s not that I don’t approve. It’s just so...*Mormon*. I thought they’d do something more exciting. Geneviève speaks Russian and Lisette speaks Mandarin. I mean, come on. They could have gone to the State Department or something. The CIA cruises BYU like it’s a singles bar. They were both recruited, but...”

Damn. That was depressing, considering I’d had to fight tooth and nail to get to go to college, and even then, it had been on the sly. Sneaking my tuition, squeaking it out of what little Gordon had left me that month. Cheating on my husband with NYU. “So you’re disappointed in them.”

“Yeah. I am.”

“Are they happy?”

“They seem so, but I don’t see them that often. One lives in Colorado and the other lives in New Orleans.”

“What did your dad think?”

“Don’t know. He said he was happy with whatever they chose to do, but I don’t know if that was the truth. He’ll lie to you if he doesn’t think the truth matters and you

keep pressing him for an opinion. He could lie to Satan and Satan would believe him.”

Oh. Hmm. “Are you going on a mission?” I asked, as if I didn’t know the answer to that already.

“I don’t know yet. I don’t believe in what my church teaches.”

I feigned shock. “But you go every Sunday anyway.”

“Sure. It’s one way I can take care of my dad.”

“I’m confused. If you don’t believe, why would you even consider going on a mission?”

“Well, I might go ahead and put in my paperwork after my dad’s released. *If* I go on a mission, it’ll only be if I get called somewhere foreign. Take the path my sisters didn’t. I’m not looking for some spiritual experience, and selling something I don’t believe? In a foreign language? Priceless training.”

“That’s rather mercenary, don’t you think?”

He laughed. “I’m all about taking advantage where I can get it. I don’t want to spend my life being four hundred people’s slave. I figure, as long as I follow the mission rules and do a good job, the Lord has no right to complain about why I’m there.”

“Does your father know about this plan of yours?”

“Not yet, but he knows I don’t believe. No point in lying to *him*. He’s had years of people lying to him; he knows when someone’s going to lie to him before they say a word.”

“Would he step in to block it some way?”

“He might. He’d definitely blow his top and refuse to pay for it, but I have the money. And Sebastian would if I asked him to. On the other hand, my dad knows I’d do the job right. Guys go on missions all the time to get straightened out, or because their parents make them. They don’t care. Probably don’t believe. But they go anyway and make it hard for the other missionaries who are really there to do the work. He hates that more than anything, I think. I’m just a lot more honest than they are about my goals and I wouldn’t fuck around while I’m there.”

“So what *do* you believe?”

“About all I can swallow is that there’s a God and he or she—they—made us. Somehow. Maybe with his hands. Maybe through evolution. Maybe some combination. I don’t know and I don’t care, but look around. I can’t believe that minds that can create this had no creator. This didn’t just form out of the soup on its own. The soup had to have had a finger stirring it, adding ingredients here and there.”

Any man who had bred and raised a kid like this was worth a helluva lot more than a casual lover and I didn’t know what to make of this strange longing curling through me. I didn’t have a chance to examine it more closely, though, because we had arrived at our destination.

I saw Mitch high up in what looked like the cab of a bulldozer, pulling levers systematically. Trevor pointed over to a flat bed where the steel pooled. Two sides of the bed moved inward so that the steel was extruded as it cooled. The mechanisms that extruded it moved in sync with the levers Mitch pulled. He hadn’t seen us yet and I wanted to watch him rather than the steel, fascinating as it was.

From what I could tell through the dirty glass of the cab, he was as filthy as his son, in a coverall and hardhat and thick gloves. He had sweat running down his face, which was a study in concentration.

I had never seen a more beautiful man in my life.

"It's called slab casting," Trevor said. The ingot Mitch had just pressed and cut was about six feet long, two feet wide, and four inches thick. "They'll get hot and cold rolled in different buildings," Trevor said, interrupting my musings, but then he lapsed into silence. I watched Mitch while Trevor watched the next ingot take shape. "Some of this will go toward the Jep products. That'll get loaded up on a semi and taken over to Allentown and machined there."

A small tributary caught my eye, and I pointed to it. "What's that?"

"That'll go to the mixing bucket for my dad's alloy."

"The one he wants to make high-end domestic products with."

"For starters. High-performance engine blocks, bridge trusses and cables, rails. Other stuff. Medical instruments and prosthetics, joint replacements. Racing bikes. Jewelry. Stuff like that."

Would I *ever* get a handle on this man?

Suddenly a siren blared. Trevor started and looked around him, his easygoing face suddenly intense. Its pitch and volume shattered the nearly deafening clatter of the mill, which came to a sudden halt all at once, ladles swinging pendulously from the momentum. I whirled in confusion as men began shouting and running.

Mitch vaulted out of his cab and sprinted down the fairway at an impressive speed, Trevor hot on his heels, then outpacing him—the only one who could. Panic seeped through the building and I began to run, too, to follow them, to see what had a foundry full of men frantic.

I gasped when I saw it.

A man sprawled unconscious on a set of metal stairs, his leg almost completely severed at mid thigh. Mitch and another man a generation older than he worked determinedly to stem the blood flow with makeshift tourniquets torn from the man's severed pant leg.

It wasn't working. There was no give to the cloth and it wasn't long enough to get a good, tight knot. The best they could do was pull the ends against each other and hold the position to keep him from bleeding out.

The blood, the gore... I swayed a bit. No, it was all I could do to stay upright and watch without puking.

I've always been squeamish about bodily fluids of the thick red variety.

The dangers of a steel mill hadn't really settled into me, even when Trevor had pulled me out of the way of the ladle. He'd seemed so nonchalant about it at the time, but this place was a death trap, I saw now. Mitch bellowed commands rapid-fire while he held his end of the tourniquet.

Rescue sirens screamed through the night almost immediately and an ambulance raced through the concourse toward the gathered men, who scattered.

Mitch and the old man held the tourniquet as well as they could until the EMTs could take over with the rubber ones. It took both EMTs, Mitch, and his compatriot to get the man and his leg onto the gurney. Without a word, Mitch bounded into the ambulance and caught the gurney as one paramedic rolled it in and the other rushed to the driver's seat. The second paramedic leapt into the back of the ambulance and the doors slammed shut. The ambulance shot out of the mill.

"Get back to work," barked the old man. His gaze flicked over me before he turned

to Trevor. "Go call his wife and get me the paperwork. You," he said to me as Trevor broke into a run to obey. "The hospital's six miles west of here. Can you find it?"

I nodded numbly, understanding somewhere in the back of my mind that he had just ordered me to go to Mitch.

He needs someone to take care of him... If they were just playing some kind of game and ditched him when they were done with him... That would really suck.

I found Mitch in a dark, private corner of the nearly empty emergency waiting room. He was sitting on a couch, slumped over, his elbows on his knees and his face in his palms. I sat beside him.

"I brought you some food," I whispered, hesitant to intrude on him, not knowing how he dealt with such things. He didn't respond, and I began to babble. Sheer nerves, I knew, but I couldn't help it. "Um, I got you some root beer. And Sprite, some water. Maybe food wasn't such a good idea, but you need to drink something, Mitch."

He said nothing for a moment. "Sometimes..." he muttered out from under his hunch, "I really hate that foundry."

My mouth dropped open.

"I know what it's like...uneducated, working at a filthy dead-end job because you have no other options. You're thirty-two, you've got nine kids—"

I stared at the plastic tops of the Styrofoam cups that held the drinks I'd chosen for him, and offered, "But it's a well-paying job. Nine kids? That's expensive."

"So what? You're a little boy, you want to be a fireman *because* it's dangerous. Heroic. *Romantic*. You aren't dreaming about being a peon steel worker, where your life is at stake because you can't do anything else."

There had never been any trace of young steel worker Mitch in our relationship, and now it disturbed me to think he could have been the one to have his leg severed once upon a time.

"They'll reattach it," I said, which was an utterly stupid thing to say. "At least you kept him from bleeding to death."

He glared at me from under his brows. "Six men have died in my mill," he growled. "This guy's leg is just the latest in a long line of serious injuries. Safety measures—Nothing guarantees a hundred percent safety."

My mouth tightened. "Nothing guarantees your employees won't be stupid, either."

He blinked.

"Don't forget. I know the Steelworks's stats inside and out. I know what happened in every case, and I will *not* let you blame yourself, especially after you saved that man's life."

It happened so quickly.

One second I was beside Mitch, snuggling against him in an inadequate attempt to comfort him, and the next his big hand was gripping the back of my head, and he was kissing me.

Hard, harsh.

Urgent.

I opened my mouth instinctively, my tongue meeting his in a mating dance of adrenaline, testosterone, and guilt. His cheek was scratchy under my palm, warm, sweaty, and I sighed into him, closed my eyes to capture more of his taste, his scent, part sweat, part grease, part expensive cologne—my senses perfectly attuned to each detail of this

moment.

We kissed for long minutes, his mouth on mine, his tongue sliding along mine—
The perfect kiss from the perfect man.

I pulled away from him slowly to speak, but he dragged me into his lap and kissed me again. I wrapped my arms around him, pressed my hip hard against his arousal.

I knew nothing but Mitch.

Nothing but his hands on my body and his tongue in my mouth.

His body trembling with need.

Mine, too.

The kiss softened into a series of lingering strokes. “Let me take care of you,” I whispered against his mouth, as I caressed his face. “Please.”

He stilled. He shifted his hips closer to mine, closed his eyes, and groaned softly, so softly, against my cheek. His hand crept up under my sweatshirt and caressed my belly and torso. Oh, how I ached for him to touch my breast, my nipple... I shuddered with desire, my pussy wet and ready for him.

I knew what he wanted. I knew how badly he wanted it. And I knew he would refuse to take any more than he already had.

But that wasn’t what I offered him now.

“Marry me, Mitch.”

I hadn’t really said that, had I?

He opened his eyes and stared at me, incredulous. I could feel warmth flooding my face. Of course he wouldn’t want to marry me, whore that I was and am.

“I’m sorry,” I said and cleared my throat. “I don’t mean to put you on the spot.” I shifted to leave his lap, but he held me tight.

“Yes,” he said, hoarse.

I stiffened and looked at him. “Trevor said you’re a master liar. Are you sure?”

He laughed a laugh completely without humor and ran his hand down his face. “Am I sure? I’ve wanted it since New Year’s, but I didn’t expect to get it so fast or without a fight.”

“I don’t love you.”

“I know what you want. I’m okay with that. For now.”

“And on your terms.”

He inclined his head. “On my terms.”

“Mr. Hollander!” The voice was female, panicked, and not quite as loud as the incessant crying of three children under the age of five. “What happened? Where’s Johnny?”

Suddenly, Mitch disappeared and CEO Hollander took his place. Somehow I understood and I slipped off his lap as discreetly as I could to let him work his magic on this woman whose husband had had his leg cut off.

There would be legal consequences; it went without saying. But Hollander Steelworks was nothing if not cash-rich and well managed by a man who wanted to serve people. He and his insurance company would do right by this man.

I corralled the children—it seemed my day had been overrun with the little things—plopped one on each knee and handed the third the Sprite. “What’s your name?”

He gulped at my boardroom voice, but he answered anyway. “Wally.”

I gestured to the sofa beside me with my head. “Sit. Drink. There are burgers in the

bag there if you're hungry."

It was a long night.

I didn't awaken until eight, when my cell phone rang. I couldn't get to it because I half sat, half lay on the sofa, a sleeping child curled up in each arm and the third sleeping on the other end of the sofa, his legs wrapped around and over mine.

Didn't matter, though. I knew who it was by the ringtone: "Money's Too Tight to Mention." I sighed.

"You want me to get that?"

I looked up at Mitch, still filthy, haggard. I'd lay heavy odds he hadn't slept at all. "It's Jack, wanting to know why I haven't shown up for work yet."

Mitch's lip curled. "I'll deal with him," he said curtly.

"He doesn't know about you and me."

He grunted and sat down on a chair across from the sofa, a coffee table between us. "He annoys me," Mitch said, as if he had nothing better to say.

"Why?"

He shrugged. "Don't know. I like him in small doses, but a little bit of Blackwood goes a long way."

I could respect that, particularly since it was true. "Sebastian seems to be the only one who can really handle him."

"Sebastian understands him. I don't. It's as simple as that."

"I can't imagine you not understanding anyone," I said.

A corner of his mouth quirked. "You have no idea how much I don't understand."

"Like?"

"Like why you persist with that stupid reason for going into prostitution."

I felt as if he had slapped me. "Are you on that *again*?" I snapped. "I'm a bulldozer, not a sneak. If I say I was bored, that's what I mean."

"You're a bad liar," he returned. "Does *anybody* believe that?"

I was fuming. "I thought you said this family had nine kids in it. Where are the other six?"

Suddenly, he grinned and I knew I had betrayed something significant, but I didn't know what. What I did know was that he wasn't going to leave this alone until he had pulled out of me whatever it was he wanted me to say.

"Decker sent Trevor out to their house to take care of them so Kathy could come here. These three," he said, gesturing to the ones that slept on top of me, "wouldn't leave their mother."

"How's Johnny?"

"Well, he could be better, but he's alive, his leg's back on with all the nerves attached, and he's on good drugs."

That would have pulled a smile out of me except for the creeping wetness I noticed against my leg. "Oh, shit," I breathed as I looked down. "The girl peed on me."

Mitch had the gall to laugh. "Is she still in diapers?"

I glared at him as I plucked the waistband away from the two-year-old to check. "Yes."

He stood then, but listed to his right. "I'll get the biggest size they have," he rasped, his humor gone and exhaustion etching his face—and he didn't think twice about pushing himself beyond his limits to keep the situation under control.

“You will not,” I snapped. He looked at me uncertainly, so I used my boardroom voice. “Mitch. Sit. Now.”

He sat. Slowly, watching me warily.

“I’ll clean her up and beg diapers from the nurses.”

I pointed to the coffee table with the carcasses of cheeseburgers and French fries. “Eat. There’s nothing wrong with it except it’s cold and has cooties.”

“Bossy,” he muttered, but did as I said while I roused the children.

After descending upon the nurse’s station to demand the diapers and the other accoutrements I needed, then herding the children into a large family restroom, they were at least clean, dry, and presentable. I had shucked my own jeans and cleaned the pee spot as well as I could, but it would take a while to dry; I had to resign myself to the fact that everyone who saw me would think I peed my own pants. The two-year-old twirled in her makeshift skirt of a receiving blanket held together with safety pins as if she were a princess. The cafeteria people acted suitably impressed with her outfit.

I sat all three of them down at a table to eat. They chattered like magpies and I was hard pressed to keep up with all the “Oh really?”s and “Uh huh”s and “Wow”s the conversation required, not to mention the “Don’t you dare do that again”s and the necessity for leveling the evil eye. My evil eye had worked on more adults than I could count and worked quite well on children I had not borne. “Miss Cassie?” said the oldest. “Where’s my mom?”

There was a beat of silence before the clamoring and crying started, which only grew in intensity. It was as if they’d forgotten her for a short period of time during their little adventure, though why they found me comforting I didn’t know. It took some doing before I’d hunted the mother down, sleeping in a chair beside her husband’s bed. He was awake and his face lit up when he saw his children, who squealed with delight and rushed to him.

My head hurt.

I left once I was assured the father was okay and the mother was in a position to be able to take over, but I couldn’t forget the way the children had run to him.

Had my children ever been that delighted to see me? If so, I didn’t remember.

Mitch was still asleep on the sofa in the waiting room and while I was hesitant to wake him up, I needed to get him home, bathed, and tucked in bed as if he were one of those children.

To take care of my soon-to-be husband.

* * * * *

An Innocent Man

February 14, 2011

Mitch opened his eyes at the soft hand on his shoulder and looked up at the most beautiful woman he’d ever seen.

Her sudden proposal had shocked him, but now that she’d opened the door, he wasn’t going to let her close it again.

He reached up to her and pulled her to him to kiss her as he had last night; whatever morals he still had left, he resented at this moment. He could think of nothing he wanted more than to take her home and make love to her.

Yet...

Somewhere in the back recesses of his mind, he dreaded her reaction to his relative inexperience—relative to any other man his age, that was. He knew enough to know he wasn't going to be a good lover to Cassandra without her help, her instruction. He hoped she would be patient with him long enough to learn what would please her.

Kissing, though, that he did well, he knew. He hadn't kissed a woman since before Mina had slipped into the last stage of her disease, but he'd had lots of practice at it before then. Kissing was all he'd been allowed before marriage to any woman and he'd taken advantage of it with abandon.

And Mina... While she hadn't cared for actual intercourse, she'd adored kissing him, making out with him—preferably in the back of the car.

"I could fuck you right now, Mitch Hollander," Cassandra breathed into his mouth, and he laughed, delighted to the depths of his wannabe-bad-boy soul that a woman felt comfortable enough with him to say something so vulgar.

"Cassandra," he said as he sat up and pulled her down to sit beside him. He wrapped his fingers up with hers and took a breath. "I don't know much about this."

"I know." Her mouth twitched with humor she didn't want to show. "It's cute."

"Puppy dog cute or little boy cute?"

She pursed her lips. "More like randy adolescent kid with the keys to the car on prom night with his pretty girlfriend cute." She took a deep breath. "I was serious when I said I was bored."

That took him out of the moment and annoyed him. "Okay, look. I know you're lying. You know you're lying. But I'm not going to wade through that right now. I'm tired and I stink."

"Yeah, you do."

He laughed. "You don't cut anybody any slack, do you?"

"I don't lie so someone can save face, no. Now," she said in that same commanding tone she'd used to take such capable charge of Johnny's children. "Get your ass up and into my car. I'll let you shower and then put you to bed. I should take advantage of your weakened state and do what I want to do to you. Including," she said, her voice dropping half an octave and taking on a decidedly husky tone, "sucking your cock."

He pulled in a sharp breath as that particular body part made itself known and eager for her. It didn't help that he had to think about whether or not to take her up on it, but then he sighed and arose. He dropped his arm around her shoulder and pulled her close. She felt good there. Right. She'd feel better if they were both naked.

"I'm not that tired. In for a penny, in for a pound."

"Damn, you're stubborn."

"I'm infamous for my patience. A third of the former CEOs in America despise me for it."

"Hence, 'former.'"

"Precisely." He leaned against her all the way out to her rental, then asked, "Have you ever thought about being a school teacher?"

He felt her stiffen against him. As she stuffed him in the passenger side, she said, "That was a foolish thing to say. I hate children and you should know me well enough by now to know that."

"Remind me to let Trevor know the master liar has competition," he returned when

she dropped into the driver's seat.

"Why don't you ever act like I think you should?"

"How do you think I should act?"

"Like a Mormon bishop, that's what, all judgmental and stuff."

"How would you know what a Mormon bishop's supposed to act like? I'm the only one you've ever met. I daresay I'm the only real *Mormon* you've ever met, since most of my makeshift family isn't exactly sterling."

She huffed and he grinned as he relaxed back against the seat and watched her. She refused to return his look, which he found vastly amusing.

"Brother Johnston, Brittany's father," he said deliberately, to see how far he could push her before she blurted something he could work with. Her mouth tightened and she swallowed. "He's been out of work for almost a year. Their house was scheduled to be foreclosed on in a couple of months. Your cufflinks will get them out from under a mountain of debt. But you didn't know that, so why'd you give them to her?"

A glimmer appeared in her eye, then a tear ran down her cheek. He expected the words *allergies* and *Benadryl* to pop out at any moment. "I don't know. Does it matter? The girl liked them, so I gave them to her. I just—I didn't mean to hurt her mother's pride."

"You didn't. She was distressed that you might not know what you'd given her. She knew their value and she thought you'd made a mistake. She didn't want to take them under false pretenses."

Cassandra's pretty eyes widened and she shot him a look filled with hope. "Oh?" she asked, keeping her tone carefully neutral. Either she was well practiced with the mixed signals or she didn't have a clue how easily he could read her. Mitch was betting heavily on the latter.

"Yes, *oh*. I told her you knew exactly what they were worth, that you had plenty more where that came from, and to consider it a gift from the Lord."

She kept driving, her eyes determinedly on the road and her knuckles white. "Why are you telling me this? Isn't that confidential?"

"Their financial situation is no secret. They just don't know *I* paid their mortgage. They—and everybody else—think the Church paid it. So keep it to yourself."

That got her to look at him again. "But you said—"

"I said it was scheduled to be foreclosed on and I said your cufflinks would get them out from under a mountain of debt. I didn't say you paid their mortgage arrears."

Cassandra put her hand to her mouth. It trembled and Mitch thought how much he could love this woman if she'd let him.

Mina was the love of his youth, their union a rough, uncertain lump of carbon, formed slowly and flawlessly into a sparkling diamond under the pressures of life.

But Cassandra—

Oh, she was the most perfect of alloys, the purest of metals in the most precise combination fired by the most extremes of heat—to steel her against the trauma that was her marriage and divorce, the one thoroughly documented in the court system.

She would be the love of his life.

If she would let him get close enough long enough to crack open her shell.

When Sabrina had caught him to ask him to give Cassandra's diamonds back, he'd told Sabrina with full confidence that Cassandra knew their value.

But nobody just gives thousands of dollars of jewels away, Bishop! Especially to people they don't know!

Yes, sometimes they do. Heavenly Father answered your prayers, Sabrina. That's how He works—through other people—and trust me, she won't miss them. Go home tonight and say a prayer of gratitude, then take a little vacation up to Manhattan so you can go to the diamond district. Sell them and buy Brittany rhinestone replacements she can play with.

But—

Don't. If you didn't need them, it'd be different. Go on now.

It had taken his investigators some more digging, but he'd finally figured out why she'd gone into prostitution.

She very definitely knew why.

Now he needed to know why she'd kept it to herself all these years, lied about it to the detriment of her relationship with her daughters.

Daughters she loved dearly and had no idea how to handle.

Mitch needed to dig it out of her, make her explain it, hear it in her words, but at this point, he didn't care whether it was before or after he got her in bed—and he wasn't above exploiting his reputation for sneakiness to do it.

He knew what Sebastian would say, could hear it in his head right now: “Dammit, Elder, don't *marry* her. If all you want is to get laid, just fuck her and be done with it. None of that messy divorce shit afterward when you figure out it wasn't the smartest thing you've ever done.” And he'd be right. Intellectually, Mitch knew this. It was the circumnavigation to get to his goal that Sebastian—and, by extension, Trevor—would find ludicrous and Mitch no less so, really.

Mitch knew what Cassandra *said* she wanted and she probably believed that. She knew she wouldn't get him in bed any other way, but there was something more, something he couldn't put his finger on. Marriage to her would give him the opportunity to suss it out, to be skin-to-skin with her so he could do that more efficiently.

Mina had always been more willing to tell him her secret fears, hopes and dreams after making love than she was any other time, deep in the night when she was vulnerable, lying in his arms naked after having had the bond of his body in hers.

He didn't know if that happened with everyone and he shouldn't assume it would work with Cassandra, considering what she'd done for a living. She would have had to learn how to put any need for such intimacy aside to do the job.

But he'd taken this gamble before and won, and he had no reason to think he would lose this time.

Sebastian might think him nuts, but Bryce would understand completely. He'd taken the same chance himself with a woman he'd known less than a day and seduced immediately. He'd married her two weeks after that. Four years and one child later, after his and Giselle's excommunications, through his ongoing treatment for PTSD, Giselle was still pulling him out of the hell he'd lived through before he'd met her, still loving him and taking care of him.

Bryce would approve of this route, and he was no fool.

Cassandra's phone rang from her open purse between Mitch's feet. He grabbed it before she could, answering her half-hearted glare with the smirk that never failed to fluster her. He looked at the caller ID.

“What,” he barked.

Stunned silence. “I’m looking for Cassie St. James,” Jack Blackwood said carefully.

“Yeah, but you *got* Mitch Hollander.” Jack choked and Mitch couldn’t help his wicked chuckle. Cassandra sighed. “She’s indisposed. I need her for a while, so don’t expect her until you see her. Have her assistant cancel her appointments for the week.” He terminated the call, dropped the phone in her purse, and leaned back against the passenger door, silently daring her to say a word.

But her mouth twitched and she began to snicker, then chuckle, then laugh.

“He’d have fired me if any of his other clients had done that.”

“He has his uses. Entertainment is one of them.”

Her mouth dropped open in delighted amazement, her eyes suddenly sparkling with humor. “You do that on purpose.”

He flashed her a grin. “I do. It’s fun to watch him dance around me.” He pointed out the window. “Turn left here.”

As she turned onto Mitch’s estate, he looked at it with new eyes. Winter made it bleak, but the house—well, he hadn’t *seen* the house in years, and it surprised him now that he lived in something so grand. Almost alone. Trevor would be gone in a year and then what? Knocking around in a mansion all by himself? Dribbling a ball alone down the empty soccer field in the back yard because he’d have no one to play with?

An image of Cassandra standing on the front portico to greet him when he came home from work flashed across his mind, but he instantly banished it.

That wasn’t her style, and at this point in his life, it wasn’t something he wanted, anyway.

“Is this a place you think you could live?” he asked quietly when she parked in the driveway and turned the car off. “*Would* you live with me?”

She looked at him then, her hair rumpled and her clothes bearing the evidence of having taken care of three small children all night—spots of mustard and ketchup, other mysterious stains. The whites of her eyes were webbed in red and there were dark circles under her eyes. “Well,” she muttered, “that’s what married people do, right? Live together? Honestly, though, it’s really too French provincial for my taste.”

He shrugged. “I’ll build you something else if you want.”

She watched him for a long time without saying anything. Then, “What did you mean when you told Jack you needed me?”

Mitch let that sink in, knowing there was something significant about the question, but too tired to figure it out right then. “I want to make love with you, Cassandra, but I *need* you in my life.”

“You don’t love me.”

Mitch stared at her, wondering if the fault was his because his cultural plane was that different from hers, or her fault for being deliberately obtuse. Finally he spoke.

Slowly.

“I don’t know why you think I’ve shown up on your doorstep every weekend for the last few weeks, but I assure you, it wasn’t because I was trying to figure out whether I do or not.”

Her bloodshot eyes narrowed and her chest began to heave. “All you want is sex. You want it with me and I want it with you. I’ll marry you because I’m not going to get to fuck you any other way, but don’t mistake it for something deeper than that because

I'll leave you the minute I've had my fill."

Mitch snorted. "You're already in deeper than that or you would have tried a little harder to seduce me. You've respected my boundaries, you've continued to go out with me, you came to church yesterday without my asking you to. Cassandra, we've been dating for weeks and last night was our first kiss. *How* is it not deeper than that? If it weren't, you'd have left me at Babbo. You aren't *ever* going to get your fill of me."

Obviously shocked, she opened the door and got out, heading for the house. He scrambled out his side and stood with the door open, looking at her over the top of the car. She had stopped about twenty feet away from him and she stood with her back to him, her arms wrapped around herself.

"When was the last time you had sex?" Mitch called. Her back stiffened and she sucked in a breath he could hear from that far away. "I'll bet it's been years for you, too. What, since you retired?"

She looked at him over her shoulder with a glare that could melt pig iron. "That's none of your business."

"You're a beautiful woman, you're powerful, you like sex. You could have any man—or woman—you want, but you've been with me for weeks getting nothing. Why? I'm not that fascinating, Cassandra. I'm just a guy who works in a steel mill on the weekends and spends the rest of the week on the Lord's Payroll, which is more trouble than it's worth most days."

Her mouth tightened. "You're a novelty to me."

"A novelty who needs you."

Her nostrils flared. "For *sex*," she spat. "Because you're a forty-four-year-old man who doesn't know shit about it and you love bad girls and you're curious and you want me to teach you what I know. You want to know what it's like to really fuck a strong, healthy woman who loves sex and knows what she's doing—and fuck her hard without all that procreation and morality bullshit getting in the way."

"So what if I do?" he returned. "What's wrong with that?"

"Nothing, but that's *all* you want and you're too fucking naïve not to *fall in love* to give yourself permission to take it."

"Give me one year, Cassandra. I want to prove to you it's more than sex, and if I haven't done that in a year, we can part company, no strings attached."

"What would your parishioners think?" she sneered.

"I don't care what they think!" he bellowed. "This is *my* life, not theirs. I only care what the Lord thinks."

"And oh, the Lord's okay with you marrying me just to have sex with me? That's just a new spin on the old fornication racket."

"Don't you put that on me. I am not the one marrying *just* to have sex. Yeah, I gotta get married to have sex, but if that's all I wanted, I wouldn't have asked you to dinner to begin with."

"Then what else could you possibly *need* me for?"

Her screech resonated within him, but only served to confuse him further.

"Cassandra, I *like* you. I can talk to you. I have fun with you. I'm a loner by nature and I've never really been *lonely*. I haven't felt truly lonely since before Mina was bedridden. But I count the days until we're together, and I call you every day just to hear your voice because if I don't— You taught me what lonely feels like."

She blinked, as if that were a foreign concept.

“It’s not like I couldn’t have beautiful women stacked from here to Manhattan if I wanted them and every one of them willing to marry me for various and sundry reasons, none of which would include love and very few of which would include sex. And don’t think that I’m excluding members of the Church, either. There are plenty of women who’ve tried to get my attention. They have no idea I have a life outside of church, what kind of women I have to choose from and how many, and they would *never* think I’d remarry outside the Church.”

She stared at him, then bowed her head and pressed her fist to her nose. He couldn’t see any tears from where he stood, but that didn’t mean anything. He forged on.

“I have plenty of opportunity, Cassandra, and I have ever since I rebuilt the mill, even when Mina was alive. None of them interested me. You do. Why do I *need* you other than sexually? I can’t articulate it, but when I think of you, sex isn’t what comes to mind first and since we’re not having any, it *should* be the first thing that comes to mind. I said it before and I’ll say it again. I want you in bed. I *need* you in my life. I don’t know how else to say it; I don’t know what words you want me to use.”

Still looking at the ground, she flung her fist through the air in resignation. “Fine,” she muttered, just loud enough so he could hear. “Lie to yourself like you lie to everybody else. I don’t give a shit. Go take a shower and get in bed before you collapse.”

He hid his smile. “Will you be here when I wake up?”

“Well, I can’t go back to work *now*,” she said with a sullen snuffle. “Jack would want to know why my indefinite service to you had been so short and definite, and I’d hate to have to tell him you have a premature ejaculation problem—which I’m sure you do.”

Mitch burst out laughing and went around the car to approach her, but she put up a hand. “Don’t. I can smell you from here. And while you’re sleeping, I’ll make wedding plans that’ll bankrupt you.”

He ignored her command and dropped an arm around her shoulder to guide her into the house. She still wouldn’t look at him. “Actually,” he began benignly as he pulled her through the front door, “what you *should* do is take a shower because *you* smell like rancid cheeseburgers and baby pee.”

* * * * *

The Last Temptation

Trevor was shocked to see me in the kitchen when he came in the house late that afternoon. I didn’t know if he’d gone to school today, but I didn’t suppose he would have.

“Is that bread I smell?” he asked, sniffing the air.

“Yes.”

“You make bread?” I nodded hesitantly and he cocked his head at me. “No shit? That’s *awesome*!”

Surely, the boy had lost his mind. My girls thought it terribly plebeian of me, but I never cared what they thought about it; I hadn’t stopped baking each day’s bread until it was no longer necessary. I didn’t know why I’d done it today, except the ingredients were there and I was bored. “Why?”

He plunked himself down at the granite bar top of the massive kitchen island and

took the fresh-baked bread I gave him with great anticipation. I handed him the butter, too, and he proceeded to inhale nearly a whole loaf with a pound of butter without bothering to answer me.

I watched his face as he ate and I thought if a teenage boy could orgasm over food, Trevor would have done so quite a few times through that loaf. I couldn't help my smile, though I tried. Such a simple thing, to make bread, and such a disproportionate reaction to it—I felt a...something...trickle through me that both pleased and frightened me. I didn't know what it was and I had no experience dealing with children who didn't demand the utmost in sophistication every moment of every day.

He licked his fingers with his eyes closed and sighed, "Cassie, marry me. Forget the sex. I'd sell my soul for this."

I had to laugh at that; this family's priorities were like nothing I had ever encountered before.

"Spoken for," I said after a moment. He opened his eyes. "I need to get my girls out here to meet you."

"Uh, does that mean..."

"Yeah," I said wryly. "Couldn't help myself, especially after your pointed little lecture."

"*You* asked *him*?" I shrugged, and he laughed. "Shit, that's awesome. You'll have to meet my sisters." Oh. Them. The good girls. Some of my sudden good cheer left as fast as it had come on. "They'll love you," Trevor went on, apparently oblivious to my distress. "Bread. What else do you do?"

Nothing that wouldn't have embarrassed Gordon and my kids to death if someone figured out *why* I was doing it.

"Um, well," I ventured slowly, not knowing, not understanding—again—a culture that would breed a seventeen-year-old boy to think homemade bread was "awesome," and I was unwilling to face even the smallest amount of ridicule for my more domestic interests. "I did it all," I finally admitted. "I could've taught Martha Stewart a thing or two."

"I guess my mom did all that before she got so tired."

"Do you miss her?"

"I miss not knowing the one my sisters knew. I miss having a mother, if that counts. My friends at church—their moms are really cool. I like going to their houses. It's always so noisy and... I don't know. Like a home."

I sighed and a dull throbbing behind my sternum started up. I cleared my throat. "How are Johnny and Kathy's kids?"

He broke off another piece of bread, spread it with butter, and chewed while he talked. "Don't know. Kathy came home with the little kids right after I got the oldest ones off to school, but they wouldn't go to sleep, all screaming and crying for their mama. Kathy wanted me to stay, but I said no way and she got pissed at me. I had to get out of there."

I actually agreed with Kathy's position and my expression must have betrayed that, because he shrugged.

"Look, Cassie, I'm seventeen, I'm a dude, I've just spent the night in a house full of kids, the oldest of which is a fifteen-year-old girl who decides to run around the house in her Daisy Dukes to see if I want to play. Then when that doesn't work—I told her to go

put some clothes on and go to bed—she decides she’s going to tell everybody about all these horrible rotten things I did to her and get me in trouble if I don’t have sex with her.

“And so when *that* doesn’t work, she starts crying and begging forgiveness and asks me if I’ll just take her to school so she can show me off to her friends— And I’m gonna let myself get snookered right into jail for being a perv and then get my name slotted onto the sex offender registry? I think not. I called Decker and made him send someone else—someone *female*, ’cause I sure as hell wasn’t going to ruin my life for doing what my foreman told me to do to help someone out during their family crisis.”

That made perfect sense and I hastily revised my disapproval of him for leaving Kathy alone. It struck me then: I had thought nothing of it when Mitch had told me Trevor had spent the night with those children.

“So you did go to school today?”

“Had to, ’cause Peggy—the fifteen-year-old—” I nodded “—was already starting to run her mouth about what I touched where and with what, which I knew she’d do. Passive-aggressive little bitch. I went to the principal first thing and let him know what happened and why so I didn’t have cops all over me by third hour. If there’s one thing I’ve learned from my dad, it’s how to cover my ass.”

And if that didn’t work, I was sure I could bribe Olivia to don her kickboxing gear and drop in on the girl to deliver a scolding she’d never forget.

“And your girlfriend?”

He waved a hand. “Eh, she’s twenty, junior at Lehigh Univer—” His eyes narrowed at me. “Oh. I bet you know about that.”

I bit my lip to keep from cracking a smile.

“Har. Har. Har.”

“I’d think Peggy would be more concerned about her dad than her Daisy Dukes.”

He sighed. “They don’t know yet. They think he’s in the hospital for observation.”

“Oh.”

“And I sure as shit wasn’t going to tell them.”

“I hear excessive cursing leads to premarital sex.”

Trevor stared at me for a split second before he began to laugh, then choked on his bread.

“I told him that,” drawled the deeper version of Trevor’s voice from the door of the kitchen. I turned and saw Mitch in a green bathrobe, leaning against the threshold of the kitchen with his arms folded across his chest. I wondered what he’d do if I went to him and untied it, pushed it off his shoulders, and put my mouth to his throat. Got on my knees in front of him. My heart thumped hard behind my breast. “But he didn’t buy it. His idol trained him too well.”

That pulled me from my salacious thoughts and made me chuckle. The idea of Sebastian Taight and Mitch Hollander being best friends had never been more oxymoronic to me than now, now that I knew Mitch, had watched him tend his flock and his employees.

“Hey, Dad.”

“You going out tonight, Son?”

“Damn straight. It’s my day off, it’s Valentine’s Day, and I have a hot date with a hot twenty-year-old. Don’t wait up or anything.” Mitch growled in response as Trevor stood and brushed the crumbs off his hands.

"I feel obliged to ask," I said. "You are using condoms, no?"

Trevor gaped at me, thoroughly offended. "Uh, *yeah*."

"I gave him the lecture," Mitch grumbled so disconsolately I had to laugh. "The last thing he needs at this age is a child. Or a disease."

"Oh, hell no," Trevor agreed. "Okay, I'm going to bed. Night, Dad."

"Night. Love you, Kid."

"Love you, too, Dad. Thanks for the bread, Cassie," he called as he strode out of the room.

"You're welcome," I said, but he'd gone by then, his long legs eating up the floor between the kitchen and the massive foyer, then to the staircase. The sound of his footsteps receded and I looked Mitch square in the eye and said, "I suggest you go put some other clothes on before I forget you're a nice boy and test the limits of your self-control. And since we are both clean and I'm spayed, *we* don't need condoms."

He smirked but turned to do as I said, which was just as well. I hadn't been joking.

I set two places for us at the island bar then went to the stove and stirred the perfect cold-weather soup, one I love, but hadn't made once I no longer needed to.

Shit, Cassie, poor people food again?

I didn't know why I'd made it today, but Trevor's reaction to my bread had bolstered my courage to actually serve it instead of throwing it out. Still, I could feel the minuscule trembles as I awaited Mitch, awaited his reaction.

What I got was not what I expected. He came back in tight worn jeans that showed every ridge of his musculature and emphasized his cock—although I didn't know if he'd done that on purpose. Over that, he wore a white sweatshirt that made his hair lighter blond and downplayed the faint reddish tones, but made his eyes a deeper blue. Looking at him was all it took to make me tingle, and now he came at me with a determined stride.

"Happy Valentine's Day, Cassandra," he murmured just before his lips touched mine.

I sighed into his mouth when he kissed me, his right arm around me so his big hand could span my buttocks and pull my body into him. He cupped my jaw with his left hand then slid his fingers into my hair.

And oh, the man could kiss. Whatever deficiencies he might yet reveal in bed, this was not one of them. He kissed with the passion of a man long denied, waiting for someone special to bestow it upon, and the thought made me melt into him, wrap my arms around his waist. I slid one hand up under his sweatshirt and tee shirt, and one down into his jeans and boxers. His skin was warm, taut, and velvety.

His kiss deepened as I caressed him, and his arousal pressed between us, hard and urgent. Somewhere in the middle of wondering how he could be that disciplined, I stopped thinking about anything but what he did to me with just a kiss, the simple connection of mouth to mouth and the slide of tongue on tongue.

The kitchen was almost completely silent, the appliances' whirrs having ceased as if to allow us a measure of privacy. The only sounds were the ones he and I made as we began the last leg of our mating dance, the slight rustle of fabric, the meeting of lips and tongues, the sighs and breaths.

Daring much, knowing he'd shut me down but still needing to chance it, I slid my hand from his nicely muscled ass around his hip to his cock, hard, long. He didn't stop kissing me so much as pause and shift.

I couldn't tell if he was trying to avoid or encourage me.

"Don't," he whispered, taking a deep breath and shuddering when I wrapped my hand around him. "Cassandra..." I tightened my grip and slid my hand down. He groaned and dropped his forehead on my shoulder. "I can't," he whispered into the crook of my neck. "I want to. I want to, Cassandra, you have no idea, but I can't. Not yet. *Please.*"

Then I understood.

He was begging me not to push him past his breaking point, trusting that I wouldn't, yet willing to go with me if I did—and I knew he would never look at me quite the same way if I didn't respect his higher need, if I catered to his baser one. He had no control left, I knew that, and I could do whatever I wanted now.

I'd won the game.

I withdrew my hand slowly, then pulled away to put an inch or so between our bodies. We were both breathing hard and I would have liked nothing better at that moment than to feel cold granite under my bare ass, Mitch between my spread legs, pumping into me hard and fast.

But at what price?

"Thank you," he whispered as he nuzzled my neck and it made me smile. Whatever needs I had I could take care of myself later and would indeed as I fantasized about this moment in time when I had him where I wanted him—

—but took the higher road instead because it was important to him; because he thought it was important to his God.

I didn't know how he'd brought me to this, this willingness to forego my own desires, my own purposes in the face of his, but he had.

He'd won the game.

We stood holding onto one another for the longest time, his arousal receding although not calming completely, but I felt a different need rising in me. "I'm hungry."

He barked a shaky laugh and released me. "How many ways do you want me to take *that*?"

"Food," I returned smartly. "I made dinner."

"Besides the bread?"

I hesitated, now treading different, though no less dangerous, waters. "I, um— I thought because it's cold outside that—" But he'd wandered to the stove and lifted the lid on the stockpot.

"Homemade noodles," he whispered, and I hoped the floor would open up and swallow me whole right then. He shot a look over his shoulder at me and said, "And you made *bread*."

My mouth dropped open when I finally comprehended the look of sheer little-boy delight on his face.

"I made honey butter, too," I blurted and kept right on blurting, "I prefer apple butter, but that takes time. And apples." He smiled at me and I felt a thrill roll through me because of it. Some skilled courtesan I'd turned out to be, to be so affected by any hint of approval. I didn't need approval; I did as I pleased and fuck everybody else's opinions. I wanted my approval in the form of cold, hard cash, which was one reason why Jack and I got along so well.

We sat as close together as we could get while we ate, talking about everything in general and nothing in particular.

I asked how Johnny was doing.

"Don't know," he said after he'd swallowed a mouthful of food. "The lawyers got called out this morning after we left the hospital."

"Already."

"It doesn't take long anymore," he said matter-of-factly. "In fact, I'm surprised it took that long. It does make me mad I can't know how he's doing until they see fit to tell my lawyers."

"Are you going to be okay?"

He grunted. "Every time something like this happens, it's another cut in your soul."

We sat and ate companionably for a moment, and after I'd killed off the first pangs of real hunger, I said, "So, speaking of lawyers."

He nodded. "I call mine, you call yours? Let them hammer out the contract."

"Pretty simple, in my opinion. I leave with what I brought, and let you keep what you brought. I don't quibble over what wasn't mine to begin with."

Mitch slid me a look. "You planning to leave me for sure?"

I shrugged and took another bite. "Depends on how fast I can get you trained."

That only made him laugh.

"For all I know, you're a slow learner, which, of course, will bore me."

"Thank you for bringing that up."

I glared. "Don't. I was bored. That's all you're going to get."

"Cassandra, do you really think I haven't figured it out?"

Of course he had. "Then why are you bugging me about it?"

"I want to know how 'I was bored' works within your family dynamic."

"No. You're an accomplished liar and one sneaky bastard, so I'll thank you to go with it."

He sighed.

"I would suggest eloping so I can start your education by midnight tonight, but we both know how that'll play."

"I have no intention of eloping," he said. "Been there, done that. And I certainly don't want the entire financial district wagering on how much I paid you to marry me. But you better make it quick."

"Fast, rude, and cruel, remember."

"Can you do it in a month? Because that's about as long as I can last."

I wasn't sure *I* could last that long. "Consider it done. All you have to do is pay the bills."

He laughed.

"I," I said briskly, "need to figure out what to do with myself for the next year."

"What do you mean, what to do with yourself?"

"Jack's already told me he won't let me telecommute and I'm not doing a two-hour drive every morning and evening."

Mitch looked at me, confused. "That makes no sense."

"I know it, but..."

"You don't need Jack anymore," Mitch said around his food. "You've got enough credibility now to go out on your own. In fact, I bet he was bluffing. He needs you a lot more than you need him."

That was true, though why I hadn't realized it, I didn't know.

“How— Um, how do we do the church thing? You know I’m not interested in the least.”

He took a deep breath. “I don’t know. I’m hoping I’ll get released soon, but I’ve got a few situations brewing I’m going to have to deal with, and I’m pretty sure I won’t be released until that’s done.”

“Oh! That reminds me...”

I launched into a description of what had happened during and after Sunday school with Sitkaris, to give him the opportunity to fill me in.

“Does he really think I’m that naïve?” Mitch asked wonderingly.

“I was shocked. He should have investigators all over us.”

Mitch pursed his lips. “Well. He *did*. He must not have realized yet why they haven’t checked in for a while.”

That made me laugh. “He’ll hire more when he figures it out. His biggest problem is he doesn’t see you as anything other than a bishop, so he doesn’t expect to find anything.”

“And he has no reason to think he can’t take you away from me.”

I slid him a glance. “Does that bother you? If it does, I’ll just slap him the next time he propositions me.”

“Why would it bother me? I have everything he ever wanted, and I have no doubts about how you feel about him.”

Warmth curled through me, and I couldn’t help but smile.

“So...” he drawled, “tell me about Relief Society.”

I described Prissy’s lesson, ending with, “It was an excellent lesson, but she was very heavy-handed.”

“She had a point to make to a few people, and some people don’t get it unless they’re bopped over the head.”

“How do you know? You weren’t there.”

“I might as well have been. I got a play-by-play from five different women the minute the ‘amens’ were said.”

I started to laugh. “I take it Prissy isn’t popular?”

“Oh, she’s popular,” Mitch replied, “but not in the way you’d expect. She does what she wants and doesn’t much care what anybody thinks about her. Most of the women look to her to validate their common sense and let them know it’s okay to dissent while remaining faithful. Her only goal is to teach concepts and principles, and the lesson manual doesn’t give her enough to go on.”

“She veered *wildly* off the lesson manual yesterday.”

Mitch smirked into his bowl just before he took another bite.

“Oh, you sneaky bastard,” I said. “You asked her to do that.”

He nodded. “I couldn’t run that ward without a bunch of sharp women watching my back.”

“The lady who escorted me around was very upset with her.”

“Who was it?”

“Sally. Bevan, I think?”

Mitch choked. “Sally?” he croaked after a moment, coughing here and there.

“Uh...” I clapped him on the back.

“Sally,” he said after a moment, “would like to have a last name other than her

husband's. Guess whose."

"Oh, for fuck's sake. Was that lesson for her?"

"Mmmm, well, about half."

"Do you need me to come and run interference for you?"

"I've been fending Sally off since I was fifteen. I'd like you to come to church with me just so I know you're there, not because I need protection from her."

I couldn't help my smile. "Well, if push comes to shove, I'll deal with her. Trust me. I've broken more than one irrationally jealous woman over my knee."

Mitch looked at me with an indecipherable expression.

"What?"

"It kind of turns me on when you get like that."

I burst out laughing.

"Ah, but there is one thing I would ask of you, for however long we're together."

"What's that?"

"That you don't cheat on me."

I blinked. Cheat on Mitch? I couldn't imagine such a thing. "What if I did?"

He looked at me for a long time, then said, very slowly, "I'd forgive you."

My world shattered. I couldn't breathe. "What if I did it again?" I whispered, actually feeling some amount of fear now.

"I'd forgive you again."

"But—"

He put his fingers over my mouth. "I told you. I believe. I live what I believe to the best of my ability. Forgiveness is part of that. That's what I do, that's my job, and I'm pretty good at my job."

I did not know what to make of this man. He defied logic, defied every worldly experience I'd ever had. He never did or said anything I expected him to do or say; it occurred to me that perhaps I should stop expecting.

"Marry me," he whispered, an odd, knowing smile on his face. "Be my wife and my playmate, my friend and my lover."

My heart stopped and I thought it would never start again.

"Yes," I said, knowing I had just promised him everything I'd never dared promise anyone else.

And I would keep that promise, even if it killed me.

* * * * *

How to Marry a Millionaire

February 15, 2011

I decided to go back to New York on Wednesday since Mitch had made it very clear that he couldn't have me overnight in the house without great temptation and agony on his part—and I refused to stay in a hotel for the next month.

I spent Tuesday at the mill, meeting with the project teams assigned to getting the parts division separated from the foundry. I also toured the offices of Hollander Homes, met the designers, saw prototype products using Mitch's perfected alloy. Tuesday evening I went back to church with Mitch—

"Activity night," he explained on the way. "Youth activities, Relief Society, Scouts. I

have interviews. Hope you brought something to do.”

“I have a wedding to plan,” I said smartly, and he laughed. “Remember my reputation for fast.”

“And rude and cruel.”

“Which turns you on.”

“It does. Tomorrow we can go get the agreement signed.” Rich people should always go into marriage with prenuptial agreements. I should’ve had one with Gordon, but that was one of the ways my father had screwed me in that deal. I never made the mistake of accepting a client without a contract, nor would I make a second trip down the aisle without one. I texted my attorney.

Lawyer: PRENUP?! You’re MARRYING this one?!

Me: Mitch Hollander.

Lawyer: LOL OK

It rather bothered me to sign one with Mitch, but that was stupid, so I shook it off.

I sat in the church foyer on a nondescript floral sofa with my feet drawn up under me, and gleefully threw myself into the role of bridezilla, my thumbs texting as fast as they could go.

“Hi again!” *Shit*. “Still at the Steelworks?”

I looked askance at Sally, who had made herself at home next to me. “Yes,” I murmured.

“Where do you live?”

“Manhattan.”

“And...when are you going back?”

I wanted to laugh, but the key to being a good whore is being a good actress.

“Tomorrow morning.”

She relaxed and her smile softened. I waited politely for whatever she would say next, and was finally rewarded with, “I’m waiting for the bishop. I have an interview with him.”

“Ah,” I said, and went back to my to-do list.

“So, you look like you’re busy.”

“I’m getting married,” I said absently. “Making plans.”

“Oh, how wonderful!” she said, and sat back fully, apparently secure in her schemes.

“Sally?”

She and I both looked up to see a man I recognized as Prissy’s husband. “Yes, Steve?”

“You scheduled an interview.”

“But I thought...”

“Mitch has a full schedule tonight. I’ll be doing it.”

“Oh.” I watched her crestfallen expression and almost felt sorry for her. She had the look of a woman who had never gotten a single thing she wanted in her life, who was treading water and completely exhausted with no rescue in sight. “Never mind,” she muttered as she arose. “It wasn’t important.”

“Sally,” he said gently, “if you need to talk, come talk with me. If it’s about...”

“No,” she whispered, her head down. “It’s not.”

No, I wasn't going to break this woman over my knee. She was already broken, probably by choices she'd made (or had made for her) long ago.

I wondered if Mitch knew that and hadn't wanted to risk digging into her psyche, or if he'd been too occupied with trying to navigate her crush on him to think of it.

She wandered off down the hall toward another large foyer. Adolescent shouts came from the gymnasium. From a different hall, the hall off which Mitch's office sat, the happy squeals of toddlers could be heard.

Steve ambled off and I was again alone, but not for long.

I looked up when a very large shadow was cast on the floor in front of me. "I'm not very sociable," Prissy said with an inscrutable yet calm expression. "But occasionally my curiosity overwhelms my antisocial tendencies."

I smirked and slipped over so she would have room to sit. "You didn't buy my cover story."

"Not a word. I saw you and Mitch snuggling up Sunday a little too close for *just* business associates. I also saw that kiss out in the parking lot earlier tonight."

Oh, *that* had curled my toes. "You're very observant."

"We—my husband and I—suspected he was seeing somebody, so we've been on the lookout for a new person to show up."

"Oh?"

"His sudden radio silence on the weekends. If it was mill business, he would've said so, but he would've answered his phone no matter what. Also, I think he must have told Louise he was dating because she suddenly got off her Mitch-must-get-married-*now* soapbox."

Asked my Relief Society president...to write the words and wrap it up.

"We knew there would be trouble with a single man as bishop—a young *rich* one—and we weren't wrong. Louise has just been the most vocal about wanting him either to get married or ask to be released."

The idea of a ward full of smart women hounding Mitch to do something to make his life easier—while he stonewalled them all—amused me to no end.

"Anyway, I'm Prissy."

"Cassie. I liked your lesson Sunday."

She looked surprised. "Oh." She blinked, suddenly uneasy. "Um, thank you."

"You don't get that very often, do you?"

"No," she said flatly. "Funny I get it from a nonmember." Not funny ha-ha. I could do nothing but make vague noises of commiseration at brilliance gone undetected and unappreciated. "What are you?"

"Technically, Episcopalian. In practice, self-absorbed."

She laughed. "You met Mitch at the Steelworks, I take it." I nodded. "That's wonderful. I hope you can get him away from here and on a very long vacation?"

"That's really up to him, but I'll try."

"Good. Little advice," she said as she maneuvered her considerable girth from the sofa and stood. "Don't come back here until you and Mitch are signed, sealed, and delivered."

I stared at up her. "Mitch needs me to, uh..." I waved vaguely toward the hallway Sally had headed down. "Be a wall."

She pursed her lips. "Oh. I can see that, I guess. Stick with me, then. I usually sit

toward the back, on the left side of the chapel. You'll have to put up with my tax deductions."

"All right..." But she had already turned and was striding with that odd grace toward the other end of the building.

Tax deductions. God, that was hilarious, and I started to laugh.

It would be a strange feeling to have a *female* friend, one who could and would guide me through this foreign world, one who was as acerbic as I, and one who *might* be smarter.

Inconceivable.

Extraordinary.

* * * * *

No Immunity, No Guarantee

February 16, 2011

"*You're what?!?*"

I sat at Nigel and Gordon's kitchen table Wednesday evening after having intruded upon their meal. Gordon, now an accomplished housewife, cooked on the weeknights and expected the girls to show up for family dinner if they weren't working. He wouldn't deign to cook "poor people food," but then, he didn't have to.

I continued to eat calmly while my daughters and ex-husband stared at me, aghast at my news. Nigel simply looked smug.

Clarissa hopped up and started to pace the kitchen. "How *could* you?"

"You act as if I have personally affronted you," I said. "Since this is my life and nothing I have ever done has pleased you, why would you think I'd start trying to please you now?"

"Yeah, but *him*?"

"I see. It's that it's *Mitch* and Mitch called you on your shit."

"He's an asshole," she hissed.

"Clarissa!" Paige yelled.

I looked up at Clarissa through my eyelashes and said nothing while she glared at Paige, until she realized my silence meant I was awaiting her attention.

"I warned you about that," I murmured. Her mouth tightened. "We're going to try this out for a year. The plan is to let you girls live in the townhouse. But if you can't keep a civil tongue in your head you *and* your sisters can find somewhere else to live and I'll lease the townhouse."

"YOU'RE MOVING?!"

I didn't know it was possible for Clarissa to look more horrified. Why, I didn't know. I thought she'd be ecstatic to get rid of me. Never mind she'd voluntarily moved back home after four days of exile. I hadn't bothered to stop her nor ask her why.

"Yes."

She dropped into her chair, completely deflated. "But—"

Nobody said anything for a moment. Helene stared at her plate, picked at her food with her fork, her mouth pursed. The twins' fingers were faintly moving, and I knew that they were signing to each other in the language they'd concocted before they could speak. Gordon sat back to look at me speculatively, his arms crossed over his chest.

Nigel continued to eat.

"I like it," Gordon finally pronounced and turned his attention back to his plate. "Congrats, Cass."

"*What?!*" Clarissa screeched. "Daddy!"

"Clarissa," he said with gentle astonishment, "this man obviously makes your mother happy. Don't you *want* her to be happy?"

She wouldn't argue the point with her father for fear of earning a look of sad disappointment. And what could she say? *No, I don't want her to be happy?*

"The wedding is March eighteenth in Bethlehem," I informed them coolly. "Mitch's home. That's a Friday. I would like for you girls to be my bridesmaids, but of course I would understand if you chose not to be, nor would I be surprised if you chose not to attend at all."

That got cries of protest from Helene and Olivia. Paige clapped and bounced in her chair, quivering in delight.

But Clarissa sat staring out the back window of Nigel and Gordon's brownstone, her arms across her chest, moisture glittering in the corners of her eyes.

"However," Nigel said in a stern voice. "*Children*. Make sure you have no conflicting events next Friday. We're invited to have dinner with all the Hollanders, and we *will* go to that."

Oh?

Clarissa reflexively moved to protest, but then thought better of it when she caught Gordon's expression of vague puppy-dog hope that she would cooperate.

I stared at Nigel, awaiting an explanation for this outrage, but he kept his face perfectly expressionless and said,

"I think Mitch and I are going to become very good friends."

Shit.

* * * * *

BFFs

February 20, 2011

I did, indeed, sit with Prissy and her tax deductions in sacrament meeting on Sunday. Her husband, as the first counselor, sat up on the stand next to Mitch. Mitch's second counselor was wearing a rich peach-colored tie today, and his family was smartly dressed in the same color. Mitch again conducted the meeting and cast me a sly glance that made Prissy bow her head and shudder with suppressed laughter.

Prissy's children were the most well-behaved ones I'd ever met, which didn't surprise me after I saw the evil eye she cast her four-year-old boy for speaking during the passing of the sacrament. He shut up immediately.

So did the misbehaving children in the pew in front of us when she tapped one on the head with a finger and glared at them the same way. I was at once in awe and thoroughly envious. Surely, one had to be born with talent like that.

Surprisingly, Sitkaris—who was again the substitute teacher—didn't speak to me, approach me, or lob sexual innuendoes at me before class, but with a look, he made sure to let me know he hadn't changed his mind about what he wanted from me.

Then his glance slid to Prissy, who had decided to take up residence to my left, and

his lip curled slightly. Out of the corner of my eye I saw Prissy lightly scratch the side of her nose—

—with her middle finger.

It was all I could do not to laugh.

Sally plopped herself down on my right just before the lesson began and exclaimed, “Cassie! You were welcome to sit with us during sacrament meeting. That way, Prissy would’ve had a little more room in her pew.” I hate women. “Prissy, aren’t you supposed to be in Gospel Doctrine?”

“Oh, I’m sorry, Sally,” Prissy replied smoothly. “I didn’t know you had dibs on Cassie.”

I’d dine out on this for months.

Or not—

“Cassie,” Prissy said sternly when Sally reluctantly left us alone in between Sunday school and Relief Society. The room emptied but for two or three people toward the front, and Sitkaris’s only gesture was to caress my shoulder as he walked by on his way to the men’s meeting. “I request that you not take a bite out of Sally. She’s fragile.”

I didn’t really like the implication that I hadn’t figured that out. “You just did.”

“Oh, honey. You haven’t seen me put anybody in their place yet.”

But I’d love to. “Why do you care? She doesn’t like you anyway.”

“You know why she doesn’t like me?”

“Um... Because you’re smart and outspoken?”

“No. Because I’m fat and I have a happy marriage, and she’s thin and pretty and doesn’t.”

I thought that a bit simplistic and said so.

“Look, Cassie. She can spit little poisoned darts at me all day long and it won’t make any difference. Yeah, it’s annoying, and it hurts. But she’s not evil. She’s just unhappy and probably clinically depressed. I might dig at her here and there, but a little dig is all it takes. Anything more than that, anything closer to her heart, would crush her.”

I stared at Prissy for a long moment, understanding that I was seeing into the soul of a very caring woman who didn’t show it much. And though I had already decided my course, I simply nodded.

“I enjoyed your little love play with Brother Sitkaris,” I said after a moment. She harrumphed and crossed her arms over her massive bosom, but said nothing. “Well?”

She slid me an annoyed glance. “I don’t gossip. In case I didn’t make that clear enough last week.”

“He has a thing for me,” I said, just to poke at her.

“No kidding.”

“I wasn’t sure anyone else noticed.” The corners of her mouth began to twitch. “He’s kind of, shall we say...smarmy.”

“Cassie,” she drawled, trying to suppress her amusement and failing.

“Apparently you and I are the only ones who know what a faker he is.”

She sighed.

“Also? He’s a manwhore.”

“I know that,” she said in a sing-song voice.

I started. “You do?”

“You know what happens when you don’t gossip?”

“People tell you things.”

“Exactly. And you know what they say about knowledge.”

“I’ll trade some of my power for some of yours.”

She said nothing. I was preparing to apologize for having taken our banter beyond her threshold of offense when she said smoothly, “You willing to put your money where your mouth is?”

“Uh...” Dammit, the woman had cornered me rather neatly. At this rate, I was going to catch a serious girlcrush. “Okay. I’ll bite.”

“After class.” She whipped an iPhone out of a hidden pocket in her dress. “But for now, stats, please.”

We were still thumbing our contact information into our respective devices when Sally returned to her defensive position on my right. I ignored her sniff of jealousy-tinged disdain. Whether it was over the gadgets or who had dibs on me or something else entirely, I didn’t know, but I stopped thinking about it because Relief Society began.

Like the week before, Louise made me welcome.

“And you are?” she said to someone else.

Prissy, Sally, and I all looked to the right to see whom Louise had singled out. An older woman, with dull salt-and-pepper hair, wrinkled skin a shade darker than the color my Italian ancestors had bequeathed me, tired brown eyes, and a hint of a widow’s hump, stood and smiled vaguely. Her simple floral shirtwaist dress was faded and nearly threadbare, and her dingy cardigan had a hole in one elbow.

“Sister Schoonover,” she said. “From DC. Visiting for a while.”

“Are you moving here?”

“No,” she said as she sat, obviously uncomfortable with the attention. “Just passing through.”

“Do you need anything while you’re here?”

She hesitated. “Um, no. Thank you.”

“Welcome, then,” Louise said with a smile.

“She looks like she’s been rode hard and put away wet,” Sally muttered with a sniff. I hate women.

“Sally,” I murmured, “that was mean.” She flushed and bowed her head, wrung her hands in her lap. I opened my mouth to put a scalpel-sharp point on it, but an elbow poke in my ribs made me shut it again.

Not without a huff, which Prissy ignored.

I revisited my phone and occupied myself with tasks I could accomplish in the next forty-five minutes. I emailed my architect and designer. First: Remodel the unused fourth floor of my townhouse into a bedroom fit for a perpetual honeymoon (to exacting specifications). Second: Transform The Bordello into a separate apartment (to even more exacting specifications). Third: Do it yesterday. I emailed my daughters and told them to move in with Gordon and Nigel for the next couple of weeks or else deal with construction dust *without complaint*.

A mother can dream.

We were deep into the lesson (to which I was not paying attention) when Prissy whispered, “I know her from somewhere.”

I looked at my friend and saw her casting glances at the woman from DC.

“Where?”

Prissy started, vaguely focused on me, and I realized she hadn't meant to say anything at all. "Uh..." she said after a second or two, her attention suddenly split between trying to dig out a memory and displaying basic etiquette. She shook her head and went back to digging.

The lesson ended, the closing hymn was sung, the closing prayer was given, and the post-worship exodus began.

"Sally."

I looked up to see an ordinary-looking man standing next to Sally's chair, his hand held out in a gallant manner. Her mouth tightened and she looked away.

"Hi, Dan," Prissy said brightly.

"Hi, Prissy," he said without looking away from Sally. His expression was one of the most heartbreaking I'd ever seen: love, hurt, betrayal... Things most men were adept at hiding, but this man clearly had no pride left.

"Well, *hello*," I murmured up at him in my most seductive voice, a weapon of some consequence.

That got his attention.

Sally's, too.

I ignored her gasp and gave him the once-over. He flushed. Her mouth tightened. She promptly placed her hand in his, allowing him to pull her to her feet. She left pissed, but he cast a relieved and very grateful smile back at me as they exited the room.

"I haven't had this much fun at church in a long time," Prissy said mildly as the last of the stragglers exited and the doors clicked closed, the only sounds the quiet roar of conversation from the hallway.

I turned to her. "Spill it."

"You realize, of course," she began haughtily, "that I don't like doing this. It makes me feel positively filthy."

"But...?"

"But..." She sighed. "I need to know. And I don't have the means to find out for myself."

I waited while she gathered herself enough to break her own code.

"I know some people in the stake who— They've all had some weird financial problems the last couple of years, kind of all at the same time. Wiped them out. The bad part is that these are financially responsible people. None of them were rich, but they were well off—you know, the millionaire-next-door types—and they got that way with hard work and being frugal. But now they're barely hanging on. Can you—" I watched her struggle to find words because it galled her so. "You have people, right?"

I nodded.

"If I give you their names, can you... I don't know, find out what happened to them? They don't talk to anybody, don't come to church anymore."

"You know these people personally?"

"Only a couple of them. But I hear things."

"So what's the bearing false witness part of that? Mitch has people, too. It'd be easy enough for him to check out."

"Well, for one, Mitch has enough problems with just the people in this ward. There's almost four hundred of us. He doesn't need to be dealing with the problems of people in the rest of the stake, too, considering there are nine wards in it. Do the math. They all

have their own bishops for a reason.”

I could buy that. “And for two?”

She took a deep breath. “They and their money problems all have Greg Sitkaris in common.”

I barely kept my mouth from dropping open. “What does he do for a living?” I already knew that, but wanted whatever details Prissy had that I didn’t.

“He works for Mitch’s father-in-law, managing the Bethlehem office of Shane’s firm. Sells insurance, annuities. Brokers mortgages. Does some financial planning. Kind of a financial jack of all trades. People trust members of the Church not to rip them off.”

I sighed.

“Whatever his other shortcomings, Shane Monroe is an honest man, so I think this is all Greg. I wouldn’t even be surprised if Greg’s cheating Shane, too.”

I wondered how much of this Mitch knew or suspected.

“Anyway, everybody knows Greg and I don’t get along, so anything I could say would be suspect. Me making trouble.”

I could see that. “And...you want me to spend *my* resources following *your* hunch.” Her eyes narrowed, and I couldn’t help chuckling at her.

“He desperately wants to be bishop,” she said low. “And he’s best pals with the stake president. Once Mitch is released—which was overdue two years ago—I have no doubt Greg will be called. And I— That *cannot* happen.” She shuddered. “I look at his wife and daughter and— Well, I can’t imagine the emotional and spiritual devastation he would cause, and have a grand time doing it.”

I sighed. “Surely there’s something you can do to forestall or prevent that?”

“Oh, yes. We have a mechanism by which the membership can object to someone being called to a position. I’ve never seen it done, but I’ll do it. My husband will. A few other people in the ward. But we’re a very small minority and we’ll need proof for when they take us aside and ask why.”

“And protect yourself from retribution.”

“Right.”

She was holding something back, even now. “All of it, Prissy. I need to know the end game.”

She harrumphed. “Fine. Louise and I are on a mission to get Amelia and Hayleigh away from him. We don’t know how to do that. Yet.”

...*politically delicate*.

“Let me see if I’ve got this straight. Sitkaris is handsome, seductive, and well off. Mitch is wealthy, but big, gruff, intimidating, and in a position where he has to deny people things they want. He’s also not nearly as attractive as Greg. The stake president’s a decent guy trying to do his job, but he’s as snowed by Greg as everybody else because he only sees one side of him. Any action Mitch takes against him will be seen as somewhat sour grapes because of Greg’s popularity and Mitch’s relative unpopularity.”

She nodded. “Add to that the fact that Mitch has fired his share of members from the Steelworks. He has a built-in non-fan base. You know he didn’t rehire anybody from the old J.I. human resources department, right? Greg was one of them.”

I stared at her. “He was?”

“Yes, before he went to work for Shane. He was the employee benefits administrator.”

I sure as hell hadn't known *that*. "You know *why* they didn't rehire anyone from human resources?"

"No. Nobody does."

"There were thefts coming out of that department and the people who engineered the consolidation didn't know who to trust. They still don't know who the guilty party was. Or if there were more than one."

We looked at each other, and I could almost hear our tumblers clicking into place at the same time.

"Mitch and Greg have never liked each other," Prissy mused. "I think there's some ancient history there nobody knows about. Even then, it didn't stop them from working together to get the ward's business done. But then..."

"But then?"

"In November. Mitch released Greg from being Young Men's president. That was a shocker. People are still mad at him over it. I swear, I thought they were going to crucify him."

"I'll do it," I said abruptly.

When I got to work the next morning, I found a slip of paper tucked into my purse, with a good baker's dozen names on it.

* * * * *

The Nuclear Family Unit

February 25, 2011

I knew this dinner would be a nightmare, with two sets of adult children who'd come from completely different backgrounds and had completely different worldviews. Even the imminent apostate Trevor was taken aback by Clarissa's snobbery about his family's lifestyle.

Gordon's Super Dad personality had kicked in the minute he met Mitch's daughters, and he set about casting the same magic spell over Lisette and Geneviève that he had over his own daughters. They hadn't noticed anything amiss.

It had seemed so easy when it was just me and Mitch.

I wanted to grab his hand and run away from here, out of his house, to Las Vegas or, or, or anywhere we could get married alone and I could fall in bed with him and...cry.

Nigel glanced at me and raised one eyebrow, an order for me to curb Clarissa's tongue, but I looked away, unable to do anything. I was humiliated to the bottom of my soul, embarrassed for her, and Gordon and me, for rearing such a not-very-nice person.

Mitch seemed to take it in stride (surprising me), but then Clarissa didn't dare direct anything at him. I was surprised she'd be so rude within his hearing, but on reflection, I could see that having her sisters present made her more daring.

"Our husbands couldn't come," a pregnant Lisette explained in the middle of the chaos of meeting. "Mine is helping his dad with some projects, and Geneviève's is working all weekend."

Once all the introductions had been made, we stood around a bit awkwardly. Lisette gave me a little glance, then led the way to the kitchen. What she saw, I didn't know, but it was enough for her to step into the role of hostess—

Oh. *My* role.

I was supposed to have done that.

Mitch and I were the last in the processional. “Cassandra,” he murmured. “Look at me.” I did. Oh, that magnificent face, serene, slightly amused. “It’ll be okay. I promise.”

“You can’t make a promise like that,” I whispered.

His mouth twitched. “Direct revelation.”

I smiled against my will and lightly slapped his chest.

By the time we all settled around the kitchen table to eat the chili and cornbread—

“Poor people food,” Clarissa murmured. “Well. I guess I know who made dinner.”

Geneviève sucked in a breath. Olivia would have snickered but caught Paige’s glare. Nigel’s jaw clenched and Trevor stared down at his bowl, holding his spoon in a death grip. Lisette and Gordon, neither of whom had heard, continued to trade wisecracks. Helene bit her lip. Mitch dropped his arm around my shoulder and pulled me close to his side.

“We need to bless the food,” Trevor said suddenly, his head popping up.

I thought my heart would plop out into my bowl.

“Trevor,” Mitch drawled, a warning in his voice at whatever prank the kid had decided to pull.

“Sure, I’ll do it, Dad, no problem. Thanks for asking.”

Mitch and his family bowed their heads, as did I. From my periphery, I noticed Nigel do the same and elbow Gordon to follow suit. After some hesitation, Helene did, too. Paige had bowed her head without hesitation when Mitch did, then nudged Olivia, who would take up her twin’s cause—or at least not attempt to sabotage it—far more readily than she would Clarissa’s.

Trevor prayed for a long, long time, incorporating every possible thanks for home, hearth, and health, asking for every possible blessing upon “Cassie’s family” and the missionaries and the soldiers and the homeless and “on the food we’re about to receive into our bodies that Cassie so lovingly prepared,” asking that the Hollander family could be an example to those who might need a light for their path—

—every phrase accompanied by Clarissa’s sighs of impatience or sniggering or whispers to herself.

“We say these things in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.”

Mitch and his daughters said “amen,” so Paige did, but Clarissa stared at Trevor speculatively, and I tensed. “How old are you?” she asked abruptly.

“Seventeen,” Trevor replied amiably, as if he couldn’t see Clarissa’s talons.

“And you believe all that bullshit you just said?”

He blinked. “Uh...”

“Oh, my God, you *do*!” she squealed and began to laugh.

“*Please* don’t curse,” he pleaded. “Or take the Lord’s name in vain. My dad’s pretty tolerant, but I *really* don’t like it.”

“So you don’t swear? Ever?” Clarissa asked, dumbfounded.

“Oh, no,” Trevor answered with a naïve sincerity even I almost bought. “It’s against God’s law.”

“Well, *fuck*,” she said. Trevor flinched, looked away and down at the floor. That sent her and Olivia into gales of laughter, but Olivia flinched with a well-placed kick from Paige. “I bet you’re a virgin, too.”

“Of course!” he said, thoroughly affronted. “I would *never* fornicate.”

“He’s very good,” Mitch drawled and I smiled at him, my gratitude evident in my expression, I was sure.

Trevor threw everything he had into his performance as wide-eyed virginal Mormon boy, clearly enjoying himself once he’d confirmed Clarissa and Olivia had fallen for every word. Paige knew something was off-kilter, but didn’t know enough *not* to believe what Trevor said. I watched this in silence, cringing in abject mortification. Mitch suppressed a chuckle and squeezed my hand under the table.

Mitch’s girls watched, more curious than offended. Nigel said nothing, but kept glancing at me to see if I would step in as he wanted me to.

Helene did not seem amused, nor did she seem inclined to stop her sister’s taunts, and for the first time I saw her distance from me for what it was: confusion. She knew something was wrong; she’d known since she was a child. She simply didn’t know what to believe and she didn’t have enough information to figure out the truths of the situation.

However, as I watched her watch Trevor play Clarissa and Olivia like a concert pianist, once or twice I thought I saw a hint of a smile.

“You really work in a steel mill?” Olivia asked with a slight sneer.

“Yes, I do.”

“Why,” said Clarissa, her tone deliberately flat to let Trevor know she thought he was an idiot for doing so. “Don’t you have a trust fund?”

“No.”

Helene coughed into her hand, releasing something that sounded like “bullshit.” Lisette and Geneviève exchanged significant glances. Nigel sat back to watch, now interested in where Trevor was going to take this. Gordon glanced at me, uneasy, and all three of my other girls sat stunned.

“Do you want to work—in a *factory*—for the rest of your life?” Clarissa asked, horrified.

“Why not?” Trevor asked innocently. “It’s a good job. I get union wage,” he added proudly. “It’s enough to support a couple of wives on, if not three.”

Their mouths dropped open. Geneviève and Lisette had given up any semblance of detachment and had busied themselves with dropping utensils and picking them back up again, their shoulders quaking. Helene bit her lip and looked away. Mitch had stuck his tongue in his cheek and wrapped his fingers through mine. I didn’t know what to do, what to think.

He pointed to Clarissa with his fork. “You’re pretty. I think I could be persuaded to give you the honor of being my first wife.”

“What!”

Trevor’s face fell into hurt confusion. “You don’t want to?”

“Absolutely not. That’s the most ridiculous thing I ever heard.”

“Well, you’d have help once I got you a sister-wife. Then there’d be two of you and you could share all the housework and take turns mowing the yard, unless you want to get a sheep or something. You’d have to take turns being pregnant, too. I wouldn’t allow both of my wives to be pregnant at the same time.”

Nigel grimaced. Gordon tensed. Helene coughed again. And again. Mitch’s body trembled and I didn’t know which one of them would burst first.

“You’re a *pig*,” Olivia whispered, horrified.

Trevor looked at her blankly. “Pig? Me? Naw. I love women. The more the better

and I intend to sleep with all my wives in the same bed every night. You know, like cowboys and their three-dog nights.”

Geneviève lost it first, then Lisette. Nigel snickered, and then the glares that Clarissa and Olivia leveled at them made Helene start laughing, then Mitch. Paige looked around, then began to smile. Gordon tried to chuckle.

Trevor kept his face perfectly straight, perfectly serious.

I didn’t find much funny about it at all.

Clarissa and Olivia looked around, confused, then back at Trevor. “You know what they say about people who assume,” he drawled, and sat back in his chair with a smirk. They sucked in breaths and looked at each other, unable to decide whether to be angry, embarrassed, or both and in what mixture. “Now,” he continued. “You all can play Little Miss Junior League somewhere else if you can’t act like civilized human beings. I cannot believe someone as *awesome* as Cassie gave birth to bitches like you.”

Both girls choked. Paige chortled.

“Trevor!” Mitch barked. “You apologize right now.”

“No, Mr. Hollander, he’s right,” Helene interrupted, sliding a glance at her sisters, who now seemed to shrink with uncertainty. “You came here to embarrass Mom in front of her soon-to-be new family and it got turned back on you. How’d it feel?”

Clarissa glared at Helene. “They’re *Mormon*,” she said, as if it were all that needed to be said.

“Oh, I see. Your tolerance level doesn’t extend to people of faith, right? Just to your special-interest downtroddens.”

“They hate homosexuals.”

Trevor rolled his eyes and heaved a great sigh while Lisette and Geneviève looked at each other, no longer amused.

“Uh, Clarissa...” Gordon began uncertainly. “Mitch and Nigel are friends, and everyone’s been very accepting of us.”

“Yeah, right *now*.”

I gulped, and squeezed Mitch’s hand tighter and tighter, while he let it play out.

“Girls,” I said quietly. “That’s enough. Let’s start over, okay?”

“No, I want to talk about this,” Helene said, “and I think Mr. Hollander probably agrees with me.”

Mitch inclined his head a bit and I knew at that moment that the two of them were allies, that they understood each other. I didn’t know how; perhaps I didn’t know Helene very well at all—

—or perhaps she was tired of her solitary task of trying to unravel the knot of deceit that had started before she was born, and wanted to get to the end.

“Paige,” she said, “how do you feel about Mom marrying Mr. Hollander?”

“She’s thrilled,” Clarissa sneered, glaring at her youngest sister. “He went to one recital, clapped and cheered, and now she’s all about the guy.”

“What do *you* do that he could clap and cheer for?” Paige snapped back. She’d always had Clarissa’s number.

Clarissa flushed, but Helene had moved on. “Olivia? Problem with the Hollanders?”

She waved a hand toward Trevor. “He made fun of us,” she grumbled.

“So? You started it. Here, in their own home, even. Insulted his family and you were mean to Mom, whom he obviously loves to bits.”

Oh. That stinging behind the bridge of my nose started up again and my grip on Mitch's hand tightened.

"Well, yeah," she agreed. "He loves her, but she's not *his* mom."

"Olivia," Helene said, "did it occur to you that since he *doesn't* have a mother, he might be happy about getting one?"

Trevor snorted. "And it wasn't like *you* were snuggling up to her. *Somebody* had to."

"Trevor," Geneviève snapped. "Shut your mouth. You had your fun."

His mouth tightened, but he obeyed.

"But he's got a point, Geneviève," Helene said, still looking at Olivia. "*He* won't take her for granted. Maybe it's time you—*we*—learned how life would be without Mom around all the time."

Olivia flushed. I gulped.

"*Now* do you have an issue with it?"

"No," she lied, and turned to Paige for comfort.

"Good. Clarissa?"

Clarissa cast a calculating glare at me, then stared at Trevor. "Did you know," she began slowly, deliberately, and my body tingled as if bracing for the impact of a speeding freight train. I knew what was coming, but it was time to get it out in the open, in front of Mitch's children.

"Don't," Helene said warningly, but Clarissa didn't give any indication she heard her.

"My mother," she spat, "*fucked* people—men *and* women—for money for ten years."

"And what did she do with that money?" Trevor shot back, as if he had known exactly what she was going to say. I looked helplessly at Mitch and he shrugged. My chest felt like it had been kicked in; Trevor had known...all along. And he still thought I was "awesome."

And, just like her mother, Clarissa had no comeback for an unexpected Hollander reaction. "Uh, I—I—" Her nostrils flared. "What's that got to do with anything? I just told you she was a whore. Because she was *bored*."

I looked to Lisette and Geneviève, but they seemed more interested in watching Clarissa lose her cool.

"That's true," I said. "I did that, and that's why I did it."

Mitch's girls glanced at me as if I were incidental to this process, then back at Clarissa. I looked at Mitch again and he shook his head. No, they hadn't known, but I assumed that once their curiosity passed, I'd get hit with the censure.

Trevor was still gritting his teeth at Clarissa. Gordon stared blankly at something over my head, and Nigel glared between the two of us.

"You know," Trevor drawled. "I can think of a lot less honorable ways to make money than by getting paid to *fuck* people." Clarissa gaped. "You're how old? Twenty-four? Shouldn't you have graduated two years ago? But you live with your *mommy* and sponge off her so you can stay a perpetual student. I think that's a kind of prostitution, don't you? Only not so honest."

She sucked in a sharp breath.

"I work in a steel mill thirty hours a week," Trevor continued. "I get nasty dirty filthy. I drive a shitty truck because that was what I could afford to buy to get me to work

and school and back. I have a bank account that's almost half the size of your trust fund and I earned every cent of it by either working or investing. I live here, yeah, but I don't ask my dad for money because I don't have to, and I haven't even graduated from high school yet. I can pay my way through any college in the world I want to go to, but I won't have to because I got scholarships and none of them are athletic ones."

Clarissa's color dropped completely.

"I had a step up on the world, that's true, and I don't have that many bills to pay, but you've got the same ride, and you're doing...what again? Oh, right, going to school on somebody else's dime and not working at all. You live in a townhouse on the Upper East Side and have a car service. I bet you don't even know how to drive. Oh, what's that? You say you go skiing up in Vermont every weekend in the winter? Summers in The Hamptons and Martha's Vineyard? So answer the question. Where did that money go?"

Mitch squeezed my hand again. Trevor knew that, too. How? I doubted Mitch would have told Trevor any of my history, but Trevor had learned how to invest from the best and either Sebastian had told him or Knox had shown him how to follow the money.

"I don't—I don't know," Clarissa whispered, her gaze locked on Trevor as if he were a snake and he had hypnotized her. Then she gathered herself and spat, "It didn't go to us, that's for damn sure. Daddy pays for everything and he can't even live in his own house— The house she *stole* from him, just like she stole his whole life."

Gordon choked.

I sighed.

"Enough!" Nigel roared, slamming his hand down on the table. The only person who didn't jump was Mitch. Clarissa gaped at him, as if she'd never seen him before and indeed, she had never seen *this* Nigel Tracey. She only knew charmingly arrogant Nigel Tracey, the stepfather who treated her like an overenthusiastic puppy and made her like it. Nigel turned to Gordon. "You take care of this," he growled. My ex-husband withered under his disapproval. "This is your fault. You fix it. Fifteen years, Gord, and I'm *goddamn* tired of cleaning up the pieces of the mess you made of her life."

I stared at Nigel, my jaw slack. Cleaning up? *My* life? In *pieces*?

"Now, wait a minute—"

"Shut up," he snarled at me. "I'm *goddamn* sick of your martyrdom, too."

The kitchen was silent, but Mitch's thumb caressed the back of my hand. I didn't dare look at him, so I looked at my daughters, who gaped at Nigel, shocked. Mitch's children looked more curious than anything else, but were too polite to reveal just how morbid their curiosity might be.

"Now," Nigel said, taking a bite of his chili before relaxing into his seat, as if he hadn't just kicked the planet off its axis. "I figure this is as good a time as any to get it all out on the table. Mitch?"

"I agree," he murmured, a hint of amusement in his voice making me glance at him, but no. His face was as poker as it ever was.

He was far too calm about this. Had been all evening, letting Clarissa run her mouth like she had, bearing the entire conversation with equanimity as if he had known how it would unfold, so nothing surprised him.

"You two planned this," I said tightly, looking between Mitch and Nigel.

"Well," Mitch drawled, fiddling with his utensils, "I wouldn't use the word 'plan.'"

"You and *he*—" I waved a hand across the table at my traitorous best friend. "—"

decided to put all the ingredients together and turn up the heat to see what it'd do."

He pursed his lips. "More or less."

"You *bastard*." I was so angry I could barely keep from screaming at him.

Mitch shrugged. "Here or a therapist's office. We figured this'd be more efficient."

"I didn't know *Bishop* Hollander was invited to this meeting."

He merely chuckled and lifted his arm, settling it around my shoulders and pulling me into his side. And, angry as I was, I reluctantly took comfort from his strong body, his warmth. I leaned my head on his shoulder and closed my eyes for a second to breathe in Mitch's scent.

"Talk," Nigel murmured, but it wasn't directed at me. I had nothing to say.

"I..." Gordon cleared his throat. Took a deep breath. Looked up at me. "I'm sorry," he said. Clearly. Decisively. "Yes. I really do want your forgiveness."

My heart pounded in my throat so hard I couldn't ignore it. This was something I had never, in my wildest dreams, thought would happen, his willingness to come clean. Our daughters stared between us, their faces betraying some...fear?...of whatever Gordon had to say.

"Gordon, no. Don't—"

Nigel glared at me. "Be. Quiet."

I shut my mouth.

"Cassie, my first mistake was marrying you."

The girls gasped, but I only nodded.

"My second was teaching the girls to be contemptuous of you, taking my anger with my father, the situation, out on you. No matter what else I did to you, *that* was the worst."

My mouth tightened, and I looked down at the table, unable to breathe because I didn't think he'd ever realize that.

"You," he said, his voice going around the table. "Helene, Olivia, Paige. *Clarissa*." She was terrified, and I reveled in the moment. Quite clearly, she had never thought Gordon would express any overt displeasure with her. Olivia sniffled and Paige bit her lip. Helene simply stared up over our heads. "I don't even know what to say."

"It's not important," I murmured, now that I had gotten what I wanted, never having wanted it at all. "Gordon, I just wanted to know you'd do it, so— Leave it alone now. It's okay."

He looked relieved and I knew he would've left it, but Helene finally spoke.

"It's *not* okay," she whispered, her face as pale as Clarissa's, looking down at her lap, twisting her napkin. She raised her eyes to me, then, her mouth trembling. "*It is* important. *I* need to know, even if nobody else does. *Somebody* is lying. *Please*, Mom."

The silence descended because *I* had no intention of dragging out inconsequential skeletons.

"I never had any money," Gordon finally said, throwing his napkin at the table and sitting up, planting his elbows on the table and lacing his fingers together in front of his mouth. "The house was never mine. It was St. James's and he gave it to Cassie free and clear in reparation." He paused. "I would've had nothing without your mother, and I punished her for it."

He had the entire table's attention now. "I refused to look in a mirror and see who I was. My father knew. Everybody knew I was gay. Except me. And *he* didn't want a confirmed bachelor running around, just waiting to discover his sexuality. He threatened

to cut me off if I didn't marry this...pretty little girl...with stars in her eyes."

I swallowed.

"But if I did, I'd have unlimited cash flow. Of course I took the deal, but he'd lied to me and swindled your Grandfather St. James. All the money we had was your mother's, but she was smart—brilliant. And you know how frugal your grandparents are. Well, she knew how to make money and save money—even then.

"But I didn't. Oh, was I pissed. Because not only did my father cut me off anyway, *then* it turned out my barely legal new wife was as tightfisted as her parents—and here I was, almost thirty years old, begging for money from a teenage girl I didn't love and didn't want, who had full and sole control over her trust, who wouldn't give me any of it.

"So I forged her signature and dug into her trust. And then I started getting loans in her name, mortgaging her property. She was millions of dollars in debt before she was twenty-five, and she didn't even know it. And now I'm as broke as I ever was. But your mother isn't."

I swallowed even as Clarissa stared at me as if she had never met me. "So...the house? Our trusts, school..." I looked away, unable to bear the look of devastation on her face. "Everything?" she whispered and looked back at Gordon. "But how—"

"She gives me money to give to you," Gordon said flatly. "She buys your birthday and Christmas presents and says they're from me, because I don't know you like she does, what you'll really like. She's always done it, from the time you were little. I bought you things, but it was what you pointed out to me. I was always with you when I bought you things, and I never paid attention to what meant most to you. Or I gave you the money to get what you wanted. She pays your tuition and school fees, funds your trusts, and lets you think I did. She pays for everything."

Olivia slowly buried her face in Paige's shoulder, and Paige's head was bowed. Helene wiped tears off her cheeks.

Gordon looked at me, silently begging me for forgiveness and I nodded. "Why?" he asked softly. "Why'd you do that?"

"I was exhausted," I said, staring down into the chili I had no appetite for, clutching Mitch's hand. "Exhausted from telling you—and them—no. Exhausted from fighting you. Exhausted from hearing the constant 'I want's, listening to the tantrums. Then having to listen to you bitch at me because no matter what I gave, it wasn't enough. Five against one. So I gave up. Finally. When I had the money. You got what you wanted and I didn't have to listen to it anymore. All I had to do was throw money at you every so often. The girls were perfectly satisfied with whatever they got as long as it came from you. So...whatever resentment you all have is...worth it. It's worth any amount of money not to be constantly hounded for anything and everything that never pleased anybody anyway."

I couldn't bear to look at my family, but I did glance up at Nigel. He'd never figured it out, and he looked back at me, abashed. The remonstrations, the lectures—I kept waiting for him to make the connection...

"All those years," Helene whispered. "You sewed our clothes and gardened and canned, made bread and fixed 'poor people food,' made our birthday presents, and we made fun of you, wouldn't wear what you made, wouldn't eat what you fixed—" I tensed. "We really didn't have any money, did we?"

I didn't answer that.

“Why not?” Clarissa demanded.

“Because I spent it all,” Gordon snapped, and Clarissa shrank into herself. “Aren’t you listening? I spent every dime I made, every dime your mother had and millions she didn’t.”

“But—” Clearly Clarissa couldn’t process this. “Where did it go?”

He stabbed his temple with his finger. “*Think* about it, Clarissa. European vacations. Cruises in the Orient. Skiing in the Alps. Personal shoppers. Private schools. French and Spanish lessons. Piano lessons. Dance lessons. Being wealthy takes work, Clarissa. *Acting* wealthy is expensive.” He barked a humorless laugh. “You don’t remember your mother coming along on those trips, do you? No. She was trying to save money in the only way she could. She couldn’t keep up with me. You. Us. She was drowning. I left her to it, and I left her with you four as ballast. She didn’t steal my life. I stole hers.”

My heart hurt. I had never wanted them to know this, how close we had come to destitution and that it was all Gordon’s fault.

He cleared his throat. “The reasons I went to prison— They were true. Every last charge.”

Paige, Olivia, Helene nearly collapsed, but Clarissa’s face reddened. “Not—”

Gordon looked her in the face. “Yes. Even *that* one.”

“Don’t blame your father,” I said hastily. “*That* was an aberration. Other than that, he *never*—”

“*Why?*” Helene growled, staring at her father, her face betraying anger I’d never suspect her of. “What did she do that would warrant...*that*?”

He blanched. Looked down at the table. “She made me confront the fact that I was gay,” he mumbled. “She knew. All she wanted was for me to acknowledge it somehow. Get a nice, quiet divorce. Share custody and be at peace—as much as we could’ve been. Or stay together for you girls, and I could take a lover. So between the money and that— It...hit me where I lived and I wanted to hurt her, to break her. So I tried.”

I could see Helene’s rage, feel it vibrating the air. She burst out of her chair, Gordon her target, but Trevor was faster, and caught her around the waist. She didn’t fight him, but my quiet, observant daughter had been pushed beyond her limits, and her chest heaved.

I went to her. “Helene,” I murmured. I touched her, took her from Trevor, turned her to face me, away from Gordon. “Helene. Look at me, love.” She focused. Finally. “Listen to me very carefully. If he had not done that,” I said slowly to make sure she understood, “I could *never* have gotten out of a very bad situation. It was awful. It hurt. I was terrified and I fought, but even while it was happening, I knew it was the key to a better future for all of us. Can you understand that?” She blinked.

“Your father was Rivington’s pawn, just like I was. He had nowhere to turn, no one to talk to. I do *not* blame him for that. Any of it. He gave me the only thing I could use as a weapon to get out from under your grandfather’s thumb.

“And don’t you forget— No matter what, your father has always adored you, wanted to make you happy, and he does. He always has. Everything turned out fine.”

“Helene,” Gordon said gently. “Prison was the best thing that ever happened to me. I’ve told you that before. Now you know why.”

“It’s done. Past. It was a *good* thing. Let it go.”

I could feel the tension in the room fade as Helene’s faded, and she plopped back

into her chair, helpless. She pushed her food away, laid her arms on the table and put her head down. There was nothing more I could do, so I returned to my seat, at Mitch's side, glad to have his solid body against mine.

Then I noticed Clarissa's dead-on stare. "But *prostitution*?"

I shrugged and looked away.

"You have an MBA!"

"*Think* about that a minute, Clarissa! I could only get my MBA afterwards, when I had the money and time to do it. Otherwise, I had no marketable skills and quite frankly, I wasn't sure I could market *that* one, either. I wanted to be home for you," I said, only now willing to admit to myself how deeply I resented that Gordon had the life I'd wanted. "I didn't want to be like the other mothers—the ones who hated me, by the way—who went off and left their children with nannies." I paused. "I guess nannies would've done a better job raising you."

"No!" she yelled and pounded the table as she stood. "There's *got* to be another reason." She pointed at me. "You can't tell me you did it because you were bored and you can't tell me you did it for the money and you can't tell me you did it because you wanted to be home with us or because Dad—*Gordon*—raped you. Those might be true, but that's not all of it. *Why*?"

* * * * *

Hadassah

I looked Clarissa in the eye, and stared at her until she sat back down, slowly, hypnotized. Of all of my girls, she would be the only one who could suss out the inconsistencies and discern something deeper.

"I was turned into a whore the minute Rivington figured out I had a crush on your father," I said flatly. "I was fifteen. Then I was sold just after my eighteenth birthday, and your grandfathers were my pimps. It took me years to realize that."

Gordon slid down in his chair and covered his face with his hands. Nigel patted his shoulder.

"So you did do it for the money?" Paige asked, more fascinated than horrified.

"No. My father bankrupted himself trying to get me out of that mess. Nigel bailed me the rest of the way out and kept me afloat until I could earn some real money—and I paid every bit of my own debt back to him."

"*Then why?*!" Clarissa cried.

Then silence descended and became complete. Mitch still held my hand, tightened his grip when I tried to pull away, but I couldn't bear to look up at all of these people looking at me as if I were some pathetic specimen in a high school science lab. I'd made my choices deliberately. Explaining why I'd made them didn't make them any more valid; in fact, it cheapened them. It made me look like a victim and I wasn't that.

But I would tell them, because I had no other way out of this knot than to slice it clean through. I took a deep breath.

"To make it official. To command my own price. To be in the power position. To have some way to exact my revenge."

Their expressions let me know they would never understand unless I spelled it out.

"You know," I said conversationally, "the women's studies courses I had to take in

college were very useful, although my professors would be the first to condemn me for what I did with all that rhetoric. You know what I learned? I learned that concubines, courtesans, mistresses—” I speared Clarissa with a look, and she gulped, but wouldn’t look away. “The smart ones, anyway. The elite, expensive ones. They’re the only women throughout history who ever had real power.

“You all took comparative religion, right? Bible as literature? Something like that? Notice: Half the women in the Old Testament traded sex for retribution and restitution. Power. You know the story of Esther, Queen of Jews, don’t you? Saved her people from extermination?”

The girls nodded vaguely.

“Do you think she saved her people because she was a pretty piece of art and a clever conversationalist at dinner parties? No. She saved them by fucking the king so well he couldn’t get out of bed, much less think straight. She whispered things in his ear and she pulled his strings and she pressed his buttons just right. Voilà. She got him to do what she needed done. She got a man *executed*. She wasn’t powerless by a long shot.

“But *I* was. Money alone caged me. I didn’t have the education to work my way up somewhere because I wasn’t allowed to get an education when I was young. I sat through those classes—ten years older than all the other students—and realized that the name of the thing I didn’t have, what I needed, was ‘power.’ And if I wanted any, I’d have to get it the way it’s been gotten for centuries—through sex. *Paid* sex.”

Clarissa flinched.

“I’m not going to lie and say I didn’t like it,” I continued calmly, looking around the table. The only people who looked away were my family members, not Mitch’s. Indeed, Mitch’s children were paying rapt attention. They’d probably never thought of Queen Esther that way, either. No church in its right mind would teach the story with such a spin, especially since the text was short on editorial comment.

“Or that I regret it. I don’t. I enjoyed myself for the most part. I had good sex. I made lots of money doing something I liked and I was good at. I made a friend or two. I gave you good educations and made sure you had the money and freedom to leave me and go conquer the world if you wanted to. *And* I kept you all in the high style to which you would have refused to become unaccustomed. I got the power and education I needed.

“Only then could I get the kind of job I always knew I’d love, given the chance. But that job alone *still* wouldn’t give me as much power as fucking powerful men gave me.

“You want to know how I broke Rivington? I’ll tell you. I made sure to acquire a client, a man he had wronged, and I played that man mercilessly until he did what I wanted him to do—and he *never* knew. Because he was too stupid to know I was manipulating him. He’s not the only one I did it to, either. I cut a swath through both sides of Central Park, any man or woman who stood in my way after the night your father raped me— They were going to answer for it.

“If they testified against me in divorce court. If they spread rumors about what a bitch I was to your father. If I overheard them say that I deserved what I got. If they told the police they thought I was lying about everything, the rape, the fraud. *Anyone* who made it more difficult for me to get out of my situation— I took them all down. I’m one of the most powerful women in America because *I know where the bodies are buried* and people fear me. *That* is precisely why I can have the kind of job I love. So if any of you have any inclination to pity me, don’t.”

"Mom," Olivia whined.

"No, Olivia," I snapped. "I won't have it. I set out with a specific goal in mind and that was the way I chose to accomplish it. I'd do it again in a heartbeat."

"Why didn't you ever tell us this?" Helene asked from the shelter of her arms, her voice muffled.

I stared at her, hurt for her and with her, for what I'd done to her by keeping her in the dark. And all my righteous indignation fled.

"I didn't think it mattered," I said softly. "All I wanted to do was marry your father and have his babies and be your mommy, and then when— After that, all I wanted was for you to have two parents who loved you and took care of you, which we tried to do."

"Why did you stay with him so long then?"

"She didn't have a choice," Gordon muttered. "Her parents, my father—I—didn't give her a choice. She was bound and gagged—" He paused. "Raped. And she did better than anybody else in that position could've done. Should've been able to do."

Gordon was miserable, looking to the girls for forgiveness or at least the hope of it in the future, but they wouldn't—couldn't—look at him. He'd lost them. It was my final revenge, one I had deliberately never taken.

I knew it would be too bitter for them all to swallow.

I had to speak, although I didn't know what to say. "I— You love your father, and he loves you so much. I couldn't take that away from you, from him. I can bear your contempt. He can't, and he does *not* deserve it. Please don't let this—"

In a flurry of motion, I found my lap filled with a twenty-four-year-old girl who'd wrapped herself around me and was, at that moment, sobbing into my neck. "I'm sorry, Mama, I'm sorry, I'm so sorry, Mama..."

I sighed and pulled her to me as tightly as I could.

•

We sat in the library, Mitch and I, snuggling on a couch.

Trevor and the twins, prodded by Nigel, set up a board game, in which Nigel overenthusiastically took the lead and participated.

Helene, having been cosseted and coddled by Lisette and Geneviève somewhere far away from the kitchen for the last couple of hours, now played pool with them in the next room, thoroughly engaged in trading stories of her experiences with them: Helene in medical school; Lisette in Hong Kong; Geneviève in Russia.

Gordon, sick at heart because none of the girls would look at him, much less talk to him, had gone to bed.

Clarissa stood in the doorway, leaning against the jamb and looking out a far window, tears creeping down her face that she didn't bother to hide or wipe away.

"I'd apologize for ambushing you," Mitch murmured in my ear, "but it'd be a lie."

"That never stopped you before," I grumbled. He chuckled. "It had to be done," I admitted reluctantly, "if only for Helene. She needed to know, to make sense of it, no matter how bad it was. Olivia— Paige, well, I didn't expect her to be as sympathetic as she was."

"Did you ever figure out why Clarissa stayed with you all these years? Why she moved back in?"

I knew. I'd always known. "She needs her mommy," I muttered, looking down at my hands. "She's always been clingy. Too different from Helene. The odd girl out with the

twins. Me, well..."

"Two peas in a pod."

"Co-dependent, more like."

"She wants your approval."

"She's my child. She has my approval."

"Does she know that?"

I sighed. "I don't know."

He glanced over at her and then slowly stood. "Back in a while." I turned to watch as he approached her, strong but gentle, and said with great care, "Walk with me, Clarissa?"

She looked up at him, her face blank not because she was hiding anything, but because she had nothing left to show.

"Sure," she said without emotion, and disappeared down the hall with him.

* * * * *

A River of Surprise

March 18, 2011

The wedding wherein I would tie myself to a man because he wouldn't have sex with me under any other circumstance was about the most perfect thing a woman my age could imagine. I had to admit, however reluctantly, that I felt eighteen again, fresh and innocent, filled with hope and promise for a future with a good man, a man of my choosing, a man I desired, in a dress that made me feel like a princess.

Mitch had insisted I wear white, and had recruited a sullen Clarissa to make sure it happened the way he wanted it to—but she'd done it and done it well.

I looked down at the ball gown she'd chosen for me (really, the girl has excellent taste), smoothed the nubby white silk and blinked to clear my eyes of their sudden cloudiness.

An evening wedding in mid March, all the doors and windows of the mansion thrown open to allow the hundred or so guests to enjoy the sweet, fresh, cool air. Orange roses garnished with creamy white orange blossoms punctuated every available display surface without going overboard. I peeked around a corner and down the stairs to see the guests being seated.

On the front row of the groom's side, Mitch's real family: his parents (lovely people, adorably caught up in each other and only concerned about Mitch's happiness), his daughters and sons-in-law. Behind them, his siblings and their spouses.

Following, Mitch's adopted family.

Giselle Kenard, in a subdued yellow evening gown, the bodice studded with pearls. Eilis Logan, in a black velvet and chiffon cocktail dress, next to her. Justice Hilliard, in a rich green-and-black silk cheongsam, on Eilis's right.

Vanessa Whittaker, clad in pink silk and white organza, on Justice's right. It didn't completely surprise me that Mitch knew her, but it did surprise me they were such good friends.

Giselle and Eilis had their heads together, whispering. Justice wrapped her arm around Vanessa, kissed her temple, pulled her close to allow Vanessa to lean on her. It had been several months since she had bid public, heartbreaking adieu to her lover. Mitch must be very dear to her when attending a wedding was clearly the last thing she wanted

to do.

The four women were a compelling vignette on the nature of true sisterhood and I realized that my life had been poorer for its lack, but now I had Louise and Prissy, and Prissy—who'd known little more about it than I—had me.

Morgan, to Giselle's left, draped his arm across his cousin's shoulder, drew her away from Eilis and whispered in her ear; she nodded and whispered back, gesturing as she spoke. Eilis leaned forward then and Morgan included her in the conversation. Family ties aside, I knew an impromptu business meeting when I saw one. Ah, normalcy. It soothed my nerves.

Then the few ward members we had invited: Prissy and Steve Seaton. Sabrina and Ben Johnston. Louise and Aaron Kelly. Terry and Mary Naples, his red tie matching his wife's gown.

Father Rory Farraday.

On the left were my family and colleagues. Gordon and Nigel sat with Olivia's and Paige's boyfriends.

Jack and Lydia Blackwood.

Melinda Newman, along with quite a few denizens of the financial district. The announcement of the *marriage* of Cassandra St. James to *Mitch Hollander* had sent roars of laughter echoing up and down Wall Street.

I had finally contacted my parents in Nebraska to tell them of my news, and while they were genuinely happy for me, they declined my invitation, even though I offered to pay their expenses. Their shame ran too deeply still. My genius father and ingenious mother, who had taught me how to invest and save, felt they deserved to live in poverty for having given me to Rivington. They could not bear my forgiveness.

I had asked Mitch's daughters to be bridesmaids along with my daughters, but Geneviève had said, "Cassie. Six bridesmaids is about five too many and your daughters need you. We love you, but no thanks. Please don't be offended."

Not likely. I completely agreed with her.

Nigel had offered to walk me down the aisle, but I demurred. I belonged to no one but myself and so I would go to Mitch alone.

The bishop of the Emmaus First Ward, who made his living as one of the foundry's foremen, would be performing the ceremony.

Finally things began to shake out and suddenly, I found myself surrounded by my daughters and their escorts arranging themselves at the top of the stairs: Helene as maid of honor and Trevor as best man. Sebastian and Olivia. Bryce and Paige.

Clarissa had not had to finagle me into arranging her with her idol, though Knox had coldly informed her she could not expect any consideration from him as to the status of her law school application just because she was on his arm for a wedding. He had also instructed her she was not to address him as "Knox" after she had been so bold as to do so once, and that "Dr. Hilliard" would do. But I understood her excitement, and I smiled when I saw the expressions of amused exasperation Knox cast her when she wasn't looking. He caught my glance and winked.

Clarissa turned to me and gave me the once-over, checked my strapless bodice for bits of misplaced lining, straightened the elaborate pearl-and-diamond choker Mitch had made for me out of his iridescent alloy, and made sure the white orange blossoms in my up-do were arranged to her satisfaction.

“Miss Rivington,” Knox rumbled and I saw that the first three couples were already paced down the stairs and up the aisle. He held out his arm. “It’s our turn.”

They disappeared down the stairs and I took my place, awaiting my music; then it began and I gulped when I saw all those people stand for me as I started down the stairs.

I saw Mitch across the library, standing in a tux, waiting for me with the look on his face that I knew meant he was very, very pleased.

My heart hurt in a way I had not known before.

Expectation. Longing.

I knew my face was an open book at this moment, but I could not discipline my expression to hide all the things I wasn’t sure I wanted known. Perhaps even things I didn’t know I might be exposing.

I reached the floor and stepped onto the white runner strewn with orange rose petals and stayed there, suddenly unable to move. But I wanted to; I wanted to walk the path that would take me to Mitch. Why I couldn’t, I didn’t know. My left hand fell to my side, my orange-roses-with-orange-blossoms bouquet in it, and I held the other out for Mitch, palm up. I didn’t know why I did such a thing; it was completely contrary to wedding protocol and not what we had rehearsed, but he didn’t hesitate. He strode down the aisle toward me, his eyes alight, one corner of his mouth turned up.

Then my hand was in his big, warm, callused one. “Hi,” he murmured.

I looked up at him. “Hi.”

He placed my hand in the crook of his arm and said, “Whereya headed?”

“I’m on my way to get married.”

“Is that something you want to do right now?”

“Oh, yes, very much.”

“Then can I give you a lift?”

“I’d appreciate it.”

I saw no one but Mitch, his strong profile, his understated but unflappable humor, his soft smirk teasing me without a word.

I think I blushed.

I don’t remember one word of that ceremony, but it didn’t matter. All I needed to know was my cue to say “I do.”

I did.

And with one long, deep kiss shortly after he said, “I do,” I became a Mormon bishop’s wife.

* * * * *

More Room in a Broken Heart

I lost myself as Mitch swept me into the first dance of the evening to an odd choice of a song, a Carly Simon one I’d never paid attention to. It caught my ear one day as I stood in Bergdorf, absently fondling a metal vase not nearly so beautiful as the ones Mitch had made for me.

Here we were, coming around again, two people in our mid-forties with a marriage each behind us, seven adult children and a grandchild between us, each of us having made our own names and fortunes, meeting as equals on a dance floor on the occasion of our wedding.

The song faded and we kissed again—

—just before the Latin beats pounded through the speakers.

“Mother!” Clarissa hissed at me and dragged me away to the bedroom I’d be sharing with Mitch for the next year. She had my long skirt stripped off me before I could breathe. “Here,” she said. The little white salsa skirt she’d ordered smacked me in the butt and slid to the floor. “Shit, where are those shoes? Oh, here!”

“Clarissa, calm down,” I murmured as I bent to step into the skirt, then sat down on the bed to put on white ballroom dance shoes covered in sequins. “You’re more nervous than I am. It’s over. Go dance and have a good time.”

She stopped and stared at me as if she had never seen me before. Bit her lip. “I love you, Mom,” she whispered, then fled as if I’d just carved her out of my will.

When I descended the stairs, I found a house full of people applying themselves most diligently to the purpose of dancing. Mitch’s family—save Sebastian, who stood in a corner nursing a glass of punch—were, while not terribly conversant with the actual steps, mixing up elements of swing, two-step, and jive for a decent imitation.

It would do.

Mitch caught me as soon as I put my foot on the floor, and he jerked me to him tight, then spun me out.

The floor cleared immediately, and not because we were the bride and groom.

We danced more intimately than we ever had, with his thigh between my legs as I shimmied and ground. It was downright dirty. Catcalls, whistles, hoots, and shouts, but halfway through our guests couldn’t stay on the sidelines anymore.

This party would last all night long.

I danced with every male present except Morgan, whose knowing grin I was studiously ignoring, and Sebastian, who, I was curtly informed, did not dance.

“Are you serious?” I said.

“My artistic and/or higher math talents do not extend to the basics of being able to count in time. Or carry a tune.” He pointed to the outskirts of the dance floor, where his wife was getting a crash course by Bryce. “See? She’s doing better than I could ever do, and my brother-in-law has to teach her.” Then he huffed a reluctant chuckle. “I need a drink. I would’ve spiked the punch, but with my luck, they’d all die of alcohol poisoning with the first cup.” I laughed. “I bet you’re dying for a good martini. Want me to go get the fixings and smuggle you a flask?”

I opened my mouth to take him up on it and gratefully, then snapped it shut again. “No,” I murmured, feeling much better that *someone* in this house half full of teetotalers understood.

His expression took on a certain chill and his body tensed. “You going the conversion route?”

I shrugged, even in the face of his blatant disapproval. “In for a penny, in for a pound.”

He studied me for a half second, his eyes narrowed. “Has Mitch asked you to?” he asked slowly.

“God, no. As far as I can tell, he’s completely ambivalent about whether I join the Church or not.”

He grinned suddenly. “Really,” he drawled with great satisfaction, as if he’d found some deeper meaning in it. When the music changed to a slow dance and Mitch came

looking for me, Sebastian handed me off to my new husband with a clap on his back.

“Well, hello,” I whispered just before he kissed me.

It wasn’t a dance so much as we stood in the middle of the dancers and I lost myself in his kiss. Unlike all the evenings before, all the days after he had kissed me for the first time, this time I knew that what I wanted would happen, but—

“Let’s go to bed,” he growled against my lips.

—he needed a dose of his own medicine.

“Now, Mitch,” I murmured, coy, pushing myself away from him just a bit, “we have guests and obligations.”

He groaned good-naturedly. “Aw, Cassandra, that’s torture.”

“This is your own fault, making me wait three months and get married, when you *knew* I wanted to fuck you on our first date.”

“But you did, in fact, wait three months and get married.”

“Yes. So now *you* can sacrifice a few more hours.”

It was unfortunate that the first real chance I had to get to know the women of Mitch’s adopted family was during a celebration, instead of an all-nighter around a dinner table with good food and wine flowing.

I met Vanessa Whittaker, who hid her sorrow well enough if one didn’t know what to look for. I complimented her on the food, asked about her time as a chef in New York, and deliberately didn’t mention her publicity woes or the man she so clearly pined for. “Mitch spent a lot of time at my inn after his wife died,” she replied when I asked her how she knew him. “Sebastian sent him, asked me to look after him. He’s such a sweet man.”

I took that as the most gracious of warnings and acknowledged it with a nod, because apparently, these people who loved Mitch like a brother viewed me with some suspicion.

Hell, I’d look at me suspiciously, too.

Justice Hilliard was just as sharp-tongued in private conversation as she was on the internet and talk radio, but her propensity for off-color humor took the edge off her cutting wit. The girl could’ve made a living as a stand-up comedian. “So how did you catch Knox Hilliard?” I asked, and immediately realized I’d stuck my sequined foot in my mouth. She slid me an amused glance. “What you mean to ask is why I deign to stay with him. Right?” I laughed, not wondering a moment longer.

Eilis Logan, bored with her dance lesson, could barely pull her eyes away from some point over my shoulder and thus, was not a good conversationalist. I finally turned around to find King Midas staring at her hotly. “Excuse me,” she muttered, put her cup on the table, and brushed past me to join him. They promptly disappeared.

Then there was Giselle Kenard, fanning herself with a handful of napkins, her face flushed from dancing nonstop. (With her complexion, she’d flush from jogging up a short flight of stairs.) She had apparently noticed Eilis’s abrupt departure and said, rather apologetically, “Three kids. Who have completely wrecked the Taights’ sex life. But you watch. Nine months from now? Taight number four. That woman’s more fertile than the Nile and for her, pregnancy is a permanent state of euphoria.”

I was only a little older than Eilis. I couldn’t imagine starting a new family at my age, but my train of thought derailed when Giselle finally got to her point.

“I saw the way you looked at my husband in December.”

The edge in her voice was unmistakable. It was probably the first time she’d ever

been confronted with another woman who found him and his mangled face sexually attractive—and she didn't know quite how to deal with it. I smirked. "Well, dish."

"Yes. He *is* that good."

"He looks like he'd be rough on a girl."

"He is fabulously nasty."

"For what it's worth, I'm no threat to you."

"That presumes that you think you ever could be." I laughed. "But as it happens, I have also been watching you watch Mitch this evening."

"Look at him," I said, pointing to where he was teaching Paige how to cha cha. Ballet, jazz, and contemporary dance had superseded proper ballroom dance lessons when the girls were growing up. "Do you blame me?"

She snickered. "Ah, okay. If that's what you want me to think, I'll go with it."

My amusement vanished. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"I have never seen a woman so in love with a man."

"Please. I only married him to fuck him. I'm pretty sure you all got the memo."

"Do you lie to yourself a lot or is this an aberration?" No, I did *not* like this woman. "Look," she said, and turned to the refreshments table to write on a napkin, "I don't like you, but I like what you do for Mitch." She offered the napkin, her phone number on it. "Call me when you figure out you're in over your head. We can go wreak havoc on Manhattan and, while I am bankrupting my husband at Manolo Blahnik, I can give you the nitty gritty of your new culture."

I snatched it out of her hand and crumpled it up, but she only smirked and turned, wagging her fingers over her shoulder. "Toodles."

"Cassandra," said that low voice in my ear, tempering my anger and turning it to desire. I could wait no longer. "New York's a long way away." I pressed backward against him, too much white silk and beaded fringe between me and his cock for me to tell anything.

But I knew.

"Not with you driving," I said as I turned in his arms.

His chest rumbled with a chuckle.

"I want to fuck you, Mitchell Hollander."

"Right back at you, Cassandra Hollander."

* * * * *

Languid and Bittersweet

It wasn't the worst sex I'd ever had, but it came pretty close.

No surprise, really, given that Mitch's entire twenty-three-year sexual history consisted of one woman who had been as ignorant as he when they set out on their journey together. They'd probably fallen into some humdrum twice-a-month routine comprised of missionary position and possibly, on a frisky night, woman-on-top—before her disease had progressed far enough that even that had to stop.

He'd been celibate for over fifteen years.

It was just another example of a lifestyle I would never have imagined existed and that millions of people led. I couldn't fathom why I was so attracted to the concept, to this man, to his parishioners.

"I'm sorry," he sighed as he lay alongside me, his arm across my chest and his hand in my hair.

I couldn't help being amused by that, enough to shake me out of some pique. "Well," I said, "your bite isn't as good as your bark, I'll admit."

He laughed and nuzzled my ear. "It's been a while."

"Tell me something. Is this the way it was with Mina?"

His body tensed, though if in anger I couldn't tell. It wasn't like Mitch to get angry over an honest question, but finally, he relaxed and said, "I don't remember."

The rest of my annoyance fled. He was so different from anyone I'd ever met and the matter-of-fact delivery tore at me somewhere inside my chest.

"How can I help you?" he whispered as his hand caressed my breast, light, soft, like a feather. I shivered because this—this I had never known, this caring and gentleness. "I hear this rumor women have orgasms all the time," he said dryly, "but I don't know if Mina ever did."

"She probably didn't or you'd remember. You can tell."

"Teach me."

I began to smile. He sounded so unsure, so...adolescent, and I realized that he still was, in terms of sexuality once the bedroom door closed. I'd instructed young men (always at their fathers' request), but I'd never instructed a man my own age who had a marriage under his belt with three children and a grandchild to show for it.

It was the first time in a long time I found sex to be...*intriguing*.

"Mitch," I whispered and shifted to kiss him, slowly, alternately teasing him and giving him the full force of a kiss. He excited me, this steel magnate and long-suffering man of God with everything going on in a salsa club and next to nothing going on in the bedroom; it was new and different. Adventurous. So I'd had to marry him to get him in bed. So what? I couldn't regret it even if the sex had been perfunctory, albeit unintentionally. There was just something about him...

"I'm going to make love to you, Mitch. Remember what I do and use this as the rule of thumb: Whatever I do to you, odds are, I'll like it if you do it to me."

"But I just finished—I can't rebound that fast."

"By the time I need your cock again, you'll be ready." Well, that was a lie. I needed it again right now, but if my time as a plaything meant anything, it was that I could be very, very patient. I knew that in Mitch I had an eager student, a man who wanted to please. I also knew—somehow—that he had the potential of being one of the best lovers I had ever had.

He drew me over him and down as I kissed him, deep, slow, so that I lay on him and even now he meant to keep control, with his fingers in my hair and a big, callused hand clutching my bare buttock. I let that happen for a while so I could drink in his taste, smell the musk of a powerful male sweaty from sex and expensive cologne. I caressed his face with my thumbs while we kissed, while our tongues slid and stroked.

I gasped when his hand slid down between my legs and he slid his finger up inside me, not only because it had been unexpected but because it was electric. It was simple, that caress, and one that I'd felt dozens of times, but with Mitch...

"You're wet," Mitch whispered against my chin as he kissed me. Normally I would have laughed at his statement of the obvious, but he knew it was obvious; he was starting over, using his imagination, unwilling in the end to let me teach him anything, wanting to

learn on his own with a woman who wouldn't balk at anything he wanted to try. He slid two more fingers inside me and caressed me—was it even possible to be *caressed* inside?

"Tell me what you want, Mitch."

"I want to watch you masturbate."

I opened my eyes and looked down at him. "You never say anything I expect."

He cocked an eyebrow. "Stop expecting."

I laughed then, delighted. "Why do you want to watch me masturbate?"

"So I know what to do to make you come."

"Oral sex makes me come."

A slow grin grew on his face. "I'd rather do that, then."

He rolled me onto my back until I reclined on a firm wedge-shaped pillow I'd ordered for just this purpose. His big, rough hands gripped my ankles and spread my legs wide. I couldn't catch my breath while I watched him lie between my thighs, his hands stroking up my legs, wrapping around my hips. Then all I could see was his head between my thighs, his sandy hair contrasting sharply against the black of my neatly trimmed pussy. As I looked down my body and watched him eat me, I could feel his tongue inside me, hesitant, unskilled, sloppy.

Eager.

Then he found my clit and pulled it into his mouth. I gasped, shocked, startled by the beginnings of an orgasm I hadn't expected.

I was going to come on a lick and a promise.

I knew how I'd taste, my juices commingled with his, and to know he tasted them too...

"Mitch, kiss me."

He looked up at me, then rose up on his knees, one against my hip and one between my legs, pressing up into me. He planted one hand on the bed over my head, lowered his body to mine, pressing me deep into the pillow. His kiss was hard, masterful, and indeed I could taste me and him on his lips, his tongue. I whimpered and he turned his attention to my jaw, stroking me with open-mouthed kisses.

The seducer had become the seduced.

I began to come with nothing more than a bare male body pressed to mine, the scent of my own arousal in my nose, my taste on my tongue, his mouth on my jaw.

Then I felt his knee move away, leaving me open and wanting— He slid the fingers of his left hand inside me again, driving in, the heel of his palm pressing against my clit and rocking with the rhythm of my orgasm as if I'd taught him that, which I hadn't.

"Come for me, Cassandra," he whispered in my ear as it went on and on. I arched my back and cried out. I tried to tell him I *was* coming and why the *hell* didn't he know that, but I could barely form a word much less an entire sentence. His thumb touched my clit and he bent to suck on my nipple. "Again," he said, and it was as if he thought he could command me.

I obeyed.

"Mitch," I gasped as my pussy clamped around his fingers. I had to wrap my arms around his neck to hold on while I fell off the edge of the world. "Oh, *God*, Mitch."

I felt the rumble of his chuckle as I drifted down from that high, languorous, lethargic, as if I had never had an orgasm in my life.

Now I knew what it was like to fuck a squeaky-clean Mormon bishop and I wanted

to do it again.
And again.

* * * * *

Between the Moon and New York City

March 19, 2011

Mitch awoke slowly in the unfamiliar bed that dominated the suite at the top of Cassandra's townhouse. Her naked body was wrapped around him, warm, soft, woman. She smelled of roses, orange blossoms, and sex. He was ready for her again, but he dreaded it.

He'd failed.
Spectacularly.

For the first time since he'd come home from his mission early.

His gut churned as his mind replayed the hours before, when he had *taken* her without so much as a by-your-leave, gotten *his* needs met, then clumsily found his way—*somehow*—to giving her an orgasm. He knew he wouldn't be able to do it again because he didn't remember what he'd done in the first place.

Then there was the possibility she'd faked her orgasm, but how would he know? Did other men know when their wives faked orgasm? And would it matter? He supposed Cassandra would be more accomplished at it than most men's wives.

For the first time ever he *hated* the restrictions he'd accepted as a member of the Church, a man of God, a judge in Israel. He should have been better at this, better at...everything about it. He was forty-four years old and he knew no more than a twenty-one-year-old freshly returned missionary.

And, worse. That Mina had never had that, never known that. He had never done that for his first wife, a woman he loved, the mother of his children. That, at least, he could remember.

Never given her oral sex.
Never even thought about it.

If he'd known how to make sex pleasurable for her...known that it *could* be...
I want to watch you masturbate.

He groaned. Had he really said that? Because he was too ignorant to know what to do and had *admitted* it?

Embarrassed, humiliated at his ineptitude, he disengaged from her to hit the bathroom. He got in a hot shower, unwilling to face her this morni— He looked out the window. Afternoon.

She would leave him sooner rather than later, and he wouldn't blame her.

He started when the glass door to the shower opened and she stepped in, tall, lithe, smiling. What in the world did she have to smile about?

But he stared at her and her smile faltered. She bit her lip. "Uh, maybe this wasn't such a good idea," she murmured and turned to go.

"I'm sorry," he blurted.

She stopped, her back stiff. She looked over her shoulder but down at the wet floor. "Sorry for what?"

"I'm sorry I was so bad last night. It must have been horrible for you and I—I'm

sorry.”

She slowly looked up at him, her piquant face serious, uncertain. “You’re not— Uh, you’re not sorry you married me?”

“No,” he breathed, horrified that she might have thought that, but looking at it from a bishop’s experience in dealing with people, it was only natural. He’d been too caught up in being a man who didn’t know how to please his wife, a man dealing with a sudden onslaught of insecurities, to think about hers. “No, Cassandra. Don’t think that.”

“You weren’t bad,” she said slowly, looking into his eyes as if to impart something important. “You’re inexperienced. That’s different. You made me come twice, one right after another. That’s rare.”

He stared at her, trying to remember the second time. All he remembered was saying “again,” but nothing more happening than what had already happened.

“But—”

She turned fully then and he couldn’t help but look at her naked body. The belly that, except for some silvery striations, said nothing about having had four children. The still-pert breasts that remained silent on the issue but for the same marks. The tight, taut thighs and delicate feet. She had the body of a thirty-year-old woman, now starting to glisten with moisture, and he hardened with the thought of sinking himself in her again.

“Mitch,” she murmured as she leaned against him, wrapped her arms around his waist, and kissed him. Long, deep, her tongue twining with his. He growled a little and pulled her closer. “Lift me up,” she whispered. “Wrap my legs around your hips.”

He gulped, understanding exactly what she wanted and he wanted it too, but he feared turning into a selfish lover—exactly what he had been to Mina for years and years, without even knowing it.

Because he was ignorant.

Cassandra slid her hands up his arms and around his neck. He did as instructed.

“Close to the wall. Press me hard between you and the wall.”

He did that.

She shifted so that the tip of his penis was at her entrance, but still he hesitated because one good thrust and he might lose it again.

“Now,” she said, “drive your cock right up into me, hard, like you want to pound me into the wall. Stay that way as long as you can.”

His heart stopped. “Cassandra...”

“Trust me.”

He sucked in a long breath, then did what she said. His world fell apart as he collapsed against her, to his surprise, still hard.

“Mitch. You haven’t had sex in a very long time. You didn’t know what you were doing in the years before that. It’s not a surprise to me, and we both knew I’d be teaching you. But you gave me what I needed last night. You don’t have any reason to apologize.”

“I don’t want to be selfish. I never made Mina do that, and I— I’m...ashamed.”

“Oh, Mitch,” she sighed. “Don’t be. Nigel gave me the first orgasm I ever had. Think about that. I was thirty-two. I’d been married for thirteen years. I had four children. A gay man gave me my first orgasm *and* had to teach me how to masturbate. Had to get me to a place where I even *cared*.”

He shook his head in resignation.

“I always assumed I couldn’t have one, and truly, I didn’t care. Believe me, it had

nothing to do with religion or guilt or sexual mores. Some women just *can't*. Didn't you and Mina ever talk about sex?"

"Not until she was diagnosed. The doctor asked her about our sex life and she admitted she hated it. It was very painful. Wiped her out for a couple of days afterward. That shocked me. Hurt my feelings that she never told me. But the doctor explained why, how the MS worked. After that, there was no point. Her body couldn't take the strain of another child and I wasn't about to add to her pain or exhaustion."

"Well, there you go. If the sex is difficult, the orgasm will be, too. Even if you'd known what you were doing, you'd have worn her out just trying to get her there."

He gulped.

"It's very possible that no matter how skilled you were, she was never going to have an orgasm. Chronic pain—disease—*isn't* conducive to one. It doesn't make you selfish; it makes you both caught in a sad circumstance."

Mitch didn't know what to say, what to think. So much he didn't know because he hadn't been able to bear thinking about it all these years, for the wanting, the need he had.

"Notice: You're inside me while we're standing in a shower having a serious discussion, and you're *still* hard."

Yes, he was, and though she had told him to stay still, he began to move. He couldn't help it, but a slow smile grew on her face and her lids lowered.

"You held back on me last night, didn't you?"

"Yes," he murmured as he picked up his pace a little, then buried his face in the crook of her neck. He felt her hands in his hair, gentle, caressing. "I didn't want to hurt you."

"Impossible." She reached down to clutch his buttocks, digging her fingernails in. "Do you understand the difference between making love, having sex, and fucking?"

He took a deep, shuddering breath, the vulgarity making so much difference to him now, meaning something instead of some random adjective.

"Intellectually."

"So, practice."

"Which one?"

"Pick one. Do that. After, tell me which one you think you did."

He lifted his head and looked into her eyes, as clear and brown and guileless as they ever were, as they had been the first time he met her. "You won't break?"

She smiled. "No."

He slid leisurely in and out of her with deeper, longer strokes, because it felt so...good, so right, and he wanted to savor each sensation.

Mitch took a deep breath, because in his gut, in that dark part of his soul he never wanted to acknowledge, the one that responded when she told him she wanted to fuck him, he wanted to do exactly that to her.

"Do what you want, Mitch. Don't worry about me right now. We have all the time in the world together."

So he did, crushing her mouth with his, the sound of the shower drowning out any sound of how hard he drove her into the wall. She whispered against his mouth, "More. Harder. Faster. Give me everything you've got."

He braced himself against the wall, his hands high up over her head, and tried. Her surprised gasp, her moan, "Oh, God, Mitch, *yes*," barely registered, but it did and he

came, his head back, being pummeled by hot water, surprised at how wonderfully *violent* it was—how strange it was to feel her rocking against him, grinding herself into him, her legs tightening around him.

Cassandra seemed to hang onto him, breathing as hard as he, and he let his forehead slowly drop to hers so that their noses touched.

“Mitch,” she murmured after their breathing had calmed somewhat.

“Cassandra.”

“That was fabulous.”

“You came?”

“Didn’t you hear me scream?”

He opened his mouth to answer, then snapped it shut again, a feeling of deep satisfaction working its way through him. “Yeah, I guess I did. You weren’t faking?”

She snorted and rolled her eyes. “I only faked for the people who paid.”

“Oh, right,” he drawled, and felt himself smile. “You don’t lie to let people save face.”

“Trust me, if you weren’t doing it right, I’d tell you. So which one was that?”

“The third one.”

She gave him a broad chuckle, shaking her head. “You aren’t going to say it, are you?”

“Nope.”

“It was all three. You realize that all making love is fucking, but not all fucking is making love.”

“I do now.”

“Did you and Mina ever take a shower together?”

“No. She was too shy, didn’t like to let me see her nude. When we made love, it was always in the dark.”

Her smile faded and she sighed. “Let me down.”

He did, wondering what she was up to, then he knew. She took a round scrunchy scrubber thing and squeezed something from a bottle onto it, then said, “Turn around.” He did and once she touched that scratchy thing to his back, he sighed and dropped his head back, the water sluicing over him and Cassandra—his *wife!*—scrubbing his back, his shoulders, his arms, his ribs, his butt, and down his legs...something he had never expected to happen. She trailed her soft hands in the soap after the scrubber, her fingers tracing patterns, writing things maybe, making him feel cherished.

Mitch didn’t remember ever feeling cherished in this manner; Mina had been so timid, so insecure...

“Turn around.”

He did, and noticed how her body glistened with water, how beautiful she was with her hair, now wet and slicked back, her face heart-shaped and perfect. He cupped her jaws in his palms and brought her to him for a long, tender kiss.

“Now let me wash you,” he whispered.

She blinked. Had no one had ever done that for *her*? He smiled and took the scrubber thing from her, spending an inordinate amount of time on each body part so that by the time they rinsed, Mitch was ready for her again and, apparently, she shared his desire.

She led him back to bed and Mitch marveled that he had never known such intimacy existed, how much different it was, making love with a healthy, sensual woman.

“Lie on your back.”

He propped himself on his elbows, then closed his eyes as exquisite agony washed over him when she straddled him and sheathed him within her.

“It’s daylight, Mitch. Open your eyes. Watch.”

His wife, his beautiful wife, set a slower pace now that they were in no rush to get to New York and into bed. He studied the way his body slid in and out of hers, the way her breasts bobbed, the way the skin between her legs glistened with moisture, the way he looked with the evidence of her desire smeared on him.

He took a long breath and lay back to take her hips in his hands.

“You just can’t give up control, can you?”

“Habit.”

She smiled at him and took one of his hands to arrange his fingers just so on her clitoris, showing him how she liked it, controlling how he touched her. He determined to *remember* this and practice often.

“Talk to me,” she whispered as she lay on his chest once she had groaned his name. The pride of a job well done burst through him. “There’s something about you and Mina — I don’t understand.”

He took a deep breath and pulled her even closer than she already was. “Mina and me... It wasn’t about the sex. It was about building a life together, fulfilling each other’s more pressing needs. She had a crush on me— I always wondered if it was because her father had trashed me before she even saw me, if I was just her big rebellion. Or if she cultivated a crush because saw me as a way out.” He paused. “My mother was mad at me for months, thinking I was bitter about my mission, marrying Mina to get Shane’s goat because he was just like my mission president, and me rebounding off Inez to boot.”

“You couldn’t have had the life you did if those had been your only motives.”

“I know, but we never talked about it. We sat down at the dinner table, set our goals and our budget, and learned how to live together. We both made an effort to serve each other.”

“And fell in love. Did Mina know about Inez?”

“Yes. I think a lot of her insecurity stemmed from that. Inez was much older, sensual. She was an intimidating woman.”

“But your sexual issues really stemmed from Mina’s illness.”

“Yes. I liked it. It felt good. To me. Wasn’t worth making a big deal over getting more, so it didn’t occur to me to resent it. I didn’t know what I was doing, didn’t know what to do to give her pleasure, didn’t know there was supposed to be that kind of pleasure. For us, it was a bonding more like...trust. Feeling close to each other, you know, us against the world. She would’ve been perfectly satisfied with making out all the time—she loved that—but you don’t get pregnant that way. Other than that, it was never about pleasure.”

“Did you ever want more?”

He sighed. “Not until my mid-thirties, when life began to shake out a little here and there. I’d think about it at odd times, then I’d dive back into my crises to take my mind off it. Try not to, uh...”

“Masturbate.”

He flushed a bit. Shrugged. “It doesn’t happen often.”

“And then she was comatose. Then she died.”

He paused. "It's been very...difficult. The last four or five years. I looked around. Saw what I could have, how easily I could have it." The sudden bitterness in his voice shocked me. "But there was always something missing, some spark. Interest. No one I could talk to and *like*. No one I could have fun with. Who could be my friend as well as my lover. My equal." He paused. "Cassandra, you are...everything I have wanted for so long, everything I never knew I needed. You have no idea how much of a blessing you are to me, in so many ways."

She turned her face away from him then and he felt her tears drop on his chest.

"Cassandra," he whispered, and, with his fingers on her chin, made her look up at him. Her eyes had filled with tears and she wouldn't meet his gaze. "Don't cry. I'm telling you I love you."

She choked and buried her face in his neck to sob.

He wrapped his arms around her and stroked her back until she fell asleep.

* * * * *

Took the Hand of a Preacher Man

March 26, 2011

"You planning to go to church with me?" Mitch murmured in my ear as we lay in bed tangled up together, sweaty, sticky, smelling of sex, Mitch's hands caressing my back and butt, his teeth intermittently nipping at my ear.

It was the last day of our honeymoon, an entire week spent in my otherwise abandoned townhouse in a suite that was as unfamiliar to me as it was to him. It was like a luxury hotel without the pool we wouldn't have used anyway.

I couldn't get enough of him. He was a fast learner, inventive and selfless. We only left the bed long enough to eat, bathe, watch a few movies (including *Bridget Jones* and *Fight Club*), and even then we ended up making love in the rest of the house.

The bathtub.

The kitchen table.

The stairs.

The very expensive couch which now had cum stains on it, which I would have to pay for myself because I couldn't blame Clarissa and her boyfriend (although it did occur to me to try for my own amusement).

But not The Bordello. It sat ready to be shown as an apartment once I finished moving to Bethlehem.

It was the most time I'd ever spent having sex with one man in one stretch.

"Yes," I finally answered.

"Oh," he said, startled but clearly pleased. "Thank you."

"Don't feel too flattered. It's Prissy I go for. Love that woman."

He laughed.

"Do you know she's one of the first real female friends I've ever had?"

Mitch looked at me. "That's sad."

I shrugged. "Not really. But now that I have her, I don't want to take her for granted."

It took us most of the afternoon to move the rest of my wardrobe and what few trinkets I wanted around me in the home I'd share with Mitch for the next year. That

night, I slept and made love with him in the bed he'd shared with Mina.

"Uh, no," Mitch informed me when I mentioned it. "This is a brand new bed."

I said nothing for a moment. Then, because I couldn't keep my mouth shut, I murmured, "This marriage is a bunch of firsts for both of us, isn't it?"

He smiled against my temple.

Mitch was gone when I awoke Sunday morning and I felt his side of the bed. Cold. That didn't surprise me, but what did surprise me was the fact that it hadn't taken but a week for his body beside mine in bed to become normal.

Necessary.

I dressed with extra care, my wedding ring catching on bits of my clothing and hair. I would stop to look at it every time, a beautiful diamond the color of molten steel in a setting designed by Sebastian. It was moulded from the Hollander alloy, the finish precisely machined to reflect the orange of the diamond to flow around the ring like a steel river.

Mitch had started building this ring the moment I told him I liked his metal, had told Sebastian exactly what he wanted, but not why or for whom.

I had to swallow over the lump in my throat when I thought about the look on his face when he saw me at the end of the aisle, waiting for him.

He loved me. I knew it before he said it, and then he had and I had broken down like a teenager with her first crush.

I had successfully kept all that at bay during the week we spent bound up in each other, naked, fucking, but now that I was alone for the first time in a week, I couldn't help but think about it.

No man had ever said that to me before.

As usual, I sat in the back pew on the left side of the chapel to await Prissy and her children. Trevor surprised me by hopping over the back of it to sit with me. "You mind?" he said brightly. "Not like I have to be up on the stand to bless the sacrament anymore, right?" That made me laugh.

Prissy's little girl made a beeline for me so as to prevent her brother from sitting by me. Whatever Prissy might have said to me died in the face of her curiosity that Trevor was sitting in the back instead of up front. "Trevor, is this seating arrangement permanent?"

"Yup."

She sighed with acute disappointment, but he shrugged. At my confused look, he muttered, "There's only one reason I'd be sitting back here until I go to college. It'll take everybody else a while to notice, much less figure it out."

People stopped to say hi and chitchat before going about finding their places. So. They still didn't know, and Mitch would most likely announce it from the pulpit and then all hell would break loose.

The service proceeded as normal, Mitch conducting.

Prelude music.

Opening hymn.

Opening prayer.

Announcements.

Ward business.

"Cassandra?"

His mouth twitched as he looked at me from the pulpit and Prissy slid me a look. “Well, stand up,” she said.

So I did.

“A week ago Friday,” Mitch said, looking at me with what I now knew to be desire, pure and hot. No one else but I would know that and it humbled me. “Cassandra St. James did me the honor of becoming my wife.”

The gasp was immediate and loud. I felt two hundred fifty pairs of eyes on me, though Sally’s was not one of them. She had her head down, her scriptures in her lap. Her husband beamed at me.

The look of shock on Sitkaris’s face made me long for a camera, but then it faded into calculation and I stared back at him until he looked away with a knowing smirk.

Sabrina Johnston wiped her eyes and flashed me a sweet, happy smile.

I felt Prissy’s hand on mine, tugging me down. “What an ornery man,” she grumbled with great amusement, and I chuckled. “I’ll run interference for you.”

I could not have named a bigger blessing at that moment, and for the two hours after sacrament meeting, Prissy was my bodyguard. If they couldn’t get around her—and, granted, that was difficult—they couldn’t get to me. She did it on purpose, shielding me physically, never allowing anyone to see that she was being deliberate.

To our great surprise, Sally took up her usual place on my right, though she was tense and disinclined to chat. She was angry with me, I knew, and for a myriad of reasons.

Greg Sitkaris had a convenient emergency and left the Sunday school class without a substitute teacher. Prissy was prevailed upon to teach with no warning, no preparation, and only a glimpse at the lesson manual.

God, she was brilliant, with a fund of knowledge I imagined could only belong to a trained theologian. I didn’t care a whit about these people’s beliefs, but I could listen to Prissy teach for hours.

It was in Relief Society that Sally finally worked up the courage to nail me. “Why didn’t you tell anyone you and Mitch were getting married?”

“It was between me and him, Sally,” I said as gently as I could because she was about to cry. I was unaccountably proud when she sucked it up. And then...

“Sister Hollander!” Louise said from the front of the room. Her smile could’ve lit Lady Liberty’s torch. “Congratulations! You have *no* idea how happy we are.”

I almost groaned at Louise’s timing, but she moved on.

“Sally,” she said with concern, “is it true you and Dan are moving?”

Sally was pale, but her voice didn’t tremble when she said, “Yes. He got a job in Seattle.”

“Excellent. Well, not that you’ll be leaving us, of course. When’s the big day?”

“Some time after Easter.”

“We’ll miss you.”

Sally only nodded, her mouth tight, and I wondered how much Mitch had to do with that, but she held on as the class proceeded. About fifteen minutes in, she said, “When, uh—” She cleared her throat. Wouldn’t look me in the face. Directed her conversation somewhere in the direction of my shoulder. “When are you getting baptized?”

“I don’t know yet,” I murmured.

“But you’re planning to?”

“Yes.”

On my left, Prissy started. “Really?”

“Well, yeah. Why wouldn’t I?”

Her mouth pursed. “You and I are going to have a little chat later, darling.”

“Okay, Mother,” I said somewhat snidely. “Am I in trouble?”

“Yes.”

Odd. First Sebastian, now Prissy. That wasn’t even counting the fact that Mitch had never so much as invited me to attend. For a church bent on converting the world, there wasn’t a whole lot of encouragement coming my way. Why would I care one way or another? I hadn’t stepped foot in a church in twenty years, since the twins’ baptisms, not even to do my Easter and Christmas duty.

Relief Society ended and Prissy dragged me out as fast as she could to find a private corner somewhere in the labyrinthine hallways. “Unless you have a thorough understanding of this doctrine and buy into it, you should not get baptized.”

“Why?”

“We—okay, *I*—take it seriously. This is *not* fire insurance.”

I stared at her.

“Fire insurance. You know, where people go to different churches and join a bunch of them to reduce their chances of going to hell.”

I burst out laughing.

“Look, I can appreciate that you want to support Mitch because you love him, but you can’t just—”

“Oh, wait a minute. Let’s clear something up right now.” Well, hell, why not tell her? She wouldn’t approve, but she’d get it. “I married Mitch for one reason and one reason only, and it doesn’t have anything to do with *love* or *money*.”

It was her turn to stare at me for a few seconds, completely confused. And then *she* burst out laughing. “Yeah. *Okay*. Sure.” She turned to leave me there. “Ask Mitch his opinion before you tell anybody about your miraculous conversion.”

“Prissy!”

“Gotta git. See you Sunday.”

She strode down the hallway, and I could hear laughing all the way.

Bitch.

* * * * *

Jacob’s Well

March 28, 2011

Mitch hadn’t been wrong in predicting that Jack would let me do what I wanted as long as I didn’t leave Blackwood Securities. Considering my agreement with Mitch only ran a year, Jack was perfectly willing to put up with the inconvenience of...no change at all.

It would be like I was out on permanent assignment, half my staff here in Bethlehem dealing with the division, which would take another couple of months, and half my staff in New York. I’d go into the office once a week or so, and nothing would change.

Monday morning, I sat in the kitchen at the island bar eating breakfast and perusing the morning’s financials on my laptop. I looked up and watched Mitch come in from the

mill, greasy, exhausted, still in his orange coveralls. He gave me a warm smile and a quick kiss, then headed to bed. He'd warned me that he didn't intend to give up his graveyard shift in the foundry on Sunday nights, and I'd said, "Okay, no problem" because it hadn't been.

Then.

I'd come home from church alone the day before and slept alone for the first time in a little over a week—and I resented the hell out of it.

Strange, considering I had only *slept* with one other man in the fifteen years since Nigel had deemed me suitably trained.

"Mornin', Cassie," Trevor mumbled as he dragged himself into the house from the garage.

I looked at the clock. Almost seven. "Why didn't you just pack a bag, take a shower there, and go to school?"

He growled. "I'm not supposed to be there at all and Scarlett's RA is a bitch. I fell asleep and barely made it out without getting caught."

"Go take a shower. You stink. I have lox and bagels if you want any, because I will not live without my Zabar's salmon."

"Yum. I could get used to this. You gonna make bread today? Maybe?"

I saw the genuinely hopeful look on his face and didn't have the heart to refuse. "Sure."

"Yes!"

I finished with my breakfast and news gathering, then headed upstairs to get ready for work—at the mill, where I would commandeer an office in which to establish Blackwood Securities's satellite.

I stopped in the threshold of the beautiful bedroom, all Mitch. Dark walls, not quite navy. Silver carpet and linens. Cherry furniture, including the bold headboard on the bed he'd bought for me. Heavy silver drapes were drawn, casting the room in near pitch dark. Ah, yes, to allow him to sleep in the daytime if he needed.

And there he lay on his back, almost spread-eagled, the bedclothes kicked off and his body nude.

His big, beautiful body, muscular from years of hard labor and regular soccer matches with his son and weekends filled with Latin dancing, dusted with golden hair. The hair on his head was still wet from a shower. His beard was a darker blond touched with white, and I wondered what he'd look like if it grew out. If he turned over, I'd be able to see that strong back and tight ass, the one that still had four tiny half-moon marks on each hip. Not two nights ago, I'd dug my fingernails into him as he pounded into me, fucked me the way he'd always really wanted to, rough and dirty, but still holding something back—

—and always tempted to apologize after the fact.

He hadn't. Yet. But eventually he'd break and push past whatever barrier he still had, and *then* he would apologize. Honestly, I couldn't imagine what he could be keeping back unless...

Don't you dare shut that door on me.

Anger.

I hadn't seen that in a while, but the stress that was causing it was still there, bubbling underneath his happiness, the happiness he ascribed to me.

He shifted a bit, and I continued my perusal of his person. I'd seen dozens of men naked, but none that stirred me as he did, and I didn't know why.

And because I am a selfish bitch, I locked the door, dropped my heavy bathrobe, climbed onto the bed between his spread legs, and licked the head of his cock. I knew from a week of experience it would take him a while to wake up this way, but I loved giving head to this man.

He was so appreciative of it. He treated it as the most precious of gifts.

I'd never known a man who thought of it as anything other than an entitlement.

He began to harden in my hand, my mouth, and he shifted again, sighed heavily. "Cassandra," he whispered, but I knew he wasn't awake yet. He whispered my name often in his sleep.

That unsettled me for some reason.

Oh, but he tasted so good, this man who said he loved me.

"Cassandra," he whispered again, his fingers in my hair, holding me close. I looked up the solid plane of his body to see him staring back at me, his face intense, his jaw clenched. "Don't make me come alone. Come with me."

Ah, yes. That was important to him, after the disaster of our first attempt. He was still embarrassed about that, but more than that, he didn't want to cheat me, wouldn't allow me to pleasure him without expectation of reciprocity.

I shook my head, and lightly scraped his cock with my teeth to make my point. He hissed, though whether in pleasure or pain—or both—I didn't know. I had awakened him after he'd been up for twenty-four hours serving others, and I would make it worth his while, to serve him in the only way I knew how.

I reached up and placed my hand on his chest, pressed gently down until he understood I wouldn't obey, and relaxed back into the bed.

Mitch's fingers wove into my hair and I sucked, licked, pumped him with my hand, remembering my birthday when I had lain in his lap and he had played with my hair. I closed my eyes as every minute of the time we had spent together—was it really only three months?—hit me in rapid sequence, each more precious than the last.

His hips came up off the bed, and he groaned as he came. One, two, three...four...jerks and he sank into the sheets.

I swallowed, something Nigel had told me *never* to do. And I never had.

Until Mitch.

"Cassandra, let me—"

"No," I murmured as I tasted my lover, all sweet and salty. "Relax. Go back to sleep."

"Come with me," he muttered, even as his eyelids drifted shut.

I could do nothing less.

* * * * *

Everything But Yul Brynner

Mitch and I sat at dinner together that night alone in our kitchen, talking, laughing. Even though it was Trevor's night off from the mill, he was out with Scarlett and wouldn't be home until midnight—if he bothered to come home at all.

It was late, as Louise had dropped in earlier to get Mitch's signature on an

“emergency food order.”

“We take care of our own,” Louise had explained as she waited for Mitch to get home from work. “I go to the family’s home, find out what they need, then fill the order from the bishop’s storehouse.”

“Mitch has a storehouse?”

She laughed. “Not *Mitch*. Any bishop. No family in a ward will go hungry as long as the bishop or the Relief Society president knows their circumstances. The hard part is getting people to cough up the information.”

“Who is it? I can help.”

“Ah, I can’t tell you. That’s for Mitch and me and the family to know, and nobody else.”

“Mitch told me all the people in the ward boundary are his responsibility. You do this for nonmembers, too?”

“If I know about it, I’ll get it done. As for monetary needs, Mitch usually covers that himself. Not many wards are lucky enough to have a bishop of his means and generosity, and the Church will pay for things like medical bills or counseling or rent or...anything that can’t be pulled from the storehouse.”

Mortgage arrears to keep a family from foreclosure.

“Is he expected to cover these things himself because he can?”

“Heavens, no. He just does.”

It was apparently a complex situation because he’d closeted himself with Louise in the library for almost an hour, during which time I baked the bread I’d promised Trevor. It was odd to think all I had to do to earn my stepson’s approval was bake a loaf of bread now and again. If that.

Once Louise left with a sheaf of papers and a few blank checks, Mitch and I got to the spaghetti with the marinara I’d made from scratch. I was hungry for food, but hungrier for the conversation. I liked this time with him, the two of us, high-level professionals relaxing, boasting about the day’s accomplishments with someone who would understand and cheer appropriately without feeling threatened.

Mitch told me about the goofy new chemist he had hired, straight out of school, a genius who hid it behind fart jokes and harmless pranks.

“Larry Karabas sent him to me,” he said, chuckling. “We’ll have to invite him and his wife to dinner sometime.”

My appetite vanished. “Larry Karabas?” I asked carefully.

“Yeah,” he said around his bite. “Friend of mine. You know him?”

I barely kept my meal from coming back up.

“You could say that,” I muttered, looking down at my plate. Shit. How had I been so willfully naïve as to think I could be Mitch’s wife and blithely float in the same social circles Mitch did without running into the very people who could afford me?

“What, you don’t like him?”

Like him? I barely knew him out of bed.

“Question,” I said briskly, still not looking at my husband. “How many of these people do you know personally?” Whereupon I rattled off the names of about ten businessmen, politicians, celebrities, and continued to fight my nausea as he answered affirmatively to each one.

I stopped, unable to go any further, because his every “yes” came slower and his

voice got more hoarse.

We sat in silence for long moments.

"I'll go get the list," I said quietly. "Tomorrow. I won't let you go around doing business in the dark like that."

"It didn't occur to you until now?" he asked tightly.

"It didn't occur to *you*?" I gasped, shocked at his tone. "Why wouldn't you think that if *you* can afford me, all your friends and acquaintances and business contacts could too?"

He charged out of the chair and away from me, out of the kitchen, stalked down the hall to the foyer, wiping his hands down his face, then stalked back. Back and forth, back and forth, pacing. Muttering names and "that makes sense," and "that one, too."

"Oh, I see," I called out. "It was all an intellectual exercise for you, or maybe a spiritual one. All theory, no reality."

He stopped and glared at me. Pointed at me. "You should've thought of this."

"You're an adult!" I snarled, rising. "You could've asked. You just didn't want to know."

"How many?" he growled.

"Men or women?"

His nostrils flared. "Total."

"A hundred and sixty-four. Congratulations! Now servicing number one hundred and sixty-five!"

"Cassandra—"

"Don't. Don't you *dare* make this an issue now, Hollander. I have asked you, every step of the way, *if* you're okay with it, *why* you're okay with it, and you gave me all these high-minded Jesus answers and I took you at your word!" I was screaming. "*Why* would I think you were lying?"

"I wasn't lying!" he roared. "I— It was—"

"What, I wasn't in your face enough? I waited for a whole forty-five minutes into our first date to tell you? Should I have walked into your conference room and said, 'Hi. I'm Cassie St. James. In case you didn't know, I used to fuck people for money. Let's get started with this reorganization!'? Everybody else knew, including *your* best friend who hired me for the job. Why didn't *you* know? Why didn't he tell you? And are your people so incompetent they couldn't have rebuilt a good portion of my client list on their own? *My* people got *your* sexual history!"

"You could've given it to me!"

"You never asked!"

"Yes, I di—" He stopped, his chest heaving, bowed his head to stare at the floor and rifle through his memory.

"You asked for test results and I sent them," I said low, furious. "If you had also asked me for my client list, I would have given it to you."

His head popped up to look at me as if to catch me out in a lie. "On our *second* date? Why?"

"So this," I screamed, stabbing the point of my steak knife into the table, "wouldn't happen! I *trusted* you not to do this. I tried to make sure you understood exactly what my being a prostitute actually meant. You. Did. Not. Want. To. Know. And I was too fucking blind to see what you were doing or I would've shoved it in your face at the very

beginning.”

“Would you have given it to any other man who’d asked?”

“Of course not!”

“I didn’t think so. So why would I ask? Why would I assume *I* was special, considering you were angry enough to walk out on me?”

“Why wouldn’t you *try*? You didn’t get where you are by playing it safe!” I stormed toward him then brushed past him. “Screw the list. Call your lawyer. I’m calling mine. Yay us. We made it a whole ten days.”

“NO!”

I turned and walked backward. “Why not? I fucked you. You fucked me. There. I got what I wanted, you got what you wanted, and you can walk away with your conscience clear because you married me to do it. Solemnized—*sanctified*—fornication.” I got to the library, stepped over the threshold, slammed the d—

“Don’t you *dare* shut that door on me,” Mitch snarled, his big hand splayed out over the wood, keeping it from moving an inch, much less slamming. I stood there and stared at him, captivated. Anger and lust were bound up in the tension in his big body, and God help me, I wanted him to fuck me right then, but this was too important.

“You like bad girls,” I murmured. “But not *too* bad. Just bad enough for your comfort zone. Forgivable ones. *Redeemable* ones. It was okay as long as it was all rhetoric and you could hide behind *Bishop* Hollander, acting as my confessor—”

“I AM NOT YOUR CONFESSOR!”

“No,” I shot back. “The man standing in front of me, pissed off, yelling at me, *jealous as hell*— *He* isn’t. *That* guy, *you*, brilliant and powerful CEO of Hollander Steelworks, savior of the US steel industry— *You*. *You* are my lover. *Bishop* Hollander is my confessor, the easygoing guy I was dating who couldn’t be shocked, but never asked for the list because he didn’t want to know details, just that I was repentant or...something. And he thought I deserved forgiveness or absolution or whatever you people call it. Did he *never* understand that I AM NOT REPENTANT?!”

He opened his mouth, but I pointed at him. “Don’t you say one more fucking word until I’m done.”

He shut it.

“Let me tell you something, Hollander. You married a *really* bad girl. I have done things you can’t imagine, things you don’t even know exist, things I *like* that I will *never* ask you to do—and some things you *can’t* do because you’re not a woman. And I’ve done them with people you know.

“But *you*, the King of Steel— You want the same things they did. You want me to take you there and *Bishop* Hollander—God’s low-level project manager—hates that. You can’t decide who you are. Are you virtuous or are you depraved? Does our marriage cover everything as long it stays between us, or are some things still taboo? How far can you go and still be virtuous? Are you a god or are you a man?

“I don’t want a god in bed with me, Hollander. I don’t want *God* there, either. I want the King of Steel in bed next to me, *in* me, and I’ll be damned if I stick around to watch you turn back into *Bishop* Hollander when you come in the front door.”

His jaw ground. “I want that list, Cassandra.”

“You may have a divorce instead.”

“Absolutely not.”

That stopped me. He was enraged over the reality now that he had names and faces to go with this nebulous idea of “high-dollar call girl,” but wouldn’t let me go?

“You’re not going anywhere except wherever you have your black book stashed.”

“Fuck you. *I* don’t jump on your command.”

“I’ll sue you if you leave me.”

My mouth dropped open and my pussy contracted with lust. “Sue me?” I laughed. “What the hell for?”

He raised an eyebrow. “Do you doubt me?”

I stared right back at him. “And I will countersue. You want Cold War II? I’ll give it to you. Mutually assured financial destruction. The entire money sector will buy tickets and popcorn to watch you and me slug it out until we’re both broke.” I approached him then, but he stood firm when I punched my finger into his sternum. “And then,” I whispered as I pressed my body against him, pressed my mouth to his chin, “we’ll come home to our little shack and laugh at them while we make love.”

He took the bait, but still he held something back from me in the night, even as angry as he was.

He lazed in bed the next morning watching me dress in old jeans and one of his rugby shirts. God, how could I be so sore? I was no virgin. To anything.

“May I come with you?”

I’d expected that. “No. I’m not going to let you know where I keep it. Not even Nigel knows. You’re just going to have to trust me to bring you back a complete and unabridged copy.”

“I do.”

I looked at him sharply. “Who’s speaking? King or bishop?”

“Both,” he muttered.

“Who did I have sex with all night?”

His mouth tightened and he looked up at the ceiling. “King.”

“So I was right. His majesty wants to keep his mistress, but the bishop wants to redeem the bad girl.”

His jaw clenched.

“Who are you, Mitch?”

He said nothing for a second or two. Then sighed. “I’m a blue-collar union steel worker and a failed missionary.”

I looked at him then. Really looked, because I knew he was thinking far beyond our pissing match.

“Everything’s a fight for you, isn’t it?”

He snorted and gestured at me. “Go read your own history, lady.”

That made me laugh, and I lay back down in bed to snuggle up to him. “I like fighting with you.”

“I...like it, too.” I knew that. “You understand. You can— You catch it and throw it back at me. Distilled.” He paused. “I’ve never had that.” I knew that too.

“And that lets you decompress.”

“Yeah.” He paused. Kissed my forehead. “Thank you,” he whispered.

“Any time. I won’t be back until tomorrow evening.”

“Okay.”

“You still don’t want to know, do you?”

He gulped. “No. But I have to. I’ll have to change how I do business with these people. I can’t do that without knowing who they are. I’m— I should’ve asked you for it up front. You were right. I didn’t want to see it.”

“Because you knew you would know these people.”

He nodded.

“And his majesty the King of Steel wanted me and he wasn’t about to let *Bishop* Hollander talk him out of going after what he wanted.”

“Yes.”

Before I left, I felt the need to inform him that his golf partner, whom he was to meet in an hour to discuss the home décor and jewelry line of products, was on my list.

Mitch groaned and pinched the bridge of his nose. “But,” I said as I sat on the bed to pull on my old running shoes. “He’s not territorial or the jealous type. He’s totally live and let live. He had three other mistresses besides me and his wife, and all five of us are different races and sizes. His problem is he’s insatiable and needs lots of variety. His wife is very understanding, but of course, he wore her out, so ‘grateful’ would be a better word.”

“Good to know,” Mitch mumbled.

“You’d be surprised how many men are like that.”

“You’d be surprised that I *do* know how many men are like that.”

“Ah.”

“And women. Thirteen years. I’ve heard it all.” I looked at him speculatively, and he held up a hand. “I’m not your confessor. I don’t want to be. If you tell me, it has to be because you trust me or you’re teaching me or both.”

“You keep *Bishop* Hollander out of this bed completely, then. Preferably out of the house.”

He sighed. “I’ll try.”

He caught my wrist as I walked by the bed, and I looked down at him, naked, beautiful. Serious.

“I love you, Cassandra.”

It took me almost four hours to get to Baltimore, to a small community credit union in a seedy part of town. I retrieved the boxes of files I had stashed in four separate safe deposit boxes, asked for directions to the nearest Kinko’s, and left.

I copied every piece of paper in those files; it would take Mitch hours to get through it all and when he was done, he’d know every detail and dirty little secret of some of the most powerful people in the world.

I barely made it back to the credit union before five. I was at their door by eight the next morning to retrieve it all for the last time and close my account. Then I set out for a bank in Manassas, Virginia.

All that driving gave me time to think, but I didn’t want to.

Mitch would be the only other person who would have ever seen these records, but it was only fair.

None of my clients knew I’d kept complete dossiers on each of them, or rather, *how* complete, until I’d finished destroying a few lives. People said things in the heat of the moment, in the afterglow of a session with a sexually accomplished, seemingly sympathetic and not-terribly-clever or interested woman. They also talked on their phones in front of “the help” and especially when “the help” had left the room for any

reason.

I had wired The Bordello with the most sensitive recording equipment on the market. When the girls were at school and I had no clients or classes, I transcribed every sound file myself, painstakingly, learning how to type on a freeware program.

When I could afford it, I'd hired investigators to find out more with clues based on my transcripts. Yes, I knew how to protect myself: from disease, pregnancy, blackmail, extortion, financial ruin, arrest.

Assassination.

I sighed, feeling some guilt at having dragged Mitch into the dark well of my life, but it had seemed so simple at the time. Innocent. Of all the people I'd ever investigated, Mitch was the only one whose background squared with the way he lived his life, with honor and integrity, who had no deep, dark secrets. Thus, I had no qualms about entrusting him with it.

It didn't matter now anyway. He wouldn't let me go without a fight.

I love you, Cassandra.

My eyes watered and I sniffled, and no wonder: Everything was starting to bloom. My eyes leaked all afternoon.

Yet another bank. Yet another random set of four of the biggest safe deposit boxes they had. Yet another road trip to relocate my records, as I did periodically anyway.

Mitch met me when I drove onto the estate that night and his mouth dropped open when I popped the trunk to reveal four bankers boxes full of files.

"State secrets," I said matter-of-factly. "Career-destroying confessions. Peccadilloes. Business deals clean and dirty. Insider trading, fraud, deceit, murder. I'm sure you're actually friends with some of these people, so be very careful about what you choose to read. If you only want the list of names, this is it." I handed him two sheets of paper stapled together. "You are the only other person besides me who will have read this. I am trusting you with my life."

He looked at me out of the corner of his eye.

"You heard me right. My *life*. Even though you have been known to go behind my back, you sneaky bastard."

"Oh, Cassandra," he whispered helplessly, turning his attention back to the contents of the trunk. "You've done everything you wanted with it. Why do you keep it?"

"Insurance. There's a dead man's switch on it."

"Who?"

"Morgan Ashworth."

Mitch gaped at me, and I smiled, albeit sheepishly. "He's unassailable. I cultivated him years ago when I figured out the scam Hilliard was running. I gave him a rundown of what I wanted to do to whom. He didn't have to be told why because he has spies in every corner of every back room in Washington."

"Does Sebastian know this?"

"No." I shrugged. "Everyone knows I have an executor. No one knows who—except you, now—but they know it has to be someone powerful enough to flip the switch and come out unscathed. And they don't want to find out the hard way."

"A lot of people fill that bill."

"None who are that autonomous and don't hesitate to act. Your...pack. They seem to feel that they have some—I don't know—Moral high ground? They're honest. They

aren't Mafia. They mind their own business. They have no interest in taking what other people have. They don't have any connections that can be used against them and they don't grant or take favors that might come with strings. Their first loyalty is to each other and to anyone else they consider family. Like you. They do what they feel they have to when they're pushed, and then they deal with the fallout. And if they all went broke tomorrow they'd just roll up their sleeves and start rebuilding."

Mitch looked at me speculatively. "I didn't think you liked them."

"I like Morgan," I said, then paused for a minute to think. "The rest— I don't know them well enough, and I may not ever *like* them, but I do admire them."

"What did he ask you for in return?"

I looked at the moon rising just behind Mitch's ear and slowly shook my head. "Not a thing," I whispered, and my eyes began to sting. "He was the first and only man who has never wanted anything from me. I still don't know the real reason he agreed to do it." My lip curled as I looked at my husband. "Fed me some bullshit answer about feeling *impressed* that he should." Mitch's Adam's apple bobbed, and I blinked away my tears to focus on his eyes. "Why is that significant to you?" I demanded.

"It's...not," Mitch muttered, turning away to pull a box out of the trunk. I didn't buy that, but it seemed that I had been dismissed, and I had no wish to pursue it.

Mitch didn't come to bed at all. I tossed and turned, wondering if he'd been so disgusted that he'd decided to sleep somewhere else, but I refused to go looking for him.

"Mitch," I murmured as the sun came up through the library window, and touched his shoulder, the only thing keeping him from sliding from his desk chair to the floor in his sleep. He started awake and looked up at me blankly, then around at the library, his desk strewn with documents and empty boxes everywhere.

Indeed, he had slept elsewhere, but not, I was far too happy to know, in a different bed.

"Go to bed," I said. "They aren't going anywhere."

"I—" He cleared the frog out of his throat. "I may never be able to look at some of these people again."

I nodded. "And me?"

His face betrayed his surprise. "You?"

"I'm no better than they are."

He laughed with no humor whatsoever, caught my hand, and pulled me down onto his lap. "Better or worse. Richer or poorer. Sickness and health."

"I see. Falling back on your wedding vows to justify to *Bishop* Hollander keeping me around."

"No. I'm not going to lie and say I would've gotten involved with you if I'd known all this up front. I wouldn't have. But it would've been my loss because you— You are the most fascinating and exciting woman I've ever met. Not having the opportunity to fall in love with you... I— I can't imagine that. I don't want to."

I tried to swallow past the lump in my throat, and waved at the boxes. "But you said you couldn't look these people in the face."

He laughed bitterly. "Do you remember *any* of what's here?"

That caught me up short. "No," I said slowly, wondering what he was getting at. "I haven't read it in years. Didn't need to."

"Some of these people have cheated me, cheated the Steelworks. And I never knew

it. They played me. Early on, I mean. They wouldn't be able to do that now."

I stared at him. "Because you were young. Naïve."

He nodded slowly, his mouth twisted. "A *Mormon*."

Does Hollander seem like a nutjob to you?

Well, no. He's such a brilliantly sneaky bastard I assumed he was an anomaly.

"What they did, I—I shouldn't have been able to survive. I'm having flashbacks of my mission. If I'd made just one wrong move..."

The only thing that stood between his Steelworks and total financial annihilation was the loyalty of Sebastian Taight, a man whose wrath no one wanted to incur.

I didn't remember that Mitch had his own place in my black book. He was an insignificant speck amongst the constellation of secrets in this pile of trash that I touched only when I wanted to move it.

"I'm sorry," I murmured. "I should've just brought you the list."

"No," he hastened to assure me. "It's good. I needed to know."

"So you know who to stop doing business with."

"The more they need my products, the sweeter the word 'no' gets."

"Without explaining."

"I don't have to."

I loved it when he got arrogant.

We spent the day going through the records, spreading them out, laying out paper pathways all over the library floor, into the billiards room, on the billiards table, to give us a visual, physical representation of any conversation we found that pertained to Mitch or the Steelworks.

By dinnertime, the picture was clear:

The people who had wanted Jep Industries to fail only because they hated Roger Oth had never looked beyond King Midas having taken it over and dismantled it.

The people with competing—inferior—products had an investment in Jep Industries failing, and had stepped up their own operations to attempt to fill the void. They couldn't figure out why they'd never made any inroads in the market.

And then a couple of those people had started digging to find out how factories that couldn't function without Jep Industries products were, in fact, still functioning.

They suspected Hollander Steelworks might be involved somehow, but couldn't make the connection, as much of it had been filtered through Ashworth's name. That was a common trick the Dunham family used, running their money and property through his squeaky-clean name and bank accounts. In most situations, one had to be a veritable bloodhound with a load of evidence to start sniffing in his direction, but because Morgan hadn't bothered to hide his connection to the Jep Industries takeover, he'd made enemies—enemies who could get to him, yet leaving his cousins untouched.

"He sacrificed his career to get J.I. and the Steelworks consolidated," I murmured, feeling that sacrifice as I never had before.

"Yes."

He continually sacrificed his human needs for the lonely and adrift in his church.

He had sacrificed his intellectual love for the sake of thousands of people who'd have lost their livelihoods.

He was willing to sacrifice his last bit of political power for me for reasons I still didn't know.

Oh, yes, I'd chosen my executor well. In retrospect, it was spooky that my inexplicable conviction that Ashworth—a complete stranger I had lured to a suite at the Watergate with the promise of a tantalizing story—was the right man for the job.

Mitch and I looked at each other. We both knew every detail of the elaborate scheme to consolidate J.I. and Hollander Steelworks, and how few people were capable of getting it done so an entire sector of the economy wouldn't collapse.

"Talk to me," I whispered, watching the play of agony over his face.

"I didn't have the resources to absorb it," Mitch said after a moment, "but Sebastian was at war with the only man in the country who did. I'd have gone under for sure if I *didn't* take over J.I., and if the Steelworks went down, it would've killed another five hundred jobs. That wasn't to mention the rest of the companies that needed those products, and there were dozens. I was stuck. To go forward with the absorption meant walking through fire and the possib—*probability*—of failure, but I had no other choice."

Forget seventeen hundred jobs between the two companies: The real collapse would have happened with the hundreds of dependent businesses. Most of them were microscopic in the scheme of things, but collectively...

A knot developed behind my sternum. *Mitch Hollander* wasn't just a name, some faceless victorious steel mogul, the savior of the US steel industry—he was a man with serious family problems, church obligations, *and* the weight of possible economic devastation on his shoulders if he failed.

"But I also had a sick wife I couldn't bear to turn over to twenty-four-hour nursing, two teenage girls and an eleven-year-old boy who needed my time and attention, and I'd just been called as bishop for the second time. On top of all that, if the Steelworks went down, it would've bankrupted me and I wouldn't have been able to get Mina the medical care and domestic help she needed. I didn't know what to do, how to do it all. I don't think I slept for two years."

I couldn't imagine that kind of pressure.

He gestured to the floor and its haphazard pattern of papers leading straight to a concerted effort by many powerful people to make sure the few failed. "If I'd known any of this—Other than Fen Hilliard, I was the only one." Indeed, Knox, Morgan, and Sebastian's uncle had had the cash and the connections and the political clout, but Sebastian would have never let that happen.

I said nothing as there was nothing to say. The what-might-have-beens were too awful to contemplate.

"I'm going to assume Sebastian doesn't know about any of these schemes, either."

He shot me a look. "They're still in business, aren't they?"

"More bloodshed on the horizon, then. Can I play? Any of this help?"

"I think it may, but not quite sure how. Yet." He pointed to one trail across the room. "I can see where Tye Afton had a large financial stake in making sure J.I. failed completely, but Eric—Knox's protégé—" I nodded. "—took care of him, so I don't have to worry about that."

"*And* put the fear of God into the rest of the Republican party."

Eric Cipriani, a young, small-time prosecutor in a semi-rural county in a midwestern state, had successfully steamrolled an entrenched senator into resigning his seat. Senator Afton had left Washington under a cloud of suspicion and a grand jury indictment. Whatever Afton had done to spur Cipriani into taking on a powerful senator and exposing

his career-ending secrets, Cipriani's arsenal and his willingness to use it had been enough to serve as a warning to others like Roger Oth and his cronies.

They were terrified of the damage a brilliant, charismatic self-proclaimed libertarian could do to the party from the inside—especially one financed by Oth's biggest enemies—and were doing everything they could to keep him out of Washington. He was no less feared by the rest of the party, but the Republican National Committee would keep its friends close and its enemies closer.

Because the enemy had a trump card: They desperately wanted Morgan back in Washington as the chairman of the Federal Reserve or, at the very least, Treasury Secretary. And, because Cipriani was yet another unrelated member of the Dunham family, he was the only politician in the country who could make that happen.

"That kid's fearless," I said. "I like him."

"Me, too."

I sighed. "Too bad about him and Vanessa."

"Oh, that'll work itself out," Mitch said absently.

"How do you know?"

He shrugged. "I just do. I didn't see Afton on your list," he said abruptly.

"God, no! He's a filthy pig. I wouldn't even attend dinner parties if I knew he'd be there." I paused. "There's another senator in here somewhere—not one on my list. J.I. was mentioned, I think. I vaguely remember one of my clients being really upset with him and trashing him."

"Oh?"

My mouth twitched. "His wife."

Mitch closed his eyes and rubbed his temples with his thumb and middle finger. I might have laughed, but we were still too close to the issue to make light of it yet. I wasn't sure he'd ever be able to.

I changed the subject. "Life is just one big chess game for your family, isn't it?"

He slid me a look. "And it's not for you?"

He had me there. "Birds. Feathers. But you don't play the games."

"It's because I produce something," he said as he grabbed a blank piece of paper and a pen to start mapping the trails we'd made. "Real things. I don't have time to play the games the way they do because what I do is more important than what they do. They shift money and power around to clear the way for me. They'll always defer to a producer—any producer—and the only games I play are to make sure I get the best deal I can and pay my people well."

I stared at him. "The pack sees you as superior to them?"

He looked up at me. "Yes. They can't do what I do. Except Eilis. And Vanessa. They're both producers. And the three of us aren't the only ones. A few more of their cousins, random people, producers they've collected along the way. We're the kings on the chess board. Everything they do— All to protect the producers and keep us producing."

The testosterone I'd dropped into that day, wondering who was *the* alpha, never giving any credit to the man I'd brushed off as ordinary and unassuming—

"So that's why Sebastian does what he does."

Mitch nodded. "He sees himself as a servant of the producers of the country, the world. It doesn't matter if they're *bad* at it. He can fix that one way or another."

Why had I never dug *that* deeply into Taight's psyche? Too late now, anyway. I'd had enough trouble just getting the surface theory through with a passing grade without adding Rand-laden armchair psychoanalysis on top of it. It did, however, add another dimension to my long-distance observations and explained a few things I had never been able to figure out.

"The warrior class," I murmured. "Guarding the king. Their moral high ground."

"Yes. Whatever it takes." He cast a pointed glance at me. "And *they* are unrepentant."

Ah, touché, lover. Any man who claimed people like *that* clan as family, and could love them for who they were had a larger capacity for tolerance than I'd given him credit for.

I looked at the mess around me and realized that as the day had worn on, my prostitution had ceased to be about the people I'd fucked that Mitch would run into on a semi-regular basis. It was now about who had taken advantage of him, when, why, and how—and what he intended to do about it. For now, anyway.

It'd come back again and again, each time he met someone on the list and he would know in explicit detail what I'd done with that person, knowing that person would have a pretty good idea what Mitch was doing with me.

There was no judgment attached.

He was jealous. Insecure.

No more, no less.

So I asked him again, because he'd already intellectualized it once, then choked.

"Um..." I gestured to the paper trails when I had his attention. "Are you going to freak out on me again like you did Monday?"

He sighed. "I don't know. It *does* freak me out."

"And how'd your golf game go yesterday?"

He paused. Thought. "Pretty well," he admitted. That didn't surprise me. "Pierre congratulated me for being the only man able to get you where everybody else wanted you." I raised an eyebrow. "At the altar."

I snorted. "Altar, my ass."

"Apparently it wasn't uncommon for your clients to fantasize about wrapping you up in a ring and vows."

"That's news to me."

"He said you give off an irresistible homemaker vibe. Martha Stewart by day and Mata Hari by night."

"Good thing he doesn't know how apt the Mata Hari reference is. But it makes sense, I guess. Sex and food, appealing to a man's only two vital organs. The madonna-whore complex." I eyed him. "Clearly you're susceptible to that one."

He shrugged.

"You know I was named after June Cleaver?"

"Cassandra *June*. Got it."

"That's it. And so?"

He raised his arms and dropped them in weary defeat. "It helps to know how many of your clients just wanted to talk."

"I give good ear."

He chuckled reluctantly. "I know. And...if what Pierre said about your appeal applies

to some of the others, that'll help, too. I'll get over it. Give me time."

"Is there anything I can do to help you get over it?"

"Yes," he said, his tone now brisk. He strode over a bunch of paper trails and stopped to pick up one particular piece of paper, with one particular spot highlighted in fluorescent orange. "Do that."

I took the paper warily, gave him a second suspicious glance, then started to read. I couldn't stop my smile from growing if I'd tried any harder.

I looked up at him. "Not tonight."

"Why not?"

"It requires accoutrements, which I don't have."

"Where would one find such things?"

I smirked. "You have two choices. I can order them online and wait for them to be shipped or we can get them tonight, but you'll have to step foot into a sex shop—at which you can be seen by anybody driving by. Pick your poison."

He stared at me, lids lowered. "I have a very fast car. We could go, say, two hundred miles round trip in any direction, stop for dinner, and be home by midnight."

"Or get a hotel room."

"Even better."

"His majesty wants to play with his mistress, I see."

"Oh, *yes*, he *does*."

* * * * *

Apron Strings

April 1, 2011

I intended to spend Friday, Saturday, and half of Sunday in my New York office because that weekend the Church held something called "General Conference" that required Mitch's presence Friday evening for the men's meeting, and for meetings all day Saturday and Sunday. From what I could gather, it was a semi-annual thing wherein all the head honchos in Salt Lake gave world-broadcast talks all weekend.

It was all I could do to make it through three hours on Sunday. I sure as hell wasn't up for the masochism of an eight-hour weekend marathon, and I wasn't going to sit around in an empty house all weekend with nothing to do while my husband went off and played with God.

More than usual.

I was tempted to talk to him about asking to be released from being bishop, but he was a grown man and if he wanted to spend a good portion of our year together at church, that was his business.

I didn't have to like it.

Clarissa popped up from the couch when I let myself in the townhouse Friday night after work. "What are you doing here?" she demanded.

"Uh... I live here?"

"Uh... No, you don't?"

"Are you expecting someone? Should I make myself scarce?"

"No," she said with a strange edge to her voice that made me look closer. I dumped my stuff on the kitchen island and went to her. I took her chin in my hand and tightened

my grip when she would've jerked away.

"What's wrong with you?" I asked, noting her red-rimmed eyes and disheveled appearance.

"Nothing."

I looked around. The coffee table, floor, couch—all strewn with empty ice cream cartons, beer bottles (the expensive stuff, naturally), pizza boxes. There were textbooks, a laptop, an iPad, and an iPhone piled in a chair at the end of the couch.

"Okay, so either you're having a pity party or you've been smoking too much weed and you got the munchies. Or both."

She jerked her face out of my grasp successfully this time, and arose to busy herself picking up the mess. "I don't smoke pot," she muttered as she worked. "Makes me puke and fucks around with my grades."

That had to be the truth, because while she might only take six hours a semester to prolong her aimlessness, they were hard ones and she maintained a 4.0.

Her pride would not allow her to be less than perfect.

"I also quit smoking," she admitted.

Ah, well. That explained a lot. My Botox lecture must have worked. "What happened to the boyfriend? The one who—"

"Gone. Two boyfriends ago."

Several DVDs from Netflix were strewn in with the mess and I picked one up. *Maid in Manhattan*.

I sighed. "Go take a shower," I said abruptly.

"But—" She snapped her mouth shut when I raised my eyebrow at her, and went up to her room. Maybe all that time in sacrament meeting watching Prissy control her children was paying off. I started clearing up the mess and soon I heard the sound of water through pipes.

"You and I," I announced when she was showered and dressed, and I was likewise showered and changed, "are going out."

She looked at me suspiciously. "Is this the mom version of a pity fuck?"

"Take it or leave it."

"What happened to my new stepfather?"

"Mitch. God's not going to strike you dead for saying his name."

"Fine. *Mitch*."

I explained the whole General Conference concept to her and she stared at me, clearly as mystified as I. "Oh," she said when I finished. "So, you're not *back* back?"

"No."

"Oh."

I had to forcibly drag her into the bowling alley, but by the time I'd taunted her through her first two frames, she forgot herself and began to really bowl, taunting me back whenever she bested me a frame. But...I'd taught the girl to bowl and apparently she'd kept up because it finally dawned on me she might beat me.

We drank beer and stuffed ourselves on nachos. A collection of college-age boys took the lane next to us, and it wasn't long before they decided they were interested in flirting with Clarissa. She participated with great enthusiasm—

—until one of them decided to hit on me.

I like it when twenty-year-old kids hit on me. It means I don't have to shell out for

plastic surgery yet.

“She’s married,” Clarissa snapped at him. “Note the four-carat rock on her finger?”

Clearly, the boy didn’t know how to process this unexpected attack, and I simply watched it play out.

“Why do you care?” he asked her, genuinely puzzled. “Sissy can’t speak for herself?”

“She’s my *mother*, not my sister.”

The boy looked me up and down. Slowly. “No *shit*...” he whispered.

Well, my bank account might thank me for basking in a little flattery in lieu of a surgeon’s bill, but Clarissa would not. If I didn’t put this boy down hard and fast, she would conflate that failure to me flirting with him. Or worse.

“Okay, look, kid, thanks,” I said. “But I’m pushing fifty and I have better things to do than babysit, here or anywhere else.”

Red suffused the boy’s face, and he turned away while his buddies howled, poked, and elbowed. He might never live it down.

I regretted that, but a mother’s gotta do what a mother’s gotta do.

They were done with us, but it didn’t matter. The evening was ruined.

It wasn’t until we had put away our bowling things, endured a silent ride home, and were each getting ready for bed that she knocked on my bedroom door.

“I, uh...” She looked around at the new suite as if she’d never seen it. “Would you have— If that guy had asked you— Um...”

“No,” I said as I towed my hair. She wouldn’t look at me. “I made a promise to Mitch and I’m going to keep my promise.”

“Do you love him?”

“No. I’m attracted to him, and I respect him more than anyone I’ve ever respected in my life.”

She stared at me for quite a while as I prepared for bed, her expression indecipherable. At least she wasn’t sneering or angry. It surprised me when she said simply, “Okay.”

“Clarissa,” I said briskly, “you know you’re always welcome at your dad’s and Nigel’s if you don’t have a date. Don’t sit around here being lonely. There is no reason a smart, beautiful woman should be sitting home alone on a Friday night watching chick flicks and getting plastered on expensive beer and cheap pizza.”

She shrugged. “Better than expensive pizza and cheap beer.”

That made me laugh. “Are you even speaking to your dad yet?”

“Some. Helene won’t.”

Mmmm, well, that would take time. “Just remember he loves you dearly.”

She ignored that. “I’m graduating in May.”

“I know. I have the date marked.”

“And I got into UMKC law school.”

I’d known that weeks ago. “Was there ever any doubt?”

“You seemed to doubt.”

“I doubted your motivation and timing, not your ability.” She said nothing. “Well, let me know when you want to go to Kansas City and find an apartment.”

“I’m staying with the Kenards.”

I blinked. “Um, good. Great. Whose idea was that?”

“Dr. Hilliard’s.”

“Are you sure you want to do that? Living with strangers is a lot different from living on your own. Their house, their rules.”

She shrugged. “They seem like nice people, and they live close enough to the law school that I can walk. I guess they have a little boy.”

“Don’t let yourself become a nanny just for a roof over your head.” Her mouth pursed. “And if that happens,” I continued blithely, as if I couldn’t figure out her fears, “either you present them with an invoice or find a way to move out on your own or call me. Don’t babysit unless you’re paid. Find out what the going rate is and charge four times that if he’s a good kid and ten times that if he’s a monster. If they say no, then you don’t have to babysit. If they say yes, then you have a decent gig. Win-win. Do you understand what I’m saying?”

“Yes,” she whispered.

I stopped what I was doing and looked at her, standing in the doorway there uncertain of her future, shoved into it when her mother had turned her world upside down by getting married so abruptly—

Clarissa wasn’t prepared for this. She couldn’t even bring herself to sleep away from home for more than four days, even though it was just at her dad’s. I blinked and saw a small girl standing in my door, wearing Hello Kitty pajamas, her raven hair in two tight braids and her green eyes big with fear. *Mommy, can I sleep with you?*

—a mother who had failed her utterly by allowing her to live in the well-appointed nest far longer than she should’ve.

“Go get your PJs on,” I murmured. “You can sleep with me tonight.”

She vanished. I turned the lights down and went into the bathroom to check in with Mitch, give him a chuckle at what had happened at the bowling alley. The suite was cast into darkness by the time I climbed into bed. My little girl turned into me, and I played with her hair while she cried herself to sleep.

* * * * *

Feel the Fear in My Enemy’s Eyes

April 5, 2011

It was Tuesday night and, as usual, the building echoed with laughter and chatter. Mitch liked hearing it. It meant people were happy, happy to get together and have a good time.

“Oh, good. You’re here.”

Mitch looked up from the weekly stats the ward clerk had given him to see the stake president in his office doorway. “Hey, what’s up? C’mon in.”

President Petersen did just that, closed the door, sat, made himself comfortable with one ankle over the opposite knee. “How’s Cassie?”

“Great,” Mitch said with a little smile, thinking about her. He felt about fifteen with his first crush, and he liked it. Liked that he could go home tonight and park his car in the garage right next to hers, see the evidence of her presence around him, her toiletries in his bathroom and her clothes in his drawers and closets. She would have dinner ready for him, would wait until he got home from church to eat with him.

“Is she here?”

“She’s at home.”

Petersen looked confused. “I thought she was traveling this week.”

Mitch paused. “Um...no,” he said slowly, wondering where he’d gotten that idea and why he was keeping tabs on Cassandra.

But Petersen shook it off and asked, “So when’s the baptism?”

“What baptism?”

“Cassie’s. That’s who we’re talking about.”

“There...isn’t one,” Mitch answered carefully. “At least, not that I know of.”

“Well, you are working on her, right?”

Mitch dropped his pen and sat back in his chair. “No, Dave. I’m not *working* on her. She is who she is, and she has no interest in the Church at all. That’s who I fell in love with and that’s who I want to stay married to. If she changes this direction, it’ll have to be because she wants to, not because I’m pushing her.” He paused. “Is there some rule I’m supposed to know about a bishop being married to a nonmember?”

Petersen hemmed and hawed. “It’s just... It’s...strange.”

“Being a *widowed* bishop is worse, yet you didn’t seem to mind that. But hey, I have another wife now, so the universe is back in balance.”

His mouth tightened and Mitch tensed as he waited for Petersen to say whatever he had on his mind.

“I’ve been...hearing some things,” he said low, picking at imaginary lint on his dress socks, not looking at Mitch.

“About...?”

“Cassie’s...ah...past.”

Really, Mitch had expected it before he and Cassandra tied the knot. He knew Greg would be feeding bits of information to Petersen on the golf course, over business lunches, and Sunday dinners at Greg’s home.

“What about it,” Mitch said flatly.

Petersen sighed. “I’m not sure how to tell you this— I don’t want to shock you or anything...”

“Yes, Dave, she was a prostitute. I’ve known all along, and it’s no secret on Wall Street.”

He started. “You do? It’s not?”

Mitch shook his head. “Now, I didn’t know when I first asked her out, but she told me right up front.”

“And you continued to go out with her anyway.”

Mitch bristled at the flat tone, the condemnation in his voice. “Don’t make me break out the scriptures. I shouldn’t have to. Not to you.”

“Is she still doing it?”

Mitch snorted. “No.”

“Is she repentant?”

“I’m not her confessor,” Mitch murmured, feeling the knife edge creep in his voice.

So did Petersen. “Oh. Okay. Ah, hmm.” He paused. “So did you— While you were dating, before you got married, did you— Ah, you know...”

Mitch thought he might be losing his mind. Surely this conversation wasn’t happening.

“Because I’ve been hearing things that make me think— And I wanted to ask you

directly and— And, so, did you and, and Cassie—?”

Mitch stared at him stonily.

“Oh, c’mon, Mitch,” he said, exasperated. “Humor me. Yes or no. Either you did or you didn’t. Easy.”

Mitch struggled to keep hold of his temper, the one he only showed on the highway and the soccer field—

—and to Cassandra, who could take it and twist it until they were both wrapped up in it, in each other, when she would wave her magic wand and make it go away.

“I thought you knew me better than that,” Mitch said slowly.

Petersen laughed without humor and shook his head. “Mitch, right now, I don’t feel like I know you at all. I’m hearing things all over the stake and then I find this out about Cassie, and you tell me you knew— I’m looking at you and wondering who you really are.”

Mitch sat in stunned silence the way he had when he was twenty and unable to believe the insults coming out of his mission president’s mouth.

Mere insults, though. Not accusations of fornication.

“Okay, fine. You don’t want to talk about that. Whatever. But there’s still Sally.”

Mitch picked up a pen and wrote “call Dan” on his scratch pad. “We already covered that ground,” Mitch muttered, his pen poised. “Nothing’s changed.”

“But you didn’t answer me straight then, and now I’m hearing more things.”

“What...kinds of more things? Exactly?” Mitch asked, each word difficult to find and produce.

“I’m saying... Well, I’m asking you if you have been, maybe, implying things, making promises, kind of, well, leading a few of the sisters on. Maybe...pressing a couple of the married ones for...you know, *things*.”

Mitch had no way to respond to that. He could only stare at Petersen while he tried to think of something—anything—to say that wouldn’t make him look stupid or guilty or both.

“Who am I supposed to have been leading on, President?” he asked wearily, pinching the bridge of his nose. “Other than Sally.”

Petersen named women Mitch didn’t even know, and Mitch could only shake his head in weary disgust. Petersen concluded with, “I’ll admit that’s hard to believe, but... What else am I supposed to think? It’s not a stretch when you went and married a hooker, *knowing* she was a hooker.”

“Correction: I married a brilliant and accomplished woman who restructures companies.”

Petersen’s jaw clenched. “Okay, then. What about Hayleigh Sitkaris?”

His nostrils flared. “David,” Mitch growled.

“No, I don’t mean sexually. I mean— Hayleigh’s run away a couple of times and...Greg has reason to believe you’ve encouraged that.” Mitch made another note: *HS—deal with this ASAP*. He was still writing when Petersen burst out, “Okay, look, Mitch. I’m just having a really hard time right now, between what I’m hearing and you getting your back up. Just tell me all of this is garbage and I’ll be on my way.”

“Would you believe me if I did say it?”

Pause. “Of course.”

It was a dumb question. The die was cast and prolonging the conversation would

only make the dull pain behind Mitch's sternum increase.

"Release me," Mitch said abruptly, throwing his pen down and letting his hands drop heavily to his desk. "I'm tired. Thirteen years of service and all I get is..." He waved a hand. "This—indignity. Not even worthy of being backed up by my superior."

"Mitch—"

Mitch stared at Petersen and growled, "If you believe I have done whatever it is I'm being accused of doing, then you can't let me stay in this position. If you don't believe it, then why are you here asking me about it? Maybe you should take a good look at the people who are pointing fingers at me."

President Petersen blinked. Pressed his fist to his mouth. Looked down at the floor.

"I—" He stopped. "I don't know," he said, with a trace of wonder in his voice. He looked back up at Mitch. "Something's wrong here, and I can't figure it out."

"Then go home and pray about it until you do."

* * * * *

Rich Man's Frug

I lay in bed listening to my husband decompress about his shitty day, watching him undress. Suit coat. Tie. Shirt. Pants.

Garments.

What looked like a plain white tee shirt and shorts that looked like an unsexy version of knee-length boxers.

Two and a half weeks and I hadn't gotten used to seeing those yet, although he normally took great pains to keep me from seeing them at all. He'd drawn a parallel to the religious garments other faiths wore, but wouldn't go into detail as to what they symbolized. I wanted more information.

I asked. He stonewalled.

I asked Prissy. Who stonewalled.

I asked Morgan. Who stonewalled.

So I went googling.

Ah, so the rest of the world found them as ridiculous as I did, to the point of dubbing them "magic underwear." Unlike the rest of the world, however, I was married to a man I respected above all others—and *he* wore them. If he didn't want to speak of it further, I would respect that the way I respected him.

And that man paced in and out of the bedroom to the bathroom and back again, frustrated but running out of steam. His gripes were minor things, things any CEO had to deal with on a daily basis, things that kept him from his lab, things he'd probably handled a million times before and would have forgotten by morning otherwise.

"I could find you a COO for the Steelworks, too," I offered. "That'd give you time in the lab."

And off he went again, veering into Bishop Hollander frustrations. He didn't name names, and I didn't know enough people in the ward to make connections anyway (nor did I care), but other than that, those frustrations sounded suspiciously similar to the CEO ones.

Humans. What do you do.

He was nude, though he had apparently forgotten that fact as he grew more agitated

with every word. I watched him run his hands through his hair and pace. Watched the way his strong back rippled, the way his tight ass and muscular legs ate up the square footage, the way his cock hung tantalizingly from the nest of sandy hair that trailed up his vaguely cut stomach and spread out over his muscular chest.

We hadn't gone dancing since our wedding day, but then, I saw no need to dress up and go to Manhattan to have pseudosex on a dance floor when I could have the real thing right here at home.

He'd stopped speaking, but his gait was jerky, tense. He snatched his dirty clothes off the chair, wadded them up, and pitched them at the hamper. I'd never seen him do that before; he treated all of his possessions with respect, but most particularly his garments.

My online searches had turned up very few faithful Mormons who were willing to talk about their garments publicly. And I was pretty sure that whatever any sympathetic person could have told me about the funny underwear would have been more informative and less insulting than the ex- and anti-Mormons who were more than willing to talk about them. Bitterly.

I simply didn't know enough to know who had an agenda, who didn't, what agenda it might be, how much to believe in either camp, and how any of it applied to my questions.

I hadn't dared ask Sebastian, as I didn't think he'd be any less insulting than the rest of the world, but I'd run out of people to ask.

Almost.

Mitch dropped on the bed and lay there staring up at the ceiling, his hands linked behind his head. He was grinding his teeth so hard I could hear the molars scraping together.

"Wanna talk about it?" I said mildly.

"Can't."

"Ah. Wanna fuck?"

"Yes."

I blinked. Stared at him. That question usually earned a blush and a wry smile. Whatever had him all knotted up would probably not be conducive to good lovemaking.

"Roll over," I said when he made no move toward me. He slid me a look, but did as I said and rested his head on his folded arms. I got out of bed to fetch one of the bottles of massage lotion we'd bought on our adventure to the adult toy store, then came back and settled myself over him.

"I'm going into the office Thursday," I said conversationally as I rubbed the orange blossom-scented cream into his back. The man was built like a god, really, though it usually took me a while to notice. He was both more and less than the sum of his parts. Understated. Droll. Oblivious to his beauty. Every day some small part of him—a gesture, an angle of his profile, a figure of speech—sneaked up on me and made me look again to see the whole man in a new way. "I have a meeting."

He grunted.

I worked my way down his knotted-up back to his waist, felt him slowly relaxing. I got to his ass and swept my hand over one of the tight muscles with admiration for the sculptor who had carved out the work of art that was my husband.

"Spending the night?" he rumbled.

“Oh, no,” I murmured as I slid my hand down between his legs. He relaxed with a sigh and shifted to give me easier access. “And miss this? Never.”

* * * * *

Remedial Mormonism

April 7, 2011

“To what do I owe the honor of having received a summons from Midas the Second?”

I almost laughed at the woman’s annoyance. Though I could see peripherally that she was leaning against the jamb of my office door, I didn’t look up. “Would it help your mood if I said, ‘You were right’?”

“Exponentially.”

She walked in and plopped her little ass on a corner of my desk and said, “I still don’t like you.”

“I don’t like you either. Frenemies?”

“Sure,” she said, her fragile voice carrying a midwestern accent so broad it bordered on rural. “No pinky swears, though.”

That did, in fact, make me laugh and I looked up at Giselle Kenard, who had played her mere cuteness well: well-worn boot-cut Levi’s, high-heeled western mules, and a white-embroidered gauzy yellow hippie-style blouse that floated down to her thighs. A matching length of embellished yellow gauze held her honey curls away from her face. She wore a pair of wide filigreed hoop earrings made from Mitch’s alloy that drew from the colors of her blouse and hair to flash sunshine. Her makeup was exotic and she had delicate henna tracings on the backs of her hands.

I curled my lip. “How do you manage to be simultaneously under and overdressed? Tragically, I might add.”

She smiled beatifically, her eyes calm. “I must have missed the dress code part of your summons.”

This woman had dressed for me, to camouflage her true nature, to allow me to feel secure in my superiority using soft colors and fabrics, a mix of submissive female and country bumpkin, to present herself as an innocent, cash-strapped tourist in the company of a beneficent Wall Street barracuda. All the better for me—for anyone—to underestimate her.

But I knew too much about her (and suspected more) to make *that* mistake.

“What is it with the weird blue eyes? You, Hilliard, Taight, Ashworth.”

“And three-quarters of my other forty-odd cousins. It’s a Dunham trait.”

“It’s creepy as hell.”

“Thank you. We planned it that way.”

I snorted.

“Just so we’re clear: If I didn’t need new shoes, I would’ve made you come to me.”

And I would’ve gone, which she knew. “You don’t have shoe stores in Kansas City?”

“Yes, but you see, I can’t get a saleswoman to show me what’s not on the floor.”

“Because you are one of the grandes dames of Kansas City society, so you already get first pick of what comes in before it gets put on the floor.”

“*The grande dame*. And I am *very* picky. You’d be shocked how small my wardrobe really is.”

“I wouldn’t be shocked at how *yellow* it is.”

“Matches my sunny disposition.”

“And your husband doesn’t mind these little junkets?”

“My husband,” she drawled, “doesn’t care what I do as long as I keep coming up with new and exciting activities that don’t involve a flogger or a third party.”

“So you answered my summons because you want to pick my brain.”

She smirked. “*Quid professional* quo.”

“And you don’t mind.”

She opened her mouth to speak, stopped. Pursed her lips. “We don’t want to see Mitch hurt,” she said low, her lazy accent now precise in its threat. “None of us cares about your prostitution, but it does make some of us think you could be playing with him till you’re tired of him. Mitch has had so much hardship and we love him dearly. He’s head over heels in love with you,” she concluded. “Nobody likes to watch people they love get their hearts broken. So, yes. We’re worried.”

Shit. There went my glow of satisfaction from a productive morning’s work. “I’m not promising anything,” I grumbled, not knowing why I felt a need to answer to this pack of religious and political renegades, but unable to shut up. “Mitch is a grown man and the year deadline was his idea, not mine. And it’s not like you’re his real family, so none of it’s your business anyway.”

She shrugged. “That’s debatable. However, since my money is on you, it’s in my best interest to make sure you get everything you need to prove me right.”

“Good ol’ self-interest. I can count on it every time.”

Giselle and I stared at one another for a long moment, two alpha wolves circling, assessing each other for the possibility of attack.

“You wouldn’t have called me if you didn’t have an interest in the long haul,” she murmured. “You wouldn’t have rearranged your entire life on a moment’s notice to move in with him, much less a hundred miles away from your family and career, much less spend any time with him at church. You’d have stayed in your brownstone and made him come to you on the weekends to service you until his novelty wore off, at which time you’d have changed the locks.”

Shit, when she put it that way...

“Well, I didn’t call you to talk about church,” I said gruffly. “Not...exactly, I mean.” At her questioning look, I said, “I’m hungry. Let’s go.”

Giselle garnered many looks—seconds, thirds, and fourths—on our way to the lobby, then as we headed down the Street to Nigel’s building, where one of his firm’s chefs awaited our lunch wishes.

“Tons of meetings today,” I explained when I caught her confused expression. “All my dining rooms and chefs are occupied and I couldn’t bribe, threaten, or extort any of them for a table or food on such short notice.”

“Ah.”

As we walked, I made sure to clarify to Giselle that she was not to view my daughter as free childcare while she lived under the Kenard roof. The look of utter disdain Giselle slid me reassured me that no, these people didn’t work that way.

“I,” she sniffed, “take care of my own child. He goes with me everywhere, including

to work. If I can't take him somewhere with me—like today—or if Bryce and I want to go out on a date, I have a mother who is only too happy to spoil Dunc silly. If she is not available, I have Sebastian and Eilis, or Knox and Justice. If they aren't available, I have seven aunts to choose from. If none of them are available, I have twenty-odd other cousins to call on. And if none of *them* are available, I have a dozen young women at church who will kill for the chance to A, earn some money, and B, sit my kid. Trust me, Clarissa would be a last resort."

Sebastian's family is large and tight. It doesn't take much time with them to want to be part of them.

I was quite envious of a support system like that. My siblings hadn't spoken to me in years and I had never met any of my aunts, uncles, or cousins.

"Where do you work?" I asked, just to be polite.

"I'm the attorney for our charity—" I nodded to indicate that I knew of the Kenard Burn Victim Foundation. "And I teach martial arts."

"What style?" I asked snidely. "Gun fu?"

A sly grin grew on her face, and I couldn't believe I'd missed such blatant sensuality. She was as primitive as her husband, her sexuality guarded by some ephemeral razor wire few men would dare attempt to navigate. I would never again be able to see her as plain.

"You know about that, then," she said.

"Everybody who had any interest in Knox inheriting OKH knows about it." That shocked the hell out of her, and I preened. "You were not then and are not now low profile."

"Oh. Huh." She paused. Her curiosity was now warring with her need to regain the upper hand. Her curiosity won. "So if Fen had succeeded in killing me...?"

"Jack was prepared to splash what he knew and suspected all over the *Journal*, take it to CNN and Fox. Everyone was very relieved when you suddenly came up married." Her mouth dropped open, and I smirked. "You Dunhams seem to think you operate in a vacuum."

"Um... Hm. Wow."

"But now that I've met you, I can see why your uncle wanted you dead."

She burst out laughing.

It wasn't until we were ensconced in Nigel's private dining room, beverages poured, appetizers served, and our orders taken that I got to the point.

"I've googled. Your church's website is practically worthless on the topic. Wikipedia threw terminology at me I don't really grasp and I couldn't follow the link trail well enough to get a decent picture of it. I've asked my new friend at church, who is utterly brilliant, but she talks over my head, theologically speaking. Also, she shies away from topics she thinks are sensitive. Mitch is so vague about...everything...and I don't know enough to ask the right questions to really pin him down. I even asked Ashworth, and he was as evasive as my husband and my friend. I assumed Sebastian would be entirely unhelpful. So since you offered..."

"Okay. Where do you want me to start?"

"Garments."

She snickered into her glass and said, "The old 'magic underwear' question."

I huffed. "As if any person of average intelligence would buy that. I just can't get a straight answer from anybody to save my life."

“You’d be surprised how many people *want* to believe it.”

“Of course they do,” I said smartly. “They’re weird. They’re ugly. Completely ridiculous.”

She nodded. “Yes. Yes, they are. But I’ve been around them my whole life, so to me they’re as natural as breathing.” She took a drink, then said, “Okay. The basis of our doctrine, other than just believing in Jesus Christ, is the family. Generally, we don’t get married ‘till death do you part’ or at least, that’s not the ideal circumstance. We get married for eternity. Meaning, if we get married in the temple and if we’ve done what we’re commanded, then when we die, we get to be reunited with our spouse and our kids, so the family unit is restored upon death. As far as I know, no other Christian faith promises that explicitly or implicitly, although I suspect *most* people assume that’s how it’ll be for them.”

“How does this happen?”

“At the temple, you make covenants with the Lord. Kneel at an altar with your intended. Say ‘yes’ when asked, and there you go. If you’re going on a mission, you make your covenants—without the altar part—just before you go into training.”

“What covenants?”

“Completely unremarkable ones. Don’t commit adultery if you’re married. Don’t have sex before you get married if you’re not. Contribute your time, talents, and money to the Church. Observe the restrictions on the use of various substances. Obey the Lord’s commandments. Stuff every person of faith commits to do in one aspect or another. To us, they just become weighted a lot more heavily.”

“And how do garments figure into this?”

“You wear them after you’ve made your covenants. It’s just a reminder, nothing more, nothing less. Not magic. No different than, say, a yarmulke or ear locks.”

“So... Sebastian was a missionary, right? He made these covenants? Wore them?”

She nodded. “Yes. Before he left the mission, left the Church. No matter how silly he thinks it all is, he won’t mock that.”

“I could’ve called him, then,” I said, more to myself than her.

“Yes, but... Mitch should have explained this to you.”

“He only drew the same parallel you just did. He doesn’t let me see them much. In fact, I didn’t even know about them until we got back from our honeymoon. So when I asked him what this means with, say, Mina, he didn’t want to talk about it anymore.”

She stared at me for a second as if she hadn’t seen that coming, and she was trying to formulate a response. I half expected her to refuse to answer, the way Prissy and Ashworth had.

“Okay,” she said slowly. “Thanks, Mitch.” She took a deep breath and then dove in. “Short answer: He married Mina for eternity and you until death. He dies, he’s with Mina. If you die without marrying him that way, *too*, you get to hang out in the awesomeness that is heaven with whoever you make friends with when you get there.”

I thought about that as our meals were served. It didn’t sit well.

At all.

We ate in companionable silence while I worked my way through it and all its implications.

Too.

Oh, God.

“So that’s it?” I finally asked, because it was the only thing I could think to say. “What if you don’t want to be with your eternal spouse eternally?”

She shrugged. “I believe in a just and merciful God, and— Now, this is the gospel according to Giselle,” she warned, and I nodded. By this time, I knew better than to think of these people as monolithic. “I think that justice and mercy are two sides of the same coin.” I glanced at her, confused. “My theory is that, with perfect knowledge as to our hearts and minds, God gives each person exactly what they deserve, which is exactly what they’d be most happy with.

“Which is partially to say that if you don’t want to be with your spouse eternally, I don’t think you have to be. Why would you want to be with someone who doesn’t want you? Why would God make you be?” She sat up and leaned forward. “If it makes you feel any better, I’m not married to my husband for eternity, either. Just death.”

“Um...oh. Okay?”

“He was sealed—that’s what we call it, ‘sealed’—to his first wife, but she was just evil. She was abusive, to him and their children. She cheated on him prolifically and indiscriminately, putting his health at risk—and it’s a miracle he doesn’t have any diseases. She couldn’t have been using condoms or birth control because she got pregnant and none of the four children she had are actually his—not that *he* ever made that distinction. I’m shocked she didn’t abort them all, though I suspect there were one or two of those, too.” She pointed her fork at me. “Now, you can’t tell me that woman deserves anything decent in the hereafter, and Bryce sure as hell didn’t do anything to deserve being stuck with her for eternity.”

“Four children? I thought you only had one.”

“Our child—Bryce’s and mine—is his fifth. You know all those burn scars on his face? The ones that got you as hot and bothered as they get me?”

I rolled my eyes, but didn’t bother to deny it.

“His children and wife died in the fire where he got those burns.”

God, my mind blew all to bits. I couldn’t imagine what I’d do if any one of my girls died, much less all at once, to say nothing of dying such horrible deaths. The thought left me breathless and bereft by proxy, and it took me a while to fight my way out of that emotional quicksand so as to continue the discussion I’d summoned her for.

I cleared my throat.

“So... Um. Why aren’t you, uh—”

“Sealed.”

“—sealed to your husband?”

“We were excommunicated,” she mumbled, now paying extra attention to her steak. “We can’t go to the temple until we’ve completed our repentance process. Rebaptized. Wait a year. At least. I don’t...” She bit her lip. Gulped. “I don’t know if he’ll ever—”

“Why were you excommunicated?”

She dashed tears away from her face. “Um, fornication. Bryce broke his temple covenants. Deliberately.”

“His? You hadn’t made any?”

“No. I didn’t intend to until I met a man I could marry in the temple. That’s the goal, you see. And then—”

“Wait, and then you just...caved?” I could understand falling in bed with a man. I couldn’t respect the sudden lack of discipline, especially compared to the iron control

Mitch had displayed.

Her head snapped up, a feral look on her face. “I was thirty-fucking-six years old,” she snarled. “All I needed to go over the edge was the right man to touch me just right, so keep your asinine judgments to yourself.”

Don’t... I can’t... I want to. I want to, Cassandra, you have no idea, but I can’t. Not yet. Please.

I acceded with a nod. Mitch was not so different from Giselle, then. I could’ve pressed him until he caved, the way Kenard had apparently pushed Giselle, but the outcome would have been vastly different.

“Thing is,” she said, settling back, her temper gone as fast as it had flared, “because I hadn’t broken any temple covenants, there was no reason to excommunicate me. I would’ve gotten a slap on the wrist and told not to do that anymore, and since we’re married now, it would’ve been a moot point.”

“That’s...backward. The man, I mean. Getting punished more than the woman. Usually, it’s the woman who’s vilified. Daughter of Eve and all that bullshit.”

She shook her head. “We don’t believe in original sin and we’re not philosophically certain Eve sinned at all.” *Really.* “In practical terms, that translates to the man being the responsible party.” Her mouth twitched and she said wryly, “We’re kind of put on a pedestal, like we have no libido, much less that we’re a bunch of succubi running around looking for any and all innocent males to suck off in the middle of the night.”

I laughed. “I get it. All madonna, no whore.”

“But unfortunately—which I never noticed until Bryce pointed it out to me—the men are regularly chastised for being scoundrels and wastrels, even though they’re not. They work hard to provide for their families, put in hours and hours of church service, and never get any credit for it. Mother’s Day is sacred, but Father’s Day is a joke. Some men are more sensitive to it than others.”

“And Bryce is.”

She nodded. “So while it’s nice, as a woman, not to be thought of as the root of all evil and responsible for all the misery in the world, it can get condescending, and *that* imbalance has a few unintended consequences. Layers and layers of subtext and gender politics there I’m not going to get into.”

I could imagine. “Okay, so if you all are so weak that you can’t be held responsible for your actions, why did you get excommunicated?”

“I...kind of...asked to be. See, Bryce has posttraumatic stress.” No doubt. “He’s been in therapy for—oh, hmmm. Dunc just turned two—so, almost three years now. He has a lot of baggage with the Church that he’s trying to sort out while he sorts out his trauma. The last thing he needed was for his wife—who was an equal partner in the deed and just as culpable, because I could’ve said no and he would have respected that—to be sent along on her way while he had to go through the whole ordeal. It would have been the final betrayal for him and I didn’t want to be the fulcrum on which he broke. I wanted to support him, to acknowledge my part in what we did, to not let him carry that alone.”

“What do you mean, you ‘kind of’ asked?”

“They’d decided not to, but I talked to my bishop, told him why I thought it would be better for Bryce, so he agreed to it. Reluctantly.” She pursed her lips. “I believe Bryce has responded better to his therapy and church because of it.”

“How does he feel about that?”

“Hates it. He feels it was all his doing, because he *intended* to break his covenants, wanted to break them with *me*.”

Ah, enlightenment. “To break his ethereal bond with his first wife and forge a corporeal bond with you. You wouldn’t be number two.”

“Exactly. The bad part is it also broke his bond with his children, and he adored them. He’d forgotten about that. So, in effect, he lost them twice.”

I would lose much more than this game, Cassandra. You have no idea how much I have at stake.

But she was still talking. “...also didn’t think about how I might have to deal with my own emotional fallout or even that I’d have any. Because of his motives, he feels he used me. Because of the way it happened, he refuses to concede that I had a choice.”

I raised my eyebrow and waved a hand. She sighed and hit me with the most marvelous seduction story I’d ever heard. Under other circumstances, I would have gasped and squealed and giggled like a little girl, asked for more, but this was not the time.

“So, yeah, he would’ve pushed me until he got me in bed, but it wouldn’t have happened if I really didn’t want it to.”

“Why not? He’s twice your size.”

“I was armed.”

Guns. As a matter of course. Such a foreign concept to me, yet it was one of the reasons I’d first considered Ashworth as my executor: Where he went, his family’s guns followed.

“And so the first time you slept with him, his garments...?”

“Bryce hadn’t worn them in years. They all burned and he never replaced them.”

“If he’d had them on that night, would you have had sex with him?”

She said nothing for the longest while. “No,” she finally murmured slowly. “I would’ve made him take me to Vegas right then or made him wait until Monday when the courthouse opened. I knew he wasn’t wearing them, so it didn’t occur to me to play what-if.”

“You knew? Before he took his clothes off?”

She nodded. “You can tell. When you go to church Sunday, watch the men’s pants legs, down around the knees. You’ll be able to see the impression of the hems through the fabric. And through the shirts. It looks like an ordinary tee shirt under there, but if you pay attention, you’ll start picking it up. The first time Bryce and I officially met, Sebastian had already told me he was a member of the Church, so I was surprised when I didn’t see the ridge around his knees or the deep scoop under his dress shirt. Then he propositioned me and I knew he’d left the Church behind.”

“That didn’t bother you?”

Once again, she hesitated. “No.” *Bullshit*. “I...felt lucky to have a sexually aggressive man who’d grown up in the same culture I did and could speak my language. No backtracking or explaining, like what Mitch had to do for you. He didn’t have to be told why my sleeping with him before marriage was significant. I didn’t have to be told why his sleeping with me was even more significant. I didn’t have to worry about him not believing that I was a thirty-six-year-old virgin or having to explain why. I bet you spent weeks trying to figure out how to get Mitch in bed because you thought you could get around him.”

That was true enough and I said so.

“And...” she murmured, looking away from me, her face flushing. “I made the mistake of assuming that Bryce would...um...”

“Repent.”

She gulped, and suddenly, my heart ached with hers.

“So,” she said abruptly after a tense silence. She cleared her throat. “You summoned me to take this bug out of your ass?”

I chuckled, but only half-heartedly. “Yeah, but it’s still there.”

“Well, I understand.” Yes, she did. All too well. “Here’s the thing: Mitch isn’t going to stop wearing his garments and asking him to will pretty much be a punch in the face. If I were you, I’d make an effort to get used to it or at least don’t say anything about them.” I nodded. Status quo, with information I finally understood, even if I didn’t like it. “Are you *really* planning on joining the Church?”

It was the same question Sebastian had asked, in the same disapproving tone of voice, then Prissy, and I couldn’t imagine why all these people wanted to keep me out.

“No information is sacred in your family, is it?”

“Not much, no.”

“I’m—” *Too*. “—was—thinking about it. Why?”

“Do you believe?”

“Does it matter?”

She barked a laugh that had no humor in it whatsoever. “Oh, yes, it matters very much. You have an honest relationship with Mitch: You don’t believe, he knows that, he accepts you on that basis. Don’t do this because you think it’ll make him happy. It’s a lot harder to be married to a member who doesn’t believe than it is to be married to a nonmember.”

“Your husband doesn’t believe at all, then?”

“He doesn’t know what to believe. His father had a fucked-up idea of doctrine, drilled it into him, and he’s having to relearn everything. We—me, Knox, and Morgan, I mean. We give him a frame of reference. Answer his questions, clear things up. We might all have our issues with the Church—and it with us—but we have a solid grounding in doctrine and we believe. Because Knox and I aren’t exactly the most pure people ever, and Morgan’s constantly torn between the Church and his homosexuality, Bryce trusts us to help him sort it out.”

Giselle was on the last few bites of the chef salad she’d requested after finishing her enormous steak. Her dessert, she’d said. I watched her eat and couldn’t, for the life of me, figure out where she put it all. “You have to understand,” she continued. “Generally, the Church sees excommunication as a break that you can build on. You know, start over fresh. Clean slate. Like bankruptcy. Bryce needs that.”

“And you don’t.”

“Well, I don’t know. Maybe I do. I mean, that night, when he and I first slept together—I don’t see how it could have ended any other way. On the other hand, I want the chance to spend eternity with him and I believe this is the only way I can do it.”

I sighed. The doctrine itself, what I knew of it, seemed to have some sort of internal logic. But the culture—The entire culture was one fat complicated mess of rules and regulations, traditions, unwritten protocols, exceptions, and paradoxes.

“Yes,” she said, her voice steady and serious. “We *are* a culture of paradox. It’s hard

to navigate. I *choose* to believe the core principles, so I've chosen to put up with the cultural and political bullshit I don't like—and there's a *lot* I don't like. While I think that your going to church with Mitch is a good thing for both of you because it shows him you're supportive of him, getting baptized if you don't believe is taking that supportive spouse thing way too far. I think it would be a bad thing.

"Why don't you take a cue from Mitch, since he hasn't tried to direct you toward this at all? I have a sneaking suspicion he'd pull rank on you and disallow it anyway. Look, you went to church on your own and you stuck with him on your own without getting laid and you married him. So... Go home, think about it. When you're ready, force the issue, make him talk to you. I've given you the information you need to do that."

"You do understand I only married him to fuck him, right?"

"Is that right. Well, in that case, tell me something. If you had known it was possible you'd be playing second fiddle to Mina for eternity, would you have gotten involved with him?"

I'm not going to lie and say I would've gotten involved with you if I'd known all this up front. I wouldn't have.

"I don't need an eternal commitment to get my itch scratched."

"Then Mina's eternal dibs on Mitch shouldn't make any difference to you, should it?"

I hate lawyers.

She speared me with those cold eyes again. Were I not so secure in my place in the world, she might have scared me a little. "The garments? Deal with it. *Graciously*. It is incumbent upon you to accept him the way he is for however long you're together. After all, he accepts you and *you* rebuilt your wealth on your back."

"You're a real bitch, you know that?"

"And *that* is why you called me," she said as she patted her mouth with her napkin. "Let's go shopping."

* * * * *

The Big Finish

April 8, 2011

Friday morning, I sat in my temporary permanent Blackwood Securities digs at Hollander Steelworks, up to my elbows in designs for home décor and jewelry one of the foundry's draftsmen had brought to me at Mitch's request. Sebastian, as his artistic alter-ego Ford, had designed a good half of them.

I was, in fact, staring at Sebastian's—Ford's—bold signature on the exquisite rendering of a bracelet when my phone began jangling his ringtone—"Brass in Pocket."

"Yo, Cass," he said when I answered. "Hate to barge in on your honeymoon, but this guy from, uh... Let's see, Worcester & Minden. Yeah. Mid-sized company in Alabama. He called me today, sounds desperate for some expertise. Can you take it?"

"Can't stand to leave the royal brats behind?"

"Well, that and I don't do insurance companies. Never have."

Of course not. He served producers.

"No problem. Deets?"

"I'll email 'em. Thanks."

My assistant and I had our routine down cold. She would pass out the particulars to my staff, who would do some preliminary research at one end of the company while I did some on the other end, and we'd meet in the middle with details and data analysis.

I called the Minden half of Worcester & Minden, introduced myself, and told him to expect me Tuesday.

"Thank you, Ms. St. James. Thank you!"

Huh. Such obsequiousness usually made me roll my eyes, but this was too desperate, too relieved, too...sincere.

"Susan," I said without preamble when I turned around and called her right back.

"Have a couple of tech guys meet me in Mobile on Tuesday morning, and get me some lawyers on retainer down there. The usual collection, but make sure at least one has some decent criminal law experience."

"Uh oh," she said absently while she typed. "Somebody's going to jail."

"Never hurts to be prepared for all contingencies."

Not ten minutes after that, I got a call from Prissy.

"So your first duty as bishop's wife is to go take a book to a sister in the hospital who is now blind and read to her."

My stomach dropped into my pelvic girdle. "Uh..."

"It's not a calling, Cassie, and it's not official. It's just something nice you can do and I didn't figure anybody would tell you about it, all things considered."

"Won't the Relief Society do that?"

"They'll take care of feeding her family and getting the children babysat and to school and whatnot. We tend to focus more on the pragmatic and not so much on just keeping someone company. There are a lot of different levels of service and sometimes the littlest, most mundane things get overlooked in favor of the more visible. After I had Calvin, I was really sick and Louise called me the night I delivered him to make me laugh. Once I got home, she just showed up one day with a cherry limeade to talk and make me laugh some more. It was all I needed. I will *never* forget her kindness as long as I live. I can't remember who brought food, but I do remember that."

Oh. Interesting. "Okay."

Mitch was in his lab and would not be disturbed, so I wrote a note and left it with his assistant. Then I went to do one of the most draining things I have ever done.

"Sister Reyes? Lena? I'm Cassie Hollander." The "Hollander" rolled off my tongue as if I'd been saying it for years instead of for the first time ever.

She was young, too young for the neurosurgery that had taken her sight, a surgery necessary to give her a chance to live longer. That was the hope, anyway.

Her brow wrinkled above her sightless eyes, as if by squinting she could see me. I tapped the back of her hand lightly, and she took it, grasped it as if she would never let go. "Cassie Hollander? I didn't know Mitch had relatives in the area."

"I'm his wife. As of last month."

"Oh," she breathed. "Oh, how *wonderful*."

"Thanks. Um, I'm kind of new at this bishop's wife stuff. I brought books to read to you in case—"

"No, please. Just talk to me. Tell me how you met Mitch."

I was only a few halting sentences into it when something I said—"salsa dancing at Cubax"—made her start to cry, then her fears began to bubble over.

And, as I had done for years, I simply listened, long into the evening, then night. It was nineish when Mitch walked into the room quietly, in a suit, his second counselor following closely behind. They sat, Mitch drawing up a chair to sit beside me and hold my other hand, twining his fingers with mine.

After a moment, she stopped speaking abruptly and wiped her eyes. "Who's there?"

"Bishop Hollander, Lena. Brother Noble. Your husband asked us to come and give you a blessing."

A what?

I looked at Mitch questioningly. He mouthed, "Watch," and arose to stand on one side of her bed while Brother Noble went around to the other side.

It was a ritual like faith-healing, but not. The other man took out a small vial attached to his key ring and put a small drop of what seemed to be oil on the crown of her head, rubbed it in a little, then he placed both his hands on her head. Mitch placed his hands over Brother Noble's. They bowed their heads and closed their eyes. Brother Noble said a few words that sounded ritualistic, but then he was done and they lifted their hands—only to change places. Mitch laid his hands on her head, while Brother Noble placed his on Mitch's.

And he began to speak to her.

My breath came short at his low voice, what he said, how he said it, with a lyricism and poetry I didn't know he was capable of. He didn't promise her the return of her sight or a long life. He didn't promise her anything at all, much less healing, much less a miracle.

He reassured her of the Lord's love and protection for her family, advised her to accept all the help she was given, as it was from the Lord, and to make an effort to learn how to live without her sight. He wanted her to use the other senses the Lord had given her, to find ways to bless others through her adversity, to let go of any bitterness she might have.

He then instructed her to learn how to dance blind, to trust her husband to partner her well, and let the music into her soul to guide her feet.

I bowed my head, humbled to my core, feeling terribly petty that I'd found fault with his garments.

Mitch finished with a ritualistic close, then stopped talking in that beautiful syntax. Now he talked to her normally, asked her how she was doing, if she needed someone to stay the night with her.

"No," she said, laughing a little through her tears. "I've taken up enough of Cassie's time, crying all over her, feeling sorry for myself."

He cast me a quick, warm smile, but turned his attention back to her. "You're allowed. Don't hesitate to call me if you need anything else. I'll stop by tomorrow sometime to check on you."

"Thank you," she whispered, so grateful, so reassured. He hadn't said anything to assuage the fears she had poured out to me, but she seemed to believe he had. "Thank you, Cassie. Go on home now. I'll be okay."

Another round of quick hugs and Mitch and I walked hand-in-hand through the hospital and out to the parking lot without speaking. I pointed to where I'd parked and he handed me in without a word, that warm smile still on his face when he reached out to touch my face with the pad of his thumb, then put it to his mouth as if he were tasting

something. Then he murmured, "See you at home."

I was in our bedroom and nearly undressed when I heard him come in the front door and shed his keys and wallet on the front foyer table where he always left them. Then I heard his footsteps on the stairs, then coming down the hall to our bedroom. I found myself holding my breath, waiting for the moment he would come in and wrap his arms around me...

...and released it in a whoosh when he did exactly that. He hummed into my neck, my jaw, as he kissed and licked and nibbled. He said nothing as he finished undressing me, helped me undress him, drew me into bed and made love to me with a tenderness beyond anything I'd known, even from him.

Bishop Hollander asked nothing from me but to lie back and be pleased and he did oh so well as if he'd had years and years of practice with me, knowing exactly what to touch and how.

Three weeks.

It had taken three weeks for him to become the most perfect lover I had ever had.

* * * * *

If We Work Hard, If We Behave

April 10, 2011

A ringing phone in the middle of the night never brings anything good, especially if the ringtone belongs to one's teenage stepson who is supposed to be home in bed.

I snapped out of sleep and snatched the phone to my ear, mid-"Allentown."

"Trevor?"

"Cassie!" After that one word, the boy launched into a panicked rendition of...something. He was hyperventilating, about to cry, and the only words I could pick out were *Hayleigh Sitkaris* and *accident*.

My heart stopped.

"Trevor. Trevor! TREVOR!" I shouted, and was finally able to get him to listen to me. "Where are you?"

"I'm— Um... Uh... I don't know, um... I couldn't— I tried the mill— My dad, I..."

Mitch was at the foundry casting ingots and wouldn't be home for hours.

I heard the faint wail of sirens. "Trevor, focus. Listen to my voice. Can you see the ambulance?"

"No. Only hear."

"If they ask you if you want to go to the hospital, say yes and go with them. I'll meet you there. Can you do that?"

"Yes."

Trevor, he made me I'm sorry he made me I'm sorry please forgive me Trevor I didn't want to he made me Trevor I'm sorry

What the fuck? Whose slurred voice was that?

Sit down or something, Hayleigh... Right here's good...

"Trevor!"

The siren abruptly stopped, and I could hear the clank of doors and gurneys, the shouts of paramedics.

He didn't answer. I tried again. "Trevor! Is Hayleigh there right now?"

“She did this,” he said vaguely, as if he weren’t quite conscious. “She— I— Hit her.”

I didn’t want to do it Trevor you have to believe me he made me do it please believe me

I believe you don’t worry

“Did you hit your head?”

“Yeah. Think so. Windshield cracked. Um...” His piece of shit truck was so old it didn’t have airbags. “Hayleigh’s hurt, too.”

There was a rustle and a thump, a grunt, and a clatter that hurt my ear.

“Trevor!”

No answer.

Trevor Trevor please wake up Trevor please help him he won’t wake up please help us

I couldn’t breathe.

Miss, don’t worry about him. We’ve got it under control.

But he— I didn’t want to he made me do it please help Trevor please ohTrevorwakeup!

Come with us, miss. We’ll tend to—Trevor?

Yespleasehelpus

“Hello? Who’s this?”

I blinked, shocked at the female voice in my ear. “The boy’s stepmother. Cassie Hollander. You’re the EMT?”

“Yes. We’re taking him and the girl to Lehigh Valley Hospital.”

The line went dead.

I glanced at the clock as I threw on some clothes and slapped a ball cap on my head. Almost one a.m.

Car.

Trevor had called the mill, but I didn’t know if he’d spoken to anyone who could get Mitch the message. It would be pointless for me to try.

GPS.

I refused to think about anything beyond getting to the hospital, but my heart thundered.

Hospital.

I walked in that place like I owned it. “Where is my son?” I demanded.

The emergency room clerk was not impressed. “And...you would be?”

“Cassie Hollander, looking for Trevor Hollander. How is he?”

Hollander Steelworks: The biggest employer in Lehigh Valley. It got her attention and she signaled to a nurse.

“He’s getting a CT scan at the moment,” she said. “You’ll need to do the paperwork, but you can do that in his assigned room.”

Ah, no privacy hassles, then. Either the EMT or Trevor had let them know to expect me.

They had me fill out innumerable papers. I knew he was on the mill’s insurance, but I didn’t have that information and I’d just pay the damn bill anyway.

Soon he was wheeled into the room, and I helped the nurse get him into bed. He was in a hospital gown with a bandage on his forehead, and we struggled because he was half

asleep and couldn't help. He gave me a wan smile.

"So," I said briskly as I drew up a chair. "You and I are going car shopping this week." And Hayleigh Sitkaris was getting out of that house.

I held up my hand when he opened his mouth to speak. "I know you love your truck because you bought it with your own money, and that shows you aren't a trust-fund brat and you're proud of that. But it's worthless now and I won't have you going without airbags. If you or your father have a problem with that, you can both kiss my ass."

He started to laugh, but then groaned and clutched his head.

"The cops are here. Have you talked to them yet?"

He shook his head and went to sleep. I know it's an old wives' tale about letting people with head injuries go to sleep, but it didn't stop me from wanting to keep him awake. Ah, but the police took that decision out of my hands when they showed up to interview him. He wasn't in critical condition and they had no compunction about requiring him to think and speak to them.

The tale was slow to emerge, but Trevor made an effort to work through his haze and articulate it with some logic.

He'd left Scarlett's dorm around twelve-thirty and was driving down I-78 at a good clip when someone zipped past him, slipped into the lane in front of him, and stomped on the brakes.

"You know the other driver, I take it?" the officer asked Trevor matter-of-factly.

"Yes," he croaked. "She—" He cleared his throat. Took a drink. "She was following me. Waiting for me to come out of the dorm. She's been following me around for the last week or so, I guess."

It was the first time I've ever wanted to kill someone badly enough to think about doing it, but not Hayleigh.

No.

I knew whose hand was up the back of that poor little poppet.

"I saw her—watched her, I mean, go around me. I slowed down when I figured out what she was going to do."

"How fast were you going, do you think?"

"I was doing a little over seventy when she passed me. Had to slam on my brakes."

"So when you hit her, how fast do you think you were going?"

"Maybe forty-five, fifty."

And hit her hard enough to send his head into the windshield and crack it. If he'd been going any faster—

The officers traded glances. They didn't believe him. Now. They would when they did the calculations.

It was a wonder the boy wasn't dead.

Oh, my God.

If he had—

Mitch—

My husband and I could take care of ourselves, but this was our *child* lying on the bed in front of me with a concussion, lucky to be alive much less lucid.

"Ma'am?" I looked up to see one of the officers offering me a box of tissues.

"Thank you," I whispered.

They didn't bother to ask about intoxication. The nurse had checked his blood

alcohol level when he was brought in and, no surprise to me, he hadn't had a drop.

"Anything else you want to cough up?"

"Well," he reluctantly admitted. "I was really tired."

They cited him. Left. Trevor fell asleep and I went in search of Hayleigh's room.

She lay on the bed and when I entered, she turned her face to the wall, away from me.

"Hayleigh," I murmured.

She hiccuped and put her hand to her nose, but still wouldn't look at me. I could only sit beside her and the second I touched her other hand, to wrap it in mine, she burst out in sobs.

"I want to help you get away."

It took a while, but her sobs started to clear up, letting me know she'd heard me and understood. She couldn't control the residual hiccups. "Wh—why?" she whispered. "I did a—an evil thi—thing."

"I don't believe you to be responsible for that."

"I shou—should've—could've said no."

I sighed. Unless this girl got years of therapy, beginning now, she would always ascribe youth and powerlessness to weakness, no matter what I said.

"If you could go anywhere in the world, where would you go?"

"I have nowhere else to go," she whispered. Her hiccups were subsiding. "He would find me. He always does."

Ah, so she'd tried. And failed. I wondered if Mitch knew that.

"What if I were to send you somewhere? Somewhere you'd be safe, with people who can protect you?"

"No one can protect me," she said tonelessly.

"Look at me," I said in my boardroom voice, which had compelled some of the most important people in the country to obey—never mind one broken little girl. "There are more powerful people in the world than your father."

She paused, as if the thought had never occurred to her. "But everyone likes him. No one would ever believe me."

"I believe you. The bishop believes you. Sister Kelly and Sister Seaton believe you."

Even though Hayleigh regarded me with some suspicion, her body began to relax.

"But—"

"But. *You* don't know the people I know."

"Where would you send me?"

"My ex-husband." If anyone could heal a teenage girl's soul, it would be Gordon.

"His husband, Nigel."

Her eyes widened at the unconventional phrasing, and she gulped.

"You trust Bishop Hollander?"

"Yes," she breathed with a fervency that let me know just how much she depended on him.

"Enough to trust the woman he married?"

She gulped. "I think—yes. What about my mother?"

"Let's worry about you first, and then we'll worry about your mother." After all, Hayleigh could have been killed, and Greg would have known that. I couldn't guarantee he wouldn't take Hayleigh's disappearance out on Amelia, but this was a desperate

moment.

“Um... How’s Trevor?” It cost her to ask, but she needed to know.

“He’s fine. Just sleeping it off right now.”

It was as if the air had been let out of her. “Oh, I’m so glad.”

“I’m going to leave now and make some calls. Will you be okay?”

“I think so.”

Prissy first. “I’ll call Louise,” she said briskly once I’d finished outlining my plan.

“With any luck, we can get Amelia out tomorrow.”

Gordon next. “Of course,” he said immediately.

“Hoping to get the mother there in the next few days.”

Sheldon last. “I’ll be right there, Ms. St. James.”

“She’ll need food and blankets.”

“I’ll take good care of her.”

My work was done.

Fast.

Trevor was still dozing when I seated myself beside his bed. I crossed my arms over my chest and stared at the floor for a long time, deliberately keeping my mind clear.

“Well, well, well.”

I looked up to see Sitkaris in the doorway.

“New mommy to the rescue. Where’s Mitch?”

“Not here,” I murmured. “I guess you’ll have to settle for fucking around with me instead. For a price.”

Rude.

A calculating smile spread across his face. “You’re a mercenary bitch, *Sister Hollander*,” he said conversationally. “I like that about you.”

“Don’t you want to make sure your daughter’s okay first?”

“She’ll be fine,” he said dismissively. “She knows better than not to be.” He rocked back on one heel and swept me with a glance, head to toe and back again. “You’re beautiful even when you’re filthy and in rags. Maybe more so. Right now, my car. How much?”

“Four million dollars.”

He scoffed. “I can’t come up with that kind of cash right now and you know it. Is that what Mitch is paying you? He’s no cover boy and can’t be so good you’d fuck him for free.”

I arose calmly, approached him until I was nose to nose with him. I pressed close against him, slid my hand up the inside of his thigh. His breath caught, but still managed to look smug. I cupped his balls through his pants, caressed his growing (and impressive) erection. Stroked him until his nostrils flared and his breathing quickened. “*I*,” I whispered, “would pay *Mitch* for the privilege of fucking him,” and squeezed.

Hard.

He yelped and fell to the floor, curled up and clutching his manparts.

A nurse rushed to his aid, but he couldn’t speak and I doubted he would admit to having had five long fingernails dug deep enough into his cock and balls to sever the nerves. (I hoped.) An orderly helped the nurse get Sitkaris into a wheelchair and looked at me askance.

I examined my blood-red manicure.

Cruel.

“Cassie,” Trevor croaked. I turned and realized he’d seen and heard the whole thing. I felt my face flush and I opened my mouth to try to repair the trust I’d just broken, but he gave me a crooked grin and slurred, “You’re awesome.”

I stared at him for a split second, then chuckled. “And you’re on drugs. Go back to sleep.”

After an enthusiastic application of soap and hot water to my talons, I left Trevor’s room to keep tabs on Sitkaris, who was lying in his own cube, growing lethargic on painkillers. I smirked every time I strolled by. He could do nothing but weakly snarl until he, too, went to sleep. The nurses watched me suspiciously. They were pretty sure I’d done something to the man, but didn’t know what and couldn’t prove it, hadn’t heard any accusations of assault from the wounded, and didn’t know whether to call the cops or not.

At three, Sheldon appeared and made a stir as he strode through the emergency room with the confidence of a man used to protecting people. Of course, Sheldon, at six-six, pitch black, bald, and gorgeous, tended to make a stir everywhere he went.

I slipped into Hayleigh’s room and helped her back into her clothes.

“Hayleigh,” I whispered. “The man who’s taking you to Gordon, my ex-husband—He’s my bodyguard.” That confused her, but it didn’t matter. “His name is Sheldon. He’s saved my life twice. Trust him the way you would trust Bishop Hollander, all right?”

She nodded frantically, uncertain but willing to take the risk.

I distracted the nurses by peeking in on Sitkaris while Sheldon helped her limp out of the common area, his big body shielding her from detection. She stumbled, but Sheldon caught her, and once they were out of the nurses’ sight, he swept her up into his massive arms and moved swiftly to get her out.

At three-thirty, the radiologist came to deliver the news that Trevor’s CT was normal and he was cleared to go home. It was four by the time I hit the Walgreen’s drive-thru pharmacy, got him home, and tucked into bed.

He was almost asleep when his head hit the pillow. I pulled his covers up to his chin. Brought him a glass of water. Sat on the side of the bed and smoothed his hair back a little, wondering what it would have been like to raise a boy child. I didn’t dare hum, as he was in enough pain already.

My throat clogged up when, just before he dropped off to sleep, he sighed, “Thanks, Mom.”

* * * * *

Oil and Tears

It seemed to Mitch that his life was crumbling around his ears, but it would’ve whether he’d married Cassandra or not. He would rather it happen when he had someone strong to lean on, who was as close as the edge of his bed, than handle it alone, his only real support a thousand miles away.

He parked next to Cassandra’s car and headed into the house, up the stairs, opened Trevor’s door. There he was, his precious son, splayed out on his stomach, snoring. He entered the room and touched the boy’s face.

“Thank you,” he whispered, unable to say more for fear he would break down.

He left the door open when he exited the room, a long-discarded practice from when

he and Mina were hypersensitive to every snuff and sniffle their children made during the night. He didn't need to; he simply found it reassuring to do so. He jogged down the hall to his own room to find a beautiful woman clad only in a pair of black lace panties walking around his bedroom turning off lamps, humming to herself.

"How is he? What'd the doctor say? *What happened?*"

She looked at him, surprised. "He's in bed, sleeping."

"I know. I checked there first."

"You didn't have to come home early. I have everything under control."

Mitch stared at her, then away. Now that most of his fears were put to rest, he had to shift gears, to think, to remember, to capture the oddity of what she'd said.

She was still talking. "...uised ribs, concussion. The doctor said he'd be fine, but he needs to stay home and rest for a couple of days. If I had my way, it'd be a week or more." Mitch was fading in and out of the conversation as he tried to process her incredulous story. "...can deal with that motherfucker or I can, but it needs to be done." He knew that, but he couldn't think. "...set it all up to get to you, but he's simply gone too far. Made that poor girl do such a thing— Trevor was doing seventy. If he hadn't been so aware, so prepared for what she might do, both those kids would've been killed."

A hand clamped around Mitch's chest. He'd declared war on Greg by confronting him about his part in the Jep Industries embezzlement scheme, and Greg was perfectly happy to engage him in that war, as he'd expected.

What Mitch hadn't expected was that Greg would go so far as to put lives in danger to win. In a way, he could see why he might risk Trevor, but Hayleigh too? Was he *that* evil?

Mitch! Listen to me. What he's doing to the sisters in this ward—

Louise, who would do that? What's in it for him?

He enjoys it, Mitch. That's what I'm telling you.

You say he engages in these elaborate schemes, but there's very little payoff for all that work. What is it? What's he getting out of it?

It's just for his personal amusement, to set it all in motion and watch it play out when everybody's at each other's throats. Then they all go to him to vent and get comfort, and he just plays them a little more.

I just don't get how that's enough motivation. People need more than that.

Or maybe they didn't.

But Greg had twenty-five years' worth of motivation to go after Mitch, starting with his preempted marriage to Mina, then losing his job at Jep Industries along with all the stolen cash, and his inability to get past Mitch on his climb up the church ladder.

More power with which to play his games.

The damage Greg could do as a bishop...

Mitch shuddered.

"Mitch?"

He focused on her fully then. "Why didn't you call me?"

"Trevor said he called the mill and left a message. Obviously you got it because you're here. But I was home. He knew that and called me. I saw no reason to wait until someone could pull you off the line when I could deal with it." She studied him, her head cocked to one side. "Are you angry with me?"

He shook his head to clear it. "I don't—know. I'm not used to this. Somebody

just...taking care of something without me, without some kind of authorization or...check writing. I thought— I went to the hospital as soon as I got the message and... He was just...*gone*. They said his mother took him home, but— Uh, his *mother* is— And then I find out *he* might have—”

“He has a concussion. That’s all. He’ll be fine.”

“But I— I wasn’t there for him. Again.”

Cassandra sighed and tugged at the sleeve of his coverall, and he went to the bed when she nudged him that direction. He sat, disoriented, feeling as if he had left a task incomplete and couldn’t figure out where he’d stopped. “Talk to me,” she whispered, sitting close beside him, rubbing his arm though he was still wearing his greasy clothes.

“I, uh...” He slumped over, his elbows on his knees and his head hanging down. He had no context for this. “I don’t know what— I wasn’t there for my kid. But *somebody* was. Immediately. It’s...strange. I’m not mad. I’m— I don’t know what I am. I’m going to have to learn to get used to this. It’s easy when I— When you and I are—”

“Fighting?”

He nodded. “I can...think. It’s focused. Right now, everything’s so scattered and I’m — Confused.”

She said nothing, but continued to caress his arm, not in a sensual manner, but caring, her touch sympathetic. He turned his head to see her hand, slim, with long narrow fingers, so soft and feminine.

Strong.

She belonged here, but she planned to leave in a year, so what did it mean? What would he do without her?

But he sighed and said nothing because that was the deal. Nagging her to stay would be cheating and it would only drive her away sooner.

“I’ve never had this,” he said again, low, afraid of how vulnerable it made him feel, how weak.

“I know,” she whispered. “Sucks, doesn’t it?”

He looked back at her sweet yet sophisticated face, as guileless as always. No wonder half her clients had had fantasies of marriage. “You...understand?”

“Oh, yes. All those years with Gordon. Fighting him. Ignoring my girls’ demands. Trying to instill some discipline and failing. Fending off Rivington, who wanted me, felt entitled to me. Then I met Nigel.” She pursed her lips in thought. “If he had come to me and said, ‘I want to help you,’ I would’ve refused. But he came to me and said, ‘I want your husband, and this is what you will do so I can have him.’ It was easy for me to take his help.

“But, say, my assistant. Susan. She insists on doing things for me and it’s...weird, this girl who just wants to do little things for me. Not because I sign her paycheck or because it’s part of her job, but it’s— It’s like she sees some weakness in me and she wants to take care of me. I *hate* it, but I let her because it makes her happy.

“And Sheldon. He knows my favorite music and makes sure it’s playing. Knows what I read and makes sure I have the newspapers I need in the car. Knows how I take my coffee, knows what gossip to pass along to me, what information and disinformation to spread and to whom. He always asks me if there’s anything more he can do for me, any errands I might need doing that he can. I asked him *once* to get my dry cleaning and now he coordinates with my housekeeper to take it in and pick it up. None of that is part

of his job. It...embarrasses me how he goes out of his way to take care of me, when he doesn't have to. All he has to do is keep me alive. Watch over my children."

Mitch nodded slowly.

"You serve everyone, Mitch. Who serves you?"

She wasn't asking about his family, immediate or adopted.

You haven't had a minute to yourself in twenty years.

Mina's voice.

"No one," he murmured.

"There's power in that, isn't there?"

Yes, there was.

"And to be served is to have power taken from you, to allow it to be taken from you."

He nodded slowly.

"I would like—" She cleared her throat. "Would you think about not working the Sunday shift at the mill anymore?"

"Why?" But he didn't have to ask. Not really.

"Just a step in that direction, Mitch. Not a big one."

He sighed. "You're right. If I'd been home tonight, I could've—"

"We *both* would've. But there was no need. You came home because Trevor was more important than whatever you hope to accomplish by casting ingots once a week."

"I like casting ingots," he muttered, knowing he sounded like a sullen little boy, and grew annoyed when she became amused at him for it.

"Let me take care of you," she murmured. "That's why I married you, after all."

He stared at her, wondering if she realized what she'd just said, but she arose and headed to the bathroom. "Get undressed," she tossed over her shoulder, then he heard the sound of water running into the oversized tub.

Mitch looked down at the floor, feeling the weight of the world on his shoulders. Then he looked at the clock. Four-thirty. His son had a concussion. Shouldn't he be more worried?

But no. Someone with strength and resources had taken the initiative to tend Trevor for him, had handled the situation beginning to end, had made sure his son was safely home and drugged and tucked into bed—

Someone used to taking charge and getting things done: fast, rude, possibly cruel.

Exhaustion enveloped him suddenly, and he might have collapsed back on the bed if *she* hadn't caught him and pulled him to his feet. He heard nothing but the soft rasp of a zipper, the rustle of fabric, as he let her undress him.

Finally he stood nude in the middle of his bedroom with his nude wife. Tired. Dizzy. He simply followed when she led him into the candlelit bathroom and obeyed when she pointed to the bathtub. He hissed at the heat of the water under all those bubbles, but climbed in anyway. He would've relaxed, but her hand on his back stopped him and she climbed in behind him.

She pulled him back against her body until he was up to his chin in hot water and bubbles, his head resting between her jaw and shoulder. Her hands caressed his stubbled chin and cheeks, kneaded his shoulders, swept down his chest and massaged there, then up again to his throat and neck. She massaged his temples with her thumbs.

"Sleep," she whispered.

So he did.

* * * * *

High Voltage

April 13, 2011

Wednesday, Mitch dropped into his desk chair to deal with the morning's most pressing business so he could lock himself in his lab and forget the world for a while.

"Hollander!" Tracey said as soon as he picked up. "I was wondering when Cassie would let you in on her nefarious plots."

Cassandra had done what Mitch couldn't have done without opening himself and the Church up to legal repercussions. She hadn't said a word about it to give him plausible deniability, but she hadn't counted on Trevor, who'd spilled the beans simply by asking where she'd stashed the Sitkaris women.

But Cassandra had stayed frustratingly mum and blown Mitch a teasing kiss before ducking into the plane that would take her to Alabama. Mitch waited until she was in the air before heading to Louise's house to demand an explanation.

"*She* didn't," Mitch grumbled.

"Cassie's a brilliantly sneaky bitch. Payback's hell, ain't it?"

Mitch grunted. "Tracey, you know I have to be kept in the loop, and she's made it very clear she's not going to tell me anything."

Nigel chuckled. "The ladies are fine. Gordon's pampering them shamelessly, and I have a shrink friend who owes me a favor or six, so she's been by to check on them, talk to them a little bit. Did you call one of your compatriots? We've never had a random Mormon bishop knock on our door before."

Thank heavens. "That was the first thing I did after Cassandra's co-conspirators 'fessed up," Mitch said. "He and his leadership need to know the situation in case Sitkaris figures out where they are and shows up to make trouble."

"He sat and talked with them a good long while. Thanked us profusely. Gave us his phone number and said he'd be by Sunday to check on them, bring them your communion—what is it?"

"Sacrament. We don't want them to show up at church in case Sitkaris has friends there, which is entirely possible."

"How do you know this bishop isn't one of them?"

Mitch felt a humorless smile curl his mouth. "He's a friend of *mine*."

"Ah. Okay. What's the news there?"

"Not a peep out of him. It makes me nervous."

Tracey made some vague noise of understanding. "Now, when the girl and her mom are a little more stable, you may want to think about sending them to Kansas City. Get them out of the vicinity and around people who don't mind getting blood on their hands."

It was a good idea, but he'd have to make sure Amelia was amenable to it. Whisking two traumatized women away in the middle of the night to get them out of danger was one thing. Orchestrating their lives was an entirely different thing.

"In the meantime, Sheldon's been hanging around getting fat and happy on Gordon's cooking, and your big bouncer friend—Luis? from Cubax?—popped up and said you'd asked him to coordinate schedules."

“Yup,” Mitch said tightly.

Tracey paused. “Rest easy, pal,” he murmured. “We got your back.”

Mitch cracked a genuine smile for the first time in days. “Thank you.”

He sat for a long time after he’d hung up, his elbows on his desk, his fingers steeped against his mouth.

The situation with the Sitkaris family wouldn’t have him this wound up if Greg weren’t so quiet about it. It’d been three days since Cassandra had sent Hayleigh to New York, and two since Prissy and Louise had packed Amelia up and driven her there themselves.

Last night at church had been quiet, routine. He’d expected Greg to show up and blow Mitch’s office door open, but that hadn’t happened. Neither had he filed an insurance claim against Trevor. That bothered him the most. Then again, Mitch should’ve known better than to expect (hope for) a frontal attack, even in the form of standard operating procedure for a car accident. Greg didn’t work that way.

“Mitch, this just came for you by courier.”

He looked up to see Darlene crossing the office with a fat manila envelope in her hand.

“Thanks.”

There was no return address on the envelope, just a laser-printed label with his name on it. It wasn’t even sealed, just held closed with the cheap brass clasp.

Pictures.

Lots of them.

And a piece of paper that slid out on its own.

cc:

President David Petersen

Nazareth Pennsylvania Stake High Council

Bishop Mitch Hollander

Pictures fell from the envelope in a blizzard, eight-by-tens, color and black-and-white, professionally shot zoom photos of him and Cassandra.

Dancing at Cubax.

Snuggling on her doorstep.

Walking hand-in-hand down Park Avenue, talking, smiling, laughing.

Almost kissing, Cassandra’s hands under his suit coat, cupping his butt.

Sitting in a dark corner of an emergency room, Cassandra on his lap, Mitch’s hand up her shirt, the two of them kissing passionately.

It shocked him.

Mitch looked at Cassandra’s face, the glances she had shot him as they went about their courtship. How had he missed it, that nebulous thing he’d felt from her from the moment she’d fallen, giggling, into his lap on New Year’s Eve?

Mina had looked at him that way, and he’d always known it for what it was.

Cassandra had been in love with him from the beginning—

If you had also asked me for my client list, I would have given it to you... You are the only other person besides me who will have read this. I am trusting you with my life.

—and he had mistaken it for simple lust. She’d never admit it, since she went to a

great deal of trouble to lie to herself, but now Mitch knew. He finally had the last piece of the puzzle that was Cassandra's true motive for dating him, marrying him. But now that *he* knew, it was exactly the leverage he needed to extend that stupid one-year agreement to the rest of their lives.

How had he been so blessed as to love *two* women in a single lifetime who loved *him* in return?

He picked up another grouping of pictures and felt his gut clench—not in fear for his spiritual future, no. With desire, wondering how he'd resisted her all those weeks.

They sat in a cab, the camera perfectly aimed to show Cassandra draped over him, Mitch's arm around her, drawing her closer. The night of the argument that had terrified him that he'd lost his chance when he'd refused to kiss her, and now...

It looked so much different from this angle.

It looked like they had been making passionate love and got interrupted by having been tossed in the back of a cab.

Her hand was wrapped around his neck, her lips pressed against his cheek, at the corner of his mouth. His eyes were closed, half ecstasy, half agony, his head tilted, letting her have her way with him.

Shot after shot, in rapid sequence. If he stacked them all together and flipped through them, he'd have a movie.

He did that.

And groaned with want, need.

But Cassandra was twelve hundred miles away and wouldn't be home until tomorrow. Only two days without her, and he was out of his mind with missing her.

Find someone. Someone who can match you the way I never could, someone who'll take care of you the way you deserve.

Let me take care of you. That's why I married you, after all.

Mitch's throat clogged.

His incredible romance, spread out in front of him. Every whisper and smile and moment that built their relationship, their love—

—yet giving every indication that not only had he *not* kept his covenants, but that he'd slunk away to New York to sin in secret.

With a hooker.

There, a picture of his feeding her a cherry cordial at Jacques Torres. Cassandra's head was back, her eyes closed, her beautiful mouth pursed mid-chew, unable to see the pure desire on Mitch's face as he held her to him and lowered the confection into her mouth.

The entirety of Cassandra's birthday flashed through his mind, when they'd gotten high on sugar and traded increasingly nonsensical gobbledygook, laughed themselves silly over it, when Cassandra had looked at him, her face shining with delight.

He was captivated by her dry wit and her affection for mankind and its foibles, something he would not have expected from a woman who'd been a pawn most of her life.

He saw her reputation for fast, rude, and cruel for what it was: at once efficient and kind. Too bad she'd never had the stomach to turn it on her daughters.

He respected her as a financial powerhouse, one who, with nothing more than a lifetime of trying to juggle household budgets veneered by a token MBA, could step into

Sebastian Taight's role as America's corporate hammer without a hint of insecurity.

No, it wasn't *sin* that had drawn him to New York. He could've gotten *sin* anywhere.

And, according to the rumors Greg cultivated, he'd gotten it right in his own backyard with who knew how many women. Mitch couldn't begin to sort it out, the whos and the whats and the whys and the wheres.

It didn't matter now. He'd set the cogs in motion himself, back in November, by confronting Greg with his fraud, releasing him from the calling he needed to play his mind games and step up the ladder. Once the stake president and stake high council got their copies of these photos, Mitch could expect a knock on his door and an envelope inviting him to his excommunication.

The question was: Did Greg have the credibility necessary to get Mitch out?

He didn't know.

There was only one person strong enough to hold him up right now, and he needed her so badly, needed to feel her strength behind him in a bathtub full of hot water lulling him to sleep because he knew she wouldn't let him drown.

Cassandra's phone rang and rang, but finally she answered. "Well, *hello*," she breathed, her voice husky.

"What are you doing right now?" Mitch murmured, hoping she'd say something shocking.

"I," she answered matter-of-factly, "am standing in the middle of the actuarial department of Worcester & Minden, watching people scramble when I bark."

He chuckled, then began to laugh when she barked, "You! Over there. Yes, you, in the cheap pinstripes. You put that file in the shredder and I'll put *you* in a wood chipper. You—young lady! Taniqua? Get maintenance up here to get these fucking shredders out of here." Pause. "NOW!" She sighed into the phone.

"You seem to be having a very good time."

"God, I love this job— Oh, I don't think so, sweetheart!" she bellowed, and Mitch's eardrum protested. "You! Go downstairs. Tell the cops I need them up *here*. Sorry about that."

"No problem. Cops?"

"Had to rustle up some shysters to get a court order and put the company into receivership, appoint me trustee. So now I'm having all the paper in this place, all the hard drives—everything—boxed up and sent to Nigel so he can figure out what the hell happened here. He started out in insurance, so he'll know better what to look for than I do."

"Mismanagement or theft?"

She paused. "You know, I'm not sure yet," she said in a thoroughly bewildered tone of voice. "Usually I can tell, but this is...very strange. Probably a mixture, like Jep."

"How'd you get a court order if you don't know?"

"These old Southern men, you know. The judge didn't hear a word my attorney said once I presented him with an entirely accidental view of tits and ass."

Of course. "I miss you."

"I miss you, too," she said huskily, then lowered her voice even more. "I do love my job, Bishop, but I must confess there is one thing I like more than this."

"What's that?" he asked, fiddling with a fountain pen, his mouth twitching because he knew.

“Fucking you.”

Mitch grinned, the pictures on his desk now back in their proper perspective: The documentary of a romance between equals.

“What are you doing today?”

Watching my enemy take me down and being unable to do anything about it.

“Thinking about you. About what to do when I get released from the bishopric.”

Next week.

“We could buy an RV. Like your parents.”

He sat stunned for a moment. “Uh... Am I speaking with Cassandra St. James? Midas the Second? *My* wife?”

She laughed with hearty, wicked delight. “Actually, I was thinking something like a Tuscan villa.”

“Everybody does that.”

“Caribbean. Lie on the beach. Dance with the natives.”

“Then see the rest of the world.”

“Together,” she purred.

Mitch could feel the thud of his heart through his breastbone. “That would...uh...take longer than a year.”

She said nothing for a couple of seconds, then murmured, “I might not remember that little detail. I...forget things that cease to be important to me.”

In the midst of tragedy, hope. “That would be okay with me,” he said, his voice gruff.

“Officer!” she yelled then. “Get that fucker away from the computers! *Nobody* touches the computers but *my* people!” Mitch burst out laughing and she muttered, “Good thing I brought my own techs. Just like children, feeding their dinner to the dog. Little bastards hiding their dirty deeds.”

“Done dirt cheap.”

“Around here, cheap is less than poverty level.”

“I called Nigel.”

“Oh, good. Now you won’t need to bug me about it.”

“Wishful thinking on your part.”

She snickered, then snarled at someone else for not jumping when she snapped her fingers.

“I better let you go.”

“Ever had phone sex?”

“No.”

“You will tonight.”

* * * * *

A Poor Wayfaring Man of Grief

April 19, 2011

“Hello, Bishop.”

Mitch turned to see an older woman he didn’t know in the threshold of his office. Frail, a bit stooped, with thinning salt-and-pepper hair and sunken cheeks, she had the look of chaotic desperation about her.

It was Tuesday night and he was gathering his things to leave and lock up for the last time. He hadn't been instructed to; in fact, he hadn't heard a word from the stake president nor anyone else. Greg, as a newly called member of the stake high council, had attended different wards Sunday, which Mitch had otherwise spent presiding over sacrament meeting and a slate of other meetings, interviews, fires to extinguish.

As usual.

He'd thought the building empty, but no. His first instinct was to panic, being alone in the building with a woman he wasn't married to, but it didn't matter now. The silence from his superior after the delivery of those photos meant it wouldn't be long until—

"Hello, Sister...?"

Her mouth trembled. "Guerrero," she whispered, a tear sparkling at the corner of her eye.

Mitch thought his heart had stopped. He could barely breathe. "Inez."

"I've changed, I know," she murmured. "Don't try to be polite about it. Nobody can pull that off."

"I— Uh..."

"I heard you got married again."

Mitch tried to take a breath. "Yeah. Uh, last month."

"The brunette, Cathy...?"

"Cassie."

"Yes. I saw her Sunday. She's beautiful."

"She is. What can I do for you, Inez?"

Asking the question was conditioned reflex, and he had too many strong conflicting emotions running through him to do anything other than act by rote.

Inez was here.

Why did you come back here, Inez?

Questions, protestations, confusion rushed his mind, turning it to mush, with only two thoughts screaming to be voiced:

Why? Why now?

She shrugged. "I have a list of things I'd like you to do for me, but all I really wanted was to say I'm sorry."

"For what?"

Inez is here. Why?

"For what I've done to you."

Mitch's breath hitched.

"You don't deserve it," she said, no emotion coloring her words. "But I'm desperate. You've always seen me at my most desperate. I was desperate for a dance partner, there you were. I was desperate to be taken care of, there you were. I'm desperate now. There you are."

She laughed then for no reason Mitch could think of, and he saw that time had wreaked havoc on her. She'd lived hard and he didn't have to wonder if she had walked the streets after her lover kicked her to the curb. Cassandra had chosen her path deliberately as a means of exacting vengeance; for Inez, it had always been about survival.

"Turn your arms out," Mitch said abruptly, but he didn't need to see the tracks to know. He'd spent a good share of the last thirteen years dealing with junkies of one sort

or another, in varying stages of addiction and varying states of remorse.

Inez complied slowly, but without hesitation. Mitch imagined she did everything slowly, and she was probably hardened to humiliation. She rolled the tattered sleeve of her dingy Oxford above her left elbow.

“Are you clean?”

“No.”

“Are you interested in getting clean?”

She shrugged. “I could say I was. I’d try. For you. But it wouldn’t last.”

Mitch’s breath left him in a whoosh, and he sat back on the edge of his desk, wiping his hands down his face.

“I had to see you again,” she said bluntly. “Let you take a look at what you escaped. I told you I wouldn’t be good for you, and you ended up marrying well. Good girls. I knew Mina. Barely. Nice little girl, good family. Your wife looks like butter wouldn’t melt in her mouth.”

Mitch barked a laugh, at once thoroughly amused and thoroughly saddened.

“And you made something of yourself. I knew you would.”

He searched for something, anything, to say. “How are your kids?”

“No idea. CPS took ’em away from me before they were teenagers.” That didn’t surprise him. “I told you what would happen with me, and I was right. I would’ve dragged you through life from ghetto to ghetto.”

Yes.

“What do you need, Inez?”

“Sixty thousand dollars.”

“You know I won’t do that.”

“What’s it to you? You won’t miss it.” She waved a hand. “For you, it’s like, what, sixty dollars?”

“Six,” he said flatly. “The answer’s no. And you know why.”

“Got over your rescue complex, then?”

He studied her, and saw none of the beautiful twenty-five-year-old woman who had left him behind with a broken heart. She’d be fifty now, but looked seventy. “No,” he said absently. “I just don’t use that method. Money doesn’t fix addiction.”

Inez laughed with no humor whatsoever. “You got that right.”

“Okay, look,” he said finally. “If you’d like a place to stay, an opportunity to get clean, I have a carriage house you can stay in. Free room and board. I can send you to the best rehab program in the country if you want.”

Not like he hadn’t tried that a couple dozen times over the years for a couple dozen other people.

She shook her head. “No, I’m good. For now. Got a little cash on me. I’ll be heading out, here in a couple of hours. Thought I might try to pop you for a few benjamins.”

“Have you eaten?” he asked, low, now too overcome with sorrow and pity to worry about propriety or what his enemy might do with it. “Let me give you dinner, at least. Cassandra can whip something up for you. She makes a killer gumbo.”

She shook her head slowly. “No. Thanks. Your wife wouldn’t want to dirty her kitchen for a whore.”

“Oh, Inez. You have no idea how wrong you are.”

She looked straight at him then, held his gaze. “Maybe someday, you’ll forgive me.”

“Forgive you for *what*?”

But she was gone, and he followed. There, disappearing around the hall corner, into the foyer, toward the doors.

“Don’t,” she called over her shoulder as she put her hand on the glass door to head out in the darkness. She looked down at the ground. “Just...remember me kindly. That’s all I want.”

“Inez! Let me take you to a shelter at *least*.”

She looked back at him, tears streaming down her cheeks. “I love you, Mitch. I always have. And I will love you until the day I die.”

Mitch stood in the middle of the large foyer, watching her go, trying to make sense of it all, but it felt like swimming through mud.

“How. Fucking. Pathetic.”

Mitch’s jaw clenched.

Greg drew abreast of him. “You want to hit me, don’t you?”

No. He would not give in to the taunts.

“You’ve always had a taste for whores. What’d she ask you for? Sixty? Shit, I only gave her thirty. But at least now you’re fucking a whore with some class, who knows what she’s worth.”

Mitch swallowed. Hard.

“And your kid— Heh. Like father, like son. Do it, Mitch,” he murmured, getting closer. “Hit me. I promise I won’t hit back.”

Mitch’s nostrils flared.

“So, how much is Cassie worth? Sixty thousand? No, I know better than that. Six million, more like. Yeah, I looked up her tax returns. That was her *lowest* year. Girl topped out at twenty-nine million. Ah, but Inez is a cheap bitch. She always was. You escaped that train wreck pretty well, but you got a different one and as usual, you were a stupid shit. You should’ve slapped Mina in a cheap nursing home and been done with it. I bet she was a lousy lay, to boot, so I suppose I owe you for rescuing *me* from *that*.”

Mitch’s fists clenched.

“Poor Mitch, couldn’t bring himself to pay a whore for sex, but of *course* marriage makes it okay. Barely. How much did Cassie charge you to get her name on a marriage certificate? I’m sure there’s a time limit on the prenup—all the better for her to get out from under you. Really. Satisfy my curiosity. How much *did* you pay her for that sham of a marriage?”

Mitch could feel the muscles of his shoulders, arms, back tightening, ramping up the way they did before a particularly laborious task in the foundry, the way they had when he’d beaten Elder Snow into a French hospital.

Greg grabbed Mitch’s wrist and touched Mitch’s knuckles to his jaw, just before Mitch jerked it away. “It’d be so easy. You’re a lot bigger than me, Mitch. You could lay me out flat with one punch, because when it gets right down to it, you’re just another loser steel worker, exactly like old man Monroe always knew.”

“And you’re a petty thief.”

Sitkaris threw his hands wide and cackled. “Ah, he speaks. Tell me. Is that worse or better than spreading your legs for anybody who can afford you?”

The natural man, the bad boy, the *animal* Mitch had kept on a tight leash for the last twenty-five years— It was howling now, wanting to defend his wife, but Cassandra

wouldn't want him to defend her. She would calmly point out that with payments of jewels and art, property, cars, and cash, she'd made far, far more than what she'd reported to the IRS in her official occupation of "investment consultant."

Then Sitkaris would soon find himself in some situation out of his worst nightmares, his fate custom-built for him by a woman who didn't hesitate to punish her enemies—and Mitch would bet his last dime she already had something in the works for Greg.

Mitch turned and walked away from him, back down to his office to pick up his things, but Greg followed.

"Does she eat pussy too? What am I saying? Of *course* she does. I'd pay to see that, oh yes I would."

No, he would not hit Greg.

He would *not*.

Help me, Father.

"Go home, Greg."

Mitch locked his office and strode down the hall, trying to get away from Greg before he shoved his fist down Greg's throat.

"Not until you give me a reason to have you arrested. Too bad I couldn't get your hired wife for kidnapping. I don't know how she did it, but I'll have to thank her for getting those two whiny cunts out of my house—though unfortunately before I could get Hayleigh to write her own, ah, *confession*." He paused. "Eh, well. You win some, you lose some. Now that my dick's recovered from Cassie's claws, I'm seeing the potential of something less...nerve damaging. Do you think she'd do it to me again? Only softer this time?"

Elder Snow. Elder Snow. Elder Snow.

He couldn't—*wouldn't*—crack now.

"Oh, c'mon, Mitch. Hit me. Icing on the cake. What could it hurt? You're out on your ass, and you *still* don't have anything on me. I told you not to fuck with me, Mitch. I warned you, but you didn't listen."

Mitch locked the building's doors once Greg had exited just behind him, and turned to stride to the parking lot, his car. Safety.

For Greg.

Because Mitch was about to kill him.

"Whatever. If you can afford to drop a couple, three million on a glorified Beetle, I can't see why you wouldn't drop sixty million for a whore like Cassie."

"Greg."

"Hit me," he snarled as Mitch opened his car door, threw his things over to the passenger side, and dropped into the bucket seat. He held the door when Mitch tried to close it. "Hit me, you motherfucker. Don't just sit there and take it."

Patience, boy.

Mitch turned the key and revved his engine. "Good night, Greg."

Greg's willingness to be harmed to advance his cause didn't extend so far as to step in front of a race car in motion.

Mitch squealed out of the parking lot, cranked the ZZ Top, and went on a long, fast drive.

•

"*WHERE HAVE YOU BEEN?!*"

Mina would never have demanded Mitch account for his whereabouts, much less screamed it at him the minute he walked in the door. He snarled and opened his mouth, then really noticed her.

An elegant red silk robe flowed around her long legs, her feet were shod in high-heeled black marabou slippers, her disheveled black hair swung around and past her shoulders. She had her arms wrapped around herself, her nose and eyes were red, there were discarded Kleenexes all over the library floor, and a bottle of some type of alcohol stood in the middle of a coffee table next to a kitchen glass.

Cassandra glared at him, but the trembling mouth, the wet face, and the snuffle all ruined the effect.

“Supposed to be home by ten, out there with your phone off, driving that—that—*death trap*—you call a car, and here it is three o’clock in the morning— Come walking in like you don’t have a care in the world—”

His arms were suddenly full of woman, warm and wonderful, who wrapped herself around him, clung to him, buried her face in his neck, and sobbed as if he’d broken her heart.

Mitch’s anger and tension drained with the feel of Cassandra’s legs tight around his hips and her fingers in his hair, closing into fists as if to keep him from leaving her ever again. He held her to him, her distress doing what hundreds of miles of high-speed driving hadn’t done.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered, but he didn’t think she heard him. He sighed and carried her to the door, flipped off the lights, then carried her upstairs while she cried.

* * * * *

Korban Pesach

April 20, 2011

I awoke sprawled out on my lover’s chest, my eyes stinging and my mind recoiling in horror at what I’d said and done last night. His scent was in my nose, his hand caressed my back, his strength lay under my body, that strength that pleased me so well.

“I was drunk,” I blurted.

“I know,” he murmured. “And I was angry.”

“I’ve never done that before. Ever. It’s not my business what you do.”

“Don’t apologize. You know I liked it.”

Yes, he would. Because I’d given him too much information. *What* that information was, exactly, or how he would interpret it, I had no idea. I opened my mouth to ask, but

“I’m about to be released from the bishopric,” he said abruptly.

Well. That had come out of the blue. I dragged my finger through the hair on his chest, swirled it around his nipple, which tightened. “Um, okay. Why do you think that? Besides the fact that you’re almost halfway through year seven?”

He took a deep breath. “I can’t tell you.”

I sighed. His body was tense, more than it had been for the last couple of weeks.

“You don’t sound as happy about it as I thought you’d be.”

“It’s going to be very ugly.”

I levered myself up to look in those pretty blue eyes, his carved face, and the laugh

lines around the corners of his mouth...the dark sandy curls that he would probably get trimmed soon... Had I truly thought him ordinary once upon a time?

"How long then?"

"End of the week. Beginning of next."

"Talk to me."

Mitch looked at me soberly. "I can't. This isn't like..."

"Your garments. Your covenants."

He started.

"You know my meeting I had to go to two weeks ago? Lunch with Giselle. She was the only one willing to inform me of my eternal place in your life."

He pursed his lips. "Um, oops?"

"Yeah. You're so in the doghouse for that."

He waved his unoccupied hand. "Okay, well, then. Not like that. What's going on— The— You know. Confidentiality."

"Not even with your wife. Your *nonmember* wife. Who has no horse in the race."

"Yup."

The fact that I understood didn't make it hurt any less. "What time is it?"

No answer while he fumbled with the clock. "Noon. Neither of us called in."

"I didn't have anything pressing."

"Mmmm," he murmured, shifting, turning me until we were on our sides facing each other, so close we were almost one. "I do."

I wrapped one leg over his hip, slid it down the back of his thigh while we kissed. "Uh, I need to brush my teeth."

"Don't worry about it," he whispered as he nuzzled my jaw.

"Let me rephrase: *You* need to brush *your* teeth."

"Too bad."

I would have laughed, but he pinched my nipple—*hard*—which made me gasp in both pleasure and pain. Oh, yes, the man *did* know how to push my buttons. He paid attention to my body, learned what it did to which touches and under what circumstances, what I particularly liked, and he remembered them.

He cared about my pleasure, to the exclusion of his own if I allowed it.

Ding dong.

"Shit," I hissed, because I knew he couldn't ignore it. It would be someone from church, and as I had witnessed, being a bishop was just as demanding as being the CEO of a company that practically ran itself.

Mitch rolled away from me and put his bathrobe on, padded out of our bedroom and down the hall.

I waited for him to come back, which didn't happen for long enough that I fazed out of my arousal and grew thoroughly disgusted with my personal hygiene.

He was sitting on the bed naked, slumped over, when I got out of the shower. A torn envelope and a crisp piece of white letterhead folded in neat thirds lay beside him.

I picked it up, saw the gold logo of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in the upper left-hand corner, and began to read.

Dear Bishop Hollander,

The stake presidency is considering formal disciplinary action in your behalf, including the possibility of disfellowshipment or excommunication, because you are reported to have been found in fornication and adultery.

You are invited to attend this disciplinary council to give your response and, if you wish, to provide witnesses who are members of the Church or other evidence in your behalf.

The disciplinary council will be held on Thursday, April 21, 2011, in the stake high council room at 7pm.

Sincerely,
David Petersen
President, Nazareth Pennsylvania Stake

I thought my heart would explode. “*Oh, my God.*” I sat down beside him, my knees suddenly too weak to hold me up. My hands trembled. “*How?*”

“It’s been a long time coming,” he said low.

“Sitkaris.”

He said nothing.

“Do you really think they’ll—”

“No,” he snapped, a steel edge in his voice. I couldn’t tell if he was lying to me or lying to himself. “They won’t. These men know me, so this is just to sort it all out.”

“You can’t be sure of that.”

“Yes, I can. Once we all get in that room together, they’ll know the truth.”

“How?”

“They’re men of God.”

I narrowed my eyes at him. “Is *Greg* going to be there?”

His Adam’s apple bobbed. “Yes.”

“And...you’re just going to wait for God to intervene on your behalf.”

“Yes.” He paused. “He has to,” he whispered.

* * * * *

Tarry Here and Watch

April 21, 2011

Thursday evening we sat in the car in the church parking lot, waiting for seven o’clock to arrive. I clutched Mitch’s hand, hoping to give him some small measure of strength. I know when men need to talk, and Mitch was really no different than any other man who’d found comfort on my shoulder.

Except that he wouldn’t take the comfort I offered him freely, and the longer he kept it in, the more tense he became until now, awaiting what amounted to an execution, his body was thrumming with anger.

There was only one way to get to him, to leach off some of that tension, so I snapped, “Mitch Hollander, you *will* tell me. I did not sign up for this gig to be kept in the dark.”

That caught his attention, and he looked at me strangely. “You signed up for this gig so I’d have sex with you.”

Hm. Well, that was true. “Things change,” I muttered, and looked out the window.

“*What* changed? Precisely?”

I glared at him for not playing along. “You said you loved me. Isn’t that what people do when they love someone? *Confide* in them? What haven’t I done to earn your trust by now?”

Mitch growled low in his throat, but then, instead of turning it back on me, he heaved a great sigh.

“Greg and I—”

I stopped him. “Spare me the ancient history. Prissy and I managed to figure out all the delicate politics.”

“Of course you did,” he said dryly. “Where should I start?”

“November. Why you fired Sitkaris from being Young Men’s president.”

“He’s a thief,” he said shortly. “Had a tip he’d swindled a family in another ward. Checked him out. I know he did it; don’t know how. My people uncovered another couple of tidbits that led me to believe he’d been the linchpin of the Jep Industries operation.”

I sat and thought about that a second or two. “All those players left the country. Why didn’t he?”

“He got left behind. He wasn’t important enough to care about, and he’d keep his mouth shut because he’d go to prison if he said a word.”

“So he was bitter about that, which didn’t have anything to do with you.”

“Also bitter about not being bishop.”

“Then you didn’t rehire him, so he not only didn’t have a job, he didn’t have his cushy side operation, no opportunity to steal from you directly, and still had to report to you at church.”

“Until I released him. I had no other recourse because anything else I could do would require the stake president’s approval.”

“Which he wouldn’t give because of how Sitkaris has cultivated his image and relationships in the stake.”

He nodded. “I confronted him with what I knew, especially his part in bringing J.I. down, told him I’d find out what and how. He called my bluff. Pointed out to me that, among other things, since Knox and his family aren’t the Church’s favorite people in the world, and they’re part of my inner circle, it wouldn’t take much for him to be able to chip away at my credibility until I had none left. That was when I realized he wasn’t just somebody I didn’t like or get along with. He showed me a side I’d never seen before.”

I pursed my lips and mused, “Sociopaths don’t bother to hide themselves once they know there’s no point. Especially if they think they have something over you.”

He was silent for a second or two. “On our first date, when we saw him at the restaurant— I knew he was completely out of control. Trust me, I would’ve called a bishop’s court right then if I thought it wouldn’t have been a complete waste of time.” He tapped his knuckles on the window. “He went whining to the stake president, who called him to the stake high council.”

“And your people?”

“I’ve had them on him for the last six months. The four of us—Knox and Sebastian

and Morgan and I, I mean—have been over every piece of paper they’ve dug up and I’ll tell you, if Knox can’t prove it, it *can’t be proven*.”

I sat stunned. “Six months?”

“Well, since Thanksgiving weekend, yeah.”

“Mitch,” I growled, “you have been dealing with this alone all this time, letting your *pseudofamily* help you, but not me?”

He started and looked at me. “Cassandra—”

I glared at him. “*I* am your family now and I have connections they don’t have. Did you ever think of that? I’ve been begging you for the last month to talk to me, to tell me, to let me help you, but you couldn’t, you said, because it came under ecclesiastical confidentiality— But apparently not really, because *they* know and have known all along, but forget the wife, right? You know *everything* about me. I have never held anything back from you, but you still don’t trust me.”

“Cassandra, it’s not like that.”

“No, it’s like you thought you should hide the assholes in your church in case I assumed you were all alike.”

“Cassandra—”

“I’m not done! I’m not so ignorant I don’t know there are a few bad apples in every barrel, and that Sitkaris is your cross to bear. I knew what he was the minute he touched me and you knew I knew, but you *still* wouldn’t let me help you. You could’ve given me a little bit of credit and just told me. It’s not as if I don’t know what happened at Jep Industries down to the last detail, and it’s not as if I wouldn’t have understood that religion or spirituality or God or whatever has absolutely nothing to do with any of this.”

He wiped his hand down his face. “I’m so sorry, Cassandra. I thought I was protecting you.”

“Bullshit! You were protecting *them*. From *me* and my *opinion* of them. The *same way* you wouldn’t talk to me about your garments and your covenants and Mina, to protect them *from me*. Because you thought so little of me and my ability to comprehend what they meant to you and respect them on that basis.”

His eyes narrowed at me. “Like you didn’t talk to me about your meeting with Giselle. Or what you did with Hayleigh and Amelia. Or that you went to my Relief Society president behind my back. Or what revenge you’ve got planned for Greg. Or that you nearly severed his most prized possession barehanded in front of an emergency room full of people.”

I sniffed. “Well, I couldn’t take it all the way off or he’d have bled to death. Even I have my limits. And your child has a big mouth.”

“He was very proud of you.”

“He was drugged,” I grouched. “I don’t even know how he remembered any of it.”

“Check. Shall I go for *mate*?”

I huffed. “Okay, then. Help me understand. How did we get from catching a thief in the middle of an affair to him presiding over your excommunication for adultery? Delicate politics aside, I thought you told me you have to have some kind of proof if the person wasn’t penitent.”

He drew a long breath in through his nose. “They...have...proof. Of a sort.”

“*What* could they possibly have?”

“For starters, pictures.”

I stared at him, confused. "Pictures of what?"

"You and me. In New York. While we were dating. Dancing at Cubax. Us on your porch, walking together. Kissing. Having dinner, the wine bucket next to the table. Feeding you that cordial cherry at Jacques Torres. Me kissing you in the emergency room, with my hand up your blouse. We— You and I look very...involved. Like lovers. It's very easy to infer what must have happened behind closed doors."

I sighed and pinched the bridge of my nose, but that wasn't going to ward off the migraine I had coming on. "And of course Greg has informed them I was a prostitute."

"Yes. They'll want to know if I married you out of guilt for having sex with you. Better yet—*paying* you for sex."

"I don't buy that. Even if every minute we spent together was photographed, none of it's incriminating."

He sat silent for a long time and I felt dread curdle in the pit of my belly.

"Mitch," I growled.

He sighed. "I think...Sally may have confessed...to having an affair with me."

My mouth dropped open. Closed. Opened again, but what could I say? *My Mitch?* My brilliant and powerful lover—with such a needy woman?

Inconceivable.

"And...Greg was going to force Hayleigh to write a similar confession. You know once that got out, I would've been arrested and charged. If you hadn't gotten her out when you did..."

My stomach turned over.

"Okay," I said briskly, determined to find a way to salvage this. "So it's Sally's word against yours."

He shrugged wearily. "That's all it'll take. Greg's managed to gaslight seventy percent of the ward, seems like."

That sounded about right. "Rivington did that to Gordon from the time he was born. His mother, too. I've never met a more broken woman than my mother-in-law, who, by the way, lives in a posh mental hospital in Connecticut and gets visited by her granddaughters on a regular basis." I paused. "You know, keeping Rivington around would've been more fun, so I could flaunt my success, rub his nose in his destitution. Find little ways to torture him. But Gordon was on the verge of insanity when he went to prison. I couldn't risk Gordon's relapse if Rivington were in close proximity to him once he got out."

Mitch laughed bitterly. "And all *I* had to do was actually *listen* to what Mina and Louise were trying to tell me, and then do something about it."

"Oh, you can't explain gaslighting to someone who hasn't lived through it and come out on the other side with a thorough understanding of how it works. Mina had had a taste of it. It's why she married you, right? Louise had to clean up the messes he left behind."

We fell into silence, and together watched the clock tick toward seven.

"You think they're really going to excommunicate you, don't you?" I murmured after a while.

This time he paused. Too long. "No," he murmured. Then he burst out, "This is so out of my realm of experience. I—" He waved a hand. "I'm trying to have faith that the Lord wouldn't let this happen when he knows the truth of it, but..."

"But you said Greg's part of the tribunal."

“Yes.”

“He’s already cemented the relationships. Being present—he’ll take over. Wrap you up and tie you in a bow.”

Mitch said nothing.

Then something occurred to me. “Why didn’t you just ask to be released from the bishopric when all this began?”

He sat still for a second or two. “I did,” he murmured. “Twice. I was refused.”

“Oh, now that makes *no* sense. If Sitkaris is so beloved, and he’s such good buddies with everybody, there is no reason for this to have gone this far. All they had to do was release you and install him. Everybody’s happy.”

“The Lord calls bishops. The stake president prays about it and is told who to call. Petersen said he had been...instructed...not to release me.”

I barely kept myself from snorting, but this was my husband and I respected him, so I would attempt to keep my cynicism to myself. “By that reasoning then, the Lord knows he’s a rat bastard.”

“Yes.”

Or not. “Thus, *the Lord*,” I sneered, “is letting this happen to you.” I regretted it as soon as it came out of my mouth, ridiculing his beliefs exactly as he’d feared I’d do. Mitch’s eyes closed and he let his chin drop to his chest as if he didn’t have the strength to hold it up anymore.

Then I knew: He had already come to that conclusion and felt abandoned.

I’d experienced abandonment and I hurt for my husband in ways I didn’t remember hurting for myself. And I’d added to it.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered.

“I won all the battles,” he muttered as if he hadn’t heard me or didn’t care. “And I lost the war.”

I cleared my throat and asked with some hesitation, “Couldn’t they have just asked you if we had sex? If you were involved with Sally?”

“Petersen did that,” he grumbled. “With the presumption that I was guilty. It didn’t matter what I said.”

“So you didn’t deny it.”

“Absolutely not.”

“Well, why the hell not?”

“I never explain anything,” he snapped and got out of the car, then walked around the front of it to open my door for me. He offered his hand, as usual, ever the gentleman. “*I* don’t have to.” I stared up at him, the King of Steel, who, tomorrow morning, would still be one of the most powerful men in the country, but would not be a bishop of a Mormon ward or even, as a matter of fact, a member of the Mormon church.

And his heart was breaking.

I reached up slowly, laid my hands on his cheeks and brought his face close to mine. I looked into that handsome, troubled face—

“I love you, Mitch.”

His eyes widened and his nostrils flared. His mouth touched mine and I melted into him. We kissed for many moments. His hand cupped my ass and pulled me in tight to his body—even in the church parking lot, even as he prepared for his pillorying.

“Do you want me to come with you?” I whispered against his mouth when the kiss

softened.

“No,” he whispered back. “I need to do this myself.”

“I’ll wait.”

“It could be hours.”

“I’ll wait.”

He took a long breath and dropped his forehead to mine. “Thank you, Cassandra,” he whispered. “No matter what happens, it’s worth it just for that.”

I wrapped my arms around him, pulled his face into the curve of my neck, felt his ragged breathing.

“Go now.”

He released me slowly, then turned to cross the parking lot, one hand in his pocket and his coat gathered over his hand.

Swaggering.

I loved that ass.

That man.

I took a seat on the hood of the car and shoved my hands in my blazer pockets, only to start picking the lint out of it. A microscopic piece of paper came out and I looked at it. Blinked. Threw it on the ground and scrambled to open the car to find my purse, then dug in it to find the list of names Prissy had given me.

I reread the list more carefully than I had when I’d begun the task she’d set me, then pulled out my phone. “Nigel,” I said as soon as he answered. “Do you remember all that actuarial bullshit I sent you from Worcester & Minden? That insurance company in Alabama? I need you to do something for me, and I need it fast.”

* * * * *

The Hour is Come

I started awake at midnight when Mitch opened the passenger door and dropped into the seat, his mouth tight. I watched him and waited, tense, for whatever news he had.

“I have to come back at noon,” he rasped, rubbing his eyes and dropping his elbow against the door ledge.

That was unexpected. “Why?”

“Two General Authorities are coming out from Salt Lake. Retired lawyers.” He snorted. “*Trial* lawyers.”

To put him on the witness stand.

“They *have* to know this is wrong,” I said tightly as I started the car and headed toward home.

“No, they *don’t*. They have a pile of incriminating pictures and three false witnesses with no reason to distrust them. If I were looking at the kind of evidence they have, having Greg in my ear, I’d believe it, too.”

“Three? I thought it was just Sally.”

“Sally,” he muttered. “Some woman I don’t even know. And...Inez.”

My heart stopped. “Inez?” I whispered.

“Who...*confessed*...that she seduced me way back when she and I were dance partners, that she and I had a short fling after I came back from my mission. You know, before I married Mina. In the temple. After having lied about my virtue, or lack of it, to

get in. And never having confessed or repented in the twenty-five years since, so I've been living a few lies all this time."

"But—" My mouth opened and closed like a fish's.

"She's here. She showed up about a month ago. She's aged. Badly. I didn't recognize her and she's using an alias."

"Oh, my God," I whispered. "That Sister Schoonover."

"Yes."

"Prissy said she looked familiar."

Mitch nodded. "Prissy was part of my age group growing up. Everybody knew I had a thing for Inez. Everybody knew Sally had a thing for me. There are lots of people who can corroborate that Inez and I spent a lot of time kissing, making out. It's not a stretch to believe it."

"But..." None of it made sense. "What would she gain by doing that?"

"Thirty thousand dollars. From Greg. To feed her drug habit. And she asked me to double it."

I sighed.

"The pictures of you and me just corroborate everything that's been confessed." He barked a humorless laugh. "Sebastian would be very proud of what I am said to have done with these women."

My stomach seemed to twist and turn in on itself, but I kept my voice calm. "Yet they didn't send you packing."

"They have no way to come out of this unscathed. On one hand, they need to uphold the integrity of the Church. If I'm guilty, keeping me around would be wrong by any organization's standard. But I have money, power, and connections. Those connections include a lot of people whose power and money equal the Church's resources. Sebastian and Knox both have axes to grind. I could do some real damage to the Church if I wanted to, whether I'm guilty or not. What they don't know is if I'm prepared to do it."

"What did you tell them?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing? As in, you didn't speak? At all?"

"No." He gestured in pure frustration. "What am I supposed to say, Cassandra? They have explicit *written* statements from three women and a mountain of pictures— Private moments between you and me, ones I cherish, are on display like a pictorial. We're dancing, snuggling, skating, whatever, fully clothed, in public—some of the best moments of my life— They reduced us to a disease-ridden junkie having a back-alley quickie with a crack whore. And...I'm supposed to justify it to a room full of men who don't know a *coup d'état* when they see one? Sit there like a five-year-old and say, 'Nuh-uh, did not'? You can't prove a negative and I'm not even going to try."

I was so angry I wanted to drive his Bugatti right into a pylon just to hear metal crumple and glass shatter. If I'd been at home, I would've thrown dishes.

"And so...you just sat there and waited for *the Lord* to come reveal the truth to all these men of God who don't know a *coup d'état* when they see one."

He sighed, but I had lost all patience in this Lord of his.

We arrived home in silence and prepared for bed. I lay on my side, nude, to watch him undress then pause when he came to his garments. He took them off reluctantly, as if parting from a good friend. He threw the top and the bottoms on the bed and stared at

them, his jaw clenching.

He'd finally explained, in those hours between the delivery of his summons and his hearing. He'd given me details Giselle hadn't wanted to confuse me with, but now I had the whole thing from him, and what they represented to him: His virtue, the sacrifice of his family in the name of the Lord to tend to four hundred people who didn't seem to know he existed until they needed him, the belief that he would have his family in eternity.

Especially Mina, the love of his youth and the mother of his children, whom he believed he would be with forever.

I hated that.

I was jealous of her, I realized, and had been since my lunch with Giselle.

I hated Mina for having first dibs on him and it didn't matter that I didn't believe a word of that bullshit; it only mattered that *he* believed.

He loved *me* in ways he had never loved his first wife.

But...a part of me was empathetic: I now knew how Mina had felt about Inez.

"Mitch?"

He looked up at me and I ached at the pain in his face.

"This," I said, feeling my voice kink up in my throat. I waved a finger between us. "You and me. How does this work for us in the— Well, the afterlife?"

Mitch's eyes focused fully on me then and he studied me, my body, lingering on my breasts and between my legs. He licked his bottom lip.

"Are you making some sort of commitment beyond the year I asked you for?" he asked, once he'd focused on my face again.

"Maybe. I'd like to know the terms and conditions first."

He took a deep breath.

Turned.

Put his clothes on a nearby chair, then returned to drop onto the bed naked, his beautiful body stretched out. He clasped his hands behind his head and looked up at the ceiling.

"Cassandra," he said abruptly, startling me a little, "Giselle explained this to you and I've spent the last twenty-four hours telling you everything you wanted to know, so... That's not the question you want me to answer."

Dammit, he'd done it *again*. The way he could get to the heart of an issue made me half believe he had a USB cord straight from God's brain to his.

I draped myself over him and felt his arm around me, pulling me even tighter. "I want to know," I said, swallowing my sudden panic because I really did not, *did not* want to know, "if you love me or Mina more?"

He sighed. "I was afraid you'd ask me that."

Why had I done such a stupid thing?

"I don't know," he murmured. "I love Mina. I always will. I couldn't be with Mina and *not* love her. I suspect that you and she were very much alike when you were eighteen. Sweet, supportive, trained to be the perfect wives and mothers, and eager to be that. I wouldn't have been able to choose between you then. Now you're entirely different women, but I still can't choose between you."

"Why not?" I asked, hating the catch in my throat.

"Because I'm twenty-five years older and I'm a completely different man. I grew

and changed. Got a better handle on the world and its shades of gray.”

“Gray? You think in black and white.”

He smiled then. “Gotcha.”

I growled.

“I can’t afford to think in black and white, Cassandra,” he murmured, caressing me. “Part of my job is to judge people worthy or not worthy and you know, there’s a whole world of mitigating circumstances in every person’s life to make the idea of worth, well, worthless. I learned that with Inez when she chose her lover over me.

“We’re here to do the best we can with what we’re given, to learn. Hopefully we learn some compassion and service. I try to weigh a person’s circumstance with their progress because there is no such thing as perfect. But there’s a time you turn the other cheek and there’s a time when you have to pick up a bullwhip and clean the moneychangers out of the temple. The hard part is knowing when to do which.”

And that was it. That was where he differed from his wolf pack. He wasn’t as quick to pick up the bullwhip; he would wait until he had no choice.

“Mina and I had a good marriage. Strong, faithful. I got her away from her father and a forced marriage, taught her how to have fun, gave her the love and family she wanted. She believed in me and supported me without complaint, always cheerful, optimistic. Pushing me to see more of my own potential and arranging our life to clear my path, make sure nothing got in my way.”

“But she wasn’t your equal. Even she knew that. You said so.”

“If she hadn’t been sick, she would’ve been. She never had a chance to grow with me; she barely had the energy to get all our children to adolescence. As the bishop’s wife, she would’ve seen the heartbreak I’ve seen, dealt with the people I’ve dealt with, and she would’ve done it with grace and love. As the wife of a CEO, she would’ve been on my arm for all the events and conferences, hosted dinners and parties. I would’ve showered her in designer clothes and jewelry and cars, given her anything she wanted. She could’ve shared in the wealth she had an equal hand in creating.”

God, *why* had I asked that stupid fucking question?

He paused for long moments. “So...what does that mean for you and me if we go the distance?” he said slowly. “I don’t know. Not really. The Church teaches that I’ll be reunited with Mina and that you’ll be separated from me. I don’t want that, but I also... Mina wouldn’t be any happier about it than you are.”

I stared at him. “And so you don’t want to believe that anymore.”

“No. The last thing I want is to hurt either one of you.”

I sniffled. “*I have* corrupted you.”

“No. Love isn’t corrupt.”

Too. “So then I should—”

“Not if you don’t believe, Cassandra. I fell in love with you as you are and I have no interest in changing you. In any case,” he continued, “we have the here and now and I am not going to waste it thinking about what-ifs. Not many men are so blessed as to love two such wonderful women in their lifetimes.” He looked at me, his face worn and tired.

“How would I choose between the most perfect diamond and the most perfect metal?”

* * * * *

Eli Eli Lama Sabachthani?

April 22, 2011

At one o'clock Friday afternoon, Mitch walked slowly out of the church building toward me, hunched over, his hands buried in his pockets, his head bowed.

My chest felt like it had been kicked in and I walked, then ran, to meet him. He grabbed me and pulled me to him tight, buried his face in the crook of my neck.

"Let's go home, Mitch," I whispered. "Let me take care of you."

He didn't say a word all the way, just stared out the window at the passing scenery. Once we got home, he went into the library and shut the door behind him.

I jumped when I heard a tortured roar and the crash of breaking glass.

"Oh, my God," I whispered.

"They didn't," Trevor breathed from above me, on the staircase. I turned to see him staring at the closed library doors, horrified.

"They did."

"Motherfuckers," Trevor snarled and clipped the rest of the way down the stairs, grabbed his truck keys, and—

"Don't," I said, catching his wrist.

"Cassie—"

"Don't," I repeated in my boardroom voice. "You'll make it worse."

He glared at me, then jerked away. "Fine. I'm calling Sebastian."

"He knows."

That got his attention. "Did you call him on the way home?"

"No."

"Then—" His eyes narrowed. "You've got something up your sleeve."

I looked away.

"Cassie, what's going on?"

"Go to work, Trevor," I murmured over my shoulder, though I couldn't bear to look at him. His anger mirrored mine and we both winced with the next crash of glass. "I'll deal with it."

* * * * *

INRI

Mitch felt a rage well up in him so great that he had no choice but to let it out in one long, racking howl. He picked up the poker by the fireplace, hefted it in one hand, then clutched it with the other and swung, shattering the glass in the barrister cases.

Not good enough.

Another swing, another pane of glass.

A third.

Fourth.

Fifth.

He dropped the poker and dug his hands into the cases, past the jagged edges left in the mullions, and grabbed the books—

—church books of all types: biographies, doctrine, fiction, self-help.

He pulled out an armful, vaguely aware of ripping his sleeve, and threw the books in the fireplace, snarling because there was no fire. He turned back for more, his shoes

crunching the glass and grinding the shards into the rug.

Another armful, cast into the fireplace with a thud.

"Matches," he growled, and snatched them off the mantel. He ripped a couple of pages from yet another book and crushed them in one hand, then set the ball afire, threw it in and waited, his chest heaving, until the first book had caught.

He wished he had gasoline.

He threw the poker, heedless where it went, but satisfied when it crashed through the window and sailed over the lawn before dropping with a dull thud.

He turned away, digging his hands into his hair and howled again, lifting his face to the ceiling, that animal inside him rising, rising within him and taking over, the animal that had always been there and he had kept leashed for the last twenty-five years.

Now he knew.

Betrayal.

"Where did you go?!" he roared. "I have given my life to serving you! I sacrificed my family for you— Another man raised my son because of you—and YOU LEFT ME!"

He dropped to his knees and hunkered down, dug the heels of his palms in his eyes.

"Where were you?" he gritted low, his chest caving with every breath. "Why did you leave me? You left me on my mission! You left me TODAY! WHY?! *WHAT MORE COULD I HAVE DONE?!*"

He felt his body quake but nothing came out of his eyes.

The bitterness of the utter humiliation he had suffered in that room still coated his mouth and his tongue. Sorrow and grief soaked him like ice water in winter.

"Mitch." He heard the whisper. Felt the hand soft on his back.

My wife.

"Come with me. Your arm and hands are bleeding."

He couldn't speak. His vocal cords wouldn't move.

He trembled in impotent rage, unable to do anything except to calculate revenge he wouldn't take although it would be only too easy to do so. He could afford to wage war on the Church and once Sebastian got involved—because he *would*—

"Mitch," she said again. Soft. Soothing. Calm and loving. "You've cut yourself."

The evidence of Cassandra's love for him shone from those pictures, strewn about the table amongst the high councilmen who'd adopted a mien of compassion to judge him guilty of...

...exactly what he had struggled so *not* to do, and had succeeded in that.

Mitch, don't you have anything to say for yourself?

Mitch, talk, please. If you don't speak, we have to treat it like you're guilty.

And even if you are, this is an opportunity to repent. Start over. Clean slate. You're married to her now, so that won't be an issue.

He'd sat silent, meeting their looks one by one until each one of them had looked away. Except Greg, who, sensing an imminent victory, had smirked.

Mitch, tell us you didn't do it. Please!

Petersen had never looked at him at all.

We put our trust in you, Mitch, and you broke that trust.

Did they really believe that?

He didn't know.

And no sign of any dawning comprehension initiated by the god he'd served so

faithfully for so many years—

—not even to the General Authorities, who had sat silent throughout.
That was the greatest betrayal of all.

I love you, Mitch.

“Come with me,” she whispered, catching the lapel of his coat and gently tugging.
He could do nothing but let her struggle to remove it.

“We can’t stay here. There’s too much glass. Come with me, my love. Let me take care of you.”

Mitch turned his head a little to look at her, that gorgeous woman who loved him, who’d admitted it, who wanted him to love her more than he loved Mina. Her eyes widened.

“I’m gonna fuck you,” he snarled at her, the word erupting effortlessly out of his mouth after all the years he’d heard it, barely able to keep from saying it when stressed.

Her jaw dropped and she took a half step backward. He watched her, expecting her to flee, but instead she held out her hand to him.

His heart thundered in his chest as he grasped what that meant.

Mina would have run from him, horrified. *Terrified.*

Cassandra let him be who he was, the natural man, the bad boy, the *animal*.

He put his hand in hers and he allowed her to pull him to his feet, but then he rushed her, picked her up, slammed her against the wall opposite the fireplace and glass.

She wrapped her hand in his necktie once, twice, and jerked him to her.

Crushed her mouth against his.

Mitch ripped open his fly as they kissed. Violent. Desperate.

He hitched up her skirt, pushed her panties aside and drove himself into her.

Again and again, pounding her into the wall with every thrust up into her.

“Good, Mitch,” she gasped against his mouth, his tie still wrapped around her hand, keeping him close. “*Yes. More. Harder. Faster.*”

Taking.

Not giving.

He roared yet again when he came, didn’t care that she hadn’t. He needed the comfort of knowing she wouldn’t resent him, that she *understood*.

Or did she?

She began to struggle against him and, suddenly disgusted with her for doing so, he let her go and turned away.

She caught him, her fingertips digging into his arm, into his cut, and yanked him around to her. He opened his mouth to let loose on her, but she dropped to her knees and wrapped her mouth around him.

His breath left him in a rush as he dug the fingers of one hand in her hair and pressed her to him. His head dropped back, losing himself in the feel of her tongue and teeth and lips caressing and nibbling and licking.

Sucking.

Running her tongue over the head, dipping it into the cleft at the tip, using her hand to squeeze and caress.

Giving.

Grief: gone.

Sorrow: gone.

Anger.

Sex.

Fucking.

Taking.

“Yes,” he hissed, tightening his hold in her hair.

Guilt: gone.

He looked down and watched her suck him off, her lips wrapped around him. Her eyes were open and focused up at him, intense and dark. One hand squeezed his cock, the other his testicles, and it shocked him to realize he was about to come a second time.

Yet another roar exploded from his chest as he erupted over her nose, her mouth—that beautiful, talented mouth—over her tongue.

Guilt: gone gone gone.

Mitch still wouldn’t let go of her hair, even as she set about licking every bit of his cum from his flesh. A cat, really, licking and cleaning with love, her eyes closed now as she concentrated.

His heart rate settled and his breathing smoothed out.

He relaxed his fingers slowly, releasing her from his hand—his animal’s claw—and looked at it, his mouth falling open.

What had he *done*?

“Cassandra,” he whispered, completely horrified.

She pulled away from him and glared up at him. “Don’t you dare apologize, Mitch Hollander.”

That forced a sad, humorless chuckle out of him, and his hand dropped away from her as she stood, her face moist. He grimaced as he used his tie to mop the moisture away from her skin, the evidence of his rage.

“I knew you had it in you,” she muttered wryly, taking his hand and turning, tugging him toward the library door.

He still couldn’t speak, his mind unable to sort through the humiliation of the process, having had to endure it a second time, all topped off by violent—*vile*—sex.

Maybe they were right about him after all.

She pulled him up the stairs.

Stripped him down.

Put him in the shower, pushing him so hard he had no choice but to brace himself against the wall with both hands.

Scrubbed him under the hot, almost scalding water and massaged his neck while he stood bent over, looking at the tiles of the floor and letting his mind remain empty.

Feeling her hands minister to him with soap and one of her scrubber things.

She turned off the water.

Dried him off.

Put the toilet lid down and sat him on it to dress the cuts large and small that ran up and down both arms, all over his hands.

“How did you cut yourself there?” she murmured. He hissed when she poured alcohol into the gash in his side, then dressed it, too.

Grabbed some Tylenol PM out of the cabinet and ran a glass of water, gave it to him.

Pulled him up and out of the bathroom to the bed, pushed him down onto it.

He looked at her naked body, still glistening with water droplets, watching her

nipples pucker hard and her skin grow goosebumps because of the relative chill.

He wanted her again.

He reached out to cup one breast in his hand, flicking his thumb over her nipple.

“Not yet,” she murmured.

He scowled at her, but she only smiled, that mischievous look on her face that made her nose wrinkle, the one he so adored, which meant she had other plans for his pleasure.

She opened his nightstand drawer and took out the bottle of anointed olive oil used for administering blessings, such as the one he’d given Sister Reyes. He almost protested, but he was too tired and besides, what difference did it make now?

She knelt behind him and he growled deep in his throat when her suddenly oiled hands swept over the skin of his back. She didn’t knead his muscles, but caressed him, using the oil only to allow her fingertips and nails to glide over his skin, barely scraping, making him shiver with rich sensation.

He felt himself falling asleep under her loving hands, felt himself falling sideways into the mattress, felt his cheek hit the pillow.

Felt the glass cuts start to burn. Vaguely wondered if the one in his side needed stitches.

Still she caressed him, then dragged his suddenly heavy limbs fully into bed.

Covered him, even as his eyelids drifted closed.

Kissed him gently, and smoothed his brow.

Whispered, “I love you, Mitch.”

* * * * *

Twelve

I let him sleep.

He deserved it after all that.

I called Trevor and asked him to come home. The boy had never been known to pull rank as the CEO’s son, but he was home in a flash, so I could only surmise that he had today.

“Shit,” he whispered as he stood in the door of the library, staring at the blown-out window, the shattered bookcases empty of about a quarter of the Mormon-related books in the library.

Tossed in the fireplace with the evidence of an aborted fire having barely touched any of them. Trevor moved to start another fire, but—

“Leave them alone,” I said wearily. “He’s not done. He’s confused and tired. He’ll either burn them or put them back when he’s ready. Right now, I couldn’t guess which and I don’t want to do something he’ll regret later.”

We walked around, the glass crunching under his work boots and my tennis shoes.

“I think,” I said, looking at the floor. “I think we ought to just pull the rug out. There’s too much glass here. It’d kill a vacuum cleaner and still never get it all out.”

“I can take it to the mill, I guess. See if some of the guys’ll help me get the glass out of it.”

I simply nodded and waited for him to go get gloves from the garage. We cleaned out every bit of glass from the surfaces, simply sweeping it to the floor.

We didn’t speak as we worked, rolling, tucking, making sure the glass stayed

contained, moving furniture as we went. The piano was a challenge. The rug was long, and we struggled to get it out to his brand-new truck without spilling glass like a crumb trail behind us.

"I'll be back later," he sighed as he climbed into the cab. "I'll dump this and then go to the lumberyard, get some plywood and board up the window."

I nodded and went in to the kitchen to make noodles, Mitch's favorite. It took me an hour or so to mix them and roll them out. They were bubbling in the stock pot and I was just taking a chicken casserole (sans noodles) out of the oven when—

"Hope you made enough for us, too."

I almost smiled at the deep voice coming from the doorway behind me. "Of course. And I hope *you* brought booze."

"Oh," Sebastian drawled, "so it's that bad, eh?" I heard chair legs scraping the tile floor as Sebastian and the rest of Mitch's honorary family settled themselves around the massive kitchen table.

"Where's Trev?"

"Well," I muttered in between taste tests of my concoction. I turned, wiping my hands, to see him and Eilis, Hilliard and Justice, Kenard, Giselle, and Ashworth, all sober. "We are now missing one window."

Sebastian's eyebrow rose. "I saw that."

"He went for plywood."

"Where's Mitch?"

"Sleeping. He cut himself up pretty badly and he hasn't slept much the past couple of weeks. I cleaned him up, gave him some drugs, and put him to bed."

Giselle looked down at her hands, which were worrying a ragged tissue. Tears streamed from her puffy red eyes down her flushed cheeks. She was a wreck. Bryce wrapped his arm around his wife and pulled her close, buried his face in her hair.

Knox had the look of a madman, ready to kill—again. Justice wrapped one hand over the fist he had planted on the table, and caressed his back with the other. She pressed her mouth to his ear.

Morgan nearly lay in his chair, his head resting on the seat back, his arms dangling at his sides, his attention on the ceiling.

They hurt as deeply as Mitch did. He was their brother and they grieved.

For him solely or also for themselves, I didn't know. Probably a poisonous mix. Three people at that table had gone through this for things they had actually done.

Sebastian pulled out a pack of well-used cards and began to shuffle, then laid them out for a game of solitaire. He didn't seem particularly disturbed, but then, Sebastian wasn't known for public displays of emotion.

"Where are all your children?"

"With our mothers," Sebastian said.

"And you're not hyperventilating?"

"By tomorrow I will be."

Nigel, Gordon, and Clarissa clattered through the front door, found their way to the kitchen. Clarissa immediately attached herself to me. "I'm sorry about Mitch, Mama," she whispered. "But— When are you coming home?"

I pulled her tight to me and whispered back. "This *is* my home now. Mitch is my husband and I love him. And you're leaving in a few months anyway." I paused.

Smoothed her hair back over her ear. “Clarissa, it’s past time for you to go live your own life. Look around you, these people Mitch brought into our lives. You will never be without love or a place to land, but you need to learn how to fly now.”

She knew that.

She pulled away from me slowly and looked at me. Her college career was over and she had no reason to drag it out any longer; she had accomplished a goal she never intended to and she had no choice but to go with it.

“Okay. Can I help you with dinner?”

“It’s poor people food.”

She shrugged. “Doesn’t mean I don’t like it.”

Many somber salutations had been exchanged while little girl Clarissa said goodbye and adult Clarissa said hello. Nigel’s mouth was tight. Gordon was sympathetic, but understandably detached.

“Cassie—” Trevor walked in and stopped short when he saw our guests. “Shit. Good timing. Can a couple of you come help me patch up this window?”

“Later,” Sebastian grunted. “Put a tarp over it, then come eat dinner.”

“Clarissa,” Trevor said and jerked his head toward the garage, “would you come help me?” She glared at him in suspicion. “Please?” he added, clearly wanting to make peace with his new stepsister. After another second, Clarissa nodded abruptly and followed him.

Eilis helped me get bowls and spoons. I put the stock pot of noodles on a trivet right in the middle of the table—family, after all. The chicken casseroles were set on either side of the stockpot, as I’d made them mostly for Giselle and Eilis. We had green beans, beverages, fresh-baked bread, and butter on the table by the time Trevor and Clarissa finished their task.

All twelve of us sat around the table, and Morgan said the blessing on the food.

“Amen.”

I looked at Nigel. “Well?”

He nodded. “You were right. Greg Sitkaris is up to his eyeballs in insurance and securities fraud.”

Sebastian scowled at Nigel. “What the fuck are you talking about, Tracey?”

“Yes, I know, Taight, you’ve been looking for the past seven years.” He went on, holding up a hand to forestall whatever Sebastian was about to say. “You haven’t looked here.”

“Statutes are almost out anyway,” Knox mumbled as he played with his utensils.

“No, no. This is recent stuff. It’s just that he’s very good and very careful.”

“Where were you looking?” he asked, stymied.

“Worcester & Minden,” I said.

Sebastian stared at me in shock. “No shit?”

“Nope.”

Nigel said, “One of Cassie’s analysts found a pattern in the records, and one of my analysts found another, but we couldn’t do anything with it. Then,” he continued as he passed a dish to Gordon, “Cassie’s little church friend had a hunch with names to back it up. Cassie put two and two together and sent me on a quest. It was luck. No more, no less.”

“Does it connect up to Jep Industries in any way?”

“No, but we can get him on this, and then maybe he’ll cough up the J.I. information. It’ll take a while, a year, maybe more, for this to spin out. We have to wait and watch, but now that Cassie’s team and I know what we’re looking for, it’ll be easy.”

Sebastian shook his head as he plopped food onto his plate. “Wish we’d had that *before* today. So whatever happened with Vorcester & Minden?”

“I shut it down,” I said. “They were upside down on their annuities. The guy who called wanted a cash infusion and an investment manager.”

Eilis snorted. “Oh, that’s rich.”

“I laughed in his face and sent him packing. Then one of my analysts comes to me and points out that every single contract that Agent 4360923 wrote was bad. You know, you have a lot of hits and misses, but nobody comes up all winners or all losers. I thought Agent 4360923 was just a catchall for bad contracts, because there were a bunch of different names attached to that number. When my people couldn’t track down any of the Agents 4360923, I sent it over to Nigel.”

“So I’m looking at this list of names for this agent,” Nigel continued. “Nothing’s gelling. One of my analysts walks in to ask me something— She happens to look down and sees this weird—very precise mathematical—pattern of letters in the names, with a high ratio of G’s and S’s.” He smirked. “It’s not every fund manager who has an ex-NSA cryptographer on staff.”

Sebastian chuckled.

“She read the code easily enough, but that still didn’t tell us who these people were. Now, I could buy that there’s a fake agent number to throw all your department’s bad contracts in. And I could buy that a whole department’s doing this. I could even buy that an entire department is colluding to defraud the company, which is what Cassie thought was happening with Vorcester & Minden. What I *can’t* buy is that an entire department that’s burying its bad contracts would all be able to use the same code without making an error.”

“Well, sure,” Sebastian said. “You’d have one guy writing the code and making the master list of names.”

“Not for four years,” Nigel returned. “Nobody would be able to keep a team like that together very long without infighting, sabotage—” He shrugged. “Plain ol’ mistakes, like somebody using a name out of order. No, this is flawless all the way through.”

“Which means,” Knox rumbled, “that there’s only one thief, he’s using one agent number because he won’t get paid otherwise, but in case anybody looks at the contracts, it looks like a bunch of different people are writing them—and he can keep track of his contracts at a glance.”

“Right,” Nigel said. “We knew this, but we still couldn’t figure out who he was.”

“Until,” I said, “I really looked at the list of names my friend gave me.”

“And they,” Nigel said, “all match up to the contracts Agent 4360923 wrote.”

“Explaining the high ratio of G’s and S’s,” Knox concluded.

“But how would you do that?” Sebastian asked Knox. “You run the numbers, you see agent number whatever with a bunch of names attached to it, they’re all bad contracts, and you know you’ve got a problem.”

“A lot of older companies like that run two, three accounting programs, maybe even one for each department they have,” Knox replied. “Sometimes they have separate databases for commission payments and contract analysis. Usually, they’re on

incompatible operating systems and have never been consolidated. So you've got your contract data on, say, XP, your accounting on an old Unix system in the basement. Maybe somebody else is on a Mac. The sales guys bring spreadsheets to sales meetings and talk names, who's out in the field really cooking, whatever. Get rid of the bad performers, right? The payroll people don't get invited to those meetings and even if they did, they only know agent number whatever. Ne'er the twain shall meet. Payroll doesn't know shit about who's who or what they're doing; they only know to cut commission checks to agent number whatever. Sales knows it has a couple of bad contracts written by this guy or that guy, no big. Shit happens. You might never notice that all these guys have the same agent number because that's not what you're sorting for. Payroll will never have the opportunity to make the connection. And if you have a high turnover in the sales department, shit falls through the cracks because no one's there long enough to start making connections."

"So Payroll's already paid agent whatever his commissions," Sebastian murmured.

"Right. And the customer's still paying, too, but they're making the checks out to Agent 4360923, not feeling cheated, because it just looks like bad luck, but they still feel compelled to honor the contracts they signed." Knox looked at Nigel. "Can you get me that stuff?"

Nigel nodded. "As we speak, it's all being scanned and uploaded to my servers. It'll take a good week, but you are free to work on it from your end. For the moment, at least," he continued, "we can connect him to the ones with the names Cassie's friend gave us, and they're the ones we can use to establish his pattern of fraud."

"If nothing else," Knox said, "we can proceed with the assumption that he was defrauding Worcester & Minden."

"I have my people on him," I said, anger swelling up in me. "Every detail of that asshole's life will be mine and I'm going to bury him the way I buried Rivington."

Gordon sighed. In sorrow or gratitude, I couldn't tell.

"The whole rabbit trail is freaky," Justice mumbled.

"Exactly," Nigel said. "I couldn't recreate it in a million years. One thing led to another that led to another, put it all together. We know he did it, but still can't figure out how. Then two inconsequential details blow it open for us. We got him. It's flimsy, but it's there." He paused. "I'm tempted to call it divine intervention, but that would be a crass thing to say under the circumstances."

Justice huffed, but she was the only one to do so and I looked at Sebastian to see how he took this supernatural mumbo jumbo. He shocked me by *not* pointing or mocking. He raised a brow at me. "What, can't a guy have a religion around here other than Mormon or Catholic Lite?"

"You *have* one?"

"Pagan."

I stared at him, speechless, but Nigel started to laugh.

"So you think...?"

"I don't believe in coincidence, Cassie," he said, completely sober. "I believe in a mated pair of deities and I don't think they keep their noses out of our business. What I am *not* is a Christian."

"Clarify," Nigel said, curious now.

"Okay," Sebastian returned as if rising to a challenge. "Christian myth posits that

there is a creator deity. Made us all in his image. We're his *children*. And he loves us. Sends us all out to learn and grow. He says, 'Be good, kids!' but isn't really very specific on how to do that. Now we all know that the only way to learn is to fail. But then we *do*—fail—and he doesn't like it. Can't stand sin in his presence. Won't let us back in the house. For anybody to go home to him after their turn on Earth is done, they have to be sinless. Think about it. That's a helluva position to be in, isn't it? So, okay, no problem. He'll just send a half-man/half-god savior as a sacrifice for all mankind's failures so he can have all his little kiddies back in the fold." He looked at Nigel. "We clear on that?"

"Right."

"I think that's bullshit." Sebastian pointed his fork at me. "Would you send your kids out into the world with no training, no guidance, no nothing, tell them to be perfect or they can't come home again, and oh by the way, good luck with that because they have no way in hell of doing what you told them to do?"

The clock in the kitchen ticked.

"And then you provide a way for them to come home, but it means your oldest child has to submit to unimaginable suffering? Think about it: Every time you sin—which, by definition, is unavoidable—you are responsible for the torture and murder of an *innocent* man."

Both Knox and Giselle flinched.

"The idea of a creator deity, who creates beings in his image and calls his children, who then turns around and becomes that much of a sociopathic asshole, is not my idea of a loving parent. I'll say this for Mormon doctrine," Taight continued blithely between bites. "There is no hell, per se. The goal is proactive—to become a god. It's not reactive, which is to escape a burning lake of fire, like the rest of Christianity. So no, you probably won't be qualified to become a god, but no matter what you do, you'll end up with a decent eternity."

I looked around the table to see if any of Sebastian's family would counter this in some way. Giselle sighed.

"This is a perennial discussion," she murmured. "He doesn't believe that ultimate justice for what we do here can truly be served by one pure blood sacrifice, that everybody should atone for his own sins. I—" She cocked her head toward Knox and patted Morgan's arm. "—we. We do. Christ's atonement satisfies justice and grants us mercy at the same time."

"How?" Nigel asked.

Giselle started to explain, but Morgan cut her off. "I'm not interested in getting into this tonight."

There was an awkward silence as each faction struggled to cool off a bit. Clearly the topic was a bone of contention in the family, and I marveled at this crack in the Dunhams' philosophical unity.

"I started thinking about this on my mission," Sebastian said when Nigel cleared his throat and gestured for him to continue. "About how I create art. I wasn't born being able to paint *Wild, Wild West* or *Rape of a Virgin* or *Goddess and Her Lover* or *Morning in Bed*, or any of the other pieces that hang in museums. Yeah, I had talent, but it took years of training under dozens of masters and years more of perfecting technique. But then I got good, more confident in my skill and vision.

"So at that level of skill, I wondered how much I'd have to hate a piece I'd created to

just toss it. Or let somebody else *fix* it for me. I couldn't reconcile it. Did that mean that the god I worshipped hated some of us and loved others of us, even though he created us all? Did he like having his work *fixed* by somebody else? Or were we just practice? Prototypes? I *have* thrown out practice pieces. I *have* had my work fixed by my instructors. Maybe I can accept that we're prototypes, practice, for a being who's learning how to be a god."

I looked down at my wedding ring, the color wash around it, orange, as always, but iridescent if I turned it just right and a rich matte if I turned it another way. It looked almost like metallic paint, but it was the metal itself, precisely, nanoscopically chiseled for that effect. Sebastian had created this and I couldn't fathom how long it must have taken him to do it, how many practice pieces he must have done.

He nodded as if he knew the direction of my thoughts, then continued. "I've been pagan a long time and never really thought past my art, but then I had kids. And I look at our kids—my oldest, Alex, he's a firecracker—and I think, 'Eilis and I *made* that,' because, you know, it took *both* of us working together. Here're these little beasts whose bodies function the same way ours do and who look an awful lot like us— So they're in our image. But they're not practice, like the hundreds of castings we did for your ring. They can't be.

"We'd have to really hate our kids—what we made—to set up such a catch-22 straight out of the gate and if we did that, then why have 'em to begin with? Are they just toys we brought into the world to amuse ourselves?

"Or—Better!—dogs. Breed 'em, starve 'em, poke at 'em, get 'em riled up, and set 'em loose on each other for our own personal entertainment? And then require your most beloved child to endure an agonizing death to redeem them? From what? Our condemnation when they act like the fighting dogs we've trained them to be? Would *you* worship Michael Vick?"

"Oh, *no*," Gordon breathed.

"That's what I thought, too. I'm not going to worship some sadistic motherfucker like that. I worship a pair of creator deities who love what they created, set us here to learn, give us as much guidance and help as they think wise, will welcome us back when we're done here no matter what we learned or didn't, then judge us according to our deeds and mete out justice and/or mercy accordingly. No sacrifice necessary and no hoops to jump through.

"Jesus Christ? Prophet, philosopher, wise man. Just like Mohammed, Buddha, and the Dalai Lama." He shot a glare at his cousins. "*Not* a blood sacrifice." Then he cocked an eyebrow at me. "And if you've never heard of Jesus because you live in some third-world backwater, you're not going to go to a burning lake of fire for a circumstance of your birth."

I blinked.

"Oh, it's all bullshit," Justice muttered. "I hate it when they do this."

Sebastian snorted. "And Little Miss Atheist over there can't stomach Rand. She's as fucked up as is the rest of us are."

"It gives her and Knox an excuse to argue when they don't have anything else to fight about," Eilis murmured, shooting an affectionate smile at Justice. "Point and counterpoint. Mutual mental masturbation leading straight to the bedroom, and even better if they've gone at it across the internet all day."

Justice laughed, and it even pulled a chuckle out of Knox.

I sent Clarissa and Trevor out to get liquor, as I'd drunk my only bottle of wine Tuesday night waiting for state troopers to come to the door and tell me Mitch had crashed his car.

"So how's the little chef?" I asked once they returned. "Vanessa. And that stud of a politician of hers? They've dropped off the tabloids' radar."

"Oh!" Eilis said, suddenly animated. "OKH Enterprises is about to become the full owner of a five-star resort with a PGA-rated golf course."

I stared at her. "What?"

"Vanessa," Knox rumbled, "has chosen love over her career."

"Ah, but so has Eric," Justice said smugly. "We're about to play a very dirty trick on them."

"Sheer genius, sweetheart," Knox murmured as he leaned in to kiss Justice.

Nigel, Gordon, and Clarissa were completely lost at this turn in the conversation. While Knox told us the tale of his star-crossed wards, we sat around the table drinking wine and eating Whittaker House pastries. Hilliard was a good storyteller, and kept us rapt for the better part of two hours as he spoke.

"That's sweet," Clarissa sighed when he finished.

"It's so O. Henry," Gordon said with a laugh.

I looked at Justice. "You're taking Eric's place, then? The new county prosecutor?"

She nodded.

"How old are you?" Clarissa asked abruptly, bringing the goodwill of the conversation to a halt.

"Twenty-eight," Justice said kindly.

"Oh."

I looked at Clarissa. I knew what she was thinking. This young woman, not even thirty and only three years older than she, would be the head law enforcement officer of an entire county while Clarissa had never had a job.

Apparently, Knox understood, too. "Clarissa," he murmured, "the nice thing about UMKC is that half the people there are older than you. It's not a party school."

"I graduated from law school when I was thirty-seven," Giselle added.

"But as Giselle can tell you," Knox continued, "I'm a lot harder on people I care about than I am on anybody else."

Clarissa stared at him, gulped, then blinked rapidly to get rid of the sudden sparkle in her eyes that this man she'd worshipped from afar for so long had said he cared about her.

"Actually," Giselle said, "he's an asshole, so fair warning."

We spent most of the evening talking, laughing.

Forgetting.

Getting to know each other the way I'd wanted to, with good food and good wine and good conversation.

But as the evening went on, I enjoyed myself less and less, sitting there at the table alone, surrounded by everyone but my love. I ached with missing him. Granted, he was only upstairs, but I wanted him here, with me, with our families, participating actively in our good time.

I stood during a lull in the conversation. "I'm going to bed," I said abruptly, unable

to partake any longer while Mitch slept. “You all know where your suites are.”

There was a chorus of “Good night, Cassie”’s all around as I left the kitchen, but a hand on my arm halted me just as I reached the stairs. That bad-tempered bitch Giselle—who had flown halfway across the country to give me what I needed to understand Mitch, a predator my equal who had matched me insult for insult, with whom I’d had more fun shopping than I’d ever had with anyone—hugged me tight.

And I returned it, just as tightly.

“Good luck, Cassie,” whispered my frenemy, her voice trembling. “He’s going to need all the love and strength you can give him, and it’s going to take a long time. Trust me.”

* * * * *

Nisan 15

April 23, 2011

I’m not sure any of us slept well that night, except for Mitch, who snorted occasionally as he changed positions and pulled me to him in his sleep.

Most of us were up early Saturday morning, dragging, and decided to go to the local hash house for the breakfast buffet. We spoke little. Hilliard and the Kenards had dark circles under their eyes. Even Sebastian looked a little haggard and he shrugged when I pointed it out.

“I’m not *happy* about it, Cassie,” he muttered. “He’s my best friend, my brother. Why wouldn’t I hurt for him?”

It was like someone had died, and maybe, in a way, Mitch had, sleeping off his grief like a frat boy after a week-long bender.

“Shit, still in bed,” Sebastian muttered when we all arrived home and I checked on him.

“Midas,” Eilis said sweetly, “we can’t all function indefinitely on two hours a night. Sometimes people have to make it up.”

I stared at him. “Two hours a night? I never could figure out how you got so much done.”

“Now, see, if you’d called me while you were putting your thesis together, I would’ve told you that.”

Bryce opened the doors of the library and stood in the threshold, surveying the damage.

“And this is after Cassie and I got it cleaned up,” Trevor murmured.

“I’ve never known him to lose control like that,” Sebastian said as he brushed past Bryce to enter it. “It worries the hell out of me.”

“It was...frightening,” I whispered.

Mitch hadn’t been able to hold back his nature one more minute, once I’d touched him in the middle of his rampage. He’d shocked me with what had come out of his mouth, that feral look on his face, the raw sexuality I’d seen evidence of on the dance floor.

It had taken a knife cutting his heart out to elicit that response, a response I could’ve lived without the rest of my life if it meant he wouldn’t have had to suffer that kind of soul-deep pain. I would rather give him up completely than watch that again, those big

muscles under that fine suit coat gathering magnificently as he swung a fire poker like a baseball bat at his precious bookcases, his precious books—only a cipher for what he *really* wanted to destroy.

Oh, I loved the sex and I wanted more of that from him, wanted that passionate, unfettered young Mitch to rise up and devour me—but not at *that* price.

“Okay, well,” Morgan boomed, “let’s get that window boarded and tidy up as much as we can.”

Prissy and Steve and their tax deductions dropped by that afternoon amidst the sawing and hammering to check on Mitch. As Mitch’s first counselor, Steve would be effectively serving as the bishop until a new one could be called.

(Poor Prissy.)

“He’s sleeping,” I said without preamble. “It’s been a hard couple of weeks for him.”

“I wish he’d said something,” Steve murmured. “Asked for help. We would’ve gone to bat for him.”

“He was waiting for *the Lord* to go to bat for him, and at the moment, I am not impressed by the way *the Lord* treats his employees.” They both flinched. “Does Louise know about this?”

They exchanged glances, then Prissy looked down at the floor, her hands in her back jeans pockets. “Louise is too...occupied right now to think about it.”

“What does that mean?” I asked, wondering if another person Mitch trusted had abandoned him.

“She is dealing with a sudden death in the ward. That’s one of the things the Relief Society president does, you know, especially when there’s no family. Arranges funerals and burials. You know.” She continued to spew nonsense.

“Prissy,” I growled.

She took a deep breath and dashed tears away with one hand, but it was Steve who offered, “Inez...overdosed. Yesterday. Louise is dealing with it, making the arrangements.”

“We didn’t know if Mitch would want to know,” Prissy muttered. “Figured it would be best to let you make that call.”

I stood there stunned.

But not.

“Did she leave a note?”

Prissy looked away, rubbing at her nose.

“She did,” Steve said when Prissy didn’t answer. “It just said, ‘I’m past desperate.’”

Whatever that meant. “Excuse me,” I murmured. It only took a minute to find what I was after, but when I returned, I found the Seaton tax deductions hanging from Clarissa’s arms, the three of them giggling madly as she swung them around the large foyer.

It was like seeing the first yellow crocus of spring pop up through the snow.

I handed my credit card to Prissy. “Spend whatever you need. Just make it nice and call me with the date. And, oh,” I said after we’d exchanged hugs, “I thought you should know. Your hunch was right.”

Her mouth tightened.

“But don’t worry,” I said with the kind of cheer displayed only in laundry detergent commercials. “I’ll deal with it.”

She nodded and they all left, the Seaton children waving frantically at their new

friend.

When Sebastian, Bryce, Eilis, Justice, Nigel, and I decided to play Monopoly, Gordon announced his intention to drop in on a nearby rare book dealer.

"I'll go with you," Giselle said, and after quick kisses to their respective spouses, they were out the door.

I looked at Nigel and said, "I thought the library in your house was yours."

He shook his head. "All Gord's. He's turned into something of an expert at spotting valuable books. Spends a lot of time at estate sales, used book stores. Goes online and helps people figure out what they have."

"Well, at least now Giselle has somebody to talk to about that stuff," Bryce murmured absently as he played his turn. "Her training's in literature, so maybe he can take the heat off me and I won't have to act like I know what the hell she's talking about."

"I don't like playing games with her, anyway," Sebastian muttered. "She's a sore loser." Bryce nodded in agreement.

Morgan, Knox, Trevor, and Clarissa availed themselves of the billiards room adjacent to the library.

While the others set up the game table, I headed upstairs to check on Mitch, who lay on his side snoring slightly.

Glass of water on the nightstand...

Open bottle of Tylenol PM on the bathroom counter...

A smear of toothpaste in the sink and a wet toothbrush on the shelf...

Wadded-up towel on the floor...

I breathed a sigh of relief that he was not, in fact, comatose, and could take care of himself. He simply needed time for his mind, body, and spirit to decompress.

When I smoothed the coarse hair at his temple and dropped a kiss there, his cheek wrinkled with a smile, but he didn't awaken.

Hours later, I was left alone at the Monopoly table with Kenard, the two of us having become tacit allies in order to have a chance at beating Sebastian, and now, as the last players standing, we were playing against each other. Everyone else had gone to bed.

"What happened?" I asked, point blank.

He looked up at me with those gorgeous green eyes of his. "What happened when?"

"To you."

He took a deep breath and then released it slowly, sat back, and wiped his hand down his heavily scarred face. He looked down at the floor and tapped his token on the arm of the chair. "A lot of things converged," he rasped finally. "What I'd been taught about the Church, about what we believe—it wasn't right. Everything else was predicated on that, all the choices I made, particularly the woman I married, who pretty much destroyed me. It's taken me a long time to relearn it all. To recover my personality and my faith, to be okay with both and learn how they work together, figure out they aren't mutually exclusive."

"And you believe?"

He pursed his lips. "If there's a chance," he said slowly, "that I can be with Giselle and my kids forever, I'll take it. I'll jump through whatever hoops I have to. If there is no chance, then my jumping through the hoops won't make any difference. I will do whatever I have to do to make Giselle happy and this is something she really wants. See,

she— She gives me some frame of reference for what's important and what's not. She's the only thing I've ever had to hold onto." He stopped. Started again. "If it weren't for her, I'd have blown my brains out long ago and I got pretty damned close a couple of times before I met her, got to know her. She gave me hope, gave me a reason to keep going."

I blinked. "So this is hitting a little too close to home for you."

"Oh, yeah. I spent years serving in the Church. I hadn't made it to bishop by the time my house burned, but it probably wouldn't have been long before I did. I know how it is, spending all that time caring for other people when you've got a bundle of your own problems at home you can't tend to. Serving the Lord. You're told from the time you can walk that if you do everything right, the Lord will bless you. Well, okay. The more I served, the worse my life got. What's the take-home message there?"

Mitch and Bryce, two sides of the same coin. Mitch had been driven to succeed at it despite the odds, and Bryce had simply been trying to keep his head above water—but Mitch had had a supportive and loving wife, while Bryce had spent those years fighting an abusive spouse, protecting the children she bore.

"So here we are," Bryce was saying, "the same age. Both of us born and raised in the Church. Returned missionaries. Married in the temple. Taught the same things. Promised the same blessings. Served in most of the same positions. But. I did the deed *and* I took my wife down with me, so the least I can do is be gracious about it and say, hey. I deserved what I got. Mitch, though— He kept his honor and this freak thing happens and he gets hung out to dry? I don't know what to think. I don't know what it means. *Again*. Giselle keeps telling me it's just naïve men trying to do what they think is right, but..."

"That's what Mitch keeps telling me, too," I murmured.

He looked around, at the broken barrister cases and the books piled haphazardly on the hearth. "You know, when you walk into a man's house and he's destroyed his library and thrown an iron rod through a window, you kind of figure he doesn't believe that."

"He...thinks God abandoned him in his most desperate hour."

Kenard laughed bitterly, his scarred lip curling, making him look absolutely satanic. "Yeah. I know *exactly* how that feels." Then he rose and headed toward the door. Stopped there. Looked down at the carpet. "I will say this," he finally said. "I like going to church now, with Giselle and my only living child. He's my fifth. I don't know if you knew that."

And again, my gut clenched with the thought of losing my children, and I nodded. I reached behind me and found the tissue box.

"Anyway," he continued, "Giselle, Dunc, and I, we're a family, sitting there in the pew in a familiar place, and it feels...right. Like I finally have what I wanted all along, like God's okay with who I am and always was. Like what happened to me and my family was to correct a bad decision I made when I was too confused to know better, to release my kids from a life of misery and give me the woman I longed for all the years I spent married to a monster.

"It's taken years to get here. I look at Giselle and wonder what *good* I did to deserve her, and for whatever reason—conditioning or wishful thinking or truth—sometimes I'm tempted to think maybe it's because I was faithful all those years. But even if that's not true, I still had to go through what I did to be worthy of a woman like Giselle, that strength and confidence. A refiner's fire." He paused. "I have third- and fourth-degree

burns over forty percent of my body, and I'll tell you something. If I had to walk through that fire again to have her, I would."

I gulped.

"G'nigh, Cassie."

"Night," I whispered, but he was gone.

* * * * *

The First Day of the Week

April 24, 2011

Mitch was gone when I awakened Sunday morning. Eight-thirty, and Mitch's side of the bed was cold. I got up and wrapped myself in a thick robe to go find him.

"Yo, Cass," Sebastian called when I walked into the kitchen to find him, Eilis, Knox, and Nigel at the table eating, playing poker, but no Mitch. "Where's Sleeping Beauty?"

"Gone," I murmured, confused. I turned, looked back into the foyer, from where I'd come. Started back out and stopped at the library doors. Opened them. Nothing but the Monopoly game we'd left last night, awaiting our return. No Mitch.

"Mitch!" I shouted up the stairs, my hands cupped around my mouth.

"His car's gone," Trevor called across the house, from the area of the garage door.

"Well, he has to come back," Sebastian said. "He lives here."

"House phone rang early this morning," Nigel said through a yawn. "Don't know if that means anything."

With that, they all went back to what they'd been doing, but I was too worried about Mitch to care. Where could he have gone? It wasn't like him to leave me no note, no voice mail, no indication.

And he was in a dangerous frame of mind.

I picked up the phone and hit the caller ID, and my heart caught in my throat.

Oh, *no*.

Not with the way he'd cracked on Friday.

I bolted up the stairs and threw on clothes that didn't match. I ran back down the stairs and through the kitchen, out the garage door, ignoring everyone. I got in my car and zipped down the driveway, then out onto the highway. It took me half the time to get to church that it usually did.

There.

Mitch's Bugatti, in its usual spot.

I parked— Far away because the parking lot was, as usual, bursting.

But I sprinted into the building and shocked the hell out of all the people I knew who were all dressed in Sunday best and present as if the world hadn't blown up.

They probably didn't know anyway.

I shot down the hallway, dodging a dozen people, to the stake president's office and blew in there, too.

"Where is he?" I demanded of the first man who happened across my path.

"Uh, Sister Hollander..."

"Where is he?" I shouted, then saw Sally Bevan step out of President Petersen's office, her nose and eyes red, her furious husband shoving her in front of him, his hand wrapped tight around her arm.

“*Why?!?*” I cried at her, reduced to begging.

“Because she can’t be happy with what she’s got,” Dan snarled at her. She hiccuped and wiped her nose on the back of her arm.

She wouldn’t look at me.

“He’s gone.” I looked up when I heard Petersen’s low voice, whose expression I couldn’t decipher.

“You ignorant bastard,” I whispered, staring at him.

He looked down and scuffed his toe on the carpet. “We all make mistakes, Cassie,” he muttered. “He’s—was—my friend. I’m not proud of it.”

But I didn’t stay to listen to his platitudes about whatever mistakes Mitch had supposedly made, up to and including—*especially*—marrying me. I burst out a door opposite the one I’d entered and saw Mitch, dressed in jeans and a rugby shirt, walking to his car.

No.

Swaggering.

One hand in his pocket and the other shaking his car keys out.

“Mitch!”

He stopped and turned. Stared at me.

“Cassandra, what—?”

But I threw myself in his arms before he could finish, and I held on for dear life because who knew his state of mind at the moment, a chip on his shoulder, driving his death trap.

That thing had to go.

I rained kisses all over his face because he was there, awake, not roaring, not collapsing, not—

“Cassandra,” he sighed, wrapped his arms around me and let me kiss him.

“What are you doing here?” I murmured between kisses. “Why did you come here?”

With a sigh, he disentangled me and put me on my feet only so far as to catch my hand and pull me into his body. His arm draped over my shoulders, he held me close as we strolled toward his car. “I woke up about three, four this morning and felt like...everything was going to be all right. I didn’t know what day it was, but you were there sleeping and the house was quiet. I went downstairs and saw the rental cars outside, so I knew I had family around me. Looked in the library. Window’s boarded up, rug’s gone, glass is all cleaned out of the bookcases, poker’s back where it belongs, and the books aren’t burnt.” His mouth twitched. “I don’t know, I wandered around for a little bit, got some noodles. Like nothing had happened, nothing had changed. Like *I* hadn’t changed. Like I hadn’t...torn my library apart or, uh—” He sucked in a deep breath.

“What I said, what I did to you—” Released it in a whoosh.

I looked up at him, saw his chagrin, the flush on his face. He could barely look at me. “Don’t you dare apologize to me for that, Mitch Hollander. I *loved* it.”

“But—”

“Don’t. Just promise me more of it.”

He sighed and snuggled me closer as we walked. We got to his car and he leaned back against the door and framed me with his legs and arms to look at me.

“Anyway, I felt just fine. Went back to bed and dozed for a while. Phone rings, it’s Petersen, says he wants to come over and talk.”

“And you said?”

“I told him he wasn’t welcome in my home, that I didn’t want it defiled by whatever evil he’d let deceive him.”

“Oh, *snap*.”

He chuckled. “He said he wanted to talk to me and could I meet him somewhere and, well, this was as good a place as any, I guess.”

“Okay, so?”

He pursed his lips.

Took another deep breath.

“I’ve been fully reinstated.”

My mouth dropped open. “Just like that?”

“Yeah, surprised me, too. What *should* have happened was, if we ever could’ve proven Greg set me up, then I would request another bishop’s court to revisit the new information. Obviously, that would’ve taken time.”

“But...?”

“Friday— The General Authorities who came out for the proceedings— I thought they were there to grill me, catch me out in a lie—they’re litigators, after all—and validate the decision ecclesiastically and legally. So did everybody else. We went through the whole thing again, but they never spoke. Just watched. The decision was made. I was out.”

“Okay...?”

“Apparently, after I left, they asked everyone else to stay. Asked Greg a few questions and kept asking him questions. It pretty much turned into a cross-examination.”

“My God. They knew.”

“Had him pegged right off the bat, the same way you did. You know he doesn’t bother to hide anything when he’s confronted with someone who understands what he is, so when he figured out he couldn’t win, he crowed about what gullible fools they all were, then left. The General Authorities nullified the decision and told Petersen to start excommunication procedures on Greg and mend fences with me as soon as possible. Then they hopped the next flight back to Salt Lake.”

“That happened Friday?”

“Yes.”

“And it’s taken Petersen this long to tell you?”

“He had to work up the nerve. He’s...ashamed. Humiliated. Grieving a long friendship.”

“And so this all happened before Sally confessed to her false confession?”

He looked at me sharply. “Sally? What—”

“Uh...” I pointed helplessly toward the building. “She— When I went in Petersen’s office, she was in the process of being dragged out by her husband.”

“Well, no,” he said, obviously confused. “If she didn’t recant until this morning, she wasn’t part of the equation.”

“And the woman you didn’t know?”

He snorted. “A call girl.”

Of course. “Have you heard anything about Inez?”

His lip curled. “I don’t want to talk about Inez until I’ve cooled off.”

Oh. Huh. Maybe this wasn’t the best time to break the news. Maybe he just didn’t

need to know for a while. *Never* would be good, too. I switched gears.

"You'll be glad to know that while you were sleeping, we figured out how to prove Greg's a thief."

"Really?" he asked, a pleased grin growing on his face. God, I loved that grin.

"Yes. Now, it'll take a while to get him behind bars, but you know, *I* am not a court of law and there is no due process with me."

He smirked. "I really don't condone revenge."

"But when I do it, it turns you on."

"Yes. It's a character flaw. I'll have to repent."

"Okay, so *the Lord* came through for you."

"Yes, he did."

"Are you still bishop?"

Mitch chuckled. "In name only. You know, there are easier ways to get released from the bishopric, but at this point, I'll take what I can get. Let's go to the Caribbean."

* * * * *

Ascension

August 2011

The tropical sun felt good on my skin, lying here on the beach of a private island near Antigua.

"I like these," Mitch muttered as he flicked the rubies that dangled from my nipples.

"Really," I mumbled, loath to speak. "Your depraved friend Giselle suggested them."

"Oh."

"Why so disappointed?"

"Not disappointed. Surprised. That it wasn't your idea."

I opened one eye and looked at him, sunning next to me, his eyes closed. I wondered if I had ever seen a finer specimen of male.

He wore plain navy trunks, as I wouldn't allow him to risk damaging such an important part of his body by getting it sunburned, depriving me while it healed. I didn't expose the most fun part of my body to the sun, either. I wore a red bikini bottom.

He liked me in red.

"When I was in the business, the only genital jewelry I could find was of the piercing kind, and you may have noticed that isn't on the list of perversions I like."

"You expect me to know what's missing?"

"Good point. I'll write those down, too, and see if any of that appeals to you. You like your cock rings well enough."

"Beats Viagra."

"Don't play the age card. You love it."

He grinned.

We settled back into the day, our only purpose to relax together in relative silence: no family, no friends, no bosses, no jobs, no ward members, no church responsibilities.

Two lovers on a solitary romantic getaway.

Neither of us had had a vacation in more than twenty years—or at least not that we remembered.

Me with Gordon, Rivington, the girls—always frantically trying to keep my life

together, then setting out on my course of revenge after the courts emancipated me from my marriage.

Mitch with college and a family and church responsibilities, then Mina's declining health, three growing children, the bishopric, frantically trying to hold the entire manufacturing sector together by absorbing Jep Industries.

There would have been no point to vacations. Neither of us knew how to relax enough to have left our worries behind and would've brought them with us wherever we went.

It had taken a while to wrap our lives up enough to get out from under that problem. Today, on the first day of our open-ended vacation, all we wanted to do was get used to being *on* vacation.

The warmth, the glare of the white sand and brilliant blue water-and-sky, the sounds of the sea and the rustling palm fronds lulled me back into a doze. I sensed Mitch adjusting the umbrella to cast us in shade.

Smart man.

"How are you doing?" I murmured later from my half doze, then reached for his hand, big and callused and oh so talented.

"Couldn't be better," he returned as sleepily as I felt.

He knew what I'd asked.

Louise had let the fact of Inez's suicide slip accidentally (on purpose), and had prodded me until I'd recited the note to him, too.

What does it mean?

It means she was a good girl who got trapped in a corner and couldn't fight her way out.

He'd insisted on dedicating Inez's grave himself.

The significance was not lost on me: Inez was as much a part of his life as Mina, and Mitch had buried two of the only three women he'd ever loved.

Still loved.

I didn't recognize myself and the green-tinted feelings flowing through me.

It is incumbent upon you to accept him the way he is.

Whereas *I* had only loved one man in my life, and I had to share him with two other women, women who made up part of his heart and soul. I had to live with the fact of their existence, whether I liked it or not.

After all, he accepts you and you rebuilt your wealth on your back.

He was learning to live with that reality. It got easier for him every time he ran into someone on my list who respectfully acknowledged Mitch as the man who had attained the unattainable. On *his* terms.

It had popped up a time or two early on: someone sneered at one or both of us.

Yeah, okay, it makes me mad, he'd admitted. *But you know it doesn't change how I feel about you. As long as you don't let your inner martyr dictate some weird change between you and me, I'll get over it.*

My inner martyr. Good God. I'd put that down hard and fast.

Like I have to get over your eternal marriage to Mina and your till-death-do-us-part one to me? Think about it from my point of view. You go where a lot of people have gone before, but they're history and you don't have to share any part of my body with anybody ever again. I'm the third woman in your heart, and I'm always going to be number three,

sharing you with them. How do you think I feel?

Uh... Oh. Oops?

Yeah, oh, oops. You've been throwing this tantrum for weeks. You better get over it pretty damned quick, because your inner spoiled brat is pissing me off.

But once Mitch put the word out that he knew everyone's dirty little secrets and would not tolerate either of us being mocked—on pain of ruinous consequences—suddenly none of these people knew me at all, much less intimately.

So in the end, I couldn't have kept Inez's death or note from him even if Louise hadn't decided to preempt and prod me.

I chose another course to fulfill what I saw as my obligation to my husband.

It had taken my people all of a day to track down Inez's children. Both boys had been adopted by an upper middle class Jewish family in Rhode Island, and had done well for themselves.

The graveside service had lasted less than five minutes. I'd stood between Prissy and Louise, some distance behind Inez's sons and their beautiful families. Mitch had said a short ritual-sounding prayer to dedicate the grave, then continued to pray in his normal syntax, praying for Inez to be blessed and happy as she had never been on Earth.

"That's it?" I'd whispered at Prissy when we'd all said "amen" and the casket rollers began to turn, and Inez was lowered into the ground.

"That's it. Normally, we'd have the usual visitation and a funeral service the next day, then this, go back to church for a dinner the Relief Society prepared, but..." She'd gestured to the paucity of mourners. "The only sacrament involved is the dedication of the grave. The rest is whatever the family wants."

"Well, that's efficient," I marveled.

"We're efficient people," Prissy said.

"Louise," I said, "I told you to spend whatever you needed. That's a shit casket."

"It is not—*crap*. It's just plain and nobody's going to see it anyway—"

"And pragmatic," Prissy added, amused.

"—but they will see the beautiful headstone. *Crap* would've been a pine box, not polished maple. Trust me. I've only been doing this for five years, yanno."

Prissy snorted. "Until Sunday."

"Hallelujah."

"What happens Sunday?"

"My counselors and I will be released from the Relief Society presidency when Mitch and his counselors get released."

"I thought he was already released?" I said, thoroughly confused.

Louise shook her head. "Not officially. Everything will proceed as if he's come to the natural end of a long second crack at bishop."

"How many people know what happened? We can't be the only ones."

Prissy looked at me with a blank expression. "Know about *what*, Sister Hollander?"

Ah, okay. That spin machine had probably cranked into overdrive the minute Prissy and Louise got the news.

"Is it like an incoming president appointing a new cabinet?"

"Kind of. Depends on the circumstances. I've seen it done other ways."

"Who's the new bishop, then?"

Prissy growled, and Louise didn't bother to hide her smirk. I would've laughed, but

this was still a funeral.

“Oh, ha ha ha,” Prissy grumbled.

I looked at my friend. “Guess you’ll have to brush up on your people skills.”

“She thought if she was antisocial enough, it would keep Steve from being called.”

“Shut up, Louise.”

But here we were, three months after Inez’s funeral and though Mitch had been fidgety and unsettled for some weeks, he still hadn’t said a word about how he felt about her death, except to tell me how his church viewed suicide—which was to say, without any real judgment on its level of sinfulness.

We don’t know those people’s states of minds or how much pain they must have been in to take their own lives, so we can’t judge if they’re even responsible for their actions. That’s for the Lord to decide.

That was when it occurred to me how much pain and suffering Mitch must have endured vicariously through the years.

Bishops forget. When I was released the first time, I forgot it all. Then I talked to some other former bishops, and they’ve had the same experience. The minute I was released this time, I forgot it all. I’m sure I could dig around in my memory somewhere, but I don’t want to.

Really? Weird.

Mmmm, not weird, no.

Clearly he had an opinion or at least a theory—one he wouldn’t share, once again keeping the deepest parts of his spirituality away from me because he couldn’t bear my skepticism or, worse, ridicule. I might have gotten angry all over again, but I’d begun to notice that this was a cultural thing. Conditioned reflex. Gunshy, the lot of them, drawing people in superficially, but keeping people away from their most sacred customs and rituals, away from the depths of their personal faith and beliefs so as not to invite more scorn than they already bore.

I’d become a little sensitive to it myself.

I knew enough by now that I could deduce the direction of his thoughts. I might be able to worm it out of him eventually, but if he didn’t cough it up soon, I’d ask Giselle. She’d answer any question I had because she didn’t consider my opinion important enough to be offended—or she would simply sneer at any bigotry I might display, inadvertently or otherwise.

That bad-tempered bitch was growing on me.

It did occur to me that Mitch might not have had time to work through it right away—we’d been busy since he’d laid Inez to rest.

Trevor had graduated from high school and moved into the new apartment in my townhouse to go to NYU. He’d insisted on paying me rent, which shamed my girls enough to offer too, albeit grudgingly. Mitch stared at me, eyebrow raised, and Nigel glared at me until I’d thought of a compromise I could live with. The children were to send the money to a charity of their choice. And provide me proof.

Clarissa had graduated from college and moved to Kansas City. We’d gone with her to make sure she was as acclimated as she could get, her first time away from home for a significant period. I’d left the Kenards’ cozy home depressed.

Giselle and Knox would do for her what I had never been able—*willing*—to do. It would be brutal for her, and I deeply regretted that, but at least it would get done if she

had the courage to stay. Bryce would likely be the only buffer she could count on. She wouldn't be able to run back home to Daddy or her sisters. Nigel wouldn't allow it. She wouldn't be able to run back to Mommy. Mitch wouldn't allow it.

If she left the shelter of Mitch's family, she'd be completely on her own.

The separation of the old Jep Industries from Hollander Steelworks was finished, right down to the last paper clip in the new office complex in Allentown. Hollander-Dunham, "a subsidiary of Hollander Steelworks," was all shiny and new, with clever branding and ad campaigns to make it as memorable to the general public as BASF was to my generation and "Intel inside" is to my kids'. Two entire floors of the largest building in the complex were dedicated to the department that would bring to market the products made with Mitch's alloy (which had yet to be named). OKH Enterprises would be fabricating some of those products, as it was the only factory in the country with the equipment to do what Mitch wanted done.

Not a month after I shut down my office at the Steelworks and sent my staff back to New York for a long paid vacation, Mitch and I rushed to New Orleans when Lisette went into labor and delivered Mitch's—*our*—first grandchild, a boy. Then we were informed that Geneviève would produce a second grandchild in January.

Whatever Inez's death had unsettled within him, the one child's birth and the news of the other child's conception must have settled back down.

My mother sent word that my father had died. Mitch, Nigel, Jack, and I met Sebastian and his mother, Dianne, in Beatrice, Nebraska, where my father had spent the last years of his life working for the Union Pacific Railroad. It didn't surprise me that Sebastian wanted to pay his respects to his mentor, but what did surprise me was the hundreds of other people from the financial sector who had also turned out.

My parents had not had a church. Mitch buried him at my request and with my mother's blessing. I watched in shock as Sebastian participated in the ritual, he and Mitch working smoothly together as if it hadn't been twenty-five years since they'd last shared a faith. Dianne Taight gave an extemporaneous eulogy of Theodore St. James that left no one dry-eyed—and she had never met him.

My mother lived in a small bungalow on a large plot of land that she had turned into an ever-providing vegetable and flower garden. She refused to move back to New York, as she was settled with the group of close friends she'd had for years, and she truly enjoyed her life. She also refused my offer of providing her with a retirement income.

Mama, don't start being stupid now.

When did you get so mouthy?

Your granddaughter taught me.

Oh, my little Cassie Junebug, you don't really think your father and I would've planted ourselves in the middle of a corn field with no intention of growing, do you? After all, this is where we started.

Ah, well. I wondered.

I have far more than enough.

I'm so glad.

I love you, Junebug.

I love you, too, Mama. Be well. I'll come back and check on you if you'll let me.

I would like that.

In October, Mitch and I would be in the Missouri Ozarks for a wedding. I don't care

one whit about Eric Cipriani's politics, but it'll be fun someday to be able to say I know the President of the United States. And Vanessa—well, she'll make the finest First Lady since Jackie Kennedy, as she has class and charm down to a science. Considering Missouri's governor had just died in an Amtrak train derailment, the kid's campaign for Missouri's attorney general had made a sharp right turn into a run for the governorship.

As an independent.

After having publicly told the RNC to go fuck itself.

He'll be a force to be reckoned with.

"Penny for your thoughts."

I started at Mitch's husky voice and saw the elongated shadows in the sand. "I'm hungry."

"I'll grill you a flounder."

"Allow me to help."

"Certainly."

He hopped up and held his hand out to me, drew me to my feet. He flicked the nipple jewelry again. "I *really* like these," he said low.

"Matches what I have on my clit. Keeps me in a permanent state of vague arousal. You know, like your cock ring. Which I know you're wearing right now."

He laughed and draped his arm around me, guiding me toward our hut.

"Do me a favor," I said abruptly.

"What?"

"Grow a goatee. I think you'd look dashing."

He shrugged. "Sure."

"To answer your question, I was thinking about Greg Sitkaris."

"Oh?"

"Do you really want to know?"

He said nothing for quite a distance and then said, "No. Plausible deniability."

"That won't fly on Judgment Day."

He smirked. "Probably not."

We grilled. Ate. Went to bed and made love.

How different it was when we were both relaxed, nothing to worry about, no pressing issues. We talked until dawn, then slept.

We basked in each other's company, read books, watched movies, swam in the ocean, drove our boat to nowhere, and slow danced on the beach in the moonlight to music we only heard in our heads. We spent the weekends on the neighboring islands finding street festivals where we mingled and danced with the locals, gorged ourselves on native delicacies, bought local crafts, and wore casual clothes to church.

He refused to miss church, and services in another country with a completely different racial and ethnic makeup, a strange accent—but the same rituals—was oddly bonding. I liked learning the culture of this ward, which was so different from the one I knew, but the same. It was at once surreal and comforting.

I never wanted to leave that paradise, but eventually we went home to Pennsylvania

—where I got the news that Greg Sitkaris was right where I wanted him.

Homeless. Helpless. With no way to make any kind of legitimate living because my people knew where he was at all times, which bridge he lived under, where he went to

beg for work, and that he'd finally turned to prostitution.

I wondered how he liked catching instead of pitching.

Mitch was at work when I got the phone call, so I didn't bother to contain my glee. I laughed so loudly the kitchen echoed it back at me.

"How are the women faring out there with you all?"

"Very well," Morgan said. "They seem to like it here, and we're in the process of getting their names changed. They'll be living in the same ward Giselle and Bryce and I do while they get used to being on their own."

"Witness protection, Dunham style."

"That's right."

"What about Shane Monroe?"

Mitch didn't know I had had his father-in-law in my sights, but it didn't matter. I had no intention of ruining the man's life.

"We, ah, *encouraged* him to never, *ever* try to contact Mitch or his kids again."

"Outstanding. You did break the news to him, I hope?"

"Of course."

The fact that the man Shane had trusted and loved as a son had stolen from him to the point of destitution would be its own revenge.

"Did you shred all those documents I sent you?"

"And burned. After Knox tucked every detail into his brain."

"What?"

"He has a photographic memory."

"That's handy."

"You have no idea. I take it you're no longer worried about a premature death?"

"Let's just say Mitch put the fear of God—and your family—into anyone who even thinks about looking at me wrong. And do you really think anybody's going to take the chance that since *he* knows, you all don't?"

He chuckled. "Probably not."

I paused. "Thank you, my friend."

"Oh, hell, we didn't have anything better to do."

"I've been meaning to ask you— How do these sorts of very un-Christ-like activities square with your theology?"

He took a deep breath and released it as if he were debating how much to say. "Um... We Dunhams...kind of see ourselves as an instrument of the Lord's vengeance. My grandfather was a bit of a rabblouser. Made sure to pass it along."

"Oh, my God. I married into a pack of megalomaniacs."

"As if you aren't."

I laughed.

"Everybody's here for a reason, Cassie," he said with the humility I'd come to expect from him in matters spiritual. "That reason varies from person to person. I truly believe *our* mission, mine, my family's, is to be the bullwhip used to clean the moneychangers out of the temple. If it's not, we'll account for ourselves on Judgment Day and take whatever punishment we get. But when we get there, we'll be able to look the Lord in the eye and say we did our best to protect and clear a path for those weaker than us."

"Oh, blah blah blah," I said. "At least I don't dress my sins up in all sorts of

philosophical mumbo jumbo to be able to sleep at night. Fucking hypocrites.”

He laughed. “I guess we are pretty Old Testament about it, huh?”

“Just a little.” I drummed my fingers on the granite and said briskly, “Okay. Time to up the ante.”

“Phase two is already in progress. Not sure how long it’ll take Sitkaris to break completely, since he knows who he’s up against, what we’re after, and why—he’s stubborn and clever—but he’s also acquired a drug habit. If we have to, we’ll pull out the big gun to get him on board.”

“Giselle.”

“She can be very persuasive.”

“Excellent. Keep me posted.”

* * * * *

Revelation

July 2012

Mitch sped through the countryside, lavender fields flashing by in a blur of brilliant purple, the sun glinting off the chrome of his Bugatti, leaves and debris exploding into the air behind his high-performance tires. He lived one hundred and thirteen kilometers from the nearest ward building and he adored every narrow twisting kilometer of it. He loved this, having time to himself on the road to race against no one—in the daylight, when he was happy, instead of in the dark, working out frustration and anger.

Going directly home after church, no responsibilities because he was a visitor—and had been everywhere in the world they’d been thus far, being *Brother*—not Bishop—Hollander.

He was forced to slow once he reached the village, and it was only another couple of kilometers until he turned onto the gravel road that would take him home. He saw it come into view, the off-white stucco and the red barrel tiles on the roof, surrounded by fields of purple, and wondered if there would come a time he’d want to leave.

Mitch parked next to Cassandra’s red Mini Cooper convertible. The shoe, he called it, to her annoyance, but at least he’d been able to talk her into the one with some power. She, however, would not be able to talk him into getting rid of his car, no matter how much she hated it.

He got out and the smell of bread and lavender wafted on the summer breeze, an odd combination, but not unpleasant and really rather comforting.

Clarissa sat at the kitchen table scribbling furiously on a legal pad, her law textbooks in front of her, all contained in an electronic tablet—Dr. Hilliard had given her a project that guaranteed she would not see the sun her entire summer vacation.

Trevor lay outside in a hammock slung between two trees, wrapped up in and making out with one of the local girls, both of them fully clothed. He’d be going back to New York in the fall for his junior year at NYU.

Cassandra’s sleek black hair was tucked behind her ears as she stood at the kitchen counter, in a sundress and apron, covered in flour, kneading a loaf of bread.

Beautiful.

Mitch went to his wife and swept her into his arms for a lusty kiss.

“Mmmm, I could fuck you right now, Mitch Hollander,” she whispered against his

lips, opening her clear golden-brown eyes.

"I'd take you up on that, but—"

The sounds of another car in the driveway, doors opening and closing, and a low conversation carried easily through the open windows.

"But Mama, I don't want to."

"I don't care what you want," said the mama, amused but unsympathetic. "You're taking a nap after lunch."

"But—"

"Duncan," said the daddy, his hoarse voice giving extra heft to the stern tone.

Mitch and Cassandra chuckled together as he cradled her in his arms, his mouth against her lavender-scented hair.

"Cawissa! Cawissa! Cawissa!" A small boy with a shock of orange hair burst into the house and ran straight for her. She hugged him and kissed him and tickled him until he squealed. "Will you take a nap wiff me?"

"Sure thing, baby boy. Come over here on this side of me and you can help, okay?"

Bryce and Giselle Kenard walked in just after that, dressed as casually as Mitch, perfect for a hot summer Sunday.

"Four years old and he's already taking girls to bed," Giselle muttered and eyeballed her husband. "Apple didn't fall far from that tree."

Bryce smirked and snatched a date out of the fruit bowl on the table. Giselle sat by Clarissa when the girl gestured to her for help on her assignment.

"How'd you like it?" Mitch asked.

"Ah, church in a foreign language. Reminds me of the first few sacrament meetings I went to on my mission," Bryce said.

"They speak English in Scotland, right?"

Bryce said something that didn't sound like any language Mitch had ever heard. "So that was English," he concluded. "And you didn't understand a word I said."

"I love it when you do that, Ares," Giselle purred. "Now come whisper Gaelic obscenities in my ear."

Bryce laughed and sat with his wife, and did, in fact, whisper in her ear.

Mitch grinned and looked at Cassandra.

"Happier than usual, I see," she murmured huskily, her mouth against Mitch's cheek. "What's the occasion?"

"No occasion," he murmured in return. "Beautiful day, gorgeous wife, great kids, good friends and good food. Could it get better?"

"Yes. Good wine, which I have chilling in the fridge."

Mitch rolled his eyes.

"Just because you insist on remaining a teetotaler doesn't mean Clarissa and I have to be."

A soft chime rang through the house, pulling Mitch away from Cassandra, surprised. Very few people could get in touch with them that way. Mitch picked up a small remote and aimed it at the massive screen hanging on the kitchen wall opposite the long farm table.

Sebastian's face came up on the screen. "Bonjour, Elder," he said heartily.

"Bonjour, Elder," Mitch said, wondering what had happened that warranted a video call. "Little bit early for you, isn't it?"

Sebastian's lip curled at Mitch's French. "Is that *Provençal* creeping into your accent?"

"Parisian accents are suspect around here, you know that. Had to get rid of it. Fast. Now speak English."

"Okay, well. Bonjour, everybody. Where's Trevor? Getting laid, I hope?"

Mitch was the only one who didn't think that was funny, but it was too nice a day to get huffy about it.

"So Cassie told me this would be a good time to call, and I see that we're all here. Good, good."

Mitch cast a glance at Cassandra who smiled her nose-wrinkling smile.

"Looks like you have a nice place. We may have to crash your little Shangri-La. So my news—"

"Eilis is pregnant. Again."

"Oh, no. I am now shooting blanks. Four is all I can handle and one more would've forced us into permanent celibacy for lack of time and privacy. Justice is taking over as head breeder of the pack. Nope. Not that."

"Okay, so...?"

"We caught 'em."

"Who?"

"The Jep Industries embezzlers."

Mitch thought his heart had stopped. "What? *All* of them?"

Sebastian grinned wide. "Every last bastard. Made national news. Kenard, you helped us decorate for the party, but then you didn't show up to partake in the festivities. What's that about?"

"Wouldn't *you* rather be in Provence?"

"Not this week."

A news segment flashed onto the screen and Mitch watched, stunned.

Yesterday in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, Gregory Sitkaris was arrested on charges of insurance fraud and racketeering. Sitkaris, a former employee of Jep Industries who was laid off when the company was absorbed by Hollander Steelworks nine years ago, revealed to authorities the embezzlement scheme which prompted financier Sebastian Taight to close J.I.'s doors. In exchange for immunity from embezzlement charges, he gave the D.A.'s office a list of those involved in the destruction of J.I. and full details on how the scheme was carried out. All twelve suspects have been arrested and arraigned.

The former CEO of J.I., Senator from Pennsylvania Republican Roger Oth, was not implicated in the scheme. Taight and his team, the so-called "Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse," held a press conference after the arraignment.

The news feed changed.

Sebastian, in black, looking more cold and ruthless than Mitch had ever seen him, stood in front of a bank of microphones on the steps of the Lehigh County Courthouse, Knox and Morgan to his right and Nigel on his left. Arrayed thusly, they looked no less terrifying than Sebastian.

"God, they *are*," whispered Clarissa. "The apocalypse."

Mitch couldn't disagree.

"Nine years ago, Senator Roger Oth called me to fix Jep Industries, and what I found was a nest of vipers buried so deeply in the heart of that company that it would have folded within a month, leaving its employees with no savings and no recourse, as well as destroying over a dozen other companies that employed thousands of people. My cousin, Knox Hilliard, came up with the plan to dismantle J.I. so that Hollander Steelworks could quietly absorb it and keep it running and, at the same time, secure the employees' investment accounts from theft. We did that.

"Roger had been set up by his team to take the fall should it come to light. If he had called me sooner, if he had let me do my work without the need for a complete hostile takeover, all of this could have been avoided, but he fought me every step of the way. Regardless, Knox and my other cousin, Morgan Ashworth, my friend Mitch Hollander, and I have tried for almost a decade now to prove these people guilty.

"It wasn't until Greg Sitkaris took out a personal vendetta against Mitch that the pieces began to fall into place. Corporate restructuring Cassandra St. James and investment banker Nigel Tracey had new information that we didn't have and couldn't get any other way.

"We are not here today to vindicate Senator Oth. We are here to represent the employees of J.I. and, on their behalf, demand the Senator make restitution to them for the time they spent out of work because of his incompetence and his team's thefts.

"It's unfortunate that Roger felt the need to pillory me and my family in the press, and drag us to Congress for attempting to protect him from prosecution. Considering he had put no safeguards in place to prevent such wholesale theft and didn't understand what was happening to his company even after I explained it, much less that I was trying to shield him because I knew he was innocent, I seriously question Roger's intelligence and his effectiveness in serving his constituents. I can only hope the people of Pennsylvania take this into account at the next election cycle.

"Finally, may Greg Sitkaris burn in hell for what he did to my friend, my brother, Mitch Hollander. Mitch protected the savings and livelihoods of thousands of people, and then endured a devastating personal attack. However. Although I wouldn't wish on anyone what happened to Mitch, I believe it was absolutely necessary to effect justice today and that without Mitch's sacrifices, the employees of J.I. would never have been vindicated."

When asked to respond to Taight's comments, Senator Oth said only, "I'm glad justice is finally being served."

Mitch Hollander, founder and CEO of Hollander Steelworks, and his wife, Cassandra St. James, restructuring specialist for Blackwood Securities, could not be located for comment.

The kitchen remained silent, and Mitch realized that he was the only one dumbfounded.

Sebastian's face appeared on the screen again, as did his two-year-old daughter's

when she went barreling through Sebastian's office and threw herself on her father. "Oof! Watch it, Celie."

"Stow, Daddy!" she demanded, hitting him with a big storybook.

"In a minute."

"No, now!"

The raven-haired toddler immediately had his full attention, but probably not the kind she wanted. His face stony, he stared down at her. "Celia. Dianne. Taight." But she giggled, reached up, dug her hands in his hair, and pulled his face down to rub noses until he laughed. "Okay, you got me. Where's mama?"

"Sweeping widda baby."

"Then go play with your brothers until I get off the phone, and do *not* wake her up. Understand?"

"Okay, Daddy!" She ran out of the room screaming, "Mommy!"

He was still chuckling when he looked back into the camera. "Looks like the wild things are up and about, so I'm gonna bail. Cass was the project coordinator, so she can explain." Sebastian looked at Cassandra, and grinned. "Allergies?"

"It's lavender season," Cassandra muttered with a sniffle, turning to hide her face in Mitch's shoulder.

"I love you, man," Sebastian said just before the screen went black.

Mitch stood dazed. "You did it," he whispered as he looked down at his wife, feeling a burden lift from his shoulders, one he hadn't realized he still carried or that still mattered to him.

"Well, *we* did it," she said, wiping her tears. "See, I started getting interested in J.I. when I did my thesis proposal on Sebastian Taight's failures as a fixer."

Mitch stared at her, confused. "There weren't any. He's never failed."

"That's what everybody *thinks*," she corrected. "There was one. J.I. The underlying theory of why he does what he does was interesting, but his pattern of getting thieves jailed stopped at J.I., then picked up again with every company he went into after that. It led me to conclude that while everyone—including you—saw your absorption of J.I. as a success, albeit incomplete, *he* considered it a failure. Getting them prosecuted wasn't your goal. It was *his* goal. *His* failure. *That* is why I almost got laughed out of my program, so I changed my thesis to something I could defend on stats and evidence."

He blinked. "And...you didn't ask Sebastian to help you defend your proposal because they wouldn't have taken you seriously."

"Right. My whole time in college and in the MBA program, I was just an uppity rich Upper East Side stay-at-home divorcée trying to keep myself occupied because my kids were old enough to have their own lives. My theories were already tenuous; it could've been argued that I'd just paid him to show up and validate them."

Giselle snorted.

"So how did this all happen?" Mitch asked, knowing he was missing a big piece of the puzzle.

"Cassie's black book," Bryce said. "That was the key. It connected the mastermind of the J.I. operation to the head of J.I.'s human resources department—Sitkaris—although in her transcripts, he wasn't mentioned by name. But he was then connected to the records at Worcester & Minden. Cassie worked her magic to herd Sitkaris one way, and Knox worked the accounting backward to herd him the other way until they had him

corralled. We used the evidence against *him* to get the others' probable locations, then we hired a team of bounty hunters. They tracked 'em down and brought 'em in. DIY extradition."

"Actually," Cassandra murmured, casting a wry glance at Giselle, who lazily twirled a steak knife in her fingers, "the bad-tempered bitch over there was the one who got Sitkaris to cough up the information. Finally."

Giselle smiled beatifically and fluttered her eyelashes.

"How—" Mitch stopped. He didn't want to know.

"He succumbed to my sunny disposition," she offered sweetly, caressing the blunt edge of the knife blade with a finger. Clarissa laughed, clearly at ease with Giselle and her disposition.

"They'll be tried in federal court," Bryce continued. "Of course, we'll all be called as witnesses, so you'll have to be moving home pretty soon."

"What about the black book? That's evidence, right? Cassandra could—" He stopped, unwilling to think about what could happen to her if it came to light.

"It's gone," Cassandra murmured. "I destroyed everything. The only copy remaining is the one in Knox's head."

"Didn't need it to *prove* anything," Bryce rumbled as he popped grapes in his mouth. "It only pointed us in the right direction. The Worcester & Minden documents and that list of names Cassie's friend gave her did the heavy lifting, gave us the connection in retrospect. It's all over but the shouting."

Finally.

The black book he resented so much—

—the one Morgan had agreed to protect without knowing why—

—the one thing they needed to finish the job they'd started so long ago, one they'd been prepared to abandon.

He gulped, gratitude heavy in his chest.

"Thank you," he whispered.

Good work, boy.

* * * * *



I didn't leave Pennsylvania because I was unhappy or because my commitment was long over. I did it because I was bored. Bored with baking, bored with my job, bored with Prissy and Louise, bored with the perfectly provincial French mansion and the little red shoe car.

I didn't get on an overseas flight because I was running from Pennsylvania or my job or the ward that had long forgotten I wasn't a member of the Church, and thus didn't realize I never would be. I did it because I was bored.

Bored with my children, who'd had the temerity to do something with their lives, leaving me high and dry with no one to fuss over. Helene and her husband, with Doctors Without Borders, were somewhere in Venezuela at the moment. Clarissa, a junior attorney at Hale and Ravenwood, PC, made no secret of where her real ambition lay:

marriage and motherhood, preferably in a chichi Kansas City neighborhood—once she found the right guy. Olivia and Paige co-owned a physical therapy and rehab center that had just started to offer franchises; Olivia’s husband ran the business, Olivia did therapy and personal training, while Paige and her boyfriend, who both still danced with Ailey, taught dance classes that increased the center’s value.

Bored with my stepchildren and grandchildren, who also had the temerity not to come entertain me in my boredom. Lisette and Geneviève now both had two, and Trevor had been called to the LDS Brazil Rio de Janeiro mission to get his precious sales training in a foreign language. He felt two years of celibacy was worth it for the experience, and though his father had refused to sanction or pay for his mission (blown his top, rather), Sebastian didn’t hesitate to pony up the cash along with a stern lecture about not fucking around while he was there and to “return with honor.” From *Rio*. That boy couldn’t have pulled a more difficult assignment if he’d tried, what with all the women walking around nude or close to it.

Bored with my best friend and ex-husband, who’d decided to trot the globe in the other direction from me. Bastards.

Bored with my adopted family because they were a thousand miles away and, since most of them had been too stupid to start their families before they turned forty, were now in full-throttle childrearing mode. That would last a while and I had no wish to mix myself up with ten children not, in fact, related to me.

A sea of faces surrounded me when I stepped off the plane in Japan, all races, colors, heights, sizes. In front of me, a staid Nigerian businessman thumbing his hand tablet as he walked right into an exquisitely attired Filipina. Next to me, a bleach-blond Japanese gothic Lolita with an enormous lollipop in one hand and a Hello Kitty plushie in the other. Behind me, an Australian surfer frantically trying to find out where in the world his expensive board went.

I started walking, pulling my rolling carry-on behind me, to see what I could see in this new place. I have not been to Japan, though Gordon had brought the girls at least twice that I could remember.

I left Pennsylvania and flew to Japan because I was bored. Bored without my lover of five years, my sparring partner and playmate, who had come here six days ago with his legal team to negotiate the sale of his alloy to the Japanese government. He’d bet me a cool million I wouldn’t be able to stand being without him for the entire three weeks of his trip.

There.

Standing arrogantly relaxed in jeans and a rugby shirt. Longish dark sandy curls. Marvelous blue eyes. Scruffy sandy goatee.

Victorious smirk.

Oh, please.

I refuse to accede the bet because it wasn’t *him* I missed. I was just bored being all alone in the house with all my reorganization projects in my teams’ hands and nothing new on the horizon. So I abandoned my friends and hopped a plane, wondering what church would be like in Japanese.

You aren’t ever going to get your fill of me.

I’ll have to find something else to do when he starts to bore me, because he will.

Eventually.

~ THE END ~

* * * * *

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Thank you.

* * * * *

About the Author

Since before Moriah can remember, she wrote stories in her head to put herself to sleep at night. Unfortunately, they grew like kudzu and took over her neural pathways until, around age fourteen, she had to start putting them on paper before they choked out everything else. She’s been writing ever since, with the exception of a five-year sagging middle—er, uh, hiatus—during which a lot of stuff happened. The trouble started when she woke up one morning in 2007 with the solution to a plot problem that had plagued her since 1995...

moriah@moriahjovan.com

moriahjovan.com

twitter.com/MoriahJovan

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