

Chapter I

**Sunday, April 4, 345 ADR
(2404 AD)
Seaton, Seaton Parish**

April 4

Ma once told me that God watches over everyone. I wish I could still believe that. But with the arrival of the New Year, I am becoming acutely aware that I'm on my own.

It's only four weeks until my sixteenth birthday and my wedding day. I am so frustrated with this whole arrangement, because even though I am the bride-to-be, I have no say in this marriage. I never chose to marry Jonathan Marsh. We don't even like each other. Yet his father foolishly forced this engagement on us when we were only children. It was when he took our family's land.

I fear for my safety—so much so that I am having trouble sleeping at night. The nightmares of my married life haunt my exhausted mind. Ma and Pa keep reassuring me that everything will work out fine and that this wedding will be canceled, but I don't believe that anymore. All these years they have been promising that this day would never come, and yet here we are, only twenty-eight days away from it.

With so little time left, it seems like such a waste of an afternoon to spend it in church. But our routine isn't going to change on my account. Ma is so stubborn that she's not only making us go to the New Year services, but she is also making us adhere to the traditional fast that comes with it. My God, I am starving! I haven't eaten since supper last night, and I would do almost anything for a little bread. I realize our ancestors didn't have a lot of food during Divine Retribution, but it's absurd to insist that we should fast, especially when we already live on the brink of starvation. I know Ma is trying to be a good Christian, but I really don't believe that eating a few vegetables or scraps of meat will land us in hell.

Out of all the church services in a year, Divine Retribution has to be the hardest to get through. Today, while people celebrate the birth of the Dominion, all I can do is mourn. I mourn for the death of America—and for the death of freedom, and a place where I couldn't be bought and sold like an animal, and a place I could be safe.

If God is watching over me, he's the only one who can save me from the future.

A knock came at the door, and Emily La Rouche looked up from her diary. "Are you almost ready?" her mother called.

Emily set her pen on the nightstand next to her. "Just about," she called back. She set her diary aside and reached down for her necklace. Her necklace was an old American

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quarter dollar that she had been lucky enough to find when she was a child. Her father had punctured it and threaded it with a length of twine in order to keep her older brother, Aaron, from taking it. She lifted her auburn hair and tied the necklace around her neck. Emily got up from her bed. She pressed down the sides of her long, slate-gray dress and joined her family in the eating room.

Within twenty minutes, the family was ready to go, and they all made their way to the horse-drawn wagon that waited outside. Her parents took their usual places at the front. Aaron hopped on the back and extended his hand to help her up. As soon as she was seated, he lapsed into an irritated silence.

It was the first time that Aaron was returning to Seaton since he had received ten lashes in the town square for the crime of adultery. As they drew nearer to town, Emily could sense his anger rising. She couldn't understand why her mother was making them go to church today. She wanted to curse the weather. Had it been raining, the roads would've been too muddy to traverse, and they would've had to stay home.

Emily let the thought go as they reached the sprawling tenements of the only city she had ever truly known. The poor quarters of the city of Seaton stretched for almost two miles around the center of town, where the cathedral stood. Every time she passed through the tenements, she couldn't help wondering if life was like this everywhere. Did everybody live in rotten houses of decaying wood and tin that reeked of human waste? Were there always hoards of barefoot children who went to bed each night with empty stomachs?

As if to answer her question, a man-sized poster caught her eye. It featured a stout, well-fed young man, smiling, with a caption that boasted: "Three square meals a day, guaranteed! Join the army of God."

She placed her hands on her abdomen as her stomach growled. There was no way to escape hunger's clutches; it had pervaded throughout her life, and it was the sole reason that David Marsh had been able to take over her family's land and force her to marry his son.

But, unlike the people of the tenements, her family had a safety net to catch them in times of absolute desperation. She might be hungry, but she'd never starve. She might get sick, but there would be medicine; she might be in need, but she'd at least have clothes. David Marsh would always provide the basic minimum necessities—just as long as she made it to the altar.

The dirt roads gave way to brick-lined streets, and the slums of the outer city were replaced by the manors and mansions of Seaton's elite. At last the cathedral came into view. The building was adorned with dozens of flags that symbolized the Dominion. The flags, white banners bearing a dominating golden cross over the smaller, blood-red continents of man, fluttered majestically in the morning breeze.

Even though they were early for the morning services, there were crowds of people gathered around the entrance of the cathedral. Aside from Christmas and Easter, the New Year celebration of Divine Retribution was the most-attended service of the year. At this time the cathedral would be filled with people who rarely attended services.

Emily left her family to go and secure the horses, and then she made her way to the crowded cathedral. Her mother had charged her with finding them a seat. Given how crowded it was today, that could be a difficult task. Last year she had had to sit by a

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complete stranger, because they had arrived late and there hadn't been enough space to sit together as a family.

The crowd gathered in front of the cathedral did not thin out as she walked inside. There were fifty rows of two pews on each side of the nave, but it seemed that the only space that wasn't occupied was the narrow aisle she was standing in. Emily frowned and scanned the nave once more. It was there she found a space, on the left side, five rows up, that would be just large enough for her family to squeeze into.

Emily claimed the space, which her family filled a few minutes later. When everyone had been seated, Emily felt an awkward silence creep around her. She glanced at the man in front of her, who made a point to look away as she made eye contact. Out of the corner of her eye, she could see the man next to her staring at her brother. Emily glanced at Aaron, who cast a fierce scowl at the man until he looked away. She tensed up; she was surrounded by the very people who had cheered during her brother's lashing. Coming to church today had been such an awful idea, and she longed for the service to begin, so it would block out the sea of gossip that flowed around her.

"All rise for the coming of the Lord!" boomed the aging voice of Bishop Joseph Aldridge.

A melodic tune echoed from the pipe organ, and the entire congregation stood at attention and faced the narthex. The acolyte, a boy who was no more than twelve, carried the scepter bearing the golden cross down the aisle. Behind him followed Bishop Aldridge, Cardinal Nathaniel Stanton, and Pastor Raymond Gertz. The entire congregation gradually turned as the procession made its way to the altar. The music reached its climax as the acolyte gave a slight bow and handed the scepter to the bishop.

"My children, may God be with you on this New Year's day. It is only good and right that we affirm our faith and allegiance to God and His holy kingdom. Please join with me in reciting the Oath of Affirmation ..."

Emily mouthed the meaningless words as she impatiently waited to take her seat.

After Bishop Aldridge had seated the congregation, he and the cardinal took their seats in the throne-like plush chairs that flanked the altar.

Pastor Gertz approached the pulpit.

"My children, God be with you on this day as we celebrate the anniversary of Divine Retribution. Today is a day for celebration, for three hundred and forty-five years ago, on a spring morning much like this one, Almighty God cleansed a sinful world with fire, so that a new era of righteousness and purity would reign for a thousand years. As told in the Holy Book of Revelations, God unleashed the Four Horsemen upon the Earth to punish the generations for their sins, and on that day four mighty asteroids, as big as mountains, fell from the heavens and brought to the nations war, conquest, famine, and death."

Pastor Gertz rested his hands on the pulpit in front of him. He paused to let the words take effect. "Our Almighty God wiped away the world's decadent democracies, which continually polluted so much sin into his beautiful world. I need not remind you what this place was like before Divine Retribution. America was a land of sinful, vengeful people. It was a land consumed with technological idolatry, greed, and pleasures of the flesh. It was a truly ravenous society."

"But I tell you, brothers and sisters, God had a plan for these people, a plan that was as old as history itself. God gave fair warning to the wicked people of America. He

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warned them in the holy book of Revelation. But yet they ignored. He even sent His Holiness, the founder of our church and our country, Pastor Elijah Kane. But his warnings were shunned. All the signs of the coming of the end were there, but the people went on living their wicked lives. But when the holy day of Divine Retribution came, they were consumed with sin, death, and everlasting damnation.”

“For over two years a cloud of ash blotted out the sun, and as the old world passed away, a new kingdom was born to take its place. In the city we now call Divinity, Pastor Kane and his flock, our ancestors, were safely sequestered away from the dying world.”

“Indeed, the hardships our ancestors faced continued after the sun returned. Resources were scarce. Much had been destroyed in the fires of Divine Retribution, but most of it had been wasted needlessly by the Americans. But, by the sweat of their brows and by the grace of God, they survived and thrived and have forged this kingdom, the Dominion of Divinity, to rule on this Earth until the great day of final judgment.”

Emily bit her lip and detached herself from Gertz’s sermon. She grabbed her necklace and spun the coin on the rope until it no longer held her interest. She looked up at the masses in front of her. It never failed to amaze her what a difference only a few pews could make. The wealthy landowners and church patriarchs were sitting up front in their best attire. The men were dressed in their pressed cotton suits and had stuffy brimmed hats, while their wives and daughters had donned elegant white-and-blue satin gowns that were bustled tightly to show off their feminine forms. But in a matter of a few feet the styles and clothing changed abruptly. Here, further back, most people dressed in clothes that were ragged from everyday wear. They were dusty and dirty, and there lingered the smell of sweat and grime that enveloped the laborers’ existence.

Emily examined each parishioner closely, playing a game she had taught herself to occupy the long New Year services. The game was quite simple. She would look at each parishioner closely to see whether or not they were observing the fast. It was usually pretty easy to tell. Those who did were tired and had trouble concentrating on the sermon. Instead, they closed their eyes and tried to drown out the hunger built up within their bellies. Those who ate breakfast looked alert and energetic and had no problem concentrating on the pastor’s message. She looked across the sea of faces toward the chancel, where Cardinal Stanton and Bishop Aldridge sat. Both men were sturdy, and they looked over their flock with somber and steadfast gazes. Clearly, they both had had breakfast fit for a king.

Emily looked at her family. Her mother, who clung to tradition and stubbornly did not make breakfast, somehow managed to find the strength and resolve to stay focused on the sermon. How she did remained a mystery to Emily. It was the same sermon year after year—powerful the first time you heard it, but after the fifth time she could practically preach it herself.

Her father, by contrast, looked as if he were about to collapse. He had dark circles around his swollen, bloodshot eyes, and he rubbed his face endlessly in an effort to stay awake. He looked far weaker than a man should halfway through a twenty-four hour fast. His face bore the expression of a man who was in desperate need of sleep but had the misfortune to be trapped within a mind that would not shut off.

Her brother still looked fiercely annoyed. She thought he was just upset at having to come back to church so soon after being whipped in the town square—not that she blamed him. If it had been her, she would never have come back. Aaron, however, was

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staring at something toward the front of the church. She followed his glaze to a brunette woman in a white gown, sitting along the aisle near the front of the nave. It was Elizabeth Mason—Aaron's lost love.

If things had been different Aaron and Elizabeth would have been married by now. He had braved the fierce January cold to come into Seaton to propose to her, only to discover that a man named Alexander Rothchild was using her family and had arranged for Elizabeth to be his wife.

After the wedding, Rothchild had had Aaron arrested for stealing Elizabeth's chastity, and he used his influence over the courts to have Aaron whipped in the town square.

Emily tensed up as she thought about her brother. Whenever she thought of him being whipped in the town square, it was a reminder of what could happen to her if she didn't marry Jonathan. Arranged marriages were fairly common throughout the Dominion, but that fact offered her no peace of mind or reassurance whatsoever.

It was absurd the way the elite could just choose who they wanted their children to marry. Seaton's wealthy families rarely intermarried because of the acrid competition between them, and all too often, their spoiled sons would use their wealth to cherry-pick their spouses from the community. Many times they would base their decisions on nothing more than a girl's physical beauty, but every so often they would steal their brides from the arms of their true loves for nothing more than an act of retribution. It had happened to Elizabeth.

In her case, Emily had so often wondered why David had cherry-picked her to be his son's bride. After nine years of living under this marriage arrangement, she had never found an answer. Her mother had one explanation. She believed it was because David's wife, Andrea, had never had any other children besides Jonathan and coveted Emily so much that she sought to make her her own daughter. Emily didn't necessarily believe that, but it was an idea that she could never fully dismiss.

When the service concluded, Emily and her family made their way back to their wagon, but they were detained by the polite musings of their landlord, David Marsh.

"Happy New Year to you, James, Julia," David said to her parents. "James, I hope you don't mind, but there are a number of things we need to discuss."

David pulled her father aside to discuss matters of the farm and other business in private.

While Emily waited impatiently for her father, she noticed that Jonathan was making his way toward her. She shivered at the prospect of having to talk to him. Every memory she had of him was unpleasant. When they were children, he was the boy who'd pulled her hair or tried to look up her dress, or find something to say that would make her cry. He hadn't changed much since then, except that he was now talking about either sex or how rich he was going to be.

"Afternoon, Emily," Jonathan said. "You know, after we're married, I'll throw us the biggest dinner reception you've ever seen, and you'll have the biggest feast you've ever eaten."

She didn't reply but instead glared into the distant horizon in the opposite direction and waited for him to leave.

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“And you won’t have to sleep in that shack you live in now. You’ll have warm rooms with comfortable furniture and a big bed to sleep in . . . with me,” Jonathan flashed a sly smile.

Emily, mortified with the thought, turned around and shot him a gaze filled with abject disgust and loathing.

“You know, I happen to like where I live now—because you’re not there,” Emily said. She promptly turned and walked away.

Her father had concluded his discussion with Marsh and was making his way back, when David interrupted him again.

“Oh, James, why don’t you bring your family out to our house next Sunday for a little pre-wedding celebration?” David called out.

“And, Emily, we need to find a time so you can be fitted for your wedding dress,” Andrea said.

“Looking forward to it,” Emily said. And she was, too, even though she hoped to God that she would find some way out of the wedding. But the dress-fitting would give her a chance to wear something other than the same old tattered clothes she’d always worn.

“Okay, we’ll be there. What time?” James asked.

“Be there about five thirty. We’ll make an evening of it. I’ll hire a photographer friend of mine to take some good pictures,” David replied.

“We’ll be there,” her father said.

Silence washed over the family as they made their way back to the wagon. Emily looked at her father, who looked as if he had a fresh burden loaded on his shoulders. She couldn’t help but feel that she was the reason.

* * *

With the return of the spring planting season, the family was busier than usual. While her father and brother tilled the fields for the year’s wheat crop, her mother took care of the livestock, and Emily was tasked with hunting fresh game for the family.

When Sunday arrived, her father slept late, and they did not attend church. Because of this, she was able to spend the morning hunting.

She had had a poor week and had only been able to bring back a couple of small rabbits. When she returned later that afternoon to her small, gray home, she was empty handed. She had wanted to stay out longer, but she needed to get ready for the Marshes’ dinner party. Emily removed the magazine and unchambered the ammunition from the rifle as she made her way across the sagging porch where the family kept their firewood. She walked through the door and set the unused bullets on the table. The family eating room was the largest of the three rooms in the house, but she could cross it with only five steps. She bagged the rifle and set it in the cupboard her father had made for it.

Emily grabbed the tin basin that she used to clean both her clothes and herself and brought it to the bedroom that she shared with her brother. Emily returned to the kitchen, grabbed a bucket, and made her way outside to the pump to fill it full of rusty water. After several trips to the pump, she at last had enough water in the basin to bathe in.

She threw a piece of lye soap into the water and then undressed. The water was freezing, and the basin was just large for her to sit in if she kept her knees bent. Emily

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washed quickly and then emptied the basin by using the bucket and dumping the water out of the bedroom window.

By now, her family had returned to the house to prepare for the evening. She had set aside her fanciest slate-gray dress to wear. She laced up the knee-high boots that Andrea had given her for Christmas. They were by far the most elegant thing she owned. The boots were made from fine black suede and had a one-inch heel. After she was dressed, she brushed and braided her long, auburn hair. At last she looked her best, but it really didn't say too much. She was gradually outgrowing her dress, and it was becoming threadbare. On top of that, her hair was still frizzled in places.

Still, she fared better than her family. Her father only had one suit, and it was the one he'd been married in. He hadn't worn it since her sister's funeral ten years ago. It had fit him better back then. He was at least thirty pounds too heavy for it, and his belly hung out over the top of the trousers. The pants and sleeves had shrunk, revealing pale white legs that contrasted with the black color of the suit.

Her brother didn't even bother dressing up, and he stubbornly wore his field clothes that were caked in dirt and grime, which caused a bitter argument with their father. Aaron had never been one for formality, but ever since he had lost Elizabeth, he had taken less and less pride in his appearance. His dirty blond hair was greasy and snarled. He rarely shaved, and his beard covered only random patches of his face.

Her mother dressed plainly in a faded black dress and wore her graying brunette hair up in a bonnet. Given her mother's historic dislike of Andrea, she seemed remarkably calm when faced with the prospect of having to spend an evening with the Marsh family. When they were ready, the family made their way to the wagon for slow trek to Seaton.

"Emily," her mother called back to her. "Can you promise us that you'll be polite toward Jonathan tonight? We don't want any trouble with the Marshes."

Emily wanted to protest. For the time being, though, she thought the better of it and answered her mother's plea with a slight nod.

"Yeah, you wouldn't wanna have your other mother yell at you, too," Aaron said playfully.

"Oh, shut up," Emily said jokingly. She looked back at her brother. "Though, I don't mind Andrea, just as long as the rest of her family isn't there."

"Are you sure you're not just saying that 'cause she buys you things?"

"Oh, come off it! All she got me for Christmas was a pair of boots, and you're acting like she bought me a diamond ring."

"Yeah, and what about the things for your hair and fingernails you got for your birthday last year?"

Emily smiled slyly and shook her head. Andrea had always been giving her beauty items that her family didn't have the luxury to afford.

"I still don't understand why I'm the one who gets chastised. I mean, you're the one who always gets in a fight with Jonathan."

"I wouldn't say *always*, just most of the time."

"When was the last time?"

Aaron scratched his beard. "It's been a while. I think I was eleven. It was back when we went to school together, before his parents sent him to a private tutor."

"Oh, yeah. What did you do?"

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“Well, you know how Jonathan is, right?”

“Of course.”

“Back in school, kids used to look up to him, ’cause he was rich and he picked on other boys who he thought were beneath him. One day, before school opened, he was making fun of my clothes, so when he turned his back I pushed him face first into a ditch filled with water.”

Emily laughed, “Good.”

“What was funnier was that his clothes were so wet and muddy he had to take ’em off and wear nothing more than an old blanket for the rest of the day. You shoulda seen how the other boys made fun of him.”

She laughed even more. “Lord, I wish I coulda seen that.”

“Yeah.”

Emily looked down to the ground distractedly, and the smile receded from her face. “I can’t tell you how sick I am of this whole engagement. It doesn’t seem real, you know. Every night I’m haunted by nightmares of my wedding day, and yet every day I wake up I’m one day closer to it.”

“I’m sure Father will think of something.”

“I s’pose. I just wish there was a place where I could live where I wouldn’t have to worry so much. Some place where I could just live my life the way I wanted.”

“I doubt such a place like that exists, Em.”

“I guess,” Emily said. She knew better. When she’d turned fourteen, David had announced that he wanted her to be a properly educated woman of class when she joined the Marsh family. He sent her to study under Nathaniel Cross, the same tutor Jonathan had studied with until he’d turned sixteen.

For over a year and a half she had met with Cross, and for the first few weeks he had taught her the manners and etiquette that the Marshes had wanted. But after a while, Cross began to find trust within her, and when he discovered her curiosity for the ancient past, the lessons began to wander. Within a month, whole sessions were being devoted to lectures on American history.

“You know, I’ve read stories about how this place used to be a place of unlimited freedom, where people could live the way they wanted to,” she said to Aaron.

“I’ve heard those same stories. How the streets were paved with gold and how men walked on the moon—but they’re nothing but rumors and myths.”

“How do you know? You know, just because things aren’t like that now, it doesn’t mean they didn’t used to be like that. I mean, where would the stories come from, if there weren’t some truth to them?”

“Maybe, who knows? It don’t really matter what happened, ’cause it’s over. All that matters is what’s here and now and where we’re going from here.”

Emily grabbed her necklace between her fingers and looked at the worn face of George Washington on the coin. She sat idle for a moment as she gazed into Washington’s vacant stare. She didn’t want to believe that the past didn’t matter, and she longed to hold onto more of it than just the decaying fragment in her hand. Unfortunately, Aaron’s words held more than a little bit of truth in them, and as much as she wanted to, she could not turn back the hands of time. She looked off into the horizon and then gradually back to the ground that was rolling slowly beneath her.

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"I'm worried about Father. He looks like a man on his deathbed," Emily said. She glanced back at her father.

"I know he hasn't been sleeping that well," Aaron said.

"I don't know. I think the wedding is killing him."

"Could be. Or it could just be the planting season is taking its toll on him. You know, he's not that young anymore."

Emily shook her head. While it was customary for her father and brother to be up before sunrise and to work after nightfall, she had never seen her father as exhausted as he was now.

"I don't know. I don't think I've seen him like that since Sarah died."

Aaron nodded in complacent agreement. "Yeah," he said.

Emily turned her head to look at her father again. His eyes were fixed on the road ahead, but somehow they were vacant.

"Hey, you think they'll serve good wine tonight?" Aaron asked, changing the subject.

Emily looked away from her father and back to her brother. "I don't think you should be overindulging yourself tonight."

"Trust me, I think what this family needs right now is a little overindulgence."

"Right," she said sarcastically.

"Have you ever really had wine?"

"No—not really. Well, just with communion."

"You've obviously never drunk enough to feel those happy kinds of feelings. Trust me; all your problems will melt away."

"Yeah, happy enough that you didn't get out of bed all day, so that I had to do all your chores—or happy enough to vomit all over the floor, so the house stunk for a whole month," she retorted.

"Well, I was feelin' good the night before."

"And the day after?"

"Hmm, not so good," he said with a slight chuckle. "Listen, don't worry too much. It'll all turn out for the best."

"I hope you're right, Aaron. I hope to God you're right."

"Don't worry, Em. I always am," he said confidently.

She laughed warmly at his joke. For the remainder of their journey into town, they talked of trivial matters: the weather, animals in the field, and distant childhood memories. Somehow, it had a way of breaking some of the tension that hung over the evening.

The church bells were ringing six o'clock when the family's wagon reached Seaton. They were late, and it would still take them a few minutes to travel through the slums to reach the Marsh estate. The streets were largely deserted. As they passed the cathedral, Emily could hear the melodic sounds of the pipe organ signaling the beginning of the evening services. Soon their wagon turned at one of the few brick streets. The street was narrow enough for only one wagon or coach. Fortunately, the street wasn't long enough to worry about more than one carriage using it at once.

The Marshes' hired hands opened the front gates, allowing them to pass through, and they traveled up the inclined drive to the front terrace.

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The site of the Marsh estate never failed to take Emily's breath away. It was a modern Garden of Eden confined behind a tall, thick brick wall. Everywhere lush trees and bushes were in the full bloom of a new spring. A willow tree towered over the west side of the mansion, and its long, wispy arms shielded the house from the sun's barbarous rays. The lawn was freshly cut and watered from a small stream that ran just behind the Marsh mansion.

David and Jonathan were relaxing on the terrace and drinking some iced tea.

Emily and Aaron hopped off the back of the wagon.

"Good evening, La Rouche family," David said.

"Good evening, David, Jonathan. We're glad to be here," her mother said, returning the greeting.

"Please excuse Andrea for not being here to greet you. She is busy with the help, getting everything ready for tonight's feast."

"It's okay. I understand," her mother said.

"James, are you feeling all right? You don't look so good," David asked empathetically.

"Please excuse my husband. He's coming down with a bug of some kind." She took her husband's arm. "Shall we go in?" she asked.

"Sure," David said. Her parents followed David inside, but Emily lingered with her brother on the terrace, taking in a final glimpse of the Marsh estate.

"Nice of you to dress up tonight," Jonathan said sarcastically to Aaron.

"Well, I debated between this and the towel I have, but I didn't want to run the risk that you'd see between my legs and get jealous," Aaron retorted.

"You son of a bitch! You're just lucky that—"

"You're lucky your father owns half this town, or you'd be some poor beggar selling his ass for a loaf of bread," Aaron retorted. He turned and intentionally bumped into Jonathan's shoulder as he went into the house.

"What the hell are you smiling at?" Jonathan demanded of her. She bit her lip to keep from laughing out loud and followed her brother into the house.

The luxury of the Marsh mansion didn't end with the verdant lawn. Exotic, luxurious furniture from all over the Dominion rested against the walls. A red velvet sofa built from cherrywood sat nestled by the door, while golden yellow chairs sat beside a bookshelf full of ancient texts. The cloth that lined the chairs seemed to be made out of burlap that covered layer after layer of stuffing. This was a piece of furniture that one could easily get lost in for days. The thing that struck her most about the furniture was its cleanliness. There was not a speck of dust anywhere, and Emily wondered whether any of it had ever been used. The walls were colored light beige, which radiantly reflected the dancing light from the crystal chandelier. Expensive art decorated many of the walls. Most of it had probably come from lands outside the Dominion. She didn't believe any of it could be produced and sold here.

One of the pieces Emily came across, entitled the *Mistress of Orleans*, clearly violated the Sixth Pillar of Faith for its offense to decency. The piece featured a young woman wearing nothing but a thin cloth over her stomach; her perfect breasts were exposed as she lay against a backdrop of an ancient, crumbling city.

Emily wandered down a long, wide hall to the gallery that showcased the finest artwork that Marsh owned. Intricate jade and ivory figurines decorated small tables,

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while paintings that were hundreds of years old lined the walls. Some of them had been damaged by centuries of dust and neglect. One such piece was a fragile painting that bore the image of a bald, aging man with a serious vacant glare. He was holding a pitchfork, and there was a shorter, worn woman standing by his side. The piece had been painted on a number of boards that were worn and warped and looked as if they had once been touched by fire. But the piece next to the burnt image was the one that caught her eye, because it looked as though it had been painted only a year ago. The portrait showed a human arm breaking through an egg that was itself a map of the world. She examined it closer, looking at its bright yellowed hues and half-tones, until a hand reached out and grabbed her shoulder.

Emily jumped and turned toward the person standing beside her. It was David. “Oh, Mr. Marsh; you startled me.” She placed her hand on her chest. “I’m sorry,” she said.

“Somehow, I thought you’d be back here. Please come. The photographer I hired has just arrived, and we need to be starting this evening.”

“Who did this painting? It’s absolutely amazing.”

David sighed impatiently. “That is a piece from Salvador Dali. It’s over four hundred years old.”

“Where’d you get it?”

“I have my connections. This is, as far as I know, an original print. It was found in the ruins of New York City, sealed in a protective vault. The story that I was told was that it took over two days to retrieve it.”

Emily stared at the painting a moment longer.

David continued, “You know, I have ancient books that show hundreds of works such as this one. I often wonder what has happened to them, and I think that if it hadn’t been for me, everything you see here might have been lost forever.”

“How much did it cost you?”

“A little more than five hundred dollars.” He gazed reverently into the painting’s elegant curves. “Come, now. We can discuss art later, if you would like. For now though, it is getting late, and we need to begin this evening,” he said. He placed his hand on Emily’s back and ushered her toward the sitting room.

When Emily reached the sitting room, Andrea stood from her chair and greeted her with a motherly hug. Emily glanced over to her mother, who simply looked away. Andrea broke her embrace. “You look very beautiful tonight,” she said. A quick smile flashed and fell from her face.

“Thanks,” Emily said. No matter how hard she tried, Emily could not match Andrea’s glamorous beauty. She was deeply envious of Andrea’s long silk evening gown. Something like that would cost her family three months’ worth of food. It was absurdly expensive, but nevertheless Emily still wanted to wear it—not to mention the fine powder Andrea covered her face with, the rouge paint on her lips, and her perfectly straight brunette hair. Emily felt that Andrea was the apex of feminine beauty and that she was just a rag doll by comparison. Emily slid away from Andrea and took a chair next to her mother, feeling even more self-conscious.

“La Rouche family, I thank you for coming here tonight, taking time out of your busy lives so that we can celebrate the coming union of our families,” David said. “To

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commemorate the first of what I hope to be many happy occasions, I've hired my friend Owen, here, to take our photographs."

"Who's the young boy you have with you, Owen?" Julia asked politely.

"My name's Douglas, ma'am," he replied.

"Why don't you set up the tripod, while I prepare the film," Owen said to Douglas.

Emily watched impatiently as Owen berated his apprentice while he set the camera up, focused the lens, and set up the poses. The first photograph Owen took was of the two families together. He seated the men in a row with the women standing behind them, their hands on the shoulders of their spouses or fiancé.

Emily did her best to smile, but it was so difficult to stand next to the Marsh family. It stressed her to see how ragged her family was by comparison. Each one of the Marshes was a work of art. David's golden beard was trimmed, and his suit fit him to perfection. Jonathan was almost an exact duplicate of his father, except he had his mother's brown hair. Jonathan probably worked in that suit, and yet, unlike her brother, he could easily wear it more than ten hours a day and still command the respect of the community.

The final pose was a solo photo of Emily and Jonathan together, standing arm and arm. As she was standing with him, the culmination of nine years of worry and fear filled her. Her face flushed red, and tears clouded behind her eyes. How could she be this close to marrying this man? She worried for her safety if she married him, but she worried what would happen to her family's way of life if they broke the contract.

Owen at last took his final photo, and both Emily and Jonathan broke their embrace as quickly as they could and took their respective places with their parents.

"Thank you, Owen. We'll see you in three weeks," David said.

"Oh, right," Owen said distantly, "What time?"

"The service starts at five in the evening, so we'll shoot the photos afterward."

Owen packed up the last of his equipment. "See you then," he said.

"And now, if everyone will follow me into the dining hall, a special feast awaits you!" David said.

Emily followed David back through the hallway, past the entrance, and through the drawing room. When she walked through the double oak doors, inviting aromas fully engulfed her senses. Succulent roast beef and chicken, along with steamed potatoes, corn, green beans, yams, fresh breads and cheeses, and several kinds of sweet cake were prepared and waiting for them.

"James, Julia, and Aaron, your places have been set for you over here," David motioned to the left of the table. "Emily, please join Andrea and Jonathan on this side," David said.

Emily said nothing as one of the Marshes' servants gracefully pulled back her chair so she could be seated.

David took his seat at the head of the table. When everyone was seated, he extended his hands toward James and Andrea. "Shall we say grace?" he asked.

Emily reluctantly extended her hand to Jonathan, and as soon as he latched onto it, David began his prayer. "Dear Lord, we thank you for bringing our two families together tonight, and we thank you for our coming union. We thank thee dearly for the

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boundless food that you have provided us with. Bless us all, and keep us in good spirits and health. Amen.”

As soon as David had finished, Emily quickly retracted her hand and filled her plate. With the exception of polite exchanges and gestures, conversation was intentionally kept to a minimum until the meal was finished.

David had provided a fine aged red wine for the dinner. With each drink, Emily found that Aaron’s words were coming true. She felt happier and less reclusive, and for a moment she was able to forget all about Jonathan and the impending wedding. After another glass, she had trouble focusing her vision, and her face felt numb. She wobbled in her seat, and more than anything she wanted to lay her suddenly heavy head down to rest.

“Everyone, at this time I’d like to say a few words, if I may.” David stood from his chair and raised his glass. “I want to wish my son and his bride-to-be the best in life, as long as they live, and I wish that their union will produce children for—”

A delayed laugh and a series of small choking coughs came from Aaron. Emily smiled at his faux pas, but everyone else sat frozen in an awkward silence.

“Sorry,” Aaron said half-heartedly.

David regained his composure and tried to finish his toast. “Anyway, here is to you, Jonathan and Emily. We wish you all the happiness in your lives together.”

As Emily raised her glass to Marsh’s toast, it slipped from her fingers, spilling red wine all over Jonathan in the process. His bleached white shirt was covered in a blood-red hue, and his brown suit jacket and pants would be ruined from the setting stain. After she realized her blunder, she did the only thing she could think of—she laughed. Once she started, it was almost impossible for her to stop. She giggled inanely in her drunken haze.

“Jonathan, why don’t you take Emily back to the sitting room and then go change into some fresh clothes?” David said, his voice hinting at a burgeoning annoyance.

Jonathan said nothing as he rose from his chair. He grabbed Emily’s bicep and pulled her from her place. Since he was almost a foot taller, he was able to guide her effortlessly from the room. A cold silence was left in his wake.

* * *

David watched with an agitated impatience as Jonathan led Emily out of the dining room.

Emily was acting like such a buffoon—and the way she mocked Jonathan! David sighed. *I can’t believe these people were the best I could find. The price I pay to insure Jonathan’s future*, David thought.

“David, may I see you for a minute, privately, please?” Andrea said, breaking the silence.

David thrust his glass down, splashing red wine onto the table. He left the dining hall with Andrea, and together they walked to the kitchen. As soon as they entered, David motioned to his servants to begin cleaning up the remains of supper, leaving them behind in peace.

“David, what’re you thinking? I’ve seen that look before, and usually it means that you’re about to lose your temper.”

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“I am just about fed up with it! First, Aaron interrupts me, and then Emily makes a fool of herself, and then she mocks Jonathan in front of everyone.”

She placed her hands on his chest. “You’re too much of a perfectionist. Nothing can go your way all the time. Besides, this was probably Emily’s first time drinking wine. You know they don’t have such luxuries. Besides, it is not as if we were entertaining the bishop.”

“Perhaps, but—

“She’s going to be our daughter-in-law. You’ll have to show her and her family some patience and remember that they don’t have the luxury or class that we have been blessed with.”

David looked into Andrea’s eyes and relaxed. “I suppose you’re right, but still ...”

“Don’t worry about it. I’m sure once Jonathan gets changed and Emily’s had a chance to rest, the remainder of the night will go smoothly.”

David looked up past his wife as he felt his anger subside. “All right, fine. Let’s go back and take the others to the sitting room and see if we can get this evening into some sort of order.”

* * *

Emily lumbered along with Jonathan as he pulled her to the sitting room. She was dizzy, and each time Jonathan tugged her, her stomach churned. When they reached the sitting room, Emily stumbled into Jonathan’s chest. He pushed her away but held onto her wrist with a tight grip.

“Am I amusing to you, Emily? Huh? Am I a joke to you?” he shouted.

“Aw, calm down, Jon, huh? It was jush a little wine, huh? Besides, you got more of ’em,” Emily said, unable to control the slur in her speech.

“Listen to me, you little arrogant cockroach! You think you can do whatever you want in your life—well, think again! I’m not in love with the idea of marrying you, but if I have to go through with it, there are some things you are going to have to learn pretty damn fast. If you don’t learn your place and show me some respect, so help me God, I will show you what I am capable of doing—and I promise you it won’t be pleasant!”

“Oh, go da hell! I ain’t gonna marry you!”

“No? Good—that’s fine with me! Why don’t you tell my father all about it and then see how you and your family like living in a dark prison cell with the drunkards and whores—but I’m sure you’ll feel right at home there.”

“You bastar—” her voice gave way to a slight scream of pain as Jonathan twisted her wrist. She tried to pull away, and at the same time Jonathan used his weight to push her down. She slipped and smacked her head against a very solid wooden chair. A sharp electric pain radiated through her skull, and a wave of nausea surged through her body as the world fell away into blackness.

* * *

Aaron hurried through the Marshes’ gallery as he made his way toward the sitting room. He had left the table the instant David and Andrea retreated to have their private

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conversation. He didn't trust Jonathan. He and Emily had once been on the receiving end of one of Jonathan's temper tantrums when they were children. Jonathan hadn't changed much in the intervening years. He was still just a child wearing a man's three-piece suit. Aaron could hear Jonathan's raised voice, and as he rounded the corner, he watched Emily fall and hit her head against a chair.

Without thinking and without words, Aaron charged at Jonathan and drove his fist into the back of his head, knocking him to the ground. Dazed, Jonathan rolled onto his back and stared up at Aaron. "You son of a bitch!" Jonathan exclaimed.

As soon as Jonathan was back on his feet, Aaron landed another roundhouse punch to Jonathan's mouth, knocking him down again.

Aaron shook his right hand as a dull ache spread through his knuckles. He heard the creak of the wooden floorboards and looked back to see his parents, followed by David and Andrea. Aaron closed his eyes. He knew that what was about to follow was going to be unpleasant.

His mother ran over to Emily, but everyone else remained frozen, as they tried to take in the scene before them.

"Just what in God's name is going on in here?" David bellowed at last.

Jonathan struggled to pull himself up from the floor and wiped the blood from his mouth. "He attacked me, Father, and I was knocked over into Emily, and she fell down and struck her head on that chair."

David turned an accusatory eye upon Aaron.

"He's lying. He knocked Emily into—"

"Enough! That's it! I want you all out of my house, at once. I've grown tired of your antics tonight."

Without a word, Aaron helped his mother pick up Emily and carry her outside to the wagon. As he laid her in the back of the wagon, his mother examined Emily in greater detail.

"Is she all right?" Aaron asked.

Julia shook her head. "I don't know. She must have hit her head really hard."

A fresh wave of anger spread through Aaron as he thought of the injustice that had transpired by Jonathan's hand. He turned to join his father, who was still on the terrace with Marsh. As he approached, David looked directly at Aaron and then back to his father.

"James, our families are about to become one soon, but that doesn't mean I won't make your life miserable if one of your brood displeases me, so a word to the wise—keep your children under control." With that, Marsh slammed the door.

"What about your miserable bastard son?" Aaron called back.

His father turned and stared at him. "Do ya ever think, boy?"

"What the hell didja want me to do?"

His father said nothing, just made his way back to the wagon.

Aaron shook his head and followed his father. "So'd you just want me to stand there while that son of a bitch beat my sister?"

His father faced him. "For nine years now, we've never had the leverage to barter our way out of this contract. If David had seen with his own eyes his son beating Emily, he might've seen for himself the mistake he has made, and maybe we coulda at last been

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free. But that's all gone—all 'cause you had to kick his ass," he said, his voice straining not to break into a yell.

"I'm not going to apologize for giving that bastard the beating he rightfully deserved!"

His father rubbed his bloodshot eyes and ran his hands back through his thinning black hair. He exhaled deeply and placed his hand on his son's shoulder. "I'm sorry. I know why you did what you did, but this coulda blown our only chance to get out of this arrangement."

"So, what're we gonna do now?" Aaron asked.

"I don't know, but we don't got much time left to figure it out." His father climbed up on the wagon.

Aaron kicked the rear wagon wheel. He refused to take the blame for what had happened tonight. He climbed into the back of the wagon and sat next to Emily. There were only twenty-one days left before the wedding. He looked at his sister, lying hurt and unconscious, and for the first time he seriously doubted his father's ability to save Emily from the whims and the wrath of David Marsh.

Chapter II

Emily felt as though she were falling through time, and before she realized it, the day of the wedding had arrived. She awoke in a daze, with fatigue weighing down heavily upon her. Lately, she had had trouble getting enough sleep, each night culminating with only a few restless hours.

She felt disembodied. She could see her actions but did not feel a part of them. She got up from bed, dressed, and made her way to the family eating room where her mother had prepared lunch. She felt like a prisoner eating her last meal before being led away to the gallows. With her fork, she twisted and turned her lunch of fried eggs and cornmeal into an unidentifiable yellow and white mash. She was looking for the strength to make it through the day.

She didn't want to marry Jonathan, and she knew he didn't want to marry her. Her parents didn't want her to marry him. So what was the point? After today she'd be trapped in an unloving, abusive, and impotent marriage—a prisoner of her husband's design, trapped in their home, only leaving for social functions and dinner with his parents. She'd almost never see her family. Jonathan and Aaron hated each other. Jonathan knew that seeing her family would bring her great joy, and that was something that he simply wouldn't allow.

It was nearly impossible to get a divorce, except in cases of lechery or homosexuality. But even with a marriage dissolved for those reasons, the unfaithful spouse was punished, sometimes severely, for violating the sacred covenant of marriage. Jonathan would certainly look outside the marriage bed to satisfy his carnal lust. What was worse, there was nothing she could do to make the authorities believe he'd been unfaithful to her. It would be his word against hers, and they would believe his. Then there was that other thing—

"Emily," her mother said, interrupting her train of thought. "Aren't you hungry, hon?"

Emily closed her eyes and tried to make time stop. She stood up from the table, hurried to her room, and shut the door. She slid to the floor and buried her head into her hands. This was it, the last day of the rest of her life. Whatever happened after this didn't matter. She would live and grow old in a perpetual state of unhappiness. For years she had known this day would come, but it had always seemed like a speck in the distant future. Somehow, time had caught up with her. It had stalked her, toyed with her, waited for the right move, and finally it had stolen her life.

She desperately wanted to run away. But they'd find her. Anyway, where could she go? She hoped that when she got to the church the wedding would be called off, because Jonathan had died in a fire or by a gunshot wound or had simply drunk himself to death. Anything would do; she thought of a hundred different ways in which it could happen. But in her heart she knew it wouldn't happen, and even though she detested Jonathan, it was wrong to wish for the death of another person—even if he was a worm!

Even if Jonathan would be tolerable to live with, sixteen was far too young to be getting married. She had seen the effects of marriage on young girls; they slowly turned to old crones with the burden of raising children and keeping house. It was the same for almost all women whose lives were designated exclusively to domesticity. She knew that

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it wasn't always like this, but she found it hard to believe the expectations society constantly reiterated for her.

Before long, her mother opened the door just far enough to stick her head through. "Emily, it's time," she said in a somber tone.

Emily pulled herself up and followed her family to the wagon outside. Throughout the trip to Seaton, she remained silent. The trip progressed slowly, but it led inexorably toward the event she dreaded. After they had finished their lunch, they reached the city limits of Seaton. When they came to the cathedral, her mother escorted her to the rear of building.

Emily stopped in front of the door to the bridal suite. "Ma, could you give me a few minutes alone, please?" she asked.

Her mother nodded, "Okay. Let me know when you're ready."

Emily closed the door and looked at the small, stuffy room around her. There was only one small window opened for ventilation, and the gray, drab bricks trapped almost enough heat to roast her. She sat down at a small desk and stared at her reflection in a mirror. She knew she only had a few minutes of precious freedom left, but she wanted nothing more than to be left alone. Her eyes wandered away from the mirror and fixed on the hanging wall clock. She watched the hands on the clock tick slowly toward five. She now had a scarce half hour left. She couldn't waste any more time. She had to get ready.

As she stood, another wave of fatigue washed over her. She removed her faded black dress and stood wearing nothing but a tattered, dusty cotton slip. She looked over her wedding gown. Despite her feelings about the marriage, she had to admit the dress was stunning, and it took her breath away to think that she could ever wear something so beautiful. The gown was as white and pure as porcelain. The corset was made of sleek, shiny satin. A line of finely tailored velvet roses crossed the breast and ran back from the left arm to the right side, and a short white lace strap would just barely cover her shoulders.

The skirt itself was actually three skirts. The innermost layer was a made from a delicate dark purple lace that would be almost completely obscured from view, except for a small length just above her ankles that would jut out when the outer skirt cut away. The second skirt was lavender and made from imported silk. The outer skirt was made of a thick bridal satin with a white lace trim and was garnished with small, delicate lavender bows. Along the back, the satin clustered together in a small, tight bustle.

It was time to put it on. Emily opened the door a crack and called for her mother. Her mother entered the room and shut the door behind her. "Give me a second to get this corset on," Emily said. Her mother turned around, and Emily removed the dusty slip from her body. She pulled on delicate lace pantalets and then stepped into the corset and pulled it around her chest. "Okay," she said, beckoning her mother to help her tie the corset stays behind her. She had never worn a corset before, and the tightness she felt in her chest made it hard to breathe. The corset slimmed her waist, giving her straight figure subtle, gentle curves. Around her waist, Julia tied a small horsehair tournure so that it rested gently on her bottom. The pillow would give prominence to her bustle and add even greater emphasis to her new curves. Her mother picked up a small package from the desk. She opened it to reveal the most beautiful treasure Emily had ever seen—delicate white silk stockings. She reached out and carefully lifted them from their box. Her eyes swam with hot tears. She looked through her veil to meet her mother's gaze. Emily knew

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her parents had gone to great lengths to procure the stockings for her. She felt her heart breaking as she slid the stockings up her legs. Would anyone ever show her this kind of loving gesture again?

Once the undergarments were in place and the corset was tied, she stepped into the skirts one by one and slowly pulled them over her small, boyish hips. As quickly as she could, her mother fastened the skirts together by the series of hooks that were sewn into the fabric. The pieces of her bridal outfit had come together.

“Come, dear. We still need to fix your hair,” her mother said.

Emily looked back into the mirror and noticed how disheveled her hair was. Its brownish-red strands were still tangled from yesterday’s sleep. She sat back in the chair, and her mother brushed through the snarls and tangles.

Her mother was midway through brushing her hair, when she suddenly stopped. Emily turned around and looked at mother. She could see her mother’s hands were shaking.

“What’s the matter?” Emily asked.

“It’s nothing, it just—” Her mother looked away from Emily, and she wiped a tear from her eye. “It’s just that I realized this might be the last time I get to brush through your hair.”

The last remnants of Emily’s strength were shattered. She threw her arms around her mother and cried. “Oh, Ma—don’t let him take me away from you. I don’t want to go!”

“I know, baby, I know. I don’t want you to go.” Her mother held Emily tight. “You know the Lord says he’ll never give us more than we can handle. I still believe that. I know this day is so hard for you to bear. But always know that, even though we may be apart, you’ll always be in our hearts and minds. I think that if you can take that with you, it will give you strength to make it through the toughest of days,” she said.

Emily didn’t believe what her mother said. They’d be separated, miles apart, but she might as well be on the moon. She knew she’d rarely get to see her family. That, coupled with being married to someone who despised her, was far more than she could ever bear. She closed her eyes and flushed those thoughts from her mind, focusing instead on her mother’s tender embrace. *The love of a mother*, she thought. *In all the world, there is no equal.*

The pipe organ began to play. The service had begun. Her mother broke their embrace and helped Emily stand up. “It’s time to go,” her mother said.

Emily said nothing. She tried to keep her mind blank; she knew that if she thought about the wedding she wouldn’t be able to go through with it. She stepped into her shoes, one-inch-heel sandals with polished white trim covering her toes. She stepped carefully into her dress and made her way back to the cathedral’s narthex as quickly as she could. She looked through the glass windows that opened into the nave to find that the pews were surprisingly full. The Marshes had only a few relatives, and the rest of her family lived more than two hundred miles south of Seaton. The rest of the attendees were regular townsfolk who apparently came to weddings to relieve the monotony of their everyday lives.

Jonathan and David walked up and took their respective positions on the stairs of the chancel. Abruptly, the music changed, calling her to take her place by Jonathan’s side. Emily swallowed hard as she reached for the bouquet that had been left for her.

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“You ready?” her father asked.

Emily nodded her head. She took her father’s arm, and together they began the long march down the aisle. With each step she took, she felt herself becoming hollow; a warm, tingling sensation flushed through her arms and face as she let her body fall into a state of automation. She could see the townsfolk looking at her as she proceeded down the aisle. Their stares tore straight through her as she moved closer and closer to Jonathan. She pulled closer to her father. Throughout her life she’d never been too close to him, but now she only longed for him to hold her and make all these people disappear. She could see them scrutinizing her every move. Her every action was being recorded in their brains as a source for something to gossip about later. She could see them whispering to one another. Were they criticizing her? Was she too plain or ordinary? Easy or prudish? None of it could be good.

When she had reached the final row of pews, her father embraced her gently and whispered, “I’m so sorry,” in her ear. They broke their embrace, and Emily ascended the chancel stairs to Jonathan’s waiting hand.

Jonathan took her hand and pulled her close. “Do not embarrass me today,” he whispered haughtily. It was an impossible order.

They walked together a few steps and then stood and faced Pastor Gertz. Emily looked over to David, who was smiling, blissfully unaware of how much she and Jonathan hated one another. The organ music had reached its climactic conclusion and gave way to the sounds of a hundred people settling into their seats.

Pastor Gertz cleared his throat. “In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. We are gathered here today in the sight of God to witness the union of this man and this woman in the holy bonds of matrimony. Our Lord Himself commanded marriage in the Gospel of Matthew, saying that ‘in the beginning the Father made them male and female, for this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united with his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.’ It is this sacred institution that is well pleasing in the sight of God, for which you are joined today, and for the eventual procreation and rearing of children.”

“Emily, submit to Jonathan, for it is commanded in the book of Ephesians, chapter five, verses twenty-two through twenty-four, that wives submit to their husbands as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, as Christ is the head of the Church, his body, of which he is the Savior. As the Church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything.”

So there it is—Jonathan’s permission to do whatever he wants with me, Emily thought.

“Jonathan, love Emily as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water and through the Word.”

As if Jonathan is capable of loving anyone but himself, she thought. A dull ache throbbed in the back of her head. Emily closed her eyes. She hadn’t really slept in two days, and it took all of her remaining energy to keep from falling flat on the floor. She began to daydream that she was back in her own bed, safe and sound, locked away from all the evils of the world, sleeping an uninterrupted and continuous sleep like the kind on a mild winter’s morning when there is no reason to arise, but one can stay warm and lose oneself in the dreams of childhood. She felt warm and comfortably numb at the thought,

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but as soon as it had entered her mind, the ongoing nightmare that consumed her life pulled her back into the real world.

“The choir will now sing as the unity candle is lit,” Pastor Gertz said.

Emily followed Jonathan to the candle as the soprano melodies of the choir rang in her ears. Together, Emily and Jonathan attempted to light the unity candle that symbolized their lives. As they pulled their flames back, the unity candle burned with a low spark, only to be snuffed out by a faint breeze that blew through one of the cathedral’s open windows. Jonathan and Emily tried lighting the candle one more time, only to see it dimly flicker before sputtering out. Even the candle knew they should not be married. The choir had concluded its melody, and Pastor Gertz motioned for them to return to him.

When they were once again standing in front of Gertz, Emily held loosely onto Jonathan’s arm, and she felt ill. She knew what was coming. Gertz looked to David and asked, “Do you have the ring?”

David reached into his pocket, produced the ring, and handed it to Jonathan. Emily and Jonathan turned to face one another.

“Jonathan, place the ring on her finger and repeat after me. ‘I, Jonathan Thomas ...’”

“I, Jonathan Thomas ...” he repeated, his voice a hushed monotone.

“In the presence of God and these witnesses ...”

“In the presence of God and these witnesses ...”

“Take you, Emily Anne, to be my wife ...”

Emily watched with quiet mortification as Jonathan slid the ring around her finger. The ring was fine sterling silver, with a diamond the size of pea. It was truly a precious gem, brilliant and beautiful in every way, but it didn’t matter to her. It was nothing more than a symbol of bondage—a chain that would forever bind her to her new husband.

“Emily, repeat after me, ‘I, Emily Anne ...’”

“I, Emily Anne ...” she said automatically, her head downcast and her voice barely escaping her.

“In the presence of God and these witnesses ...”

Emily repeated Gertz’s hollow sentences. She reached for Jonathan’s ring that rested in his open Bible. Her hands were shaking so violently that she thought she’d drop his ring on the floor. Somehow, she was able to hold onto it long enough to place it over the tip of Jonathan’s finger. Emily pulled her hand back as if his hand were a rat waiting to bite her. Jonathan refrained from looking at her but instead finished the job for her and slid the ring down the rest his finger.

She faced Gertz again, dreading what was coming next.

“Jonathan Thomas Marsh, do you pledge to keep your promise toward your bride from now and this day forward? If so, say ‘I do.’”

Jonathan cleared his throat and quickly said, “I do.”

“Emily Anne La Rouche, do you pledge to keep your promise toward your husband from now and this day forward? If so, say ‘I do.’”

“I do,” she whispered.

“Then, with the power vested in me by God and the Church of Divinity and Salvation, I hereby pronounce you man and wife. You may kiss the bride.”

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Emily turned toward Jonathan and looked up into his eyes; they were cold and callous as a copperhead's. From this moment on, she'd be his to do with as he pleased. She felt like running, but her legs were made of stone. She felt her face coming closer to his, the acrid bitterness and foulness of his breath hinting at too much whiskey and bourbon the night before. Their lips pressed together, and for a brief second they became one. The kiss was hollow, empty, and meaningless; their embrace was only for show. As they parted, Emily could still taste him. She wanted to wipe the trace of him clean from her lips, but she held still as she felt the cold, hard stares of two hundred eyes looking through her, waiting for a vague sign of discontent. She bit her lip instead. Everything that she was had disappeared in an instant, and as the organ music once again began to blare, she took her first steps toward destiny.

Jonathan and Emily walked together down the aisle toward the narthex to greet the wedding attendees. The townspeople stopped by to shake the couple's hands or offer a hearty congratulation before walking out into the balmy afternoon. Occasionally, an old man would try to pose as a gentleman by kissing Emily's hand, or one of the many tearful hags would hug her and comment about how beautiful she looked as they passed by. Emily didn't want to be touched; she wanted to be alone and, ideally, far, far away. At last, her parents appeared, with David and Andrea Marsh. Her mother hugged her tightly and then gave Jonathan a half-hearted congratulation.

David once again interceded, "Emily, come; let's get a picture of the two of you by the altar."

Emily followed the Marsh family through the nave and back to the altar, where Owen and Douglas waited with the camera.

Emily took her place next to Jonathan and did her best to plaster on a smile, while Owen shouted at Douglas about how incompetent he was at nearly everything. After they had stood in line for nearly twenty minutes, Owen finally took his pictures.

Emily and Jonathan then joined Pastor Gertz in his office for the signing of the marriage certificate. Emily signed her name last. She wrote cleanly and plainly, and she noticed that her signature looked elegant and dignified next to her husband's blocky chicken scratch. As the paper was folded and given to Jonathan, it occurred to her that it was the last time La Rouche would grace her name. Now she had a swamp attached to it.

An expensive coach sat waiting for them at the foot of the cathedral steps. It seemed like something out of a fairytale. The coach's exterior was so brilliantly white it was as if no dirt had ever touched it. Painted gold branches trimmed the coach's bulbous pear-shaped body, and the seats inside were the color of rich red wine. Two majestic Arabian horses sat waiting for the chauffeur to whisk his passengers to their destination. Emily and Jonathan got into the coach together, but as soon as it was out of view of his family, Jonathan moved to the seat facing Emily. Neither one spoke to the other, and at that moment, they at last had something in common: each wanted to be far away from the other.

When the coach reached the Marsh estate, Emily and Jonathan were escorted from to the sitting room to wait for the dinner guests. A wave of cold dread flushed over Emily as she walked through the doorway and into the sitting room where Jonathan had pushed her into a chair. As she sat down, the dull ache intensified and spread from the back of her head through to her temples. Emily let out a moan and massaged her head with her fingers. The dinner guests were slow, and Emily was forced to sit with Jonathan

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through an unbearable silence. After a time, David arrived with Andrea and the rest of his family. Emily's parents were the last to arrive.

"Where's Aaron?" Emily asked her mother.

"He didn't think he could come, after the last time. He said he would catch up with us tomorrow." Emily was dismayed at the comment. In this desperate hour, she gained strength through her family, but now one of them was missing. She was angry that he was not here. She didn't want to be here, but she was. She was beginning to feel increasingly abandoned. "If he doesn't want to be here, that's fine with me. I don't need him," Emily said. She followed the rest of the Marsh family back to the dining hall.

During supper it wasn't difficult to see the segregation between the families. The Marsh family sat to the right of Jonathan and enjoyed the abundance of food prepared for them. They laughed, they drank, and they ate. David's brother, Edward, regaled the rest of the Marsh family with how he had been too drunk to say 'I do' at his wedding. Meanwhile, David's sister, Gabriella, tried constantly to keep her six unruly children in place at the table.

The La Rouche family, by contrast, said very little. Emily didn't eat but kept drinking the wine that was brought to her. Unlike her last experience with wine, she didn't feel happy; instead she fell into a deeper and deeper state of depression. The more she drank, the more her soul felt sick. She felt numb, yet the throbbing in her head intensified. She grabbed her goblet and took another deep drink.

Time became meaningless. Soon the evening gave way to night, and people began to disappear. Reality turned to water as shapes melted into one another, and soon the whole room was spinning on an axis of its own. She felt warm, her breathing slowed, and she felt as if she might fall into the realm of dreams.

Before long, the feast was finished, and it was time to say goodbye to her parents. Emily and Jonathan would not be staying the night at his family's estate. Instead, David had booked them a suite at the best hotel in town. Her parents stood silently by her and once again apologized with their eyes, while their bodies quietly sang a requiem for the long chapter of their lives that was coming to an end. They held each other in a deep embrace for what felt like the last time. Emily didn't want to let go, and she held fast to her mother for as long as she could. It wasn't right! It wasn't fair! She was being ripped away from the only people she loved. A tear escaped her eye as she parted from her parents. The final grain of sand had fallen through the hourglass. It was time to face fate.

The chauffeur assisted Emily back to the coach, while Jonathan said his good-byes to his parents. At last he climbed into the coach and sat across from Emily. Emily looked at her new husband. There was lust in his eyes, deep and meaningless. There was no love between them. There never would be, but that didn't mean he wouldn't use her body for his pleasure. She was repulsed by the very thought of being with him. But there was nothing she could do to stop it. She let her head fall into her left hand as she prayed to sleep through the coming nightmare.

The coach stopped at the Piedmont Hotel. While Jonathan secured the room key, Emily collapsed into a chair. She closed her eyes and drifted off to sleep. A moment later, she was looking back up into Jonathan's face. She felt aloft, weightless and detached. Jonathan ascended the stairs to their room one by one, with her in his arms. She closed her eyes. There was no point in fighting it any longer. She was his.

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They entered the room and were greeted by absolute darkness. He laid Emily on the bed and then lit a nearby oil lamp. Jonathan quickly stripped off his clothes and stood in front of Emily.

Emily averted her eyes from him and fixed them instead on a painting that hung on the wall. She felt Jonathan slide up to her as he started to kiss her along her neck and cheeks. Jonathan ran his hand along the side of her head and turned her so that she was looking up at him.

“Don’t worry. It won’t hurt,” he said. He bent down and kissed her.

She felt his tongue on her lips. She closed her mouth as tightly as she could and tried to pull away from him, but she could not sink any deeper into the mattress.

Jonathan sat up and began to unhook the skirts of her gown. One by one, each hook was undone, and the skirt was free. Jonathan pulled the skirts from her body and flung them aside. He moved into her body and suckled the side of her neck. His hands were running up and down her legs.

Her heartbeat echoed within her ears. It pulsed to the ache in her head, which intensified and felt like fingernails ripping out her eyes from the inside. She tried to focus on something other than what Jonathan was doing to her. She focused again at the painting on the wall; she stared at the lush vegetation and the pleasant blue sky.

Jonathan began to slowly thrust himself between her thighs. He held her down at her shoulders as he positioned himself on top of her. He cupped her breasts that were still bound in the corset, and he slowly moved his hands to undo the snaps between her legs that held the garment together.

Emily closed her eyes. She tried to wish the nightmare away. As he undid the snaps, she felt as if she would explode; her skin burned as if it were on fire as his fingers danced between her thighs. Finally, with the last snap undone, Jonathan had his prize and he moved in to claim it. As their bodies joined in unison, his scream pierced through the muggy night. Emily looked up at Jonathan. He quickly jumped away from her. His face reflected shock and surprise.

“You’re a ... you’re not a ... Oh my God,” Jonathan said. He held his hand over his mouth as if he might be sick.

After all these years, her secret had at last been uncovered.

Darkness fell over Emily. Fear consumed her heart, and she felt the world spinning around her. The pain pulsed through her consciousness, scattering her into a million pieces. She couldn’t breathe, and her body shook violently as she struggled to open her eyes. At last the nightmare released her, and as her eyes opened, a blinding light shot through her pupils. Her head throbbed and there was no escaping the pain. She wrapped her arms around her head and let out a loud moan.

“Is she all right?” she heard her father say.

“She doesn’t look too good, I’m afraid she might have a concussion.” her mother replied. “Emily can you hear me? Emily?”

Emily looked at her mother and exhaled. The wedding had all been a dream! As she faded back into unconsciousness, she hoped with all her being that it would never become a reality!

Chapter III

Julia ran her fingers through Emily's soft hair and listened to her daughter's faint breathing. She could only construe the events that had taken place tonight at the Marshes dinner party as a bad omen for the future. She drew in a deep breath and sent up a silent prayer to the Almighty, asking Him to watch over her family through the coming days. After all her family had been through, they were going to need as much help as possible when David Marsh found out that Emily would not be marrying Jonathan. It wasn't an absence of love or the fact that Jonathan had assaulted Emily that was going to annul the marriage contract, but something much more fundamental. Emily was really a boy.

It was a secret the family had spent years hiding. They had even moved from their farm by the small town of New Antioch in the Augustine Parish to keep her safe. Julia remembered the turbulent events that had begun over sixteen years ago. She remembered vividly how much James had complained about the weather and the prospects of a mediocre harvest. She had had her hands full with the children. Sarah, three years old, had been a handful, as she was walking everywhere and had even nearly gotten lost outside while Julia was attending to Aaron's needs. Aaron, who had been just over nine months old at the time, was teething, and he fussed constantly.

When the fall harvest came, all of James's worries were realized when he was only able to make a little less than what he had the previous year. The day he came back from town, James complained about everything: the lousy weather, the shoddy equipment, and the health of his animals. By then, she had suspected that she was pregnant. It had been over eight weeks since she had bled. She had fierce cravings for eggs, and she was becoming highly irritable, things that had happened only when she had been pregnant with Sarah and Aaron.

It had been a cold night in late October when she finally decided to tell James. They were lying in bed, trying to keep warm, as the rain and wind battered their small home. Aaron was sound asleep in the bassinet, and the sounds of his soft breathing filtered into her ears.

She placed her hand on her husband's shoulder, "James," she whispered.

"Hmm."

"I think ... I think I might be pregnant again." She had always been reluctant to tell him of a new pregnancy, not because he would be unhappy or upset, but because her first pregnancy had ended with a miscarriage, and she didn't want to worry him.

"Oh," was James's disheartening response.

Silence filled the room as he absorbed the news.

"Are you okay?" Julia asked.

James was silent for a moment longer. "I don't know. I'm worried. I always hoped that after Aaron we wouldn't have any more kids. I worry that I won't be able to keep us fed, 'specially if we have another poor harvest. Worse still, I've heard stories 'bout other farmers who've had their crops burned and livestock killed, just so the landowners in New Antioch can bankrupt 'em and take their land. If we can't make enough money, how'll we back on our feet if something bad happens?"

Julia rolled away, "I know. I didn't wanna burden you while you were harvesting, but I thought you should know."

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He rolled over and put his arm around her waist. "I mean, I'm happy. I just don't want anything to happen where we might have to give up our land."

"I guess we'll just have to trust in each other and in God to make sure that everything will work out," she said.

But as Julia's belly grew, so did her husband's worry. By the time she could feel the baby kicking, the bitter cold winter choked the land and several of the farm's animals died from exposure. That winter also came without the vital life-giving snows that would moisten the soil for the next planting season. There were even times that James would complain out loud that he was going to have to sell the land just to keep the family fed.

The springtime was filled with anxiety for Julia. Throughout the last trimester of her pregnancy, she had experienced a number of false labors, and her younger sisters briefly moved into the cramped farmhouse to help watch the children and comfort Julia while she rested.

After a false labor, Julia finally had the real thing the afternoon of May 1, 329, but the baby kept her waiting for a grueling thirteen hours.

"It's a boy!" Julia's sister Maria exclaimed. Her sister's declaration caught Julia by surprise. Through all her pregnancies, she had always had an intuition as to whether she was having a boy or a girl, and with both Sarah and Aaron she had been right. She had been so sure that she was having a girl with this pregnancy that she hadn't even thought of a boy's name for the baby. But, as her sister handed him to her, she couldn't help but notice a slight resemblance between him and her uncle Erik, so she named the baby Erik Richard La Rouche after him.

The moment she handed Erik over to James, he seemed transformed. The dour look of worry that had overcome him during her pregnancy disappeared as he laughed and smiled with his newborn son. On that day, it had seemed as if God smiled on her family. They had three healthy, beautiful children. Then the weather soon changed for the better, and that fall James reaped one of the best harvests of his entire life.

* * *

Erik's first few years of life were peaceful, but as he grew, so did a vast feeling of disconnection within him. He didn't feel as if he fit in with the world around him. The feeling was there every morning when he woke up and it persisted in his dreams. He had no interest in wrestling and playing with Aaron. He cried whenever his clothes got dirty, and he was always particular about keeping his hands clean. Aaron tried to get him interested in the things he liked, but Erik would often feign interest or do something completely different. When they went out to play in the fields, Aaron tormented small insects, but Erik would often chase butterflies or pick wildflowers for his mother. While Aaron followed his father to help with the chores, Erik would stay behind to help his mother and sister around the house, and while Aaron would play soldier with the other town boys, Erik would look through the windows of the town's clothing stores and admire the colorful silks and satins.

More than anything, Erik admired his older sister, Sarah, and during the last year of her life they were inseparable. She loved teaching him the things she'd learned in school, and she'd often tell tall tales that would make him happy. He enjoyed brushing through her long, dark brown hair. Just before Sarah died, Erik had a dream that he was

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wearing one of his sister's dresses. It was her favorite dress, one with purple velvet trim around the chest. He saw himself twirling in the warm sunlight, the dress's long, flowing skirt fluttering as he moved. When he awoke that morning, he finally felt at peace with himself. It was then he realized that he was a girl trapped in the wrong skin.

For days after his epiphany, Erik searched for a way to confide his feelings to his sister, but before he could tell her, she was taken from him forever.

On a warm afternoon in September, Erik, Sarah, and Aaron were playing near the chicken coop, by an old pile of rusted scrap that their parents had often called the metal carriage. Aaron chased Sarah around the carriage, and she tried to elude him by climbing over the scrap, but she fell and sliced a deep cut through the back of her leg. It wasn't until a few days later that her parents learned of the cut and discovered how badly the infection had spread. One morning before school, Sarah started feeling chills. As the day progressed, her memory slipped away, and she couldn't remember simple things like her mother's name. Her heart raced and her breathing quickened as she slipped into a state of shock. Julia sent her husband to fetch a doctor, but by the time he returned, Sarah had died. The doctor said little, except that it was her time and that she was with God.

For over a month, a heavy period of mourning fell over the family, and Erik spent much of the time alone. His father would often sleep much of the day, and during the time he was awake, he scarcely spoke to anyone. His mother, by contrast, was busier than ever as she took over many of his chores.

Erik was completely distraught. He would never see Sarah again. His closest confidant and friend had been taken away from him, and it left a hole in his soul. They had been sisters, and now he'd been left alone. Erik felt as if he would burst. With each day that passed, he knew with more and more certainty that he could no longer live as a boy. He stopped responding to Erik and told Aaron that he wanted to be called Emily, instead. Aaron laughed hysterically when Erik told him this and ran to tell his mother the joke.

"Ma, Erik thinks he's a girl! He keeps wanting me to call him Emily," he said and then laughed again.

His mother stared at Erik, waiting for him to say something to the contrary, but when nothing came, she said, "Oh, Erik, quit joking around."

But it was no joke. With every moment that passed, anguish gathered in Erik's heart and ate at his soul. His name was Emily, and he didn't understand why he had to constantly be called a name that did not fit him. He didn't understand why he had to wear the drab and constricting clothes of a boy, instead of a beautiful and freeing girl's dress.

With each new day, Erik looked to escape the world that confined him and trapped him in the wrong body. He grew his hair long, and when he could, he'd play with Sarah's old dolls. More than anything, he longed to wear one of her dresses. Since she had passed away, his mother had kept them in a small wooden chest at the foot of Sarah's bed. But every time he would try to wear one, his parents would shoo him away and tell him to stay out of her things.

Finally, the opportunity presented itself. Erik knew that his father was working in the fields and wouldn't return until after the sun had set. His mother wanted to take him into town, but he had no interest in going. He couldn't bear the thought of following his mother around on her errands. Inevitably, she'd run into someone she knew and would

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talk endlessly, and all he'd be able to do was wait quietly and long to be one of the many girls that would pass by.

He told his mother that he was tired and wanted to rest. He was surprised that she let him stay home. Usually, she'd take him and Aaron into town regardless of whether he wanted to go or not, but she was in a hurry and didn't argue. She saw him off to bed and left with Aaron. He lay in his bed until he was sure they had left. He opened the door to his bedroom and listened for sounds of movement. He worried that someone would return to the house and stop him before he had a chance to wear one of Sarah's dresses.

His heartbeat echoed in his ears. He slipped into Sarah's room and gently shut the door behind him. He walked to the foot of her bed to the trunk that contained her clothes. He opened the lid and pulled aside some old blankets. At last he found the purple dress of his dreams and held it against his chest. The gown unfurled past his toes. It wouldn't fit him. He set the dress aside and continued to rummage through the trunk. Sarah hadn't had a lot of clothes. He hoped beyond hope that he could find something that she'd worn when she was younger.

At last he found it, a maroon gingham dress. It had been several years since he'd last seen Sarah wearing it. He held the dress up to his chest again. This time it was a perfect length.

Erik quickly shed his clothes and left them in a pile on the floor. He pulled the dress over his head. It wasn't a perfect fit, after all. The gown itself was just a tad too long, and he knew that he would not be able to tie the laces in the back of the dress by himself. But it was good enough. His soul swam. Never in his whole life had he felt so right. He imagined himself opening the door to Sarah's room and walking out into the eating room, where his mother would say, "Why, Emily, you look so beautiful tonight."

The thought left his mind as he caught his reflection in the window. He took a step toward it and looked deep into his reflected gaze. He could see his face staring back, but that wasn't what he was looking at. Beyond his reflection he could see a girl staring back at him. Erik smiled back and as he turned he bumped into the trunk causing the lid to shut with a thump. No matter. Erik spun in the dress and let the gown float on the air. This was the air that he needed to breathe to live. He needed to be a girl.

"Erik, what do ya think you're doing?" his father said, breaking the serenity that surrounded him.

Erik, shocked, turned and looked at his father, too scared to say anything.

"You get outta that dress right now, young man!" his father shouted.

Erik stared back at his father. He couldn't obey him. There was no way that he would go back to a world that felt so wrong, even if it would make his father angry.

"No, no, no! I won't."

"Why not?"

"Because I'm a girl."

"No, you're not! Now get outta that dress right now, or so help me, if I have to take it off you, you'll be in big trouble," James demanded. He grabbed Erik and tried to remove the dress himself.

Erik resisted and fell to the floor, shrieking and shouting. James, flushed with rage, grabbed Erik by the wrist and pulled him into the kitchen to wait for Julia. The minutes crept by as Erik sat at the table waiting for his mother. His father would not look at him but spent the time staring out the window.

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Erik was scared. His father's anger tore through him, and he was afraid that he would be taken over his father's knee or worse. But he felt no shame in what he was wearing—it felt right, it felt natural. He was a girl. After a half hour, his mother returned with Aaron. She was caught off guard by what she saw when she opened the door.

“Erik ... why ... why in God's name are you wearing your sister's clothes?” she demanded to know.

“My name's not Erik. It's Emily. I'm a gir—”

“No, you're not. Now get those ridiculous ideas out of your head, boy,” James shouted. “You were born a boy, and you'll always be a boy,” he pointed his finger at Erik.

Erik's faced reddened at his father's retort. “No, I won't!” he shouted.

“Yes you will! Now get out of that dress this instant, or you'll be in big trouble!” His father towered over him. “Do you hear me, young man?”

Erik broke down in tears and ran back to his bedroom. He spent the rest of the night crying at his father's declaration. He refused to believe that he would always be a boy.

* * *

Julia watched Erik run from the room and slam the door. She sank into a chair, trying to take everything in.

“James, what just happened? Why is my son wearing a dress?”

“'Cause he's sissy girl, Ma,” Aaron said playfully.

“Shut up, boy,” James said hotly.

Julia set her hand on Aaron's shoulder, “Honey, why don't you go outside and play for a little bit? Your father and I need to talk.”

“Oh, okay,” he said.

Julia waited until Aaron left before she continued. “So what happened?” Julia asked. Her mind was still trying to process what it had seen. This couldn't be happening. She had worried about Erik's behavior over the last few months, but it had all been small stuff. But this! She never suspected that he'd ever go as far as to wear his sister's clothing.

“I just came in here to get a bite to eat, and I heard sounds coming from the kids' room. I thought it was odd, 'cause I thought everyone went to town.”

“No, I was gonna take them both, but Erik said he was feeling tired and wanted to rest, so I let him.”

“So I get back there and I find him wearin' his sister's things, and he says he's a girl,” James said.

“Why would he say that?”

“Hell, I don't know! I tried to get him outta the dress, but I couldn't, so I brought him out here to wait for you. I thought maybe other people seein' him dressed like that would scare him out of it.”

“It didn't, though.”

“No,” he exhaled in disgust. Silence fell between them as they tried to think of a solution for their latest problem.

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"I'm going to hide Sarah's old things, to make sure he can't get them," Julia said at last.

"Why doncha just get rid of 'em?"

"I don't know if I can do that yet. They're the only things I have left to remember her by."

James sighed and rubbed his face, "Fine. Just make sure he doesn't get ahold of them. I don't want my son growing up to be a sodomite!"

"This is probably just some phase he's going through; he's still probably hurt by the loss of his sister."

"You better be right, Julia. You better be right."

From that night on, James and Julia tried desperately to get Erik to accept that he was a boy. They would take what toys he had away when he called himself Emily. They'd send him to his room or give him extra chores if he wore one of Sarah's dresses. Finally, despite Julia's reluctance, she had to let James finally burn all of Sarah's old clothes to keep Erik from wearing them. Each time Erik was punished, he would break down and cry. Eventually, he stopped eating altogether. It was this that changed Julia's mind about her son.

"Do you think we're doing the right thing for Erik?" Julia asked her husband one evening as they were lying in bed.

"I don't know, Julia. I just wish he'd grow out of this phase or whatever it is he's in."

"But what if he doesn't? He hasn't eaten any food for the last three days and, honestly, I don't think we can keep doing this much longer."

"So, what? You want him to act like a girl for the rest of his life?"

"There're plenty of worse things than that."

"Like what?" James asked bitterly.

"Like not having him around at all! If he's not eating now 'cause of this, what's he gonna do to himself when he gets older?"

James rolled away from his wife. "God, I just don't understand this. Why does he want to be a girl? This is the most shameful thing I've ever endured."

She rolled next to him. "I know, hon," she said.

"It's just that, since Erik was born, I've always had this dream in my head of how my boys would grow up. Roughhousing with them, teaching 'em the ways of the farm, and watching them become men and have families of their own—and now I don't see any of that ever happening. It's like my dreams have been stolen from me."

"You know we still have Aaron."

"But what if something happens to Aaron? Then what?"

"Don't say things like that. Nothing's gonna happen to Aaron."

James looked skeptically at Julia, "How do ya know? I mean, Sarah was fine, and then the next minute she was gone. You can't say something like that couldn't happen again—it happens all the time. Tomas Moreland's family lost three children last year."

"James, you can't see the future, and you shouldn't try. Whatever God says happens, happens."

James pulled himself up in bed. "And what would God say about this, huh? Do you think he's all right with a boy doing this? Do you think he's all right with Erik prancing about the way he does?"

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“I think God would want us to love our children and do what we could to see them happy.”

“There’s just no way I’m gonna let my son be a sissy.”

She sat up sharply in bed. “Then what do you suggest we do?” Julia asked. “It’s been six months since you caught him in that dress, and things’ve only gotten worse. And to be honest, I don’t think I could stand a few more weeks of this. It breaks my heart every time I hear him cry. Every time I hear him, it gets harder and harder for me not to lose it, ’cause I know we’re hurting him.”

“I think I’ll start taking him out to the fields and teaching him how to do some of the more difficult chores. I think that if he sees what it’s like to be a real man, then he’ll forget this girlish twaddle.”

“And what if that doesn’t work?”

“It will. It has to,” James said. He rolled over and blew out the last candle in their room.

Over the next few days, Julia watched as her husband tried to teach Erik some heavier chores. James impatience was almost immediate. He derided Erik when he couldn’t carry bales of hay or firewood. It didn’t take very long for her husband’s impatience to wear Erik down. James would berate Erik in an effort to motivate him, but it always had the opposite effect, and he’d run back to the house, crying.

As the days passed Erik grew sicker. He ate little food. His cheeks, once plump with baby fat, were sallow, and his hair fell out. His deep blue eyes were hollow shells. He became withdrawn, and the time he didn’t spend on chores with his father he slept in his room.

Julia finally had had enough. She couldn’t stand to see her son in so much pain. She couldn’t wait for James to come to his senses, and late one afternoon, she went to town with the intention of buying Erik a dress. What she was doing would only aggravate James, but she was out of options. At this rate, she’d have to bury another child before the snows fell.

A cold shiver ran up her back as she entered Allen Eisen’s clothing shop. Although she felt buying Erik a dress was the right thing to do, she still couldn’t believe she was doing it.

As she stood in Eisen’s store, all the reasons that she shouldn’t be there came flooding back into her mind. They didn’t have that much money, James would be furious, and it was just crazy to be buying a dress for her son! But she remembered why she was here—because he was in agony, and she loved him, and she just wanted for him to be happy once again.

Eisen approached her. He was a middle-aged man of forty-five. His dusty brown hair was slowly giving way to gentle gray strands. He looked at her through his thin spectacles with his friendly, helpful brown eyes.

“Hello, Mrs. La Rouche. What can I help you with today?”

“I’m looking to buy a girl’s dress.”

Eisen looked puzzled. His expression unnerved Julia. New Antioch was a small town, and most people knew that Sarah had died last fall. In reality, she had no reason to be buying a girl’s dress, and she feared if she didn’t offer some excuse Eisen would guess her son’s secret.

“Um ... it’s for my niece; it’s a birthday present.” she said.

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“Oh, how old is your niece going to be?”

“Um ... she’ll be six. Do you have anything here that would fit her?”

“I think I’ll be able to help you out; how much can you spend?”

“No more than five dollars.”

“Okay, just give me a moment and I’ll bring you back some of the selections that I have.”

Eisen walked between the wooden mannequins and wire dress forms and disappeared behind a curtain where he kept his inventory. Julia exhaled nervously. She felt uneasy, and her stomach was unsettled. To some degree, she felt that she was losing her son, but then she realized that he wouldn’t be gone, but still an ongoing part of her life. Everything that he was now would remain the same; only the name and clothing would change. As she waited for Eisen to return, she looked at some of the other items his store had to offer. She came to one dress form that held a sleeveless maroon dress made from fine linen. At eighty dollars, it was elegant, and she wondered who could afford to spend such money on such extravagant clothing.

Eisen returned a moment later with three small dresses draped over his arm and one by one handed them to Julia. The first one was a child’s Sunday dress. It was beautiful, but it was also white and trimmed with white lace. Give it a week and the dress would be covered in the dust and dirt of the farm. She handed it back to Eisen. The next dress was too big to fit Erik’s small frame, and as with the first dress, she was concerned that the light-peach color would not hold up to the farm environment. When he held up the last dress, Julia knew it was perfect. It was a simple dark-blue cotton, the color of Erik’s eyes.

Julia held up the dress for Eisen, “I’ll take this one,” she said.

“That is a good choice; I am sure your niece will love it.”

A reflective smile fell over her face. “I think she will, too.”

She paid four and a half dollars for the dress and left the store. She placed the dress in the saddlebag and began the trip home. James would spend most of the day harvesting the fields. Since Erik could not yet help his father with this work, it would give her the perfect opportunity to give her son the dress without James knowing. When she got back to the farm, she could see her husband off in the distance harvesting the grain row by row, step by step. He would be furious when he learned what she had done, but it was unavoidable.

She took the dress from the saddlebag and walked into the house. She found Erik asleep on Sarah’s old bed. He lay on his left side, with his right arm over his head. He looked peaceful while he was sleeping, but that also concerned her, she’d never seen any child sleep as much and as long as Erik. It was his way of escaping the harsh reality of his surroundings. It was where he could be himself and not have to live with the daily callousness of his father’s disappointment.

“Erik.” She shook him gently. “Erik, honey, wake up.”

He opened his eyes and looked at her warmly but said nothing.

“Erik, honey, I have something for you.”

Erik sat up in the bed with the fuzzy haze of sleep still clouding his eyes.

“I know the last few months we have been hard on you, and I can only hope you’ll forgive us for that, but I can’t stand to see you in so much pain.” She unfolded the dress and handed it to him. “I bought this for you.”

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The minute she gave him the gift, life returned to his eyes. The chrysalis which he had stored himself in was destroyed. Erik clutched the gift in his arms and embraced her tightly. "I love you, Ma."

"I love you, too, Erik."

Erik hugged Julia one more time and left to go put the dress on. As he was walking out the door, he turned back and looked at her. "Ma, can you call me Emily? Please?"

Julia looked down at the dusty floor and nodded her head. "Okay, honey, but please give me a little time. It might take some getting used to."

A myriad of thoughts ran through Julia's mind as Erik left the room. She worried that she'd made a mistake and that this might not make Erik happier. Even if it did, James could still stop everything and destroy the dress. But aside from that, what was she to do now? She couldn't take Erik to town wearing a dress. People knew he was a boy. She thought about how Eisen's expression had made her worry. What would other people think? Maybe buying Erik a dress was a terrible idea, after all.

"How do I look?" Erik asked.

Julia looked up to Erik, who was standing in the doorway. She smiled. The gown fit him perfectly in a way that nothing else had. It was not only that it was the right size, but when he wore it, Julia saw a certain beauty in Erik that she had never seen before.

"It's absolutely perfect ... Emily."

* * *

James returned home late that evening, exhausted from harvesting the crops. When he walked in through the door, he was surprised to see Julia sitting at the table waiting for him. Usually during the harvest, she'd leave his supper on the table and go to bed.

"What are you still doing up, hon?"

"We have to talk," Julia said.

At hearing those four little words, James's blood ran cold. He was exhausted. He didn't want to talk. He wanted to eat some food and catch a few hours of sleep before he had to go back out into the fields. He approached the table. "All right," he said skeptically.

"I bought Emily a dress today."

James instantly became incensed. "What the hell didja do that for!"

Julia stood up to face him. "Because I'm tired of seeing her waste away in front of us, and I'm not just gonna sit by and lose another child," she said.

"*He* isn't dying; *he*'s perfectly fine."

"No, *she* isn't. Every day she grows sicker, and I simply can't watch it anymore."

"And what is this "she" business? *He*'s not a *she*." James pointed toward the ground. "I can't believe you are just going to sit back and accept this," he said.

"James, it's time to get over your foolish pride and start acting like a father. Your child is happy now. She actually ate all of her food tonight, and for once it seemed like everything was back to normal again."

"Normal! How can you say that when you've turned my son into a damned sissy!"

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“Look, I’m not going to sit here and let you talk about Emily like this. You can either get on board and do what’s right for your child or ... or ...” She looked away from him.

“Or what? Or what, Julia?” he barked in her face.

“If ... if you don’t love your child, why should I love you?” Julia said, her voice quivering. “You haven’t hardly said anything to Emily that wasn’t in anger in the last six months.”

“His name is Erik, not Emily, dammit!”

“Listen, for the first time in a long time she’s happy and full of life, and I’m not gonna let you take that away from her,” Julia said. She folded her arms and shot a fierce look at James.

James had seen such a look before, around the farm and in the wild. It was the same look the female of every species gives when protecting her young. He was not going to be upstaged by his wife.

“Julia, get outta my sight before I do something I regret,” he said, while thoughts of backhanding her danced in his head.

“Fine, but don’t even think about coming to bed with me tonight.” She stormed past him to their bedroom and slammed the door.

James picked up the plate of food in front of him and threw it. The wooden plate bounced against the wall, his meal flying off in every direction. He stormed outside. He couldn’t believe his own wife would do something as horrible as to buy his son a dress. This whole thing was such an embarrassment. He should have hit her. That would have ended this dress-wearing nonsense once and for all. Then, surely, Julia would no longer placate Erik’s nonsensical fantasies, and he wouldn’t be acting this way. He was going to have to take matters into his own hands. Otherwise Erik would forever be a lost cause. First, he would have to take that dress away and destroy it, and if Erik didn’t learn what it was like to be a boy, he would have to resort to tougher discipline.

For an hour he walked around the farm, still enraged by the events of the evening. As the night passed, his anger slowly subsided. In their eleven years of marriage, he had never once thought about hitting his wife. He had heard other men talk about it, but he had never believed in using violence to get what he wanted. But he had thought of it tonight, and what was worse, he had wanted to do it. He could see vividly the back of his hand striking her face. He could see her fall down and he could see her tears as she wept from the betrayal. And would he do the same thing to his son? Would he hurt his son to toughen him up? James’s stomach soured at the thoughts he had contemplated. He did not think of himself as a wicked man, but here he was, entertaining thoughts of abuse to get what he wanted.

And what about Erik? Like Julia, he wanted his son to know peace and to find happiness and just be a carefree child again. But he couldn’t allow him to become a girl. He couldn’t shake that image of Erik wearing a dress from his head. He seethed at the memory. It was just so insulting and embarrassing. There was no way he could stand seeing his son wear a dress every day. And *Emily*? He could never call his son by such a name.

But what if—James thought before cutting himself off.

There was no way he could ever let Erik live as a girl. There was no way. But then what would happen? He had already been hard on his son, but nothing had

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improved. Julia was right; he could scarcely recall a time in the last six months when he hadn't spoken to Erik in anger. It was clear that Erik hadn't been happy for months, but it wasn't something he had wanted to acknowledge. In fact, Erik was downright miserable, and if James continued to be hard on him, Erik's misery would never end.

Looking back, he saw that Erik had never acted like other boys; he had always been different. Be even if he wanted to, he couldn't just let Erik live as a girl; it would make their family the laughingstock of the community. Plus, what would the church do?

James fell to his knees. There were no easy answers. Why, of all people, did he have to face this problem? No one else he knew had ever had to go through something like this. Was he the only one on Earth with a child like Erik? Was God punishing him? First, he had taken Sarah away, and now this. James sat most of the night outside thinking and praying for answers, but none came.

Over the next few days, he busied himself with the harvest. When he was alone in the fields, his thoughts were mired with the situation that engulfed his family. Even though he had returned to sharing a bed with Julia, she remained unusually cold to him, and he hadn't seen either Aaron or Erik during that time. This was expected during the harvest, since he didn't come in until well after sunset, and he was usually up well before the sun rose. He felt unusually lonely and isolated from his family while he worked the land. But his isolation did not end when the work ended. He was tired of the division that plagued his family; he was sick of being at odds with Julia; and, despite Erik's dress-wearing, he missed the time he usually spent with his sons. After three days, he finished harvesting his crops—but his mind was still troubled. Seeking guidance, he took a trip to town to talk with the pastor.

Confessions or spiritual guidance could often be tricky things, especially if the issues violated church law. The church was more forgiving by making the punishments less severe if a confession was involved, but most of the time it was safer to speak in generalities. James found Pastor Nimitz sitting hunched over his desk in the vestry, scribbling notes on paper for Sunday's sermon.

"Pastor, can I speak with you a moment?" James asked.

Pastor Nimitz turned and looked at James. "Come on in and have a seat," he said dryly. He turned his attention back to his sermon.

James walked in and sat in a chair facing Nimitz. Nimitz had been the pastor in New Antioch for as long he could remember. In fact, Nimitz had baptized James when he was an infant. While James was growing up, he remembered, Nimitz had been a warm, caring pastor who, unfortunately, had rather long and monotonous sermons. But over the years, Nimitz had slowly deteriorated into a cold, bitter man. It was well known around town that he had never accepted his stationary position in life and that he had been repeatedly denied becoming a cardinal.

"Pastor, I need to speak with you on a rather delicate topic."

"What is it?" Nimitz asked. He didn't look up but continued to write his sermon. "A friend of mine's having problems with his son. He thinks he's a girl and refuses to wear boy's clothing. The whole thing's putting a strain on their family. His wife's all right with it, and my friend isn't, so they fight all the time. He's so embarrassed by it he asked me to speak to you about it."

Nimitz looked up at James. "Hmm, what's your friend's name?" he asked. "Just so I know who to refer to."

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James paused; he had to be sure he didn't give himself away or get someone else in trouble. "Ryan, Ryan Alton," he said.

Nimitz scratched his chin. "I'm not sure I know that person."

"Might not, he lives far out in the country. He doesn't get into town too often."

"Hmm," he said, unconvinced. "Well, the basic problem is that your friend's son violates God's law. You see, God created two different sexes and charged each with different tasks. Our Fourth Pillar of Faith outlines this. Men are to be the protectors, providers, builders, and leaders, while women are the nurturers and givers of life. No one should want to be the other sex, and such desires are unnatural."

James shifted uncomfortably in his seat. "I ... my friend is confused as to why someone would wanna do such a thing," James said.

"Have you forgotten the Fifth Pillar of Faith? It is written that homosexuals are lost souls, which the devil himself propagates onto this world to tempt and lead the faithful astray. Your friend's son is being corrupted by the devil. His only goal is the destruction of the good and the pure. The devil will use people like your friend's son as a pawn to destroy the family order and corrupt the faithful into unholy practices."

James looked at Pastor Nimitz with a high degree of uncertainty. While his family was enduring a great period of tribulation, he didn't believe that Erik had intentionally set out to harm the family. "But his son's only six years old—how could he be possibly set out to destroy their family?"

"You should understand that these people, if you can even call them that, are agents of the dark one; they think of nothing but sin and destruction, and it is the duty of the Church and every God-fearing soul to find these people and to purify them."

"So, how exactly would you purify them?"

"It depends on the circumstances. But from what I hear, no expense is spared in saving the sinner."

"So, what'll they do?"

"Whatever they have to—the body is very resilient. But nothing we do will be as bad as the torments waiting for an unsaved soul in the next world. It's as our Lord tells us in the book of Mark: 'If your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into hell.'"

"What if they still do not change?"

"If such an abomination were to exist, they'd surely be removed from our good society. They could not be allowed to cause others to fall from the grace of God."

Removed from society? James thought. The words sliced through him. As uncomfortable as he was with Erik wearing a dress and acting like a girl, he couldn't bear the thought of him being removed from his life.

"What happens to their family?"

"Nothing, if they bring them forward. But if they shield the abomination from our saving grace, then they themselves are lost."

James quickly stood up. "Well, thank you for answering my questions, Pastor. I'll tell my friend what you've said," James said.

"Before you go, son, tell your friend to bring his child to us, so that we can save him before it's too late, and also his wife, so that she can be corrected for leading one of the Lord's children to sin."

"I will. Thanks for your time, Pastor," James said. He left Nimitz's office.

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Riding home, James was more conflicted than before he had gone to town. If he didn't bring his son forward, his family could lose everything. Nimitz's words still rang in his ears: "removed from society." He had already lost one child, and he lost his breath whenever he thought of Sarah. When she had died, a part of him had died, too. He detested the thought of Erik acting like a girl, but what could he do to stop it? And if he brought Erik forward, he lose him, too. He couldn't allow the church to sacrifice his son. There was no way they would be able to change him, especially as his attempts had failed so miserably. But even if he wanted to, there was no way to let Erik live as a girl without someone finding out—and then they'd all have to pay the price.

When he was still a way up the road, he could see Erik playing in the grass field outside of his home. He could see Erik's fine auburn hair twisting through the air as he ran, with his blue dress floating around him. He couldn't remember the last time he had seen Erik so carefree.

He rode up to Erik, who stopped cold when he saw him approach. James dismounted his horse and walked up to Erik. For a moment, there was nothing but silence as James struggled to think of the words to say. At last, James knelt down to Erik's level, placed a hand on his shoulder and simply said, "I'm sorry." His blood was hot and tears stung his eyes. "I'm sorry I was so terrible to you. Erik, if this is who you are and there is nothing I can do to change it, then I guess the only thing I want is for you to be happy and healthy."

A wave of sadness washed over James as he wondered abstractly what he was going to do now. In an instant, Erik wrapped his arms around James, hugging him. "Thank you, Pa," Erik said joyfully.

James sighed. He returned Erik's embrace, but he kept some separation. He didn't look at his son. Instead, he stared at the heavens. Finally, he broke Erik's hold. "Where's your mother at? I need to talk to her."

"She's in with the chickens."

"Okay, then. Why don't you run off and play?" he said sadly.

James watched Erik as he ran toward the house. A sense of grief came over James as Erik ran inside. He knew that the little boy he had once held in his arms was gone.

He found Julia near the chicken coop rummaging in a patch of loose grass by the metal carriage. "What're you doing?" he asked.

"Trying to find this egg I dropped. I don't think it broke," she said.

"Can you forget about that for a minute? I've got something to tell you."

Julia stood up and waited for him to continue.

"I told Erik that if that's how he wants to be, that it'd be all right."

"You mean Emily?"

"Yes," he said reluctantly, "Emily."

For the first time in days, the veil of rage that had covered Julia's face was lifted. Julia set the wire basket of eggs aside and her face was lit up. She walked over and took his hand.

"I know this was hard for you. You're truly a good father to put your child's happiness ahead of your own."

"I know, but it still doesn't feel right. I mean, I don't know if I'll ever be able to look at him—"

"You mean *her*."

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“Yeah, I don’t know if I’ll ever be able to accept her,” James said, bitterly tasting the pronoun. He shook his head. “You know, no matter what, I am always going to see him as my son.”

“James. This will all happen in time. We’ve only now discovered who Emily is, and it will still take some getting used to. But she’s your child, and no matter what, she’ll always love you.”

“But, what are we going to do about ... about Emily?”

“What do you mean?”

“I talked to Pastor Nimitz this morning, and he said that we should bring him to them so he can be saved.”

Her eyes widened. “Why’d you tell them about her? Are you crazy?”

James held his hands up defensively. “No, no, no,” James said. “Listen. I didn’t tell him it was us who had the problem, but he said we’re required to bring him in or it will fall on us.”

“You can’t seriously be thinking about it?”

“No, of course not. But tell me, if we let Erik be the way he is, how long will it be before someone finds out and tells them? Then what are we gonna do?”

He and Julia were silent for a moment while they pondered the situation.

“I mean, let’s say we let him dress at home but make him dress appropriately when we go to town. All it takes is one slip-up, and our secret’s exposed. Not to mention, do you think Aaron’ll be able to keep quiet about it while he’s at school?” James asked.

“Then, what do you suggest we do?” For a time they were silent, both lost in their own thoughts.

“What if we move and make a new life for our family in some other parish? And Emily could just be Emily, and no one would be any the wiser,” Julia said at last.

“What! And leave our families behind?”

“We rarely see them as it is. Not to mention, do you think they’ll be willing to keep quiet once they find out? Loose lips sink ships, after all.”

“Where’d you hear that?” James asked.

“I can’t remember. But you see what I mean—the more people that know about her, the more likely our secret is to get out.”

“Are you sure you want to do that? I mean, how’s Aaron with all this? Plus, I’m sure he doesn’t wanna leave.”

“Aaron’s okay with Erik being Emily. He thinks it’s partly a joke, but it doesn’t bother him. And it might be hard for him to leave, but he is young, and he’ll get over it.”

“Are you sure you want to leave New Antioch?” he asked more for himself than Julia.

“James, I’ll do whatever it takes to keep our children safe.”

“All right,” James said quietly. He wasn’t happy about moving, but for their collective safety, it was the best plan.

Over the next two weeks, the family made preparations for their journey. James bought a covered wagon and loaded it with their few belongings and supplies. He sold the farmland and all the livestock to a wealthy landowner and, combined with the money he had made from the harvest, he had just over six hundred dollars, the most money he’d ever held in his hand at one time. He selected their new home in the Seaton Parish almost arbitrarily, but to him it seemed like a good pick. It was a rural parish that would have

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lots of open and fertile farming land. He knew they had a long journey ahead of them, and he hoped they could get to Seaton before the snows fell.

On the last day of October, James stood before his land and gave one last look at what had been his home for so long. He bent down and picked up a clod of cold dirt. In many ways, he felt a little like the ground before him, empty and distressed. A cold northern wind hit him in the face, and he let the dirt crumble and blow into the air. His dreams were gone, his fate like the dirt blown into the wind.

“Aaron, stop it! Leave me alone!” Emily shouted behind him. James took a long, deep breath and took his first step into an uncertain future.

Chapter IV

**Late August 336 ADR
(2395 AD)**

James looked over his fields with dismay. As far as he could see, brittle and dead sticks jutted up like thorns through the dried and blistered soil. It had now been ninety-one days since rain had graced his crops, and since then he had been at war with the sun to keep them alive. He had made endless trips the creek that ran behind the fields to fill watering cans full of water to pour over the plants. In the end, it was no use; the heat fried their roots and evaporated the water. He put his hands above his eyes and glared at his solar nemesis. Everything was lost. What could be harvested wouldn't be enough to last his family more than a few weeks. If they slaughtered the animals, they might have enough meat to last two months, possibly three to four, if the hunting was good. The best case scenario? They would be able to survive until March, but even then he would have no money to buy seeds or livestock.

James threw his hat to the ground. It had been a terrible year. Since they had moved from New Antioch ten months ago, nothing had gone right. Why had they trekked all this way to end up starving to death? Surely the weather was better back in New Antioch, and even if it wasn't, at least he could have relied on his or Julia's family to help them make it through the winter. A stiff breeze gusted from the south, stirring up miniature dirt devils. James watched his future disappearing into the air with them.

Over the past few weeks, David Marsh had been soliciting offers to buy the land from him for a reasonable price. Each time Marsh hinted at the subject of buying his land, James thanked him but reassured David that he'd be fine, while he hoped and prayed for a miracle from the skies.

Nothing happened. He was a modern-day Job trapped in a test of faith that had no end. Whatever deal Marsh offered would keep him alive, but he and his family would be little better than slaves. But what choice did he have? If he didn't take the deal, his family would be penniless and starving inside half a year.

He no longer had any choice. He'd have to visit David tomorrow and pray that his offer was still on the table. James bent down and picked up his hat. "Why, God? Why this, now, after everything?" he said.

* * *

James found little sleep that night and as the sun rose, he found himself paralyzed in his bed.

Day ninety-two.

Normally, James would be feeding the livestock now, but what was the point? In a few hours they wouldn't be his anymore. James looked at Julia, who was sleeping peacefully next to him. She had cringed when he told her that he was going to sell the farm. She sensed his frustration and disbelief. But all she said was, "We'll get through

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this. Whatever happens, even if we are broke, we'll still have each other." He wished he could share her optimism.

As the morning passed, he could no longer remain idle in his bed. He got up, but he still couldn't shake the dull ache of apathy that filled his body. As he dressed, he could hear Aaron and Emily playing in the next room.

"Aaron, no! Don't kill it."

"Why not? It's just a spider!"

"So, what did it ever do to you?"

"It's just a spider. There are hundreds of 'em everywhere."

James smiled at the irony. He was like the spider, caught between forces of life and misery. He listened to the children play-fight some more. He knew who would win, and it wouldn't be the spider.

Julia greeted him with a simple, but loving, kiss to his cheek when he came into the family eating room. He sat at the table with his children and tried his best to stay upbeat. For a moment he wished he could trade places with Aaron and be a boy again, just so he could live one day without worrying about tomorrow.

"Ma said you didn't sleep well last night, so I fed the animals for you, Pa," Aaron said with proud enthusiasm.

"Hey! I helped too," Emily said.

"Thank you. That was very thoughtful," James said.

"We only have one bag of corn feed left," Emily said. "Can we go with you tomorrow when you get some more?"

James gritted his teeth. The drought had wiped out all the fields where the cattle typically grazed. In order to keep them alive, he had had to resort to buying expensive feed. Doing so had drained what little savings they had had. He didn't want to tell his children that, with a disastrous harvest looming ahead, he might not be able to spend the last of his money on animal feed. "We'll have to see. I'm not sure what tomorrow will bring."

Julia prepared a light meal of scrambled eggs and boiled carrots. Knowing the potential crisis they faced, she made the helpings smaller than what she traditionally served. James only ate a little of his food and gave Aaron the rest when he complained that he was still hungry.

Beads of sweat condensed on James's forehead. One look out the window told him all he needed to know about the weather. There were no clouds in the sky, the air was still, and if the previous three months were any indication, the sun's blistering rays would nearly bake him into a human roast.

"Do you kids wanna go to church today or stay home?" James asked.

Before he had discussed his plans with his wife, James originally had planned to go by himself and approach Marsh after the service to discuss selling his land. The prospect of his children seeing him beg David Marsh for their survival sent chills up his spine. But Julia didn't want to deprive the children from worshiping. The family went every week, and she wanted to make sure Aaron and Emily would grow up to have a strong faith. They argued for nearly an hour, but Julia would not relent unless they were at least given the opportunity to go.

"I don't wanna go. It's too hot to listen to some old boring sermon," Aaron said.

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“How ’bout you, Emily?” he asked her. He expected her to follow her brother’s lead.

Emily frowned as she thought it over. “I think I wanna come with you.”

“You *sure*?” James said, emphasizing the last word carefully.

Emily’s eyes darted away from him to her mother. “Yes, I think so,” she said at last.

“Okay,” he said. Emily had been following him around more than she had at any other time in her life. She always wanted to spend his free time with him. It was as if Emily was trying to make up for something. “Why don’t you go fill our canteens with water while I get the horse ready?”

“Okay,” she said. She slid off her chair, grabbed the canteens from the cabinet, and then disappeared out the door.

James stood and slid his chair back under the table. “Well, I s’pose I better go get Duncan saddled up.”

Julia gave him a quick hug, “Okay, good luck with everything.”

“Yeah,” he said softly. He turned to make his way outside.

“Good luck with what?” Aaron asked.

“Never you mind. Your father just has a couple of things he needs to take care of after church,” Julia said.

James closed the door behind him. He didn’t want to tell his children that he had failed to keep them fed and that he would have to become a sharecropper in order to survive, yet it was only a matter of time before they would know.

James retrieved Duncan from the barn, saddled him up, and brought him out to the front of the house, where Emily was waiting for him. He reached down and, with an effortless motion, picked her up and set her in front of him.

“You sure you want to go, Em? You know it’s gonna be pretty hot in there.”

“I don’t mind. I’d rather go with you than just sit in the house all day.”

“Okay,” he said.

Emily looked up at him, “You okay, Pa?”

“Yeah, I’ll be okay.”

He looked back at Emily, into her deep blue, loving eyes. As she looked at him, he felt some of his anxiety slip away. Perhaps it wasn’t bad for her to come after all. Perhaps if she was there it would give him the strength to get through the day and do what needed to be done.

* * *

David Marsh peered around the standing parishioners to the back pews and stared at James La Rouche. James looked weary, beaten almost. He had seen the look on so many farmers’ faces this summer as one by one they had surrendered their farms to him. The cost of keeping them going over the winter would be staggering, but as long as the drought did not persist for more than another summer he would more than make back all the money he had spent.

But money was not what he wanted from the La Rouche family. As each year passed without Andrea conceiving any more children, the more he became concerned about leaving his legacy to Jonathan. David wanted to make sure that his son would be

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able to take over the family enterprise when the time came. He needed to ensure that Jonathan would have a bride who would be able to bear legitimate children.

The family value laws prevented illegitimate children from collecting inheritance. In order to ensure the successful continuation of his family enterprise, he needed to do everything he could to prevent Jonathan from ever fathering a bastard son. He had seen the drama play out numerous times in a number of Seaton's most prominent families. One of their sons would spawn some bastard, who would drag the entire family through some embarrassing public spectacle that would often prove costly in terms of money and reputation lost. He had even covertly used such information to gain leverage over his rivals and, as a result, earned respect from the church as a moral businessman.

The best way to prevent that from ever happening would be to have a bride in place for Jonathan as early as possible. Some of the wealthier families in Seaton had girls who were close to Jonathan's age. But he had made too many enemies on his rise to the top to successfully secure a deal.

His last resort had been to cherry-pick a bride for Jonathan from the children of the working class. For the most part, his options had been bleak. Most of the girls were not the right age to be Jonathan's future wife, and the rest did not come from families he wanted to be related to.

That had all changed ten months ago when the La Rouche family was formally inducted into the church. When he first met them, he knew Emily would be a good match for his son. She was beautiful and had an above-par intellect—these would be becoming features for his future grandchildren. After watching their family from afar, David could tell that they weren't like most people of their social class. They weren't rude or completely inept of formal graces. By contrast, they seemed to be dignified despite their poverty.

The La Rouches, like most farmers, were now teetering on the brink of starvation. And David would press that fact to ensure that Emily would become his son's bride. Andrea, who was normally unreceptive to many of his suggested prospects, was also excited at the possibility of Emily joining their family, and she would often press him on the matter. At last, today was the day. He would secure his future.

"And may the Lord give you his peace," Pastor Nathaniel Stanton said.

David and the rest of the congregation took their seats as Pastor Stanton read the day's announcements and news.

"I think today might be the day," David whispered to his wife.

"Why do you say that?"

"He has that look that says he knows he can't survive without some outside intervention."

"Are you sure he'll give up his only daughter?"

"I have no doubt of it, and at this point, he really isn't going to have much of a choice."

"Is the rest of the family back there, too?"

"No, it's just him and Emily."

"Why don't you invite them over after the service? We'll have the servants prepare a feast and then, while you and James discuss business, I can introduce Jonathan to his future bride."

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Pastor Stanton concluded his remarks, and the organ summoned the exit procession. It was difficult for David to contain his excitement as he waited for the ushers to dismiss them. The good news was that they were only two rows from the front. The bad news was that James and Emily were sitting in the very back. When David reached the narthex, he was greeted warmly by Pastor Stanton, who solicited him with an offer for supper. A reflective smile fell over David's face. It was the second time this month that Stanton had made the invitation. David knew that Stanton was hoping to secure the vacated cardinal's position and that he needed David's influence on the parish council to secure it. It was amazing to think that less than ten years ago no one, not even the newest Authority of the Law, would have wasted such patronage on him. It was a different story now. The wealth and property he had accumulated had made him a very important figure. Things were especially promising for the future now. He had acquired so much land as a result of the drought that his competitors would find it almost impossible to stop him.

The narthex filled with people whom David knew, and he chatted pleasantly with them until, at last, James and Emily emerged. David smiled and made his way toward them.

"Why, hello there, James. Hello, Emily. How are you today?" David said. He knelt down to Emily's level.

"I'm good," she said. A faint smile crossed her face as she pulled closer to James.

"Hey, that's quite a necklace you have." He fingered Emily's quarter. David looked at it intently. He wondered how someone as poor as little Emily La Rouche could have something as valuable as an American quarter just hanging around her neck. Clearly, her family didn't know of its worth; otherwise, they wouldn't need him to bail them out of their current troubles.

"Why don't you have something that's a little bit shinier?" he said. He reached into the breast pocket of his suit, pulled out a new silver dollar, and handed it to her. "Here, sweetheart, this is for you."

Emily took the coin and clutched it tight within her tiny hands. "Thank you," she said, excitement filling her voice.

David smiled briefly and stood and faced James, "I have a deal I'd like to offer you, James. Why don't you bring your family over to my estate for lunch?"

James looked away. "I s'pose, but the rest of my family is back home."

"That will be no problem. I'll send my best coach, and they can join us. Then, afterward, while the children play, you and I can discuss matters of business."

"Okay. I'll meet you at your place, then, in a few minutes."

"Do you know how to get there?"

James admitted that he didn't, and he listened carefully while David pointed out the directions. "I'll see you over there in a few minutes, and I'll make sure to tell my servants that you'll be arriving shortly," David said.

"All right. I'll see you soon, I guess," James said.

David smiled and made his way out of the cathedral and into the hot afternoon. At long last his future would be secure.

* * *

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James looked over his family as they finished their meals. It had been a long time since he had felt full. In all his life he couldn't remember eating a meal that had been so abundantly prepared. The roast had been succulent, full of flavor and spice, and the vegetables tender and fresh—unlike the food they'd been living on, which was usually either too ripe or too green. But still, all this fine food would taste like bitter ash when he handed over his land to David.

"How was everything?" David asked politely.

"It was good; it was good," James said.

"If you would like, please help yourself to more wine. It's the best wine that the Goldenlands have to offer."

"Thanks, I'm fine."

"So, James, tell me, what motivated you to bring your family all the way up here to Seaton?" Andrea asked.

The question caught James completely off guard. Most people in the community knew he had bought the old widower's farm the previous November, but they never asked him questions about why the family had moved.

"Just a chance to get off my father's land and work my own, I guess," James replied. Whether Andrea knew it or not, her question was a slap in the face. It was a bitter reminder of all he had and would be giving up in order to give Emily the life she wanted. He longed to be back home again, and not just the old widower's home outside of town, but his real home back in New Antioch, where his family was near, the land was his, and Emily was still a boy.

James tensed up as he realized he'd have to be careful with his words. It had been nearly a year since Emily had started living as a girl, and while he had been mostly successful at calling her by that name, there was still the occasional time he called her Erik or referred to her as a boy. But as long as he was at the Marshes', there could be no slip-ups.

"Well, what do you think of Seaton Parish? I don't think any of us have been outside of it before," Andrea said.

"That's not true. I went to Saint John's Parish last year to see about investing in a munitions factory. Remember?" David replied.

"Oh yes. How could I forget? That was the week that Jonathan had the chicken pox."

"Stop telling everybody about that," Jonathan protested.

Andrea smiled, "Oh, why not?"

"Cause."

"It's only fair given the grief you put me through." Andrea looked back to Julia. "I don't think he slept the entire week, and he spent the whole time complaining about how much they itched," she said.

"Both Aaron and Emily were just babies when they had the pox, so they just fussed constantly," Julia said.

"I'd still take having an infant with the pox over an older child. Eight-year-olds are nearly impossible to pacify."

"Anyway, James and I have important matters to discuss," said David. "Andrea, why don't you take Mrs. La Rouche out to the back lawn, so the children can play?"

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James sighed and stood up from the dinner table. It was time to face the music. He pulled the napkin that was tucked into his shirt and tossed it aside. As he passed Julia, he gave her a stern glance. He only wished that when his life was all said and done that he could say this adventure had been worth it.

* * *

Julia and the children stepped out onto the Marshes' back terrace. "I'm afraid this summer's been terrible on our lawn," Andrea said.

Julia looked over the lawn and was stupefied that Andrea had even bothered to make such a comment. The grass was in perfect condition; it was even, lush, and more importantly, green. Across the lawn she could see two servants, dressed in black pants and white sweat-drenched shirts, walking up and down sprinkling the lawn with precious water. It was such a waste. With their well running low, it been over two weeks since she'd been able to take a bath. She'd had to settle for washing herself and her children with a damp rag. The way Andrea smelled, there was no doubt she took a bath every day.

"It's beautiful," Julia said dismissively.

"Mother, may I go swimming, please?" Jonathan asked.

"I suppose. Just be careful down there."

"Can I go, too, Ma?" Aaron asked.

"That's fine. Have a good time."

She watched as Aaron and Jonathan ran over the freshly manicured lawn toward the back gate that led to the creek. The boys stripped off their shirts as they ran. Emily followed but stopped when Julia called to her, "Emily, why don't you stay here? I don't want you to get wet."

"It's okay, Ma—I'll just stay on the banks and watch."

"All right; just be careful. You know I worry about you."

Julia watched Emily follow her brother.

"You should really let her go swimming. The poor thing is probably just roasting in that hot dress," Andrea said.

"I'm sure, but I don't think there's a thing in this world that would make her take that dress off."

* * *

David let James into his study. It was cluttered with piles of books, both old and new. A painting of Christ rested against the desk. Legal papers completely covered the surface of the desk. Most of the office furniture was covered with David's business effects, which left only a small sofa free for sitting.

"I apologize for the mess. Had I known you would be visiting today, I would've had one of the servants organize this place."

"I'm sure it musta been a surprise," James said.

"Indeed it was. Come, let's have a seat on the sofa. I don't want to make my proposal to seem too intimidating."

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James didn't comment. Instead, he sat on the far side of sofa. He didn't expect mercy or pity. He expected to be taken for everything and left with nothing but the ashes and the dust.

"James, I know it's hard for you to be here today, and I know you don't want to give up your land. But I'm not a cruel man, and I think that you'll find my offer most fair ..."

* * *

Emily sat on the banks of the creek, watching her brother and Jonathan splash each other with water. The creek was shallow from the lack of rain, but in parts it came up above the waist of each boy. She watched the water flowing with a hypnotic stare. She longed to be able to shed the hot confines of her black dress and take a swim. It had been so long since she had been able to go for a swim. Back home, the creek was only ankle deep and in most places full of leeches.

Emily wiped the sweat from her brow. She watched Jonathan and Aaron as they played. Each boy returned wave after wave of splashes until Aaron lunged at Jonathan in an effort to tackle him. Aaron caught Jonathan in the sternum and both boys fell beneath the water. Emily stood up as she waited for Aaron to resurface. A moment later he stumbled out of the water and fell down on his rear.

Jonathan popped up a second later, choking and coughing on the water he'd inhaled.

"Are you okay?" Aaron asked Jonathan.

"You stupid little horse pile. What do you think?"

"I'm sorry—"

"You're sorry! Why don't you see how you like it?" Jonathan exclaimed. He lunged at Aaron, grabbed a handful of his hair, and thrust his face into the muddy water. Aaron tried to push himself back up, but just as he managed to break the surface, Jonathan repositioned himself so that Aaron could not escape.

"Stop it! You'll drown him!" Emily shouted. But Jonathan ignored her. "Stop it, stop it, stop it!"

Aaron raised himself only to be thrust back under.

Emily picked up a small jagged stone and hurled it at Jonathan as hard as she could. Jonathan shrieked as the stone smacked him between the eyes. He released Aaron as he fell into the water. Aaron, now free of Jonathan's grasp, collapsed on the opposite shore, hacking and coughing.

Emily made her way down to the water but stopped as Jonathan perked his head up and fired a hateful glare at her. She turned and tried to run up the steep embankment, but just as she reached the top, Jonathan, grabbed her by the hair and pulled her down. She tumbled to the ground and down the embankment. The loose rocks and gravel slowed her to a stop just as her feet splashed into the water.

Emily looked up at the tiny tyrant who stood atop the banks of the creek. He clutched the bump on his head and then turned and ran back toward the house.

When Emily was able to stand, she lifted up her skirt and made her way across the creek to her brother.

"You okay?" she asked.

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“I think so,” he said. He let out a deep, grating cough. “What happened to your clothes?”

“I hit him with a rock, and he threw me down to the water.”

“Where’d he go?”

“Back to the house, I think.”

“We should prolly go back, too, before he gets us in trouble.”

* * *

“But I can’t give you Emily!” James exclaimed after he had heard David’s proposal.

David held up his hands defensively, “Now, now, James. I understand. She’s your only daughter, and you’re not comfortable with the idea of just marrying her off. But look at it this way—you’ll be giving her a better life. She won’t have to worry about living hand to mouth, she won’t have to worry about whether or not she’ll have a meal to eat, and she won’t have to worry about whether or not she’ll have clothes on her back. And what’s more, you and the rest of your family won’t have to worry about losing everything. As long as you are under my wing, I’ll look out for you.”

Under the contract that David had devised, he would take ownership of all of James’s land and the animals. He would pay James a monthly stipend of thirty dollars for one year and allow James to keep fifty percent of the profits he made from the harvest. He would front the cost for the purchase of any new livestock. As well, there would always be the basic assurance he’d invest to keep the family in good health. With all of the land acquisitions this summer, he had never made an offer this generous. He typically allowed the tenants to keep twenty percent of harvest, plus a twenty-dollar monthly stipend, at most.

“But surely there must be something else you’d want. There’s just no way I can give you Eri—um—Emily.”

“Honestly, James, there’s nothing else I could want that would benefit me. You don’t own that large a plot of land, and what you could bring me would be a pittance compared to the other lands that will soon be available.

“And I’ll be honest with you. Both Andrea and I are excited with the prospect of Emily joining our family. Andrea is delighted with her, and I have to admit, after seeing her today, I heartily agree with her,” David said.

“There’s no way I can do it. I can’t give you Emily. Take my land; take a greater share of the harvest. It doesn’t matter, but I cannot give Emily to you.”

David sighed and scratched his chin. He could buy James’s farm at the rate he was suggesting. He would even make more money on it. But the most important thing was for Jonathan to have bride.

“I’m sorry. This is my only offer, and I’m stretching to make that. If you don’t take this, can you be sure you’ll find someone who’ll give you enough to survive? I am offering you a new start at a more than generous offer than you’ll find anywhere else. I understand that this is a difficult situation for you to be in, but look at it this way—your family will be safe, you’ll have food in your stomachs, and you’ll never have to worry about being bankrupted by another accursed drought,” David said.

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James stood up. "I'm sorry, but this is a deal I cannot accept. Offer me anything, anything at all, and I'll take it, but do not ask for Emily."

Silence fell between them as both men stared at each other. "I need to be getting home to feed my livestock," James said.

James walked briskly to the door but stopped when David called after him, "Before you go, ask yourself: 'Is it worth it? Is Emily worth starving over?' Perhaps you can tell yourself that she is, but what will you do when she comes asking for food and you can give her none? What will you do when she grows weak with hunger and gradually becomes sick? And what would happen, God forbid, if she were to starve to death? Could you live with that, knowing that you could've prevented it?"

James looked back at the floor, his hand still firmly fixed to the doorknob. He sighed heavily. "When would Emily have to marry?" James said to the door.

"Why don't you come back here and have a seat?"

* * *

Julia tried to think of something to say to Andrea. Since the children had gone off to the creek to play, Andrea had more or less dominated the conversation, that is, until she realized that they had few things in common. Julia personally didn't care about their dinners with the bishop and the authorities of the law, or evenings of dancing and theater, or what the latest gossip was about the other well-to-do ladies of Seaton. So an uncomfortable silence arose between them. Truth be told, Julia was relieved that Andrea's mouth had ceased to run, but she didn't want to appear rude, so she tried to think of something they might have in common. It was tough work.

A moment later, a tall, young servant with receding blond-gray hair walked out onto the terrace carrying a tray of lemonade.

"Good afternoon, ladies. With this heat, I thought that you might be thirsty, so I brought you some freshly squeezed lemonade with light sugar," he said in a monotone voice. The servant set the tray on a table between Julia and Andrea and filled their glasses.

The servant handed a glass to Julia. "Here you go, madam," he said.

Julia stared at the square chunks of ice floating in her drink. "Where'd you get the ice on a hot day like this?"

"Oh, we have an icer. My husband just bought it a few months ago. They're pretty hard to get ahold of, and the one we have is a jerry-rigged version of the standard British model."

"Jerry-rigged?"

"Oh, I'm sorry. Me and my big words, again. It's a hand-operated electric generator that somehow cools the water enough to make a block of ice. Then we just chip it up. You'll be amazed at how much it makes drinks more refreshing and keeps food fresh. It takes the servants about three to four hours to make one block of ice. But it's so worth it. David says that if we could only get a source of electricity, then we wouldn't have to have them spending all day making ice, and they could be doing other productive things."

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Julia's head throbbed as she sipped the lemonade. Her eyes watered and her face puckered when the liquid touched her tongue. She had never drunk anything so sour in all her life, but she swallowed so as not to offend Andrea.

"Thank you, Mason," Andrea took the glass from his hands. "What do you think of it?" she asked.

"It's different."

Andrea laughed. "I'm sorry. I forget it's something you're probably not used to. It's really hard to get good lemons and oranges this far north."

Julia set the lemonade on the table and looked up at Mason. "How long do you think it'll be before my husband is done with his meeting?"

"It's impossible to say, ma'am, but I do know the church's notary just arrived. So they should be concluding shortly."

"Thank you," Julia said.

Mason nodded and returned to the house.

"This whole thing must be trying on you, dear, but don't worry about it. I know that David will give you the best deal possible."

"What do you think he'll offer?"

"I really can't tell you right now, but I will tell you that you'll be surprised and more than likely quite a bit delighted!"

Andrea's chirpiness was beginning to grate on Julia's nerves. She wished that whatever deal was being conducted upstairs would soon be finished, so she could put this whole affair to rest. It wouldn't be easy, since James was bound to be upset. The whole summer had been terribly frustrating for him and, although he had not lost his temper with her or their children, it might be only a matter of time. She was afraid he would blame Emily for all that had befallen them and resent her as he had after that first night he'd caught her wearing Sarah's dress. She pushed the thought from her mind. James would never treat Emily like that again.

Julia was reaching for the lemonade when her eyes caught Jonathan running toward them as fast as he could. He bolted up the terrace steps and stopped only inches away from Andrea.

"Mama! They tried to drown me, and then Emily hit me with a rock. See?"

"Oh my goodness, honey! You're bleeding! Mason? Mason! Come here this instant," she called.

Mason appeared on the terrace a moment later.

"Mason, I want you to return to the kitchen and fetch some of that ice for Jonathan's forehead. Quickly, now!"

Mason left to retrieve the ice.

"Julia, why did your unruly children attack my son?" Andrea asked.

"I—I don't know why they would! Aaron and Emily would never hurt anyone."

"Well, they did!" Jonathan snapped back. "Look at what they did to my head! I better not get a scar."

Julia stared at the little hellion whose head was now tucked closely to Andrea's bosom. She didn't really believe that her children would have done what Jonathan accused them of unless they had been in some way provoked. She looked toward the creek for some sign of her children.

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“Julia, I’ve always thought Emily was such a sweet girl. Please don’t tell me I was wrong.”

Julia tried to think of a reply, but the words were stuck in her mouth. A moment later, Aaron and Emily walked through the gate and made their way across the lawn.

Something was wrong. Aaron was speckled head to toe in mud, and Emily’s dress was torn, tattered, and streaked with dirt.

“What did you two do to Jonathan?” Andrea demanded.

“He tried to drown me. He held my head under water,” Aaron said.

“Which one of you hit him with the rock?”

“I did,” Emily replied. “Aaron and him were playing, and then Jonathan got upset when they both fell underwater, and he tried to drown Aaron. He wouldn’t stop, so I threw the rock at him, and he chased me, and when he caught me he pulled my hair and made me fall down into the creek.”

Andrea looked at her son. “Jonathan, is this true?” she asked, the aggravation in her voice lifting.

“Just the part where she hit me with a rock.”

Andrea sighed. “All right. I want you to go find Mason and get some ice for your head. I’m sure you and your father will have a talk later.”

Jonathan clutched his wound to try to garner more sympathy from his mother, and then he walked toward the house.

Julia clutched her hands in rage at the injustice that had just transpired. Andrea knew that Jonathan had lied, and she had just dismissed him as easily as if he had smashed a fly. Her children were scraped and muddy because of Jonathan, but it didn’t matter to Andrea. She hoped James would be done with his meeting soon and then, God willing, they’d never have to come back to this house again.

“Aaron, why don’t you go put your clothes on. Your father’ll be ready to go any moment now.”

* * *

James looked up from the copy of the contract that he had been reading, and he watched David count out thirty dollars in silver. He felt as hollow as an animal carcass that had been gutted and left for the crows. After a lifetime of sweat, toil, and hardship, he would have little more to show for his work than the clothes he wore and enough food to keep from starving. David would make sure they had food and supplies enough to make it through the drought and, providing that it did not extend past this season, he would get his promised fifty percent of the income that the harvest brought. But he had lost everything else. The land would now be in Marsh’s name, and so would the house, barn, the livestock, and all the farm equipment. In assuming his land, David would also be taking his vote—as well as Aaron’s, when he turned sixteen—for the parish elections.

Worst of all, Emily would be required to marry Jonathan on her sixteenth birthday, a date that was less than nine years away. He had fought hard to make it as late as possible, but David would not wait until her eighteenth birthday. David pressed for fifteen, so Jonathan would have a bride when he was seventeen, but in the end, they compromised at her sixteenth birthday. James tried to get a clause in the contract that would void the marriage agreement if Jonathan committed an act of infidelity, and one

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that would allow the family to buy Emily out of the marriage, but David wouldn't allow it. The only way that Emily would be free of the contract was if she or Jonathan died; otherwise, any other breach of the contract promised stiff penalties. James would not only forfeit all of his crops, but he would have to pay David restitution for all that he invested, plus face whatever civil penalties the church would impose.

David finished counting the coins. "Are you ready to sign?" he asked.

James set the contract on David's desk and reached for the pen. He shouldn't go forward. That there was no way Emily could marry Jonathan, and he'd have to face the penalties the contract promised. But the choice was between being able to feed his family for the next eight years or slowly starving to death over the coming winter months. An image of his children, pale and gaunt from hunger, flashed through his mind.

James grabbed the fountain pen and scribbled his name on one of the three contracts that David had placed in front of him.

"And here," David said. He pointed to the second contract. "And, finally—"

"I know," James said shortly. He signed his third and final contract.

He handed the fountain pen back to David and watched him sign the contract. Within a minute it was complete, as the church notary signed the documents and affixed his seal on them.

It was all done. The thing James had feared for so long had finally come to pass. He was now a sharecropper. What was worse, he had put his family on a collision course that would put Emily's secret in direct conflict with a very rich and powerful man.

* * *

The trip home was painfully quiet for Julia. Since the Marshes had brought them to their estate in their coach, they had to be returned the same way. David insisted that one of the servants ride Duncan and another navigate the coach. It seemed completely cruel to force a man to wear an expensive black suit to ride a horse through this miserable heat. She wanted to tell James about everything that had happened, but she didn't want any of the servants overhearing her comments and reporting them back to either David or Andrea. If the Marshes were going to own their land, Julia wanted to have as few interactions with them as humanly possible. Their snobbishness and profound lack of politeness irritated her, especially the way they flaunted their wealth. Her family had trouble securing enough food and drink for a week, while David and Andrea could afford to fix a feast at a moment's notice and have servants sit around and do nothing but make ice all day.

James had wanted to tell her the details of everything in the deal, but she stopped him and asked him to wait until they were home, so they could discuss it without snooping ears. Before they left the estate, she managed to get a moment alone with Aaron and Emily. She told them to keep quiet about Jonathan until they got home—and then they could complain about him all they wished. For now, they were too tired to talk. Emily had fallen asleep minutes earlier, and Aaron was about to join her. Julia was tempted to do the same, but the anger that boiled inside her would not abate until she had told James everything that had happened, and for that, she would have to wait until they reached home.

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They reached the farm within a half hour. James retrieved Duncan from the servant and thanked him for the ride home. The servant politely returned James's thanks and joined his companion on top of the coach as they headed back to the Marsh estate. James passed the horse's reins to Aaron and told him to take Duncan to the barn while Emily made her way to the house.

"So, just how bad do we fare, James?"

"Worse than you think. He's taking all the land, we get to keep half the profits at harvest, and worse than that—worse than that—" James was speaking very rapidly.

"It sounds like he's taken everything. What more could he possibly take?"

"Emily. He's taking Emily to be Jonathan's bride when she turns sixteen years old."

Julia stopped cold in her tracks. Utter disbelief washed over her face, and the boiling anger that she had tried to contain all afternoon suddenly erupted. "Oh God! What were you thinking! You know that she can't marry him! Did you think that you could possibly save more land at the expense of your daughter?"

"It wasn't like that. If I hadn't taken that deal we'd have gotten nothing, and we woulda starved. Do you think I would just give Emily to him after all we've been through?"

"But what will happen when she does turn sixteen? There's no way she can get married, none at all!"

"Don't ya think I know that? I did what I had to do, 'cause it was the only option we had."

"Well, why didn't you offer him a greater share of the harvest?"

"I tried that; he wouldn't budge."

"Then why didn't you leave? You know there are other landowners who could've bought the land."

"Are you serious? Do you know how many offers I have had on this land since the drought began? None. We can't wait for a miracle to come from the skies, 'cause it ain't gonna happen," James said. He motioned angrily toward the heavens.

"Well, you should've done something—anything—that would've stopped us from getting in this situation!"

"There was nothing else I could do. If we're lucky, we have three months of food remaining, and if it's a choice between starving now or eating for the next eight years, then the choice is simple. We eat. And we'll figure out somethin' when the time comes."

"But, James—"

"But, nothing! Our backs are against the wall, all because we had to leave home!"

"Don't even start with that!" She pointed her finger back at her husband. "We did what we had to do to keep her safe, and besides, New Antioch isn't too far away from here. I'm sure they're having the same problems that we are."

"Yeah, maybe. But we woulda had better options to get out of it."

"I doubt it. Remember, you were the one who was always bellyaching about having to sell your land, even when we lived there."

James started to refute his wife's comment, but he stopped when he saw Emily walking out of the house. She carried an aluminum pitcher to fill from the old water pump.

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“Well, go on,” Julia motioned toward Emily. “Why don’t you go over there and tell Emily she’s got a fiancé now?” Julia said.

“You know what? I’m tired of this nonsense! I’m tired of pretending my son is my daughter. You go tell *her*,” James said. He turned and strode furiously to the house.

Julia watched him enter the house and slam the door behind him. It was so loud that it made Emily jump. She quickly turned her head at the direction of the sound. Emily looked back at Julia with a worried expression. Summoning all her strength, Julia walked over to Emily and, when she had reached her, knelt down to her level.

“Is Pa upset with me?” Emily asked.

“No, sweetie. He isn’t. He has just had a bad day, and he said some things he didn’t mean because he’s upset at what happened.”

“Oh,” Emily said. Her eyes darted away from Julia. “What happened?”

“Um ... your father ...” Julia started to say, but she stopped. She knew that she probably could go for many years without telling Emily that she had a fiancé, but as long as she was here, she might as well tell her. That way she wouldn’t need to avoid the subject if it came up later while Emily was within earshot.

“Emily, what did you think of Jonathan?” Julia asked. She already knew the answer.

“He’s a worm. He tried to hurt Aaron, and then he tried to get us in trouble.”

“I know, sweetie, and I’m not mad at you ’cause you hit him with that rock. You did what you had to do to help your brother. But ... there’s something you should know about Jonathan,” Julia paused as she tried to select the right words. “You know how it hasn’t rained in a long time?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, the crops haven’t grown like your father hoped, and we don’t have enough money to replant for the next season, and we wouldn’t have enough food to get through the winter. To be able to make ends meet, your father had to sell the farm to David, but ... um ... he wouldn’t buy it unless you marry Jonathan.”

“I’m never gonna marry him. He’s mean.”

“I know, sweetie. It’s not going to happen. I promise you we’ll find some way to get you out of it.”

“Okay. So, I won’t have to see Jonathan again, will I?”

“I hope not, sweetie. I hope not,” Julia said. Julia wrapped her arms around Emily, and she hoped beyond hope that she could find a way to keep her promise to her daughter.

* * *

James opened the door to his bedroom and threw the coin purse against the wall. The terrycloth sack ruptured, and the silver coins echoed dully off the wood. James fell silently into his bed. He just wanted to go to sleep and pretend he was living someone else’s life. He felt hollow. Everything that meant something in his life was now gone. Was it too much to ask for something to go right for once?

Despite the searing heat and humidity, James pulled a thin sheet over his body. He closed his eyes and tried to wish the world away. Gradually his mind turned off, and he fell into a light, dreamless sleep. He awoke when Julia slid into bed with him. She didn’t

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bother to say anything. Instead, she just fell asleep. It took James nearly an hour to fall back to sleep, and when he did, his mind kept replaying nightmare after new nightmare. He was running but staying in place. His land was burning with a fire that could not be quenched, and when he looked for salvation, he found no one there to help him. He was all alone.

James shook the dream from his mind and opened his eyes. It was cool. The humidity had broken during the night. It was still dark, and the first rays of twilight were obscured by a heavenly gray shroud. Above him, he could just make out a faint pattering on the roof.

It was raining.

Chapter V

Emily floated in and out of consciousness. She felt pain, sickening and sharp. Her body felt hollow and placid, like a decaying fish on a sandy beach. She kept her eyes closed in an effort to make the pain go away, but no matter what she did, it persisted. Memories danced randomly through her mind. She remembered the dream about her wedding, and she remembered hunting earlier that morning and tonight's dinner. The world around her grew dark, and Emily could faintly see the shadowy outline of her mother sitting by her side and running her fingers through her hair. Her mother asked her a question, but her words were muted, indistinguishable sounds.

Emily passed out. When she opened her eyes, the world was darker, and the shapes and sounds around her changed until she felt she was floating through the air. Her father was carrying her into the house. He did not look at her but kept his vision forward as he brought her inside and laid her down on her bed. She felt her body melt into the soft mattress, and she drifted back to the realm of unconsciousness.

James brushed her hair aside and gave her a kiss on the forehead. Julia placed a damp cloth across her forehead, and together they left the room to let Emily sleep. Aaron stood outside the room in the cramped, narrow hallway, waiting for them.

"How is she?" Aaron asked.

"She's asleep. She'll probably be like this for the next few days as she gets better," Julia said. "I'll stay with her tonight to make sure there are no more problems."

"So, where am I gonna sleep?" Aaron asked.

"Why don't you sleep in our room tonight?" Julia said.

Aaron looked uneasily at his father before looking back at her.

"Don't worry too much about it. Your father'll probably sleep on the floor anyway. It's easier on his back."

"All right, I guess."

"Good, why don't you get to bed? Your father and I need to talk."

Aaron turned and walked to his parents' room. When he had shut the door, Julia walked into the family eating room, with her husband following closely behind. James took his usual spot closest to the fireplace, while Julia sat across from him. The lonely candle in the center of the table cast a dull light that accented the tired lines in James's worn face.

"James, we need we figure out what to do about Emily," Julia said. Her voice quivered and her hands shook. Her daughter had been assaulted and injured, and she couldn't do anything about it. "Please tell me you have a plan."

"I don't know. After Aaron's little brawl, I think we lost our only chance to get outta the contract."

"Maybe, but I think that even if Aaron hadn't knocked some sense into Jonathan, David would've done whatever it took to calm things down—but he would've never released Emily from the contract.

James sighed and let his head rest in the palm of his hand. "I don't think we got any good choices left. It isn't safe for her to stay in Seaton. We're gonna have to send her somewhere."

"What about your family? Could she stay with one of your brothers?"

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“No, I haven’t heard from either Martin or Daniel since we’ve been livin’ here. Besides, the last they remember of Emily, she was still Erik; they’d prolly be very reluctant to take her in.”

“I forgot about that. It’s too bad that my parents weren’t still alive. I mean, they at least knew about her. I think they would have taken her in.”

Julia’s parents had died within six months of each other five years ago. The first notice she’d received of it had been a poorly written letter from her sister Maria a year after the fact. Her parents had been the kindest people she had ever known, and she vowed that someday she would make it back to New Antioch to visit their graves, but so far she hadn’t been able to fulfill that promise.

“I know, I still remember the first time they met Erik as Emily; it was just as if she had been there all their lives. They were really good people,” James said. He stared deeply into space, and silence filled the room as they tried to think of a plan.

“Is there any way that we could move, as we did ten years ago?” Julia asked bluntly.

“What, all of us?” James asked.

“Yeah.”

“Hmm, I don’t see any way we could do it. When we moved last time, we still owned our land and could sell anything to raise the money we needed, but now David owns everything, and if we try to sell anything that’s his, we could end up in jail.”

“Then what’re we gonna do, James? If she stays here, her life is as good as gone,” Julia said. Suddenly, the gravity of the situation hit her, and she couldn’t maintain her composure. “God, this isn’t fair! All I ever wanted in life was to be able to see my children grow up and have families of their own. But Sarah died young, Aaron’s a convicted adulterer, and Emily ...” she paused to try to select the right words, “... can never marry.”

In spite of all her family had been through, Julia took pride in Emily and how independent and creative she was. Emily was perhaps the most intelligent person she had ever known. But at times she found herself wishing that Emily was either completely male or female and not somewhere in between. She loved Emily as a daughter, but she would never wish her situation on anyone. It was too much to handle. She lived under a cloud of fear that someone would find out that Emily was a boy and all the family’s efforts to keep her identity a secret would’ve gone to waste.

She worried even more when Emily turned thirteen. Julia watched Aaron grow from a boy into a man. He was nearly six feet tall, and his muscles rippled from the years of heavy farm work. He had thick patches of facial hair that matched his sandy-blond hair. She had worried the same thing would happen to Emily, that by the curse of nature she would develop into the man that she was supposed to be. So far, Emily had been lucky. Emily was nearly sixteen and still possessed an array of feminine features. She was only a few inches above five feet tall. Her voice had only broken moderately, and she only had a few hairs above her lip, which she meticulously plucked out. Perhaps her most striking feature of all was her long, flowing auburn hair. It flowed around her shoulders and down the length of her back, where it came to an end around her waist. Her hair was the color of autumn and as fine and smooth as the best Chinese silk. It was the hallmark of her femininity.

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Ever since Emily had started living as a girl, Julia had worried. She vividly remembered the agony and the heartbreak that her daughter had felt, and she remembered the things Emily had done to herself. It had scared her when Emily had refused to eat because she couldn't be a girl. Even though they were letting her live the life she wanted, Emily occasionally went through bouts of depression. There were days when she would stay hidden in her room, and on those days she'd scarcely do anything or talk to anyone. When Emily had been younger, she would sometimes talk about how she would grow up to be a woman. Julia knew it was absurd but humored her anyway, for fear of breaking her heart. But with each year that passed, Emily slowly came to the realization that it was nothing more than a childhood fantasy and there was nothing that she could ever do that would turn her into the woman she knew herself to be.

Emily had also seen what puberty had done to Aaron, and it scared the hell out of her. Julia remembered Emily saying one night a few years ago, "I'd rather be dead than to have to end up looking like Aaron." That statement alone kept Julia up many nights. No child should ever say such things.

Now, James said, "I know. We've done the best we could. I think most people woulda given up on a child like Emily."

"I know, but I don't wanna let her go. We've already lost one daughter. I don't want to lose her, too."

"We won't," James said.

James winced as a sharp pain shot through his stomach. He was plagued with worry. He worried what would happen to his way of life once the wedding fell through. It was well within Marsh's power to seize the land and force Julia and him out into the streets. He could even be arrested.

No matter what form of retribution he faced, nothing pained him more than the realization that he would never see his children again. But the only way that Emily would ever be safe would be if she fled beyond the borders of the Dominion. There was no way he could send her that far without someone to look after her and be her companion, and that job would fall to Aaron.

James tried to remember a map of the Dominion. Emily could be safe in the western parishes, as they were sparsely populated, but the land was less suited for farming. On top of that, further west there were the mountains, and James didn't like the thought of his children having to cross them alone.

Sending the children south was out of the question, as he would only be sending them deeper into the heart of the Dominion, where the laws were stricter and more often enforced.

He couldn't send them north, either. The Dakota Territories were teeming with Mormon refugees and extremists. The situation had deteriorated over the last year. Farms and settlements along the northern border were increasingly under attack. Last autumn, after the railroad bridge in Lewis Bend was bombed, Bishop Aldridge had announced that he would send soldiers to the northern territories to root out the Mormon infection.

Sending his children east was the only option left. Over the Missouri River was the Saint James Parish. It was less populated than the Seaton Parish, but if James wanted to make sure that Emily was safe forever from the Dominion's laws, they would need to settle in the Great Lakes Territories, which began near the Mississippi River. The

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territory had fertile farming land and enough wildlife and game to live off for as long as they would need.

He rubbed his tired eyes. "I guess our only option would be to get her far away from here. The only thing I can think of is to send her east, toward the Mississippi," he said.

"Where's that?" Julia asked.

"It's 'bout four hundred miles east of here."

"But she wouldn't make it that far by herself."

"Aaron would go with her."

Julia's eyes widened. "So all of our children would be gone," she said, the words barely escaping her.

"Julia, it's the only way."

"I know." She wiped a tear from her eye. "I know. How soon would she have to go?"

"The wedding's in three weeks. When did Andrea wanna do the dress fitting again?"

"The sixteenth. Next Friday."

"Okay, she'll have the fitting, and I think I can get enough supplies and money for them to leave two weeks from now. That's plenty of time for them to get out of the area before the wedding."

"God, James! I never thought we'd have to see a day when we would lose all our children," Julia said.

James could not imagine the pain and stress that Julia was feeling. In all their years of marriage he could scarcely recall a time when she had taken the Lord's name in vain, and now, within a space of just a few minutes, she'd done it twice.

"But at least she'll be safe and be able to live a long life."

"What about Aaron? You know how stubborn he can be. Remember our last move?"

James did remember, and it wasn't a pleasant thought. From New Antioch to Seaton, Aaron had thrown nonstop tantrums. He had asked endless questions and repeatedly harassed and blamed Emily for their having to leave their home.

"I don't know. He's grown since then," James replied.

"Still, he hates change, and I know he's still in love with Elizabeth."

"Sooner or later, though, he'll realize that she's untouchable. At least this way he has a chance to find someone else and get married."

"Hopefully, that'll be sooner rather than later. We've almost run out of time. Speaking of which, what do you plan to tell Marsh? We can't just not show up the day of the wedding. You'll have to tell him something."

"And what do ya suggest telling him? You know he won't accept anything less than Emily at the altar."

"You could tell him the truth."

"What? That Emily's really a boy, and that we've been raising what the church and everyone else sees as an abomination for the last ten years? I'm sure he'd love that!" James said.

"What else are you gonna tell him? If he knows the truth, he might just call off the wedding."

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“Don’t you think that’ll just make things worse? I mean, if it just looks like Emily ran off, then we might be able to come through this with our livelihood intact.”

“But if it looks like she just ran off, then there’s absolutely no way she can ever come back. If David knows the truth about Emily, he might just end the contract himself, and we could stay together.”

James shook his head. “He won’t show us any mercy, ’specially after the wedding he’s been planning for ten years blows up in his face.”

“You know, despite what happened tonight, he’s always been fair to us.”

“Tonight will be nothing if he knows the truth.”

Julia sighed aloud. “You know we don’t have much choice. You tell him whatever you think’ll be best, ’cause you’re the one who’ll have to talk to him.” Julia stood up from her chair and looked at James. “You should try to get some sleep. It’ll be daylight before you know it,” Julia said. She turned to make her way to the children’s room.

“Julia,” James said.

“Yes?” She stopped and looked back at him.

“You know I love you.” Those words seemed almost alien to him. It had been a while since he had last said them to her, and with the weight of the world on his mind, his marriage at times seemed to be nothing more than a simple friendship. But now, as he looked at the careworn face of the woman who’d been his companion for the last twenty years, he realized he needed her now more than ever.

Julia walked over to him and wrapped her arms around him. “I know you do, and I love you. No matter what happens, I want you to know you’re the best father and husband a woman could ever ask for. There’s not a man on Earth who would’ve made the sacrifices you have for your family.” She gently kissed his forehead. James lifted his head and their eyes met and exchanged a lifetime of moments, the good and the bad. Through thick and thin they had been there for each other. She lowered her head, and for a moment they kissed. Her warm, wet lips moved with him. A fire burned deep inside him; it felt like the first time they had kissed. Their spirits were one as they danced the dance of life and love. The burden of the future slipped away as he loved the woman who had always remained steadfast by his side. How long had it been since he’d felt this way? Too long!

Julia parted and closed her eyes, holding on to the moment for a little longer. A smile flashed over her face. “I should go tend to Emily and make sure she’s all right.” She paused to take one last look at James and then walked to the children’s room.

A fresh wave of fatigue washed over James. He decided to try to get some sleep. He grabbed the candlestick and made his way to his bedroom. He opened the door, and the dim light cast an unearthly light over the room. James set the candle on an uneven end table and quickly stripped off his clothing down to his shirt and undergarments. Aaron was sprawled across his bed. Rather than moving him, James grabbed a pillow, blew out the candle, and lay down on the floor.

Twenty-one days was all that remained before the wedding day. Only fourteen days remained before he’d have to say good-bye to his children for the final time. He hoped and prayed for the best, that everything would clear itself up and his children would be able to stay home. But he knew it wouldn’t happen. Time was his enemy. It was unbelievable that so much time had slipped away from him. Nine years had disappeared

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in what seemed like the blink of an eye. Just before James fell asleep, he made a promise to himself. He might not be able to stop the future, but he would right the things he had let go wrong in the past.